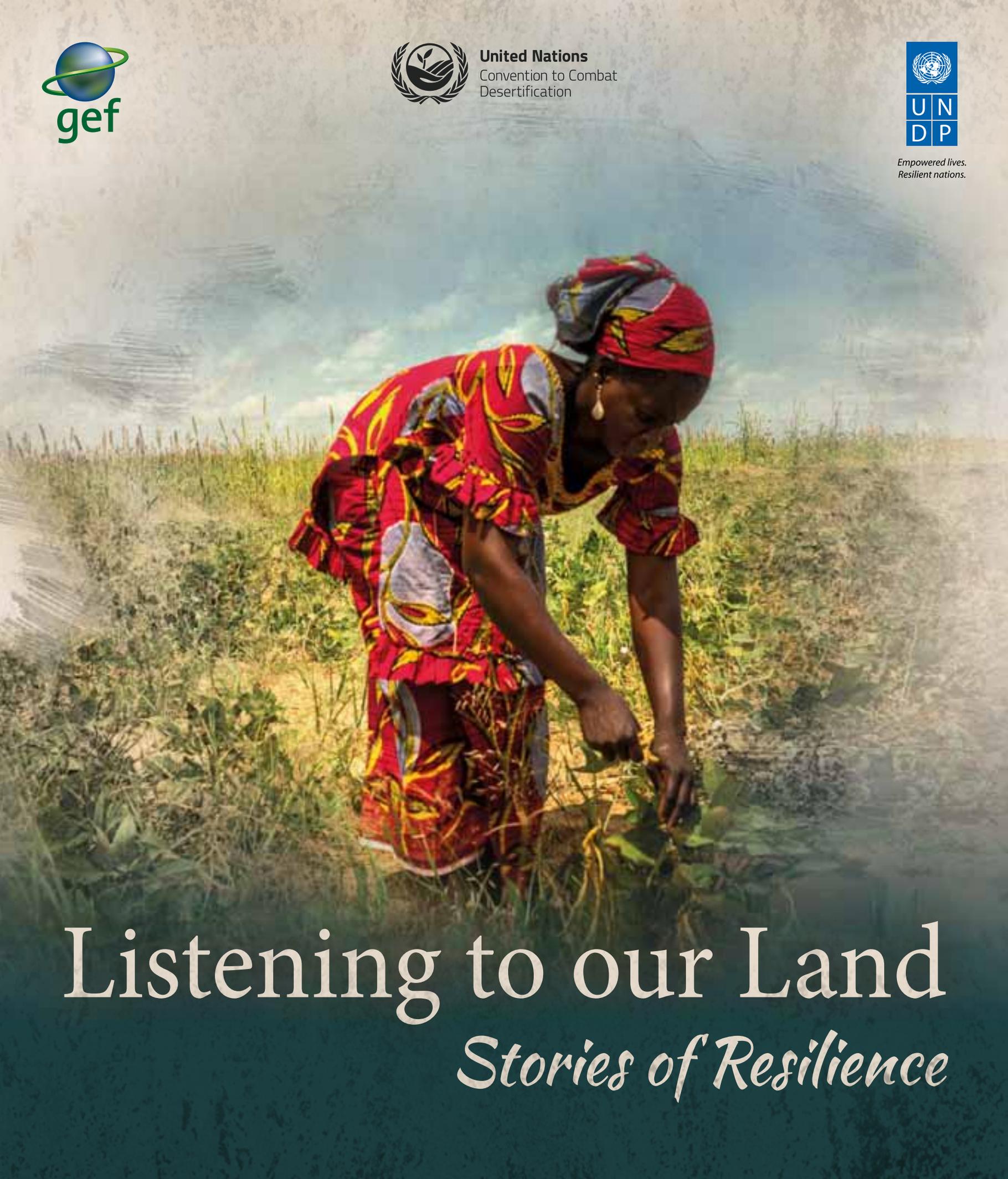




**United Nations**  
Convention to Combat  
Desertification

