



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

WOCAT
World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT AND ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF



OVERVIEW

South-South Cooperation (SSC) is a powerful means of accelerating the exchange of knowledge and expertise in sustainable land management (SLM) and ecosystem restoration (ER). Countries in the South offer a myriad of development solutions based on knowledge, experiences, good practices, innovative policies, technologies and resources that have proven cost-effectiveness and huge potential to be scaled up and shared. SSC is already playing a greater role than ever in the international development landscape. Innovation in the South is generating new tools and partnerships for tackling issues of food security, sustainable land use and livelihoods, based on *FAO's Quick Guide to South-South Cooperation*.¹

This brief is based on a survey of three regions in the global South. It sets out the case for investment in SSC in the context of SLM and ER. The availability of a rich pool of knowledge is highlighted, and the enthusiasm to share and to learn is emphasized. Above all, it points to a way forward for investment in SSC. This can facilitate the spread of knowledge to help countries address the crucial issue of land degradation. As the impacts of climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss are becoming increasingly felt,

the need to share experiences and solutions between different actor groups – land users, government and non-governmental officers, researchers, and policymakers – is even more urgent.

WORKING TOGETHER TO ESTABLISH THE POTENTIAL FOR SSC IN SLM AND ER

Fostering SSC is based on principles of multistakeholder participation, co-development of knowledge and co-design of potential solutions through a pragmatic approach. Countries eagerly share a plethora of potential solutions to prevent, halt, and reverse land degradation when provided with a platform for exchange.

FAO has facilitated SSC exchanges and projects for food security and agricultural development for over forty years by helping to connect country demand and supply. FAO's Quick Guide to South-South Cooperation sets out key steps in setting up an SSC initiative. *WOCAT's Global SLM Database*² holds over 1 600 practices from the global South – and offers an unrivalled resource plus a platform to share good practice.

BOX 1: KEY MESSAGES

- **SSC has vast untapped potential for knowledge exchange.** There is a pool of relevant knowledge and experience about SLM and ecosystem restoration that can and should, be shared between countries and regions. This can help stimulate action and innovative problem-solving.
- **SSC can be a powerful tool in overcoming constraints to improve SLM.** These include lack of finance, poor awareness of options, inadequate incentives, weak institutions, low capacity and dysfunctional monitoring and evaluation (M&E).
- **Matching existing expertise with demand for exchange** is the key to effective SSC programme design. The study described here has identified both.
- **Innovative financing mechanisms present a specific area where SSC can help.** Finance for SLM is a challenge, yet there is evidence of local solutions to be shared to learn from successes.
- **SSC platforms should represent a "neutral space"** with informality encouraged, multistakeholder representation, and without hierarchy.
- **SSC offers a rewarding investment opportunity.** Interventions should capitalize on the pool of expertise available and the receptiveness to exchange ideas. SSC for knowledge exchange is popular, proven and cost-effective. Investments will pay dividends.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/3/i5163e/i5163e.pdf>

² <https://www.wocat.net/en/global-slm-database>

BOX 2: TERMINOLOGY: IN BRIEF

- **South-South Cooperation (SSC)** is the mutual sharing and exchange of key development solutions – knowledge, experiences and good practices, policies, technologies and resources – between and among countries in the global South.^a
- **Knowledge Exchange (KE)** comprises information sharing, skill-building and knowledge generation.^b
- **Sustainable Land Management (SLM)** is the use of the land's resources to provide goods and services while maintaining its long-term potential.^c
- **Ecosystem Restoration (ER)** is assisting the recovery of degraded land to regain its productive capacity and ecosystem function^d

Sources:

^a <https://www.fao.org/3/i5163e/i5163e.pdf>

^b https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/EN_GEF.STAP_C.61.Inf_04_Understanding_South_South_Cooperation_KE.pdf

^c FAO. 2011. Sustainable Land Management in Practice Guidelines and Best Practices for Sub-Saharan Africa Field application. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/in-action/kagera/information-resources/details/en/c/242408/>

^d <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/ecosystems-and-biodiversity/what-we-do/decade-ecosystem-restoration>

INVESTIGATING DEMAND AND EXPERTISE: NEW INSIGHTS

An online survey and a series of workshops were organized in 2022 to assess demand and expertise for SSC about SLM and ER. Three regions were selected: Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Central Asia (CA) and Near East and North Africa (NENA). The objective was to establish i) who are the potential sources of knowledge and on what specific topics; and ii) who are those with a demand for knowledge and on which topics. Results revealed considerable existing expertise in SLM and ER with a consistent and strong interest in SSC for knowledge exchange.

CONSTRAINTS TO SLM: HURDLES TO OVERCOME

Asked to indicate the main constraints to scaling up SLM and ER, the 114 respondents (representing institutions) from 33 countries were in close agreement. These constraints, ranked from (1) being the most important, to (7) being the least concerning, were:

1. Lack of finance: to support initiatives
2. Lack of awareness: of technical interventions, etc.
3. Lack of incentives: to overcome bottlenecks

4. Weak institutions: from village to national
5. Lack of follow-up: no/little post-implementation support
6. Low capacity: SLM technical; M&E, etc.
7. Lack of policies: creating an enabling environment for SLM

Constraints to improving SLM/ER could be proposed, logically, as entry points to SSC. However, decisions on topics to cover during the exchange process should be determined as a specific participatory exercise for each South-South initiative.

