PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDG LAND DEGRADATION COMMITMENTS

WHERE ARE WE AT?

2025

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IT IS 2025. WHAT HAVE MEMBER STATES ACCOMPLISHED?

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW THE LAND AND SDG MOMENTUM GROUP IS SUPPORTING SDG REPORTING WORK ON LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION
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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 2024 VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REPORTS (VNRS) SUBMITTED BY 36 COUNTRIES TO THE SDG HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM (HLPF) AND THE SDG INDICATORS' GLOBAL DATABASE?[1]

In 2015 when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted, we celebrated world leaders' recognition of the foundational and strategic role that sustainable land management must play in advancing climate resilience, conserving biodiversity, and maintaining sufficient food supplies for all.

We welcomed SDG 15 which aims to "protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss."

With only five years left to achieve the ambitious 2030 agenda, it is important to assess the progress made towards SDG 15: what actions countries have taken to address their ambitious but critical cross-cutting commitments to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.

The powerful platform offered by the SDGs can only fulfill its potential if it prompts timely, real-world interventions. Without narrative insight into why countries have experienced land degradation improvements or setbacks, the data risks becoming abstract. More meaningful VNRs are those that analyze trends, share lessons learned, and describe how effective interventions can play a vital role in achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN). These narratives can guide policy development, align stakeholder efforts and support learning.

Such comprehensive reporting also supports civil society engagement and facilitates targeted advocacy. When governments include detailed accounts of successes and challenges, it enables a more focused and strategic response to land degradation.

Each year a subset of UN member countries submits VNRs on their progress toward implementing the 2030 SDG Agenda. This brief focuses on the actions taken by countries that submitted VNRs to the HLPF in 2024, toward meeting SDG target 15.3, which by 2030 aspires to *"combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world."*

The target 15.3 overlaps significantly with country commitments under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which has led global efforts to combat desertification, land degradation, and drought since its adoption in 1994. As the custodian agency for SDG Indicator 15.3.1 - "the proportion of land that is degraded over total land area", which measures

the progress of the target 15.3, the UNCCD plays a central role in monitoring global progress towards achieving LDN by 2030. According to the UNCCD, this indicator is assessed using a harmonized approach that considers land cover change, land productivity, and carbon stocks[2]. Beyond monitoring, the UNCCD supports countries through technical guidance, education, capacity building, and the exchange of good practices, with the aim of enabling national-level implementation of LDN targets, which, in essence, contribute to achieving the SDG Indicator.

In 2024, 36 countries submitted VNRs. Within the scope of this publication, we reviewed these submissions to understand the steps countries are taking to meet their SDG commitments on land degradation and restoration.

The VNRs submitted in 2024 reveal that while some countries have made meaningful progress in fulfilling their SDG commitments on land degradation and restoration, overall advancement remains uneven. Several nations have engaged in thorough planning, allocated new resources, or enhanced land restoration and sustainable land management efforts with a focus on inclusivity. A select few have enacted ambitious reforms, launched new national programs, or drafted legislation aimed at ensuring long-term impact. Nonetheless, our analysis shows that, despite active initiatives targeting deforestation, efforts addressing land degradation beyond the forestry sector are comparatively limited. Apart from countries experiencing severe desertification, many have yet to prioritize land degradation neutrality, with most having taken only limited action. Even among those with policies and strategies in place, significant challenges remain in scaling these efforts sufficiently to meet the 2030 target of land degradation neutrality.

The following sections provide a detailed account of the progress countries have made toward SDG 15.3 on land degradation neutrality, based on the VNRs submitted and data from the UN SDG Indicator Database, which tracks progress on Indicator 15.3.1.

BACKGROUND ON SOURCES

For the analysis that follows, we have relied on 36 publicly available VNRs submitted for the 2024 High-Level Political Forum by Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belize, Brazil, Chad, Colombia, Republic of the Congo, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Federated States of Micronesia, Georgia, Guinea, Honduras, Kenya, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Libya, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Namibia, Nepal, Oman, Palau, Peru, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, South Sudan, Spain, Uganda, Vanuatu, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

2 UNCCD and UN Statistics Division, ***Metadata for SDG Indicator 15.3.1: Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area***, 2020. Available at: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-15-03-01.pdf

PROGRESS ON SDG LAND DEGRADATION COMMITMENTS: WHAT ACTIONS HAVE COUNTRIES TAKEN?