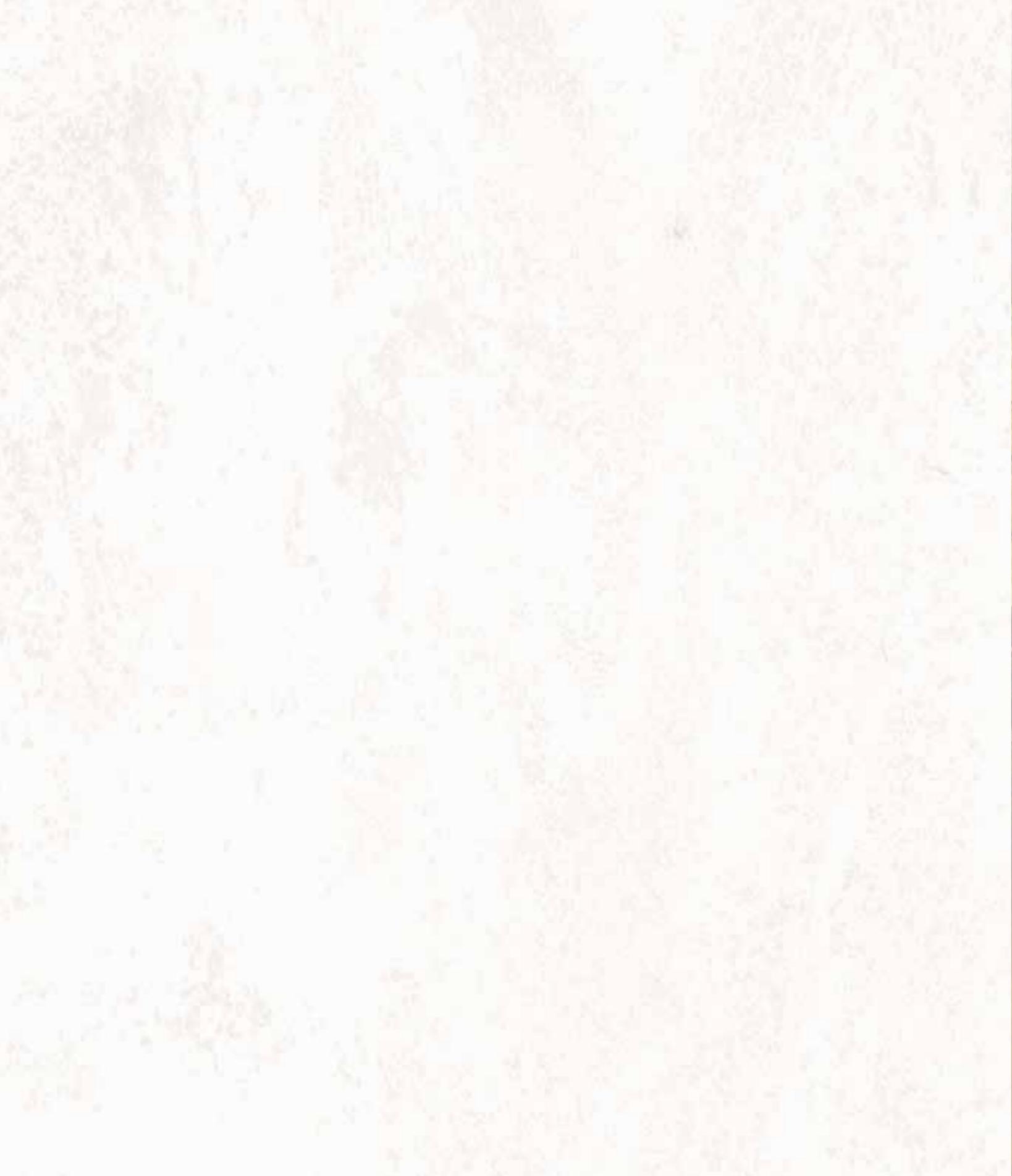


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Resilient nations.



