

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (Executive Summary)

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1. Objective of the Convention

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which was adopted on 17 June 1994 in Paris and came into force on 26 December 1996, aims at the following (Article 2, paragraph 1):

The objective of this Convention is to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels, supported by international cooperation and partnership arrangements, in the framework of an integrated approach which is consistent with Agenda 21, with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.

Paragraph 2 of the same Article adds the following:

Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level.

2. Issues in the context of the global politics

The following issues in the context of the global politics, rather than in the scientific context, led to the adoption of the Convention:

- What are Global Environmental Problems, in which the desertification issue is usually included;
- Sustainable Development, which is repeated in the Convention;
- Science and Technology vs. sovereignty of States, both of which were always discussed in the history of the development of the desertification regime;
- Financial Resources, for which States had to spend a lot of time and other resources in the negotiation for the Convention; and
- Africa and Other Regions.

3. Global Environmental Problems

The word “global environmental problems” is often used in a vague way. Also, the phenomena that occur on a global scale are often said to be “global environmental problems.” However, in the context of the global politics, the “global environmental problems” are the

issues that have become subjects of the concern of the North and the South and thus that require global discussion and action with certain restrictions on the sovereignty of states.

This is supported by the discussions by KUWABARA Yukiko, 1991, legal officer of the UN Headquarters, YONEMOTO Shohei, 1994, researcher of the history of science, and Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown, 1991, 1996, as researchers of international politics.

The history of the identification of specific environmental problems also supports the view: The Global Warming, which is generally thought to be a typical global environmental problem, was already included in the Action Plan adopted at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. Desertification was already included in the program areas of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1973. Only in late 1980's, such problems were recognized as "global environmental problems" when the East-West Cold War came to an end and subsequently complex interdependence deepened in which the common problems of the mankind can be discussed and action can be taken with certain restrictions on the sovereignty of states.

The "global environmental problems" are thus defined in the context of global politics where certain restrictions on the sovereignty of states should be imposed, rather than in the context of the phenomena. Accordingly, in addition to the environmental problems the phenomena of which extends globally, transboundary and even national environmental problems can be "global environmental problems" so long as they are a matter of global political concern.

Desertification is not a phenomena of a completely global scale. However, it is a problem of a global concern. In this regard, it should be discussed as a global environmental problem.

The primary causes of desertification are local. So are the victims. These are special characteristics of desertification as a "global environmental problem." Therefore how to globally respond to the local causes and local victims is a key to the action to combat desertification.

4. Sustainable Development

The concept of "sustainable development" was born in the repeated resolutions of the UN General Assembly on permanent sovereignty of states over their natural resources. The first document in which the concept was included was the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States adopted by the General Assembly in 1974¹. It was to consolidate the notion of permanent sovereignty of developing states over their natural resources by incorporating the duties of all states to protect, preserve and enhance the environment for the present and future generations as well as to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of their national jurisdiction. Therefore it stressed that the environmental policies of all States shall enhance and not adversely affect the present and future development potential of developing countries.

But the very first document that gave the concept of "sustainable development" was the Cocoyoc Declaration adopted at a Symposium on "Patterns of Resource Use, Environment and Development Strategies" held in Cocoyoc, Mexico in October, 1974, co-organized by UNEP and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The

Declaration stated that “the problem today is not primarily one of absolute physical shortage but of economic and social maldistribution and misuse; mankind’s predicament is rooted primarily in economic and social structures and behaviour within and between countries.” With this recognition, it stressed the need to ensure the quality of life for all with a productive base compatible with the needs of future generations.

After the World Conservation Strategy prepared by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1980 stressed the concept of sustainable development drawing attention to the inseparable relationship between natural resource conservation and development, “Our Future” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), revived the concept of “sustainable development” in the North-South relations in 1987. However, while in 1974 the concept of sustainable development was used in the coercive relationship between the North and the South with the South rejecting the intervention on domestic matters by the North, the Brundtland Commission used the same concept in order to encourage close collaboration between the North and the South for the “common future.”

The Convention to Combat Desertification mentions “sustainable development” already twice in its preamble. Article 2 provides that the Convention aims to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas. After this, the Convention mentions sustainable development eight times. As such, sustainable development is a key concept for this Convention.