The majority of the VNRs included references to land, land degradation, or land use. These mentions were often limited to descriptions of the country's context, history, or challenges rather than active steps being taken in the context of meeting SDG 15.3. Thus, to gauge the extent to which governments are moving toward fulfilling their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments, we screened countries' VNRs for two criteria:

- VNRs that report concert actions such as new or revised national strategy, legal or policy reforms, programmatic action, active policy implementation, or similar measures. Many governments described existing policies' goals or aspirational activities, and these are not included below.
- VNRs that report activities that have taken place after the SDGs have been agreed upon and set in motion; that is, since 2015. Important as past actions might be, we sought recent policies or implementation activities.

The summaries below share countries' reported activities that adhere to the criteria described above. We have made no attempt to validate the reports' claims. We want to recognize the following countries for the specific actions that they report taking to reverse land degradation:

- **Azerbaijan**
  The VNR addresses land degradation through related challenges such as salinization, affecting over 20% of agricultural land, and emphasizes the need for improved land and water management, particularly in post-conflict regions. The report highlights sustainable land use efforts in Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur through the establishment of green energy zones and restoration initiatives.
- **Brazil**
  The VNR does not report directly on SDG indicator 15.3.1. However, the report references issues and actions related to land degradation and desertification. Brazil clusters SDG 15 targets into themes including "combating desertification and land degradation," but focuses analysis on targets 15.1, 15.2, and 15.6. The review highlights deforestation, fires, infrastructure development, mining, and urbanization as major drivers of biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. The Brazilian Action Plan to Combat Desertification (PAB) is mentioned as a key policy instrument addressing land degradation and drought effects, aiming to reverse such processes nationally. Additionally, efforts to reduce deforestation and promote restoration such as forest recovery programs and investments in degraded areas are noted, though not presented tied to the specific indicator.

- **Colombia**
  Colombia's 2024 VNR outlines its commitment to tackling land degradation through the introduction of a National Policy for Sustainable Soil Management, which focuses on restoring degraded soils and preventing erosion and salinization. The report highlights ongoing efforts to develop comprehensive soil inventories and assess land use conflicts, particularly those stemming from erosion and emerging salinization challenges. It also notes that national LDN targets are currently in development, although they have not yet been finalized or officially adopted.
- **Costa Rica**
  The VNR does not explicitly reference LDN, but it outlines several relevant initiatives. The country highlights its robust participation in the National Decarbonization Plan, which includes forest restoration and sustainable land use transitions. It also describes the use of Payment for Environmental Services (PES) programs that incentivize landowners to protect forests and watersheds. Additionally, the report notes soil and landscape rehabilitation efforts in degraded areas through erosion control and agroforestry initiatives under the Sustainable Agricultural Transformation project. While Costa Rica monitors forest cover, biodiversity, and ecosystem health using national geospatial platforms, these efforts are not explicitly framed within the context of LDN or SDG 15.3.1.
- **Eritrea**
  Eritrea has implemented a National Sustainable Land Management Framework, which guides interventions such as watershed development, afforestation and reforestation, soil and water conservation, and climate-smart agriculture. These efforts have reportedly contributed to rehabilitating degraded landscapes and increasing vegetation cover, though no quantitative data are provided for SDG 15.3.1. The report also emphasizes community engagement in land restoration and mentions collaboration with development partners, suggesting an integrated and participatory approach to combating land degradation. Overall, while lacking specific indicator data, Eritrea's VNR reflects substantial programmatic commitment to achieving the objectives of SDG 15.3.
- **Honduras**
  The country acknowledges land degradation as a key environmental issue under the scope of SDG 15.3 but does not provide specific data for the indicator 15.3.1. The report highlights pressures on ecosystems due to deforestation, agricultural expansion, and unsustainable land use. In response, Honduras has adopted several measures, including the National Strategy for the Comprehensive Management of Forests, the Forest Law, and the establishment of the Institute for Forest Conservation. Actions mentioned include reforestation, promotion of agroforestry systems, and ecosystem restoration efforts.
- **Kenya**
  The VNR explicitly reports on SDG target 15.3 and provides data for indicator 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of degraded land over total land area. The report indicates that land degradation in Kenya declined significantly from 19.4% in 2019 to 11.4% in 2020 and remained at 11.4% through 2021 and 2022.