# Listening to our Land

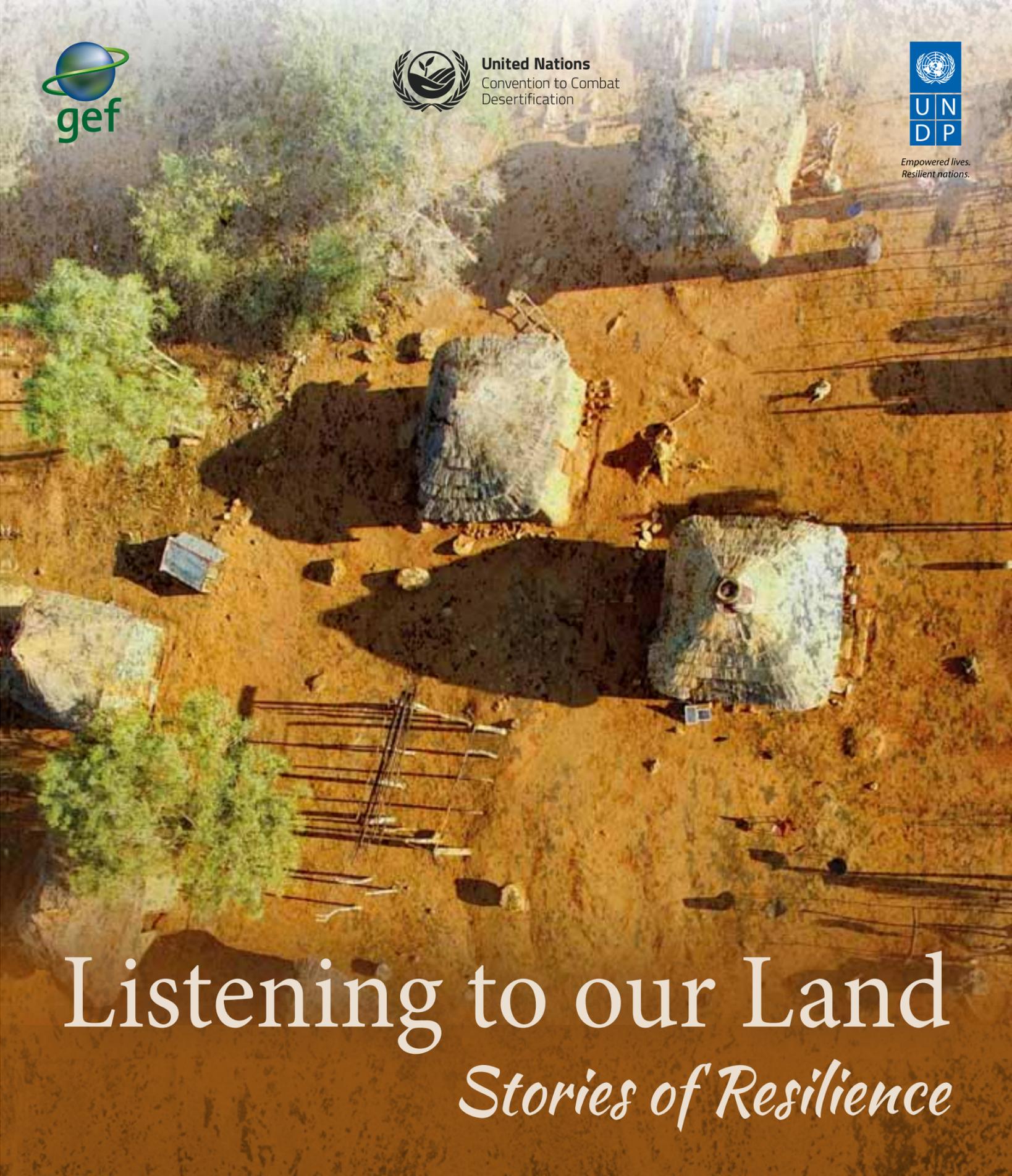
## *Stories of Resilience*



United Nations  
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Desertification



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.



# Listening to our Land

*Stories of Resilience*



UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in more than 170 countries and territories, we offer global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations. [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)

Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.



The Global Environment Facility (GEF) was established on the eve of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to help tackle our planet's most pressing environmental problems. Since then, the GEF has provided over \$17 billion in grants and mobilized an additional \$88 billion in financing for more than 4000 projects in 170 countries. Today, the GEF is an international partnership of 183 countries, international institutions, civil society organizations and the private sector that addresses global environmental issues. [www.thegef.org](http://www.thegef.org)



