



University of Natural Resources
and Life Sciences, Vienna
Centre for Development Research

Global Discourse, 19 November 2015, 6 pm

Event summary: Soils don't cry

Worldwide 20 million ha of fertile land are lost every year due to land degradation, drought or desertification. An astounding number of 168 countries report that they are affected by land degradation. More than one third of the African continent and 16% of Europe. These are some of the facts **Franz Breitwieser from the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** presented in his introduction to the CDR Global Discourse "Soils don't cry". The event attracted a well-informed and critical audience engaging in an emotional debate on the nature of soil, the valorisation of natural resources in order to avoid land degradation, and issues of power in the debate about who are the main culprits of soil erosion.

When **Michael Hauser (CDR)** engaged the audience in a poll whether soil was male or female, the vote was not unanimous. It is important to determine how sick our soils actually are, but whether we are able to read the signs correctly is debatable. Michael continued to ask along these lines whether soil had the ability to express itself – is it able to cry? A surprise demonstration of the sounds of different soils provided further input for reflection on the ability of soil to communicate.

On the podium **Waltraud Rabitsch (Austrian Development Agency - ADA)** and **Mark Schauer (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ)** discussed issues of land degradation from their respective backgrounds: Waltraud Rabitsch is an expert in poverty reduction, rural development and decentralization at ADA, while Mark Schauer is the coordinator of **ELD (The Economics of Land Degradation Initiative)** at GIZ. The core message of ELD: sustainable land management pays off - it is simply the cheaper option.

Waltraud Rabitsch reported that African countries are facing serious challenges regarding soil erosion, having severe impacts on **food security**. In response to Michael Hauser's question about other factors, she explained that social and demographic aspects, land tenure / access to land, land grabbing, impacts of climate change etc. also influence food security. Land grabbing is of high concern as it has additional detrimental consequences such as forced migration and displacement of people.



Michael Hauser introduces the panel (© Roschinsky/CDR)



Does soil cry? (© Roschinsky/CDR)



Waltraud Rabitsch points out the issue of food security (© Roschinsky/CDR)



Smallholder farmers are often blamed as the main culprits for soil degradation. In Ethiopia large-scale investors can lease much land yet with few conditions, they are presumed to be the “modern, good” farmers. On the other hand, smallholder farmers are often blamed for the consequences of “outdated farming practices”. However, to what extent this presumption holds true is highly questionable. Narratives of soil erosion are put to the front of the political debate, while the wider political connotations are largely blended out. Land degradation is a highly political issue, and powerful actors are using the debates to drive forward their own agendas.

The reaction of the audience to a short video by ELD was highly critical. The video wanted to convey the message that land degradation has severe economic implications. By using economic arguments, ELD wants to influence decision-makers to allocate more funds to combatting land degradation. However, many of the people joining the debate disagreed with this apparent valorisation of soil. Rather clear regulations on soil quality should be put in place. The market cannot solve the problem alone; and too much focus on economic aspects may even create new, additional problems. Mark Schauer clarifies that ELD does not support valorisation, and that ELD is seeking a demarcation from large transnational cooperations, which could use ELD’s economic arguments for their own cause.

The final round of discussion referred to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Franz Breitwieser explained that on a policy level the foreign ministry, ADA and other ministries have already agreed on a common ground and embraced the SDGs. However, he also pointed out that they were not as far as having concrete actions on the ground. What makes the SDGs different from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is their relevance for all countries, not only for so called developing countries. Austria will be judged on how it is implementing the SDGs. Mark pointed out the relevance the SDGs have for land degradation as they are aiming at a “land degradation neutral world”. This puts pressure on those countries who signed to pursue this concept until 2030 - and he also expects this topic to be taken up at the Climate Change conference in Paris in December 2015.

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Hastings Chiwasa points out the needs of poor farmers (© Roschinsky/CDR)



Mark Schauer explains what ELD is about and how it can be abused by powerful actors (© Roschinsky/CDR)



Franz Breitwieser explains how the SDGs will be implemented in Austria (© Roschinsky/CDR)