However, it simply repeats “sustainable development” without defining it in the context of the objective of the Convention. Accordingly how to achieve “sustainable development” in the implementation of the Convention is a critical issue. Sustainable development in the context of the CCD must be achieved through the action by the Parties to the Convention.

5. Science and Technology vs. sovereignty of States

The Plan of Action to Combat Desertification adopted at the United Nations Conference on Desertification in 1977 provides for three groups of means, i.e. engineering and ecological means, economic means and social means. The Agenda 21 adopted in 1992 also provides for these three kinds of means to combat desertification. However, the largest number of means provided for are social, with engineering and ecological means and economic means in the same numbers, indicating its emphasis on the social means. The Convention adopted in 1994 provides only for social means in its principles with engineering and ecological means and economic means given in the provisions for regional and national action plans only. The Convention thus provides that the primary means are social. (Tables 1-3)

After independence, the developing countries joined the international community as unitary actors, in which all the orders from the central government could be realized at the local level. With this assumption, intervention by the former suzerains or powerful countries was rejected. The rejection of such intervention was also critical in their effort to achieve substantive independence. However, the reality was either that the states did not function unitarily or that only military governments and other dictatorship could achieve unitarianism. Also, their rejection of intervention by developed countries delayed the discussions of the causes of

desertification and the measures that could be effectively addressed to such causes.

Only when the Cold War was over in the late 1980's, discussions of the causes of desertification free from political dogma began. Such discussions highlight social constraints which had not been touched in previous years, and expedited agreement on the critical and priority measures to be taken. Recognition of social means as critical and of engineering and ecological means and economic means to be taken on the basis of social means was the result of such discussions. Accordingly, in designing measures to combat desertification, due consideration should be given to social issues, including the associated "bottom-up" approach.

6. Financial Resources

The provisions for financial resources are different among the Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification Conventions. The Climate Change Convention provides firstly for the Global Environment Facility as its Financial Mechanism and supplementally for bilateral and multilateral funding from developed countries. The Biodiversity Convention provides firstly for funding as a means to achieve its objectives, subsequently for developed countries' obligations to provide new and additional financial resources, thirdly for the GEF as its Financial Mechanism and lastly for bilateral and multilateral resources as supplemental.

In contrast, the Desertification Convention, in providing for funding in much detail, establishes the Global Mechanism which is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of existing financial mechanisms, rather than establishing a new financial mechanism. Because both primary causes and victims of desertification exist locally, the same financial mechanism as that of the Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions could not be applied to desertification. However, the problems whose primary causes and victims exist locally, including desertification, have long been a subject of development assistance. Because of this, the existing bilateral and multilateral resources are the primary financial resources in combating desertification.

Therefore, to effectively combat desertification, the functions of the Global Mechanism are critical. Of course, it should be kept in mind that the financial resources that play a major role in development and that are most sustainable are those of the private sector and that official resources should be used to effectively catalyze such private resources and for other purposes for which the private sector cannot play a role.

7. Africa and Other Regions

The word "desertification", which French scientist Aubreville had devised in 1949 (Sabakuka Taisaku Sogo Kento-kai, 1996), was for the first time applied in combating the serious drought occurred in Africa in 1968 - 1973. Therefore desertification was a problem of Africa in origin. Although the adoption of "desertification" by the UNEP Governing Council as one of its program areas in 1973 and the decision of the UN General Assembly in 1974 to convene the UN Conference on Desertification did not confine discussions to Africa, the Conference adopted a special resolution to appeal assistance to the Sahel in view of the seriousness of the situation in this area. Also, the resolutions on desertification which have been adopted every year by the UNEP Governing Council and the UN General Assembly

since the Conference were dual: one on desertification in general; the other on the desertification in the Sudano-Sahelian region.

Actually, African countries are very positive toward the Desertification. Already in mid 1998 when only 65 % of the countries of the world had ratified or acceded the Convention, 94 % of the African countries had already ratified the Convention with three exceptions which had no effectively governing national authority due to civil war. (Fig. 1)

The Regional Implementation Annex for Africa is virtually an African Convention to Combat Desertification rather than "guidelines" as provided for in Article 15 of the Convention. Not only the contents of the African Annex are comprehensive and much in detail, but also "shall" is applied to most provisions including the provisions for the actions to be taken by developed countries while "may" is applied to the provisions of the Regional Implementation Annexes for the other Regions. Therefore efforts should be made to fully understand the desertification in Africa.