**United Nations**  
Convention to Combat  
Desertification

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is the only legally binding international agreement on land issues. The Convention promotes good land stewardship. Its 196 Parties aim, through partnerships, to

implement the Convention and achieve Sustainable Development Goals. The end goal is to protect our land from over-use and drought, so it can continue to provide us all with food, water and energy. By sustainably managing land and striving to achieve land degradation neutrality, now and in the future, we will reduce the impacts of climate change, avoid conflict over natural resources and help communities thrive. [www2.unccd.int](http://www2.unccd.int)

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# Foreword

Productive land is a critical natural asset for rural communities in developing nations, providing them with a wide range of ecosystem resources, such as water, fertile soils, plant and genetic diversity – on which they depend daily for survival. For many communities, the land is also an integral part of their cultural identity, helping to maintain social cohesion and stability, in addition to building resilience to socio-ecological shocks and risks such as those caused by climate change. But land is a vulnerable resource that must be managed and restored to ensure a sustainable future.

Globally, land degradation adversely affects approximately two billion hectares of land – about one quarter of all landscapes that are under human use. The deterioration of soil fertility, loss of forest cover, and erosion of rangelands causes biodiversity loss and compromises the flow of ecosystem services that enable food production and support the livelihoods of millions of people. If current trends in land degradation are not reversed, an estimated 135 million people may be displaced by 2045 because of desertification, with cascading social, economic, and environmental consequences.

The scale of the problem is immense, but so is our determination and commitment to address it. We believe that the tools we have at our disposal for addressing land degradation are better now than ever before – the stories in this book are evidence of that.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a financial mechanism for implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Since 2006, the GEF has invested more than US\$876 million in over 190 programmes and projects that encourage Sustainable Land Management (SLM) as a comprehensive and socially-inclusive way to improve land stewardship in support of achieving multiple goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In particular, SDG target 15.3, to combat desertification and restore degraded land and soil, provides the core vehicle for this effort. As an implementing agency of the GEF, and as a key partner for

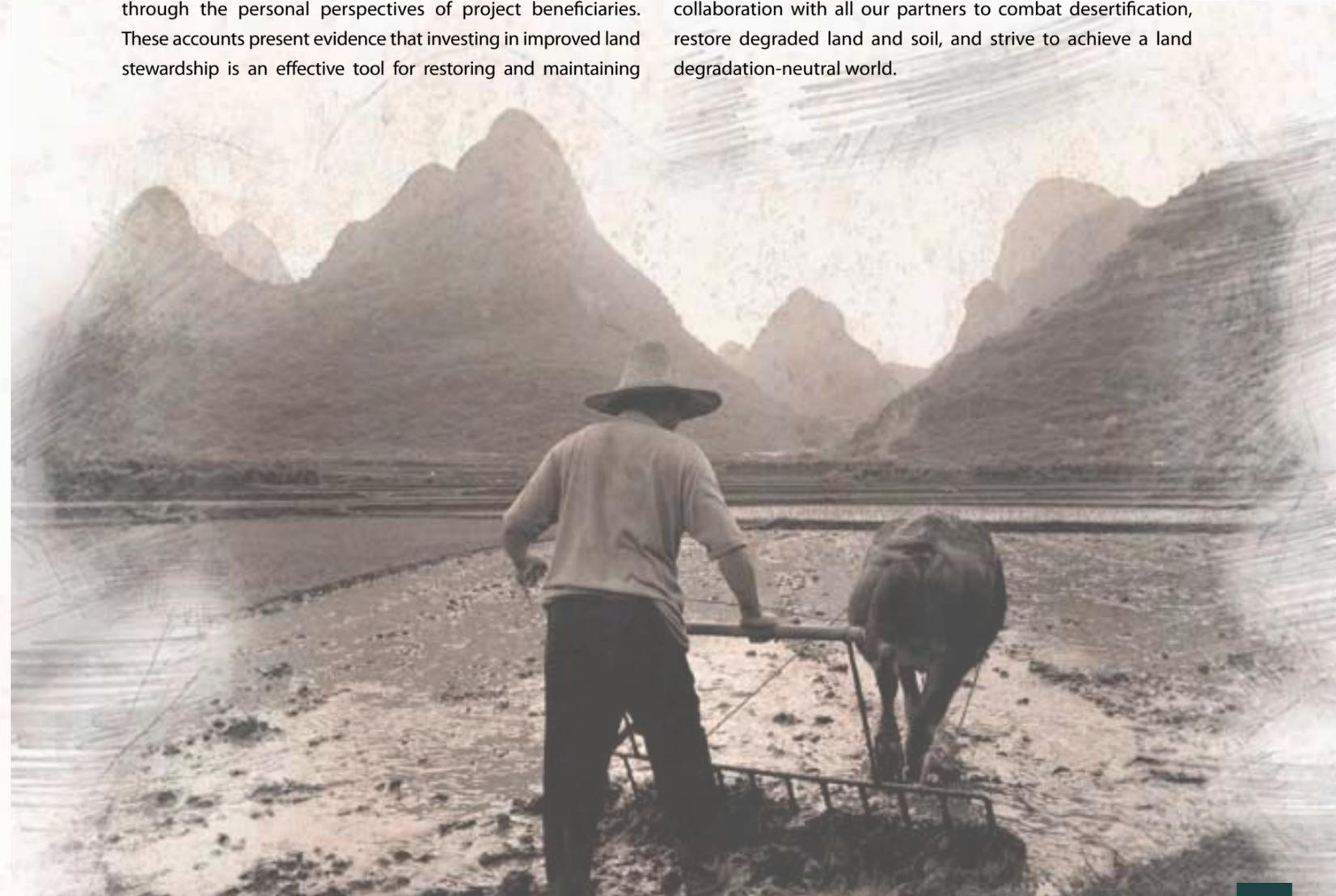
the UNCCD, UNDP currently provides support to implement 85 SLM projects in 53 countries, with a total resource envelope of about US\$357 million and leveraging co-financing in the order of US\$1.38 billion. This work is complemented by local and community-led efforts, supported by the UNDP-managed Equator Initiative and the GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP).