» **Mauritius**
Mauritius reports advancing efforts aligned with LDN by integrating biodiversity and land degradation considerations into climate mitigation policies through the Net Zero Nature-Positive Accelerator project, supported by GEF and UNEP. Agroforestry initiatives, such as converting unproductive sugarcane land into endemic forest plantations, are being implemented to restore ecosystems, mitigate land degradation, and enhance climate resilience. These actions reflect a broader national commitment to sustainable land management and ecosystem restoration in response to land degradation challenges.

» **Namibia**
The VNR reports that deforestation and land degradation are contributing to ecosystem losses, prompting the government to expand the number of community forests from 43 to 48, now covering nearly 90,000 km. Afforestation is promoted as "a positive effort in curbing the over-use and destruction of natural forests." Although tree cover declined slightly in 2021, Namibia continues to advance sustainable forest management practices and ecosystem restoration to combat land degradation and enhance climate resilience.

» **Nepal**
The country reports on the scope of SDG indicator 15.3.1 through two related sub-indicators: forest density and the conservation of rivulets and riverbanks through bioengineering. The report notes that forest density remained stagnant at 430 trees per hectare from the baseline, showing no progress, while only 83.6 km of riverbanks had been conserved by 2022 against the baseline in 2015, a figure well below the national target of 5,560 km. Although the report does not provide data on the overall proportion of degraded land or mention land degradation neutrality explicitly, it highlights concerns about land degradation, deforestation, and ecosystem loss. Nepal's efforts include community forestry, habitat restoration, and sustainable land management initiatives, reflecting a broader commitment to addressing land degradation challenges.

» **Palau**
The report explicitly addresses SDG 15.3, noting that 10.77% of the country's land is classified as degraded (UNEP, 2019). Some areas of degradation, such as in Ngardmau, stem from historical land use dating back to the colonial period. While several states have active reforestation programs to restore degraded lands, progress is slow due to poor soil conditions, highlighting ongoing challenges in combating land degradation.

» **Peru**
Peru has experienced a rise in degraded terrestrial ecosystems, with affected areas increasing from approximately 13.7 million hectares in 2015 to nearly 16 million hectares by 2021. Despite having 72.1 million hectares of forest representing 52.9% of its national territory, the country lost 1.85 million hectares of forest between 2010 and 2021. These losses are largely driven by pressures on key ecosystem components such as water resources, soil quality, and biodiversity, particularly in the Amazon region. In response, Peru has enacted multisectoral measures including the approval of the Forest and Wildlife Law, strengthened environmental sanctions, and the creation of conservation areas. Nevertheless, the country continues to face challenges in effective ecosystem protection, enforcement against illegal activities, and the governance capacities of regional governments.

