

# GRASSLANDS, SAVANNAHS & RANGELANDS

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## Strategic Approaches to Restore Grasslands, Savannahs & Rangelands (GSRs)

*Prepared by the organisers of the UNCCD COP15 Food Day - Seeds for Change for a Nature-Positive Future*

### Key Recommendations:

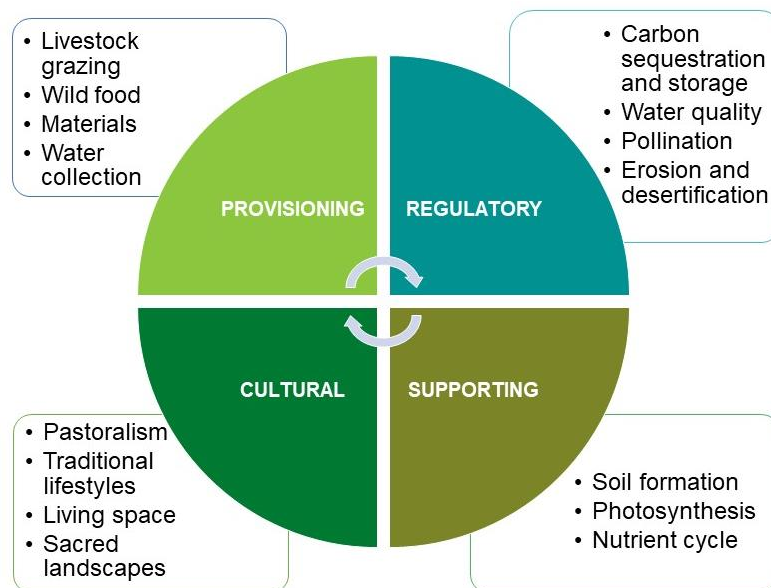
UNCCD's goal of Land Degradation Neutrality<sup>1</sup> (LDN) provides a unique opportunity to focus attention on the protection, management and restoration of grassland, savannah, and rangeland ecosystems.

Globally, these ecosystems are in urgent need of three overarching actions:

1. **Protect:** increasing the area conserved in protected and conserved areas to include ecologically-representative, viable and well-connected examples of all GSR ecoregions – **LDN Response Hierarchy Action 1:** “**Avoid** new degradation of land by maintaining existing healthy land”.
2. **Manage:** improving management of the world's GSRs to increase carbon storage,<sup>2</sup> optimise grazing levels, boost biodiversity to support adaptation to climate change,<sup>3</sup> reduce compaction and erosion,<sup>4</sup> and increase other ecosystem services, such as water security – **LDN Response Hierarchy Action 2:** “**Reduce** existing degradation by adopting sustainable land management practices that can slow degradation while increasing biodiversity, soil health and food production.”
3. **Restore:** implementing large-scale restoration to re-establish ecosystem services and improve the livelihoods of over a billion people living on degraded farmland. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration<sup>5,6</sup> provides a mandate for a radical scaling up of restoration ambitions – **LDN Response Hierarchy Action 3:** “**Reverse** land degradation through the rehabilitation and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystem processes.”

This briefing paper argues that given their high rate of loss and low level of protection, **GSRs require particular attention in UNCCD's LDN voluntary in-country Target setting** and identifies some targets and indicators to measure progress.

**Grasslands, Savannahs & Rangelands (GSRs) play critical but often forgotten roles in a wide range of ecosystem services, including biodiversity conservation, food production, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.**



*Figure 1: Some of the ecosystem services from grasslands, savannahs, and rangelands*

Ecosystem services from GSRs are far more valuable than usually recognised.<sup>7</sup> They store carbon to mitigate climate change,<sup>8</sup> possibly better than forests in places at high fire risk,<sup>9</sup> with huge potential for restoration, which for many ecosystem, services can be achieved faster than for other ecosystems.<sup>10</sup> Grasslands cover 54% of the land.<sup>11</sup> They reduce desertification<sup>12</sup> and dust storms, and protect water supplies.<sup>13</sup> They support a quarter of the world's people, with huge cultural diversity, from gauchos in South America to nomads in Central Asia,<sup>14</sup> and contain many sacred landscapes.<sup>15</sup> Grasslands support food security<sup>16</sup> with natural grasslands providing feed for many livestock<sup>17</sup> and resources for wild food collection,<sup>18</sup> and grasslands also provide the source ecosystems for almost all agricultural lands. Sustainable pastoralism plays a key role in the maintenance of many ecosystem services. GSRs are critical to the 500 million people who identify themselves as pastoralists,<sup>19</sup> and on 15 March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly in New York unanimously declared 2026 the International Year of Rangelands & Pastoralists.<sup>20</sup> Regaining the health and sustainability of the world's GSR ecosystems is a critical component in the Nature Positive by 2030 movement.<sup>21</sup>

But these ecosystems are amongst the most threatened in the world: under pressure on three fronts, from conversion, degradation, to the impacts of climate change.