However, the Convention is relevant also to other regions. And within each region, countries face a wide variety of natural and socio-economic conditions. In the case of Asia, the economic situations are quite different from country to country, and also within a country quite varied conditions are often seen. Within Latin America, the geographical conditions are quite different between the Andean area and arid Northeastern Brazil. Therefore, while due attention should be given to Africa, actions in accordance with the different conditions should be elaborated.

8. Various actors

Various actors play various roles in the contemporary global community where complex interdependence prevails (Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 1989). In the past, international affairs were predominantly the matter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, in complex interdependence, the other governmental agencies whose activities used to be focused on domestic affairs, are now playing important roles according to different issues. In complex interdependence, actors other than government agencies, such as NGOs, enterprises, research institutes, etc. also play important roles. Accordingly, due consideration should also be given so that various actors can effectively play their roles.

9. Achievements and issues yet to be discussed

The Convention has led to significant achievements, particularly when compared to the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification adopted in 1977. However, there are still many issues to be discussed for solution.

The most significant achievement is the confirmation of the criticality of the action and effects at the community level. Under the Convention, many Parties have already prepared or started to action to prepare national plans of action which incorporates action at the community level, which, under the Plan of Action, States failed to agree on. Also quite important is the particular provision in Article 2, paragraph 2 additional to the objective of the Convention that *"Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the*

rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level.” Whether the action at the community level as provided for in the paper is actually taken and whether institutions to help effectively realize it will be critically monitored to assess success or failure of the Convention.

The global character of the issue of desertification has been confirmed not only by the specific provision of the Convention that it is open for signature by all states but also by the actual participation of most countries from all regions. However, not a small number of developing country Parties do not seem to be eligible for assistance under the Convention because their climatic conditions are not within the “*arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas*” as provided for in Article 1 (g) in relation to the definitions of “*desertification*” and “*combating desertification*”. Nor are they in a position to provide substantial financial or technical assistance to affected developing country Parties. On the other hand, the actual absence of many of such Parties in official meetings tends to affect the quorum. Therefore whether other substantive positive effects of their participation than the critical linkage strategy for the Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification Conventions developed by the community of diplomats concerned with the economic development issues of the UN General Assembly can be identified and fully realized is critical for a success of the Convention.

One of the critical provisions of the Convention is for mobilization of financial resources for affected developing country Parties to combat desertification and to mitigate the effects of drought as provided for in several parts of the Convention including Articles 20 and 21. However, for what specific activities financial resources should be mobilized has not yet been clarified while there are many relevant provisions in Articles 1 (use of terms), 2 (objective), 3 (principles), 4 (general obligations), 5 (obligations of affected country Parties), 9 (basic approach), 10 (national action programmes), 13 (support for the elaboration and implementation of action programmes), 16 (information collection, analysis and exchange), 17 (research and development), 18 (transfer, acquisition, and development of technology), 19 (capacity building, education and public awareness) and regional implementation annexes. Actually the Members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee have not been able to agree on guidelines to identify projects to help affected developing countries effectively combat desertification. For effective mobilization of financial resources to help affected developing country Parties combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought, such guidelines that effectively lead to “*improved living conditions, in particular at the community level*” (Article 2, paragraph 2) should be developed.

The Convention has led to development of common understanding of technical matters in relation to effective combating of desertification and mitigation of the effects of drought. The work on traditional knowledge was particularly successful with benefits from the similar work by the Biodiversity Convention. It clarified what traditional knowledge is in an operational context and thus greatly contributed to possible development of the activities to combat desertification at the community level. It should also be noted that follow-up activities have been initiated by different actors, including UNEP, FAO and the Italian Government, in cooperation with the CCD regime.

On the other hand, the development of the cooperation with existing networks, institutions, agencies and bodies has been slow. This is closely associated with the slow progress in the

survey and evaluation of such networks and bodies have been coordinated by UNEP. It should be expedited so that the activities under the CCD can interact with such existing networks and bodies.