This publication tells stories of people's work on the land. Through descriptions of their relationship with their land and their efforts to improve its quality through sustainable land management practices, this book highlights the impacts of SLM projects supported by UNDP and funded by the GEF in eight selected countries. Each story has been chosen to demonstrate the effectiveness of a particular approach to SLM, reflected through the personal perspectives of project beneficiaries. These accounts present evidence that investing in improved land stewardship is an effective tool for restoring and maintaining

productivity and resilience of the land, strengthening adaptation to climate change, reducing conflict over natural resources, and helping communities thrive.

These stories also show that SLM ensures that meeting future needs for fuel, food and fibre is possible without degrading the finite land resource base. This is the concept of Land Degradation Neutrality, to which parties to the UNCCD committed in 2016. UNDP has recently formed a partnership with the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, to provide technical support for reducing or reversing land degradation through the newly established Land Degradation Neutrality Fund.

UNDP and the GEF are fully committed to continue the collaboration with all our partners to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.





# *Introduction*

Land: our home, our future

## Land degradation: global trends

- During the last 40 years, nearly one third of the world's fertile topsoil has been lost to erosion, and top soil loss continues at a rate of more than 10 million hectares per year
- Up to 40 percent of the world's agricultural land is seriously degraded
- Two thirds of land in Africa is impacted by land degradation (affecting at least 485 million people, or 65% of the population of the continent)
- Globally, up to 5% of potential agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) is being lost due to land degradation

Sources: [www.thegef.org](http://www.thegef.org); [www2.unccd.int](http://www2.unccd.int)



Since the earliest times, people have depended on land, and the resources it provides, to meet their basic needs and support productive and peaceful lives. In turn, human activities have played an integral part in shaping landscapes and ecosystems – even some landscapes considered wild and 'pristine' bear hidden evidence of past human settlement or use, such as ancient ruins, stone tools, shards of pottery, and iron-smelting sites.

In the modern context, land resources are the basis of production activities that contribute to food security, provide employment, and shape the development path of a country. People are potent agents of change, and their development choices and land-use practices inevitably impact, to some extent or another, on biodiversity and the capacity of ecosystems to provide the goods and services on which a sustainable future depends.

Today, the impact of human activities on the Earth's ecosystems is all too evident. Burgeoning population growth, over-consumption, intensive agricultural practices, the use of damaging extractive technologies, growing conflict over rights to land, forced migration of people, and increasingly unpredictable and extreme climatic patterns, are pushing the planet to its limits, causing land degradation on a vast scale.