- **Samoa**
  The VNR highlights national efforts to combat land degradation through reforestation, protection of natural habitats, and sustainable forest management. The forest area increased slightly from 58% in 2015 to 58.2% in 2020, reflecting gradual improvement. The establishment of the National Forestry Monitoring System (NFMS) in 2023 marks a key step in tracking forest cover and carbon stocks, supporting long-term land restoration. The report acknowledges challenges such as ecosystem loss, biodiversity decline, and unsustainable land use, and calls for accelerated action in conservation, forest management, and sustainable land practices. Community-based conservation initiatives and stronger environmental policies are among the actions taken to mitigate land degradation and promote ecological resilience.
- **Sierra Leone**
  The VNR highlights efforts to reduce environmental vulnerability and address land degradation through support from UNDP and government partnerships. These include implementing land reform policies to improve equitable land access, especially for women and persons with disabilities, rehabilitating mangrove ecosystems, reducing deforestation and land degradation, and promoting the sustainable management of community natural resources.
- **Yemen**
  The VNR reports that 17.5% of its land was degraded as of 2019, with approximately 90% desertification recorded by 2014 across diverse areas including agricultural, coastal, mountainous, and residential lands. The country faces severe land degradation driven by climate change, rising temperatures, drought, and weather variability, leading to soil erosion, loss of vegetation cover, and declining land and water productivity. The report warns that anthropogenic activities will likely exacerbate this degradation in the coming years, posing significant challenges to achieving SDG 15.3's goal of combating desertification and restoring degraded land by 2030. To mitigate land degradation in Yemen, key priorities include securing international funding to preserve biodiversity, forests, and agricultural terraces; conducting comprehensive soil and land degradation assessments using remote sensing and GIS for a national database; establishing an environmental monitoring system to reduce pollution and enforce laws; promoting environmental awareness across society; expanding protected biodiversity-rich areas; launching afforestation campaigns; and implementing laws to prevent groundwater over-extraction, deforestation, and vegetation loss.
- **Zimbabwe**
  The VNR reports progress on SDG indicator 15.3.1, noting that 6,473 hectares of degraded land have been rehabilitated through two national programs (though unnamed). The NDS1 Mid-Term Review attributes successful landscape restoration, especially in mining areas, to strict compliance with Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations. This reflects Zimbabwe's ongoing efforts to combat land degradation and restore degraded land, contributing to SDG target 15.3.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR ON INDICATOR 15.3.1?

The relevant outcome-based land degradation indicator is SDG 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of land that is degraded over the total land area.

Reporting uptake by countries of this indicator has increased.

Indicator 15.3.1 is now a "Tier 1"[3] indicator, signaling both that standards for reporting on the indicator are clear and that at least 50 percent of countries are regularly producing data for the indicator.

Importantly, the UNCCD 13th Conference of the Parties approved a four-year frequency for countries to provide information on SDG Indicator 15.3.1. Under this agreement, the first reporting period was 2018 and the UN Statistics Division included the outcome of this reporting in the 2019 SDG Report. Baseline data for measuring this indicator is from 2015.

15.3.1 indictor data are now available for most countries for 2015 and 2019.

According to data from the UN SDG Indicator Database, 119 countries have reported values for both the 2015 baseline and 2019 reference year for SDG indicator 15.3.1, which measures the proportion of degraded land over total land area. This level of reporting demonstrates substantial global engagement with the LDN agenda. The availability of time-series data for these two key reference years allows for comparative analysis of progress toward SDG Target 15.3 and reflects evidence-based policymaking to combat desertification and restore degraded ecosystems by 2030 (despite poor qualitative reporting in the VNRs).

Official statistics on indicator 15.3.1 for the next four-year period, which would presumably be from 2023 have yet to be made public. For now, official statistical comparisons can still only be made between the 2015 baseline and 2019.[4]

