Three critical factors

by the Drylands Development Centre

THE PROSPECTS for the East and Southern African drylands need to be seen in the context of recent history and the changes that have occurred in the realms of policy, economic and social conditions and the environment.

In the arena of public policy, all the countries in East and Southern Africa have developed their National Action Plans to implement the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). However, most have not been implemented due to lack of capacity and resources and a failure to integrate these plans into national budgetary and planning frameworks.

Most countries have developed either Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers or separate Poverty Reduction Strategies that outline their objectives, policies and intended measures. Countries have also committed themselves to developing Millennium Development Strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, but few of these have been incorporated in their National Action Plans to combat desertification.

On the economic front, poverty is still prevalent in these countries. In sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, some 323 million people – almost 30 per cent of the total population - live on less than one dollar a day. According to UNDP’s Human Development Index, the conditions of life have worsened in countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

As for poverty reduction, the drylands have received low priority in allocation of development resources and have benefited from little or no investment. Their contribution to national economies has often not been properly documented and many mobile herders are unable to use banking facilities, even where they exist, which in turn has led to poor investment.

At family level, the process of social change from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ is having a direct impact on the roles of both men and women. In general, these changes have meant a greater burden for women in the drylands, with more work and responsibilities.

While people have struggled valiantly to accommodate these changes, the natural environment has not been kind. Over the last 30 years, the incidence of drought in East and Southern Africa has increased both in frequency and severity – and in the past 15-20 years drought has triggered food crises across the region. For example, in 2006 Kenya experienced one of its worst droughts, affecting three and a half million people. The severe human consequences were due in part to low rainfall, but also to a history of under-investment and the absence of government policy for the development of arid and semi-arid areas.
Challenges ahead
Three of the biggest challenges facing East and Southern Africa in the foreseeable future relate to climate change, land tenure and HIV/AIDS.

With respect to climate change, recent analysis indicates that under a high emissions scenario, temperatures will rise by up to 7°C in Southern Africa by the 2080s, compared with a global average rise of 4°C. The poorest, as usual, would be hardest hit by the resultant increase in disease and decline in agricultural production.

As in other parts of Africa, there is a prospect of increasing conflict – notably but not exclusively between pastoralists and sedentary farmers – over land tenure issues and access to other natural resources. Separating out the reasons for tenure insecurity may shed light on how best to approach conflict mediation, as well as providing clues as to how powerful interests can be contained in order to achieve wider social benefit.

The grim toll of HIV/AIDS means that by 2025 East and Southern Africa will have a working-age population (20-59 years) of only 38 million, compared with the 63.5 million that would have been expected without the disease. Apart from long-term population growth rates, this has major implications for employment, land-to-person ratios in small-holder farming sectors, food production and cropping patterns.

The increasing incidence of AIDS-related illnesses and deaths is already changing the demands for services across sectors and undermining the capacity of households to cope with the consequences of the epidemic.

UNDP’s Drylands Development Centre, located in Nairobi, assists countries in the world’s arid zones to fight poverty and promote development. Founded in 1973 as the UN Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), it changed its name and moved from New York to Nairobi in 2001.

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