The author is concerned about the operation and management of the Convention secretariat and meetings in the way of the UN General Assembly. That is likely to spend an enormous amount of time and money but produces no substantive results. Concerns are also about the too small a number of delegations participating in meetings, delay in the nomination of vice-chairs by regional groups, statements made in contradiction to the provisions of the Convention, Rules of Procedure, past decisions of the Conference of the Parties and recent agreements among the Parties, the acceptance by the delegates of what the Convention secretariat explains, and others. Furthermore, the Conference of the Parties does not check the financial implications of proposed activities. Delegations do not further request clarification to the secretariat who simply insists that a specific activity in questions will be covered by both the regular budget and extra-budgetary resources including the costs covered by the host government of meetings without clarifying even the proportions of the resources from the regular budget and extra-budgetary resources. This actually leads to insufficient realization of the activities, which in turn leads to inefficient use of resources. From these, it is suspected that the delegates are present without clear instructions from home and that this reflects the insufficient commitments to the Convention by the Governments.

In accordance with the Rules of Procedure Rule 15 which provides, “*The Permanent Secretariat shall report to the Conference of the Parties on the administrative and budgetary implications of all substantive agenda items submitted to the session, before they are considered by it. Unless the Conference of the Parties decides otherwise, no such substantive agenda item shall be considered until at least forty-eight hours after the Conference of the Parties has received the report of the Permanent Secretariat on the administrative and budgetary implications,*” the secretariat must submit reports on the financial implications of proposed actions. And the Committee of the Whole, which is responsible for administrative matters, must surely take responsibilities to appraise such reports from the secretariat, whether the specific activity is under the jurisdiction of the Committee itself, the Committee on Science and Technology or the plenary.

The Committee on Science and Technology is incapable to make in-depth discussions of scientific and technical matters “*to provide [the Conference of the Parties] with information and advice*” (Article 24) due its too large size open to all Parties. Although some specific issues can be referred to Ad Hoc Panels, not all are suitable for studies by Ad Hoc Panels. Furthermore, the Panels are again of intergovernmental character composed by those representing regions. The Parties tend to resort to discussions by informal groups. However, this not only lacks transparency of discussions decisions but also tends to make political discussions rather than scientific or technological discussions. The way of discussions of the matters referred to the Committee must be reformed so that the issues are discussed on a sound scientific and technological basis.

The two-week duration of each session of the Conference of the Parties is too long in relation to the quantity of the agenda. It seems that the duration was decided in line with most global meetings of the UN, not with the quantity of the particular agenda of the sessions of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties. The long duration have been discouraging the delegates’

intensive discussions, resulting in too much money in proportion to the outcomes of the discussions. The duration of a session should be reduced in accordance with the agenda.

There seem to be too many regional activities promoted by the Convention secretariat and funded by the Conference of the Parties. Although it is recognized that some regional activities contributes much to national and local activities, particularly the local, which are the most critical in combating and mitigating the effects of drought as the Parties agreed in providing in Article 2, paragraph 2 that “*Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level.*” Resources should be more rationally assigned so that the living conditions at the affected community level will be substantially improved, not so that bureaucrats’ travel and discussions for the sake of discussions are funded.

Finally it is appreciated that at the fourth session of the Conference of the Parties the developing country Parties, who tend to support establishing new organizations, strongly opposed to the EU’s proposal to create virtual subsidiary bodies to the Committee on Science and Technology. They expressed their firm commitments to rational use of resources in avoiding proliferation of subsidiary bodies.

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Table 1. Classification of the “basic principles” of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, 1977 (: relevant; : partly relevant)