### Land degradation: a barrier to sustainable development

Land degradation now affects about one quarter of the world's land area, with direct impacts on the health, well-being and livelihoods of an estimated 1.5 billion people – many of whom are rural, poor and directly dependent on nature to meet their daily subsistence and livelihood needs. Land degradation also leads to loss of biological diversity, which, itself, holds enormous value for all societies.

Historically, many rural communities have a deep connection with their land, and have evolved traditional systems of land stewardship that are sensitive to the environment. But, balancing consumption of natural resources with the capacity of the Earth to provide them, is growing increasingly difficult –

especially as changing lifestyles, altered market forces, and pervasive poverty drives people to adopt coping responses that cause biodiversity loss and damage to ecosystems, and deplete the productive capacity of land.

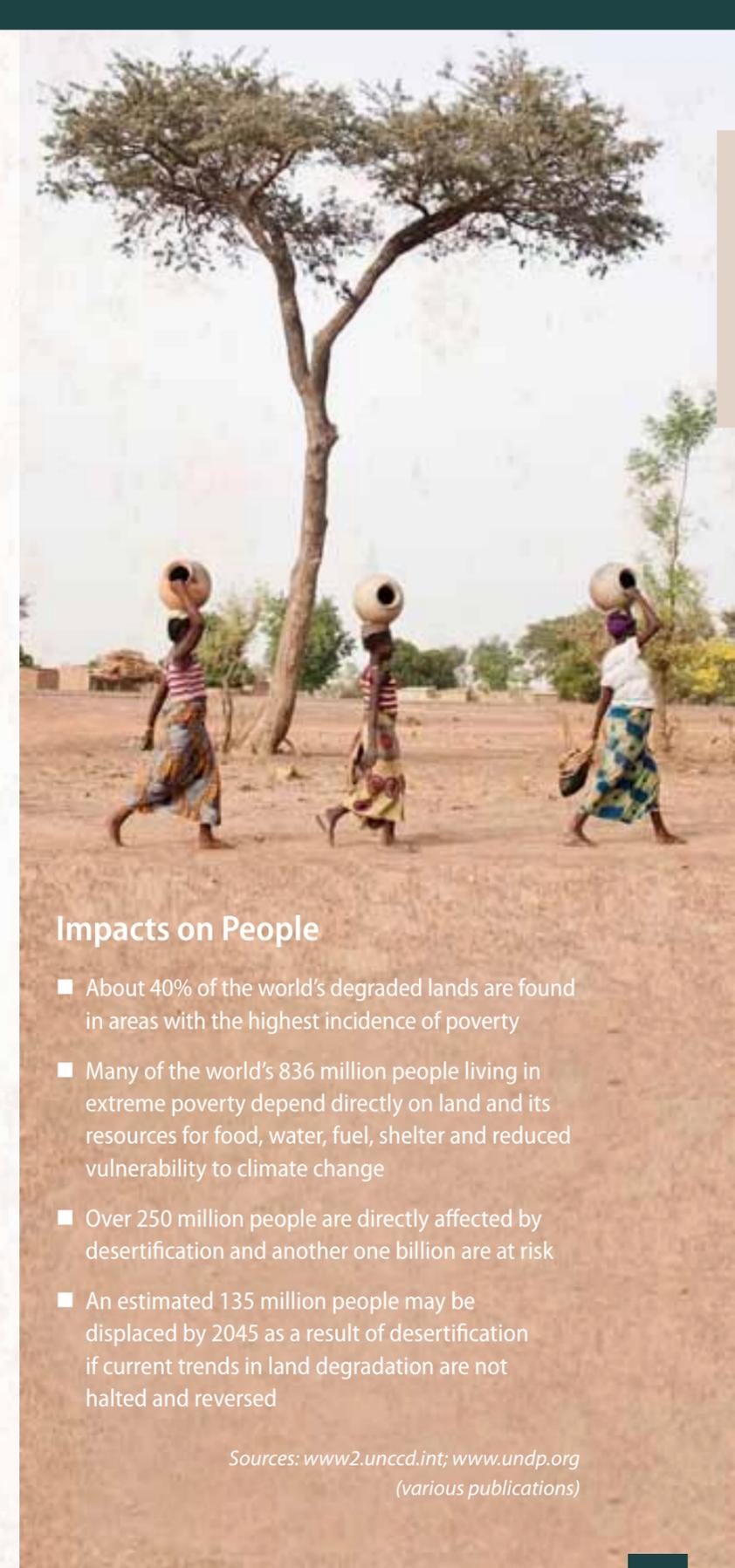
Land degradation is a barrier to sustainable development that destabilizes communities by causing food shortages and social insecurity, making people vulnerable to environmental and economic shocks and disturbances, including those caused by climate change. Land degradation is also a driver of forced migration, when people abandon lands that have become unproductive. In turn, it is worsened by large-scale movement and re-settlement of people linked to natural and social disasters, such as famine, floods and civil war.

