Making the Case for Rangelands to Become the Poster Child of the SDGs

The SDGs are a collection of 17 ambitious goals to transform the world by 2030 and create a sustainable future for all. They are founded on the indivisibility of the goals at the world by 2030 and create a sustainable future for all. They are founded on the indivisibility of the goals at the

Interconnected Blueprints or Goals to Pick and Choose?

There may be a goal dedicated specifically to restoring degraded rangelands (SDG 15.3). “By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world); but, this goal alone is not enough to sustainably develop rangeland landscapes. And never was it supposed to be. Without, for instance, striving to end poverty (SDG 1), reduce inequalities (SDG 10) and combat climate change (SDG 13), efforts to restore rangelands will fail short of their target because they will not contribute to inclusive, prosperous societies and a thriving planet. Practically speaking, though, it is not always easy to work with such an interconnected approach. All too often, political agendas and personal preferences get in the way. Leading organisations and government bodies to pick and choose individual goals to champion. This makes it harder for practitioners and researchers to use the SDGs as an interconnected tool because their hand is being forced by directives to choose one single goal. Accordingly, a clear visual of their interconnectedness is needed to keep the indivisibility of the goals at the front of peoples’ minds.

Rangelands: Interconnected Landscapes

The world is a complex place and it is not always easy to visualise how the broad-sweeping, abstract SDGs should play out in real life, let alone interact. How do we know that conservation efforts don’t exclude local communities from natural resources? Or pasture restoration won’t lead to inter-ethnic conflict? Or more economic opportunities for women won’t negatively affect childcare? For the world to get behind the SDGs and really push for interconnected change, we need a clear image of how people, profits and the planet are intertwined. This paper argues that rangelands provide an ideal focal point. Rangelands are inherently interconnected environments in which “people, planet and profits” are inextricably linked; to understand any aspect of a rangeland environment, you need to take an interconnected approach to understand how all the moving parts fit together. The people who live on rangelands, their economic systems and the environment are inextricably linked and any changes in one will have a domino effect on the others: an ecological change can lead to major disruptions to social dynamics, and vice versa. In East Africa, where communal grazing is commonplace, desertification forces herders onto the pastures of neighbouring communities and can lead to inter-ethnic conflict over resources (Anderson & Bollig, 2016). Concurrently, the shift from a livestock to a cash economy has led to sederatisation among many pastoralists and the subsequent demarcation of land for monocultures like maize, in turn accelerating biodiversity loss and pasture degradation (Reid et al., 2004). In short: people effect the environment, and the environment effects people.

Reaching the Goals from the Bottom

Achieving the SDGs for rangeland communities means respecting their interconnectedness: sustaining high quality ecosystems (“environmental sustainability”); developing equitable market infrastructures (“economic sustainability”) and encouraging inclusive, cohesive communities (“social sustainability”). Every rangeland is unique yet shares a common interconnectedness: they all have their own challenges and opportunities determined by the interplay of their specific social, economic and ecological dimensions. So attaining prosperous, healthy and just rangelands requires unique solutions born out of the landscape and adapted to meet the specific needs of the local community. This necessarily calls for bottom-up development efforts that work within the existing parameters of the social-ecological landscape in question and draw on local knowledge. And this calls for “localising” the SDGs, or “making the aspirations of the SDGs become real to communities, households and individuals, particularly to those who are at risk of falling behind” (Steiner, 2017). Rather than imposing standardised, top-down solutions, collective global efforts ought to prioritise finding, funding and supporting sustainable, localised solutions on the ground. “Bottom-up” means starting with an ethnographic understanding of the local context and working upwards to build policies and agendas that are flexible enough to apply to the unique circumstances of each given environment. If harnessed effectively, scientific evidence has the potential to guide policy and development projects and evaluate their impact. However, “expert” scientific knowledge alone is not enough. The effective implementation of localised solutions requires the local knowledge of the community and local organisations.

Conclusion

The inherent interconnectedness of the SDGs matches fairly well with the interconnectedness of the planet and offers a tangible tool to navigate complexity. However, when they are interpreted as a top-down construction designed to fill numerous development arenas, they are intrinsically vague and abstract; too easy to misinterpret or be read as a menu of individual goals from which governments can “pick and choose”. To live up to their potential and foster holistic, inclusive change, it is upon the SDGs encourage grounded decision-making (and research) that appreciates the unique nature of every social-ecological landscape. A clear visual of the goals in the real world goes a long way to keeping them grounded, taking them out of the abstract domain of development discourse and anchoring them in the challenges and complexities of real people. Rangelands offer an ideal candidate for such a real world image. The indisputable interdependence of people and the environment provides fertile ground for showcasing the interconnectedness of the SDGs whilst simultaneously raising the profile of rangelands in global conversations on sustainable development.

References


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