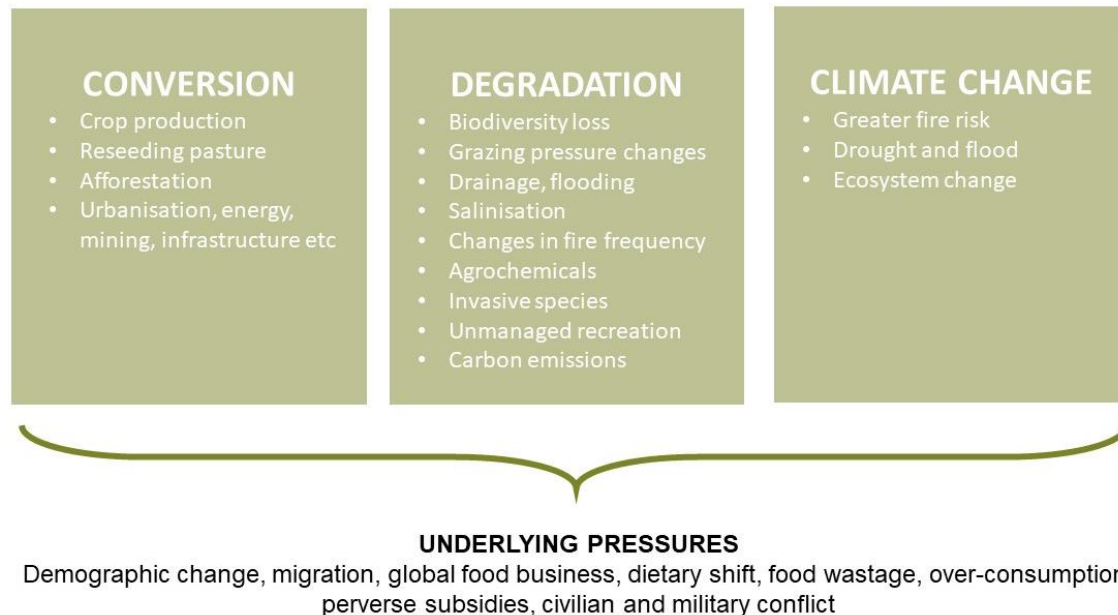


Figure 2: Threats to grassland and savannah ecosystems

Grassland ecosystems are at high risk. Over 40% have been converted.<sup>22</sup> From 1998 to 2013, 19% of grasslands, and 27% of rangelands showed persistent declining productivity trends.<sup>23</sup> Grasslands are poorly protected, with only 4.5% of temperate grasslands in protected areas,<sup>24</sup> leaving the biome liable to fragmentation and loss,<sup>25</sup> with national laws often too weak to provide security.<sup>26</sup>

Losses come from **conversion** to agricultural crops<sup>27</sup> and tree plantations,<sup>28,29</sup> the latter sometimes under the auspices of “reforestation policies”;<sup>30</sup> from reseeded for intensive livestock production;<sup>31</sup> and through the impacts of urbanisation,<sup>32</sup> transport infrastructure,<sup>33</sup> mining<sup>34</sup> and other factors.

Equally serious, but harder to measure, are various forms of **degradation**, caused by changes in grazing (both over-<sup>35</sup> and under-grazing), drainage of wet grasslands, poor irrigation creating salinisation,<sup>36</sup> agrochemical<sup>37,38</sup> and other pollution, invasive species<sup>39</sup> and harmful recreational activities including off-road driving.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, **climate change** increases the likelihood, frequency, and severity of many pressures, including droughts,<sup>41</sup> floods and catastrophic fires,<sup>42</sup> shifting the baseline for entire ecosystems.

**WWF requests that UNCCD, to support 128 Parties in setting the 2030 LDN targets, and with particular reference to the 250M hectares of farmland<sup>43</sup> that has already been voluntarily pledged for restoration:**

- 1) Develop a better understanding of status and trends in degraded and converted Grasslands, Savannahs and Rangelands (GSR) including a measurable baseline against which to measure change**
- 2) Place a stronger and more explicit focus on policies relating to grasslands, savannahs, and rangelands through:**
  - a) Explicitly including GSRs in LDN target setting, as well as other development and environmental plans, with a view to promoting large-scale ecological restoration
  - b) Promoting the restoration, protection, and sustainable management of degraded GSRs to regain productivity in places impacted by desertification, degradation, and drought, at national and international levels
  - c) Providing evidence of the important role of GSRs in food production, biodiversity conservation and the sequestration and storage of carbon and thus in climate change mitigation
- 3) Identify successful GSR restoration approaches (tools and enabling conditions) that address ecological, cultural, and social needs, in particular:**
  - a) Improve the selection of tools for restoration so that they distinguish important GSR ecosystems that require conservation
  - b) Avoid and remove perverse incentives for countries addressing targets, including the risk of afforestation of ecologically significant GSRs with plantations<sup>44,45,46</sup>
- 4) Agree measurable targets for GSR restoration as a component of LDN:**
  - a) Targets for carbon sequestration in the 250 million ha of farmland already committed by countries towards the UNCCD LDN targets
  - b) Targets for restoration of natural GSR ecosystems, inside and outside protected and conserved areas

**This policy brief is in alignment with:**

- The UN's 2026 International Year of Rangelands & Pastoralists (IYRP)<sup>47</sup>
- The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration<sup>48, 49</sup>
- The IUCN's resolution on Protecting and restoring endangered grassland and savannah ecosystems<sup>50</sup>

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