Society can choose how to respond to these challenges.

### Finding practical solutions

Currently, the global cost of land degradation reaches about US\$490 billion per year – much higher than the cost of action to prevent it. Despite concerted efforts by the international community and national governments, degradation of the world's ecosystems continues apace and there is an urgent need to scale-up corrective action and make it more effective.

For many countries, the challenge of preventing and reducing land degradation comes down to a trade-off between meeting people's immediate needs (or the country's short term goals for economic growth), and investing in long-term sustainability (of both the environment and social well-being). Sustainable Land Management (SLM) offers a comprehensive approach to the management and governance of land resources that makes significant and lasting differences in the near future and over the long term. SLM provides a diversity of practical tools for managing soil, water, vegetation and animal resources in ways that are ecologically sound, socially and culturally sensitive, and cost-effective. It also promotes a land stewardship mindset that aims to integrate people's co-existence with nature over the long term, so that the provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services of ecosystems are ensured.



### Impacts on People

- About 40% of the world's degraded lands are found in areas with the highest incidence of poverty
- Many of the world's 836 million people living in extreme poverty depend directly on land and its resources for food, water, fuel, shelter and reduced vulnerability to climate change
- Over 250 million people are directly affected by desertification and another one billion are at risk
- An estimated 135 million people may be displaced by 2045 as a result of desertification if current trends in land degradation are not halted and reversed

Sources: [www2.unccd.int](http://www2.unccd.int); [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)  
(various publications)

In most developing countries, SLM opens up multiple opportunities, both for restoring health to the environment and bolstering the livelihoods and quality of life of the people who depend on it. SLM enables farmers to enhance the productivity of their land and maximise yields, without degrading land and water resources, or causing negative downstream impacts. It also ensures improved management of agro-ecosystem services across production systems, reduces pressure on land resources, and helps improve and sustain economic productivity. Many countries are willing and ready to adopt SLM approaches, but face economic, institutional or other kinds of barriers to doing so, and lack the knowledge and technological innovations to overcome them.

### UNDPs support for Sustainable Land Management

Promoting SLM is a key strategy identified in UNDPs Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework (2012 -2020), which guides its work to harness the potential of well-managed ecosystems to support sustainable development. Under Signature Programme 1, UNDP is committed to stepping-up efforts to integrate sustainable ecosystem management into development planning and production activities, in order to maintain ecosystem services, safeguard biodiversity and sustain societies. As part of this process, UNDP, in partnership with the GEF, helps countries to implement the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to achieve simultaneous environmental and social benefits.

### Listening to our Land: Stories of Resilience

This publication features eight stories drawn from countries across the world, to demonstrate how addressing land degradation through SLM promotes the objectives of the UNCCD and contributes to achievement of multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through the experiences of people who earn their livelihoods by tending the land, the stories

reflect how SLM is improving living conditions of communities and strengthening environmental resilience. They also highlight the importance of improved land stewardship in striving to achieve land degradation neutrality (LDN), by restoring productivity and fertility to degraded land and preventing future degradation. This is the essence of target 15.3 under SDG 15 (Life on Land), which works towards meeting growing demands for food, water and other land resources, without depleting the systems that provide them.

