

**TITLE:** The social context of land degradation ("desertification") in dry regions.

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**ABSTRACT:** The discussion of the links between desertification and population growth focused on the social processes that contributed to land degradation in dry regions. These social factors included the issues of poverty, labor shortages, and income inequalities. The case studies in Kenya, Sudan, and India focused on the inequalities in land distribution and the importance of time series analysis in understanding environmental degradation. In countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, Kenya, and the Sudan, programs to correct desertification compound the problems through sedentarization, individual land titling that benefits African and India elites, and "rolling back" of common property systems. Policy makers continue these programs in the absence of academic knowledge directed to policy formation and strategies for land management. Donors have been influenced by strong political interests and citizen pressure groups based on archaic assumptions. Behnke and Scoones summarized conference proceedings which were useful to decision makers on dryland ecologies and appropriate development action. A major need was identified as the redirection of policy and thinking about drylands to social and development concerns in positive ways, rather than in the war-like language of "combatting environmental degradation" as if there were no human element. Research studies should include examination of local people's perceptions of environmental degradation and actions that would influence welfare. A herdsman may consider degradation to be declining milk yields from dairy herds or time spent gathering fuelwood. Research directions should also focus on restructuring labor relationships and the effect on resource use. The question is whether management of natural resources is conducted more carefully when the material gain is enhanced. Environmental problems should be treated as epitomizing conditions of social and economic underdevelopment and poverty: human concerns rather than a narrowly defined land preservation perspective.

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