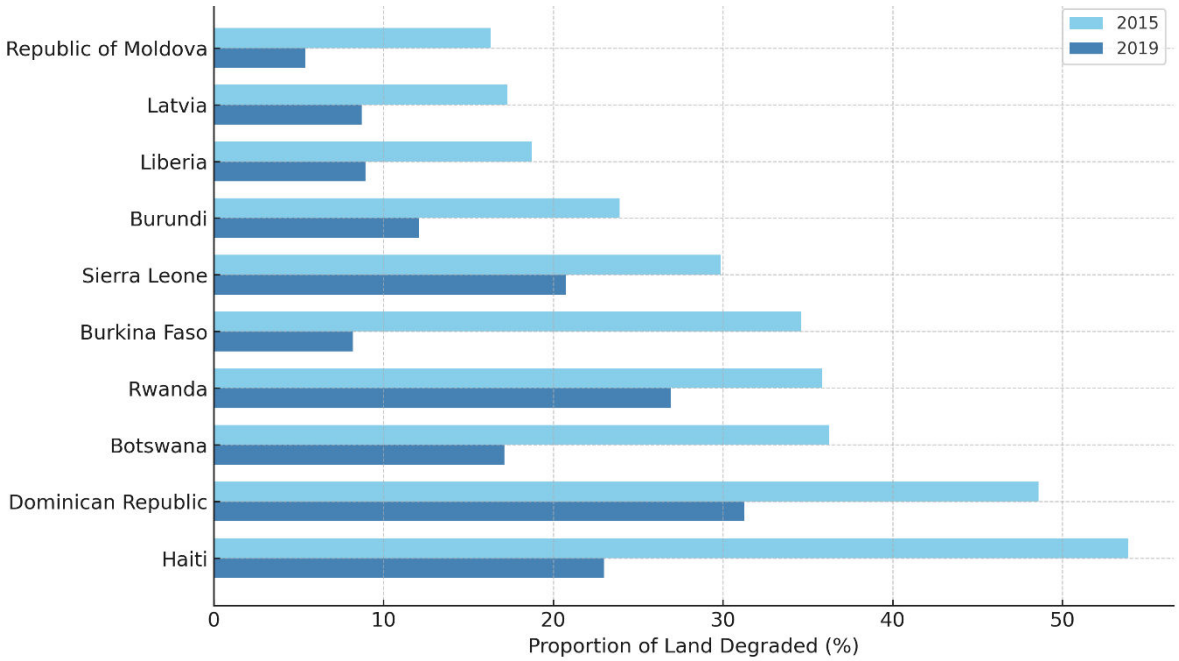
Out of the 119 countries included in the official indicator database, 44 countries show progress in reducing land degradation, while 73 countries show worsening conditions over the period. Two countries, Poland (0.2% land degradation) and Lesotho (8.83%), show no change between the two years.

Charts 1 and 2 highlight countries with either significant reductions or notable increases in land degradation from 2015 to 2019, based on SDG indicator 15.3.1 data from the UN SDG Statistical Database.

3 For Tier classification see here Tier Classification of SDG Indicators_29 Mar 2021_web.xlsx

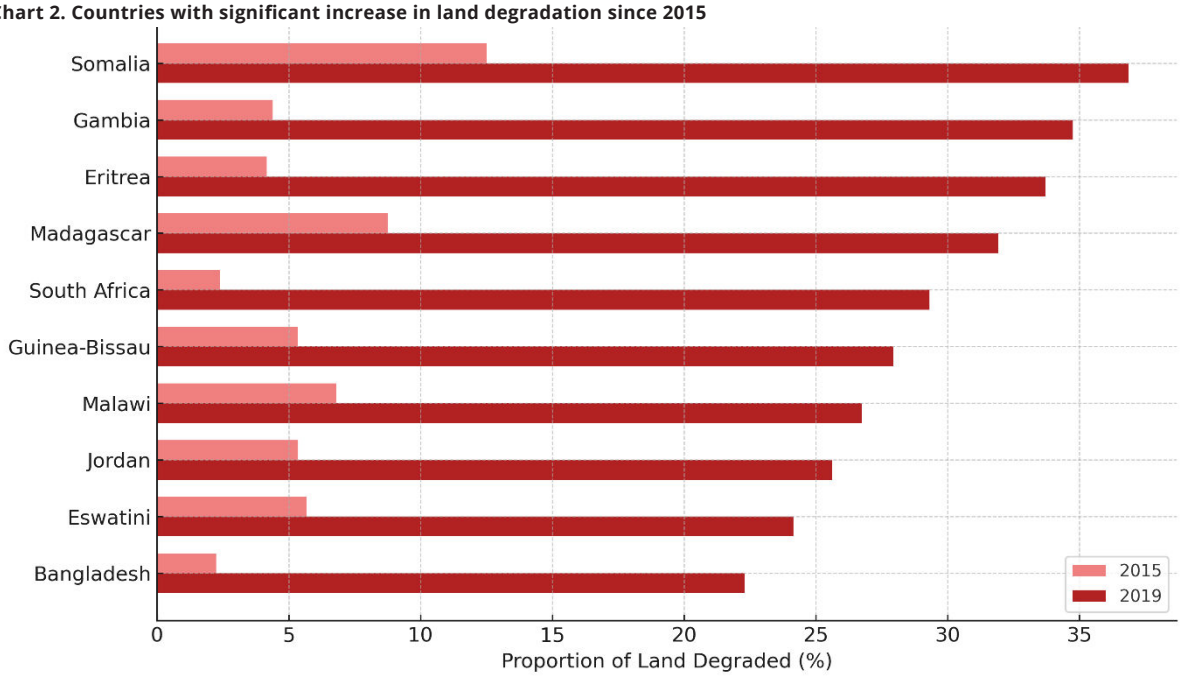
4 [4]UNSDG visited last on 15th June 2025

