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Land degradation: Why our daily choices matter



An Egyptian farmer holds a handful of soil to show the dryness of the land due to drought in a farm formerly irrigated by the river Nile, in Al-Dakahlya. REUTERS/Mohamed Abd El Ghany

Jun. 17, 2018 | 09:06 PM

Mohammad al-Hamdi | The Daily Star

“Land has true value. Invest in it.” That is the theme of this year’s World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, marked on June 17. The Arab region suffers from high levels of dryness, with the desertification of 70 to 80 percent of its land.

Most of its countries rank below the poverty line in water resources, with more than half of the Arab population facing severe water scarcity. To what extent can our daily choices support the future of our planet?

The causes of land degradation are numerous and include rapid population growth and urbanization, unsustainable use of natural resource, continued agricultural expansion and intensification, overgrazing of pasture lands, wind and water erosion, soil compaction through human activities, water pollution, groundwater depletion, destruction of biodiversity and sand dune encroachment, to name but a few.

Land water resources are limited with the average per capita share of arable land at less than 0.17 hectares, with more than half of the Arab population living on less than 500 cubic meters of water per year – well below the water stress level of 1,000 cubic meters.

It is anticipated that these essential resources will keep decreasing as populations and cities grow, resources degrade and deplete, and climate change settles in.

Another major cause of land degradation which can no longer be overlooked are facets of our modern lifestyle that include shopping habits, settlement choices, resource-consumption patterns, waste generation and the creation of various recreational activities.

These excesses are often taken for granted despite the significant negative impacts they have on the environment and dwindling land and water resources.

According to United Nations sources, most countries of the region are consuming well beyond their biocapacity or internal ability to generate resources and absorb waste, with some consuming well over 10 times their internal capacity, alongside a lack of adequate legislations.

As consumers, we have often been prioritizing convenience over environmental responsibility as seen by the number of nondegradable plastic bags used every day with little consideration about their long-term effects.

Many people who can also opt to upgrade their electronics on a regular basis, be it mobile phones, laptops, televisions or microwaves.

This is leading to unsustainable consumption patterns characterized, among others, by a substantial increase in waste generation.

When this “e-waste” is not recycled properly, harmful components are released as pollutants into the air or soil.

Meanwhile, we have also grown accustomed to carrying food and beverages in waxed or plasticized containers. In addition to environmental effects, this “convenience” can expose us to a fluorinated chemical compound associated with increased risks on fertility, child development, hormone production and balance, the immune system and elevated cholesterol levels as well as cancers.

Other examples of fluorinated products include popcorn bags, pizza boxes, nonstick cookware, stain-resistant upholstery and fabrics, water-resistant clothing, many cleaning and personal care products (such as shampoo or dental floss) paints and sealants.

Once discarded, these products contaminate our land and water resources, with their hazard increasing as they accumulate in the environment.

Unfortunately, most degrade slowly; it is estimated that newspapers and most kitchen waste degrade in three to four weeks, wax paper and cigarette butts in three months, painted wood in 10 years, plastic bags and leather products in 100 years, aluminum cans in 200-500 years, some plastic bottles in up to 1,000 years, while chewing gum is nonbiodegradable. It is also important to consider the other resources used for their production and the greenhouse gases emitted during that process.

Nevertheless, this can be reversed though encouraging and replicating small but meaningful steps in the right direction, ones that would include smart choices and decisions in our everyday life regarding what we produce, what we purchase and how we consume.

These habits can have a dramatic impact on the sustainability of our natural resources so current and future generations can enjoy their fruits and benefits. However, this must go hand in hand with stronger environmental legislation and enforcement to prevent illegal waste dumping and ensure proper waste collection.

For the past 23 years, the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought has served to raise awareness on how strong community involvement and cooperation at all levels can support “land degradation neutrality”— an issue of great concern to the Arab region given its geographical location and prevailing and projected climatic conditions.

The lead international organization on these efforts, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, declared, “Land has true value. Invest in it,” as the theme to stress that we are all decision-makers and our daily choices have consequences.

Livelihoods and communities around the region can be revitalized through good stewardship of land and water resources, as exemplified by striving agricultural communities in desert areas in Algeria and Egypt despite their own challenges.

Given available knowledge, what can we do to improve resource-use efficiency – more output per input – while minimizing waste generation?

There is a wide range of daily smart choices and decisions we can adopt including, for example, favoring organic products, which are grown with minimal impact on the environment; buying items that have been sustainably produced or that support sustainability, such as those certified to comply with given specific criteria like green,

animal welfare, forest and water stewardship or sustainable seafood products; and of course adopting environmentally friendly attitudes including reducing purchases, reusing items and recycling products.

The need for urgent action was yesterday, but thankfully it is not too late to make changes that can still have impact.

It is time to initiate intensive awareness-raising campaigns to educate policymakers and the public using a wide range of media and messaging tools.

Each one of us is responsible for setting the example within our communities, households and families by encouraging the adoption of small but incremental changes. It is also necessary to recognize the paramount role that women play in education and attitude change within public and private spheres.

As we celebrate the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, let us recommit to enhancing the environmental stewardship of our planet.

After all, there is no planet B to look forward to after Earth.

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