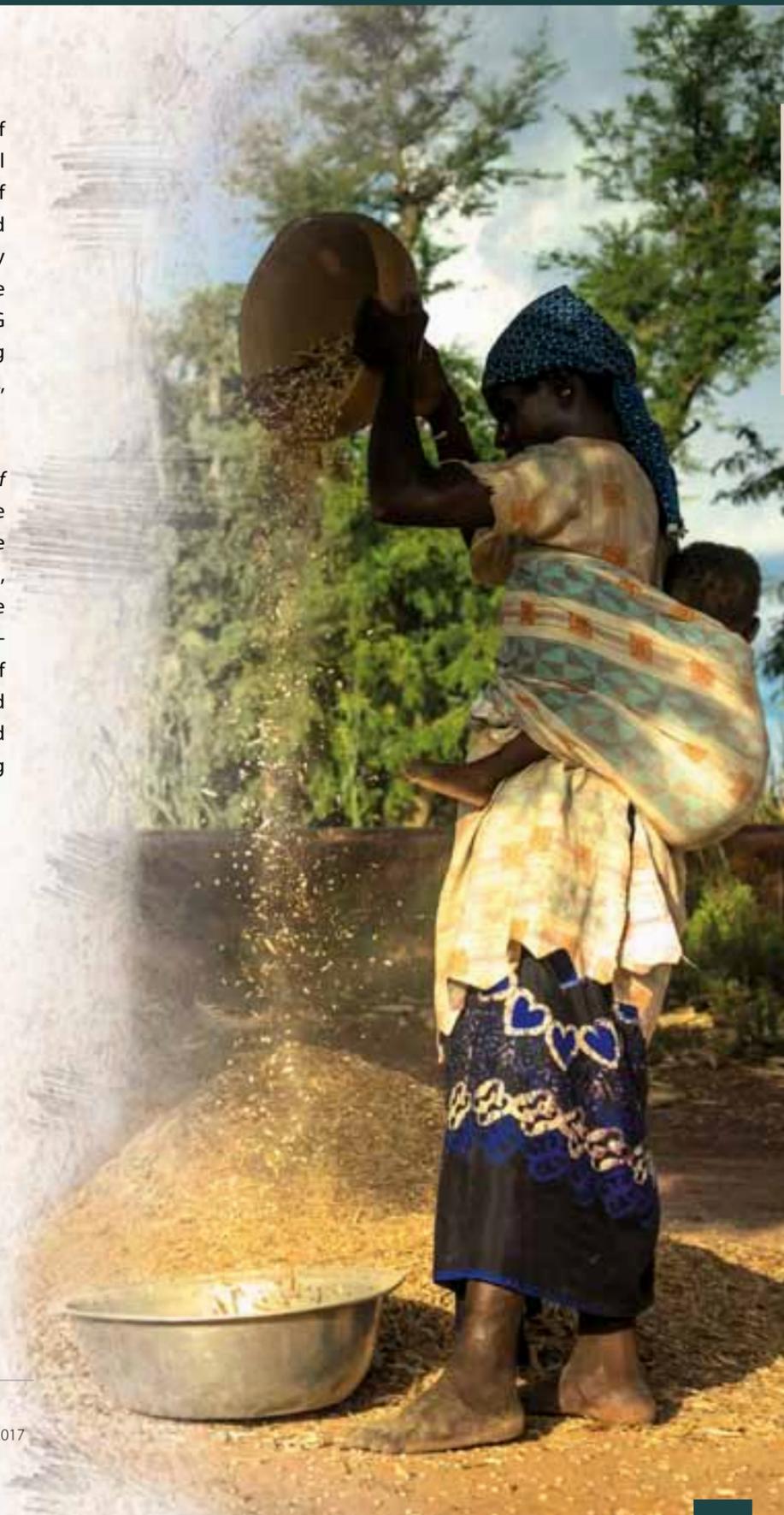
The common thread running through these 'Stories of Resilience' is that SLM has wide scope to provide multiple benefits that empower people and nations to restore life to their land, accelerate inclusive social transformation, reduce resource-use conflicts, and cope with the disturbances created by natural disasters and socio-political crises. These benefits are presented at the back of the book in 'balance sheets' that reflect how the featured projects contribute to achieving targets under SDG 15 and other SDGs, and build strong partnerships for attaining 'the Future we Want.'

“... Land needs to be remembered, needs to be listened to, needs to know we can still speak its language.”

– ABORIGINAL ELDER, AUSTRALIA\*

\* Source: www.CreativeSpirits.info

Aboriginal culture - Land - Meaning of land to Aboriginal people, August 2017



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