Chart 1. Countries with significant decrease in land degradation since 2015



Percentage of land degradation reduction: Haiti – 31%, Burkina Faso – 26%, Botswana - 19%, Dominican Republic – 17%, Burundi – 12%, Sierra Leone and Republic of Moldova 09%, Latvia and Rwanda – 9%, Liberia – 8%.[5]

Chart 2. Countries with significant increase in land degradation since 2015



Percentage of land degradation increase: Gambia – 30%, Eritrea – 29%, South Africa – 27%, Somalia – 24%. Madagascar – 23%, Guinea-Bissau – 23%, Jordan – 20%, Malawi and Bangladesh – 20%, Eswatini – 18%.[6]

5 Figures rounded to the nearest percent

6 Figures rounded to the nearest percent

Achieving the SDG target on land degradation neutrality (LDN) will demand unwavering political will, adequate resources, and coordinated, multi-sectoral engagement across all countries. A review of progress against indicator 15.3.1 reveals that while some nations are holding steady or even reversing land degradation, others have seen marked deterioration between 2015 and 2019.

The growing uptake of SDG indicator 15.3.1 is an encouraging sign of increasing awareness around the urgency of addressing land degradation. However, despite wider data availability, many VNRs fall short in providing clear evidence of implementation. In numerous cases, shifts in land degradation are reported without accompanying context or explanation, limiting the usefulness of the data for informed decision-making. Compounding this, up-to-date figures to assess developments since 2019 are still lacking.

While progress is visible in some contexts, significant implementation gaps remain. Strengthening data systems, fostering cross-sectoral integration, and embedding land degradation priorities into broader land management frameworks are pressing needs. The 2024 VNRs submitted to the High-Level Political Forum illustrate a range of approaches to SDG 15.3 - some countries report on national strategies and forest-related programs; others offer quantitative data or highlight land restoration initiatives.

Yet overall reporting quality varies widely. Many VNRs emphasize forest protection, often neglecting broader degradation concerns in agricultural or dryland areas. As a result, references to LDN beyond the forestry sector are uncommon. Most countries that address the indicator 15.3.1 have yet to operationalize their commitments into coordinated, large-scale responses.

Reaching the 2030 target for land degradation neutrality will require translating ambition into action. VNRs must evolve into tools that bridge data and decision-making, strengthen accountability, and foster cross-sector partnerships that share lessons learned both regionally and internationally. Looking ahead, deeper and more consistent reporting on SDG indicator 15.3.1 will be essential to ensure global efforts remain aligned, transparent, and capable of delivering impact at scale.

SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP

THE SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP is a coalition of civil society and multi-lateral organisations geared towards monitoring the progress of the SDG land targets and conducting advocacy to meet the same end. Currently the secretariat of the group is coordinated by the International Land Coalition Secretariat. Members of the group include Asian NGO Coalition, GLTN, Huairou Commission, IPAR, IWGIA, Land Portal, Landesa, Natural Resources Institute - University of Greenwich, Oxfam, Rights and Resources, TMG Think Tank, .Transparency International and World Resources Institute

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