Basic principles	Technological measures			Political measures			
	Engineering & ecological measures	Economic measures	Social measures	UN-centered	Sovereignty of States	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
(a) All action shall be consistent with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations.							
(b) A central theme will be the immediate adaptation and application of existing knowledge, particularly in the implementation of urgent corrective measures against desertification, in educating the people and the affected communities to an awareness of the problem, and instituting training programmes in collaboration with international Organizations such as ...	(Existing knowledge)		?			(educating people & ...)	Existing knowledge
(c) Improved land use, calling for assessment, planning and sound management on the basis of the application of known ecological principles to areas subject to desertification, is a key to success in combating desertification.							
(d) Improved land use should recognize the inevitability of periodic climatic drought in dry lands and their generally low natural biological potential.							
(e) Integrated land-use measures should be directed at the restoration of vegetation cover on marginal land, making particular use of adapted species of plants and animals.							
(f) When the restoration of vegetation requires the relaxation of human pressures, temporary compensatory measures should be taken to provide alternative supplies of food and fuel.							
(g) The Plan is to be carried out as an effective, comprehensive and co-ordinated action programme against desertification, including the building up of local and national scientific, technological and administrative facilities in the areas concerned.							
(h) All measures are to be primarily directed toward the well-being and development of the peoples affected by, or vulnerable to, desertification.							
(i) Efforts should be consistent with, and form part of, wider programmes for development and social progress.							
(j) Implementation is based on the recognition of socio-economic, cultural and ecological variety in the vulnerable areas, and the overriding need for a positive and flexible response.							
(k) Additional research to clarify a number of fundamental problems for the solution of which the requisite scientific knowledge is not yet available, should be consistent with strengthening the scientific and technological capability of the affected areas.							
(l) Traditional use as food, fuel or other products of wild species of plants and animals which often do not appear in the national marketing statistics should be regarded as an important resource and fully investigated.							
(m) Implementation calls for the pooling of the resources of the United Nations system in launching the Plan and carrying out an integrated and worldwide programme of development, research and application of science and technology to solve the special problems of desertification.							
(n) Land and water management should take into account a number of ecological principles: (i) Lands need to be managed as ecological wholes (e.g. an entire watershed, the total of plant and animal communities, an area viewed as a complex of micro-topographies); (ii) The use of drylands should be carefully timed to confirm with fluctuations in climatic conditions; (iii) The use of land should be carefully allocated so as to give optimum sustained productivity; its use must be fitted to its capabilities.							
(o) Particular attention should be given to the utilization of local experience, knowledge and expertise in the implementation of the recommendations of the Plan at the national level in the countries concerned.							
(p) While populations currently affected by desertification urgently require short-term relief measures, long-term amelioration should not be delayed, since the cost of prevention is less than that of cure.							

(q) Attention should be given to the assessment of secondary environmental problems which may be triggered by measures intended to remedy desertification, as well as the effects of development activities undertaken outside the affected areas.							
(r) Attention should be paid to providing facilities and housing for people living in new conditions created by programmes which combat desertification.							
(s) Attention should be paid to the judicious conservation and use of water resources in each region, including fair and equitable sharing of the waters of international rivers, lakes and underground aquifers, and inter-basin transfer of surplus water where this is environmentally sound and is necessary to prevent desertification.							
(t) The productivity of all available renewable resources, including forest, wildlife and fisheries, should be optimized and managed on a sustainable yield basis.							

Table 2. Classification of the “Programme Areas” in the Agenda 21 Chapter 12: Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Combating Desertification and Drought (: relevant; : partly relevant)

“Programme Areas”	Technological measures			Political measures			
	Engineering & ecological measures	Economic measures	Social measures	UN-centered	Sovereignty of States	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
A. Strengthening the knowledge base and developing information and monitoring systems for regions prone to desertification and drought, including the economic and social aspects of these ecosystems							
B. Combating land degradation through, inter/alia, intensified soil conservation, afforestation and reforestation activities							
C. Developing and strengthening integrated development programmes for the eradication of poverty and promotion of alternative livelihood systems in areas prone to desertification							
D. Developing comprehensive anti-desertification programmes and integrating them into national development plans and national environmental planning							
E. Developing comprehensive drought preparedness and drought-relief schemes, including self-help arrangements, for drought-prone areas and designing programmes to cope with environmental refugees							
F. Encouraging and promoting popular participation and environmental education, focusing on desertification control and management of the effects of drought							

Table 3. Classification of the four “Principles” provided for in Article 3 of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, 1994 (: relevant; : partly relevant)

“Principles”	Technological measures			Political measures			
	Engineering & ecological measures	Economic measures	Social measures	UN-centered	Sovereignty of States	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
(a) the Parties should ensure that decisions on the design and implementation of programmes to combat desertification and/or mitigate the effects of drought are taken with the participation of populations and local communities and that an enabling environment is created at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local levels.							
(b) the Parties should, in a spirit of international solidarity and partnership, improve cooperation and coordination at subregional, regional and international levels, and better focus financial, human, organizational and technical resources where they are needed.							
(c) the Parties should develop, in a spirit of partnership, cooperation among all levels of government, communities, non-governmental organizations and landholders to establish a better understanding of the nature and value of land and scarce water resources in affected areas and to work towards their sustainable use.							

(d) the Parties should take into full consideration the special needs and circumstances of affected developing country Parties, particularly the least developed among them.							
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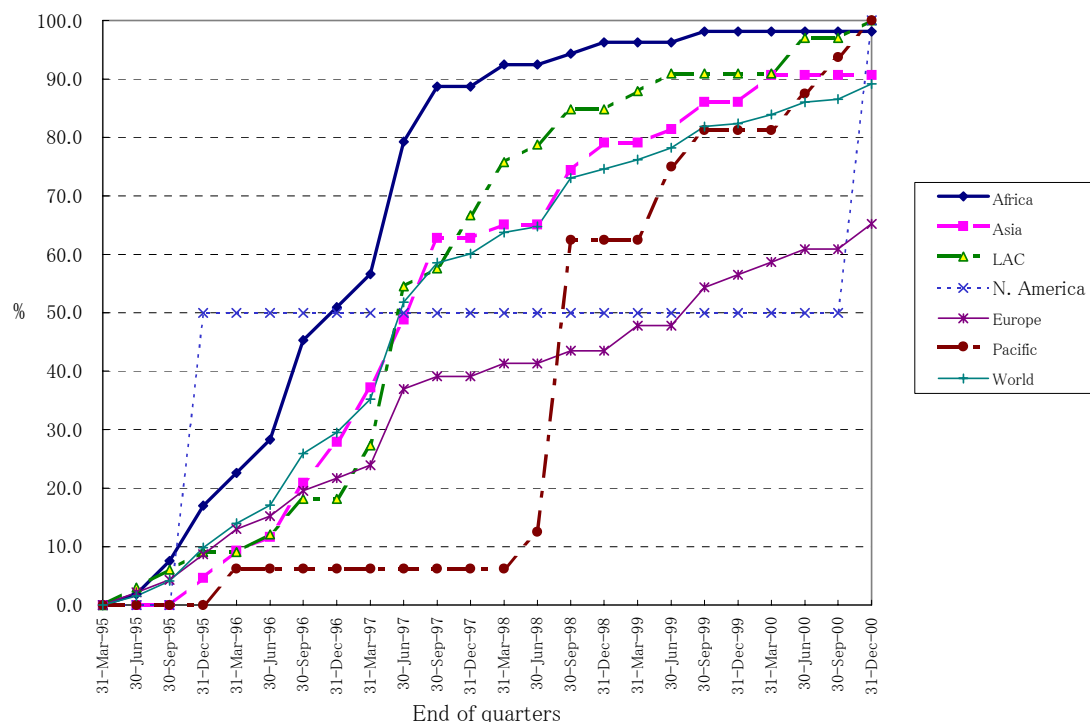


Fig. 3. The percentage of the countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention to Combat Desertification in each region

(Note)

- This chart is based on the dates of ratification or accession, not the date of the entry into force of the Convention for individual countries (90 days after such action), in order to show the situation before the entry into force of the Convention itself (26 December 1996).
- EU, which ratified the Convention on 26 March 1998, is not included in this chart.
- The regions were identified as follows on the basis of natural geographical divisions:
 - Africa includes Cape Verde, Egypt, Somalia, and the Seychelles at its northwestern, northeastern and eastern ends.
 - Asia includes Cyprus, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Maldives at its western and southwestern ends.
 - LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean) includes Bahamas and Mexico at its northern ends.
 - Europe includes Malta at its southern end. It also includes Russia.
 - The Pacific includes Australia, Papua New Guinea and Palau at its western and northwestern ends.
- The “countries” here means the “States Members of the United Nations or any of its specialized agencies or that are Parties to the Statute of the International Court of Justice” that are invited to sign the Convention as provided for in Article 33 of the Convention.

ⁱ Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States (UN General Assembly resolution 3281 (XXIX), adopted on 12 December 1974 at its 29th session) Article 30:

The protection, preservation and enhancement of the environment for the present and future generations is the responsibility of all States. All States shall endeavour to establish their own environmental and developmental policies in conformity with such responsibility. The environmental policies of all States shall enhance and not adversely affect the present and future development potential of developing countries. All States have the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of their national jurisdiction. All States should cooperate in evolving international norms and regulations in the field of the environment.