EXPERIENCE, EXPERTISE AND INTEREST: KEY TOPICS FOR INFORMED SCALING UP OF SLM AND ER

The survey sought to establish both supply (expertise) and demand (interest) for knowledge exchange in specific areas. Overall, it became clear that there was relatively more expertise in the topics of assessments and planning than in the enabling environment – including gender, tenure and youth – where there is high demand for exchange and inputs. In some cases, the countries that reported the greatest level of expertise were also those expressing the highest interest in sharing to gain further insights.

LAND DEGRADATION/LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY

Land degradation (LD) assessment is clearly an area of strength among government and research institutions in several countries. The survey has helped to map knowledge providers on the subject across the three regions: this is a valuable resource, and it facilitates the planning of future interventions and exchanges. Thus,

taking the LAC cluster, Table 1 shows existing expertise as well as demand for mapping land degradation at different levels and over the three Land degradation neutrality (LDN) subindicators. Argentina, Mexico, Colombia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela identified themselves as experienced sources of knowledge in assessing land degradation and sustainable land management while Panama, Colombia and Uruguay were the countries with the greatest demand for knowledge exchange on the topic.



TABLE 1: LAND DEGRADATION AND SLM ASSESSMENT: EXPERTISE AND DEMAND. RESULTS FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Land Degradation & SLM Assessments [Latin America and the Caribbean, n=41]	Expertise (%)				Interest in Knowledge Exchange (%)			
	None	Little	Good	Excellent	None	Small	Medium	High
Mapping of land degradation								
• At national level	32	24	32	22	20	7	12	27
• At sub-national level	27	17	34	22	12	2	12	32
• At landscape level	22	15	46	20	12	2	17	34
• At local level	22	12	37	34	12	5	5	34
Land Degradation Neutrality assessment								
• Trends in land cover	17	27	41	24	12	5	10	34
• Trends in land productivity	20	22	41	27	15	5	10	34
• Trends in carbon stocks above or below ground	22	29	41	12	17	2	12	37

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

LAND USE PLANNING

Experience with various forms of land use planning and implementation of SLM is not as strong as with LD and SLM assessment. Answers were more cautious: “little” rather than “good”. Demand, however, is equally high. Table 2 summarizes the findings. Thus, taking the NENA cluster, Iraq and Lebanon identified themselves as experienced potential sources of knowledge in land use planning and territorial planning while Jordan, Iraq and Tunisia were the countries with the greatest demand for knowledge exchange on the topic.

GENDER, YOUTH, DISADVANTAGED GROUPS AND TENURE

Gender, youth, disadvantaged groups and tenure expertise within the context of SLM/ land restoration is currently limited in CA Region (Table 3). However, the demand for such expertise is notably high. For gender and youth there was not a single respondent who did not express interest or demand for exchanging knowledge on the subject – and interest regarding for gender was also high. Uzbekistan identified itself to be experienced in that matter but also showed high demand for knowledge exchange.

SLM PRACTICES

Regarding the implementation of SLM practices, cropland, forest/woodlands, protected areas and grazing land are land use types in which respondents were most experienced and also showed the highest interest in knowledge exchange. However, priorities in the different regions vary due to different agroecological zones and different challenges/priorities. Protected areas were among the top four in terms of expertise and interest in knowledge exchange across all three regions. The NENA region priorities for knowledge exchange closely align with the average results, and so do the results for CA region but with settlements and infrastructure instead of forest/woodlands. Countries in the LAC region distinguished themselves by not prioritizing cropland and by showing a notable interest in unproductive land as well as in waterways, water bodies and wetlands (Table 4).

TABLE 2: : LAND USE PLANNING: EXPERTISE AND DEMAND. RESULTS FROM THE NENA REGION

SLM/land restoration planning and implementation [Near East and Northern Africa, n=45]	Expertise (%)				Interest in Knowledge Exchange (%)			
	None	Little	Good	Excellent	None	Small	Medium	High
Land Use Planning (LUP)/Territorial Planning								
• Development of LUP fostering participation	29	38	31	16	18	13	20	40
• Development of LUP integrating tenure dimension	27	36	33	13	16	7	33	36
• Implementation of land use plans	24	31	36	20	13	18	22	38
• Identification of priority areas for interventions	16	29	38	27	13	16	20	36
• Identification of suitable SLM/land restoration interventions	16	29	29	29	13	16	20	42
• Implementation of suitable and promising SLM/land restoration interventions	22	20	36	18	16	9	16	38
• Others, please specify in comments	20	7	7	9	13	0	11	24

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

TABLE 3: GENDER, YOUTH AND LAND TENURE: EXPERTISE AND DEMAND. RESULTS FROM CA REGION

Land Degradation & SLM Assessments [Central Asia, n=18]	Expertise (%)				Interest in Knowledge Exchange (%)			
	None	Little	Good	Excellent	None	Small	Medium	High
SLM/land restoration and Gender								
• Assessment of gender-responsiveness of SLM and restoration practices/interventions	22	39	33	6	0	22	28	39
• Assessment of enabling environment to support adoption of SLM/restoration practices by women/men	11	44	22	11	0	22	28	39
SLM/land restoration and youth								
• Assessment of youth in the context of specific SLM/land restoration technologies	11	33	6	6	0	17	44	33
SLM/land restoration and disadvantaged groups/indigenous people								
• Assessment of disadvantaged groups/Indigenous Peoples in the context of specific SLM/land restoration technologies	28	22	39	0	11	22	39	22
SLM/land restoration and tenure								
• Assessment of disadvantaged groups/Indigenous People in the context of specific SLM/land restoration technologies	6	61	22	0	6	11	56	22
• Assessment of land tenure/governance in the context of specific SLM/land restoration technologies	6	44	33	6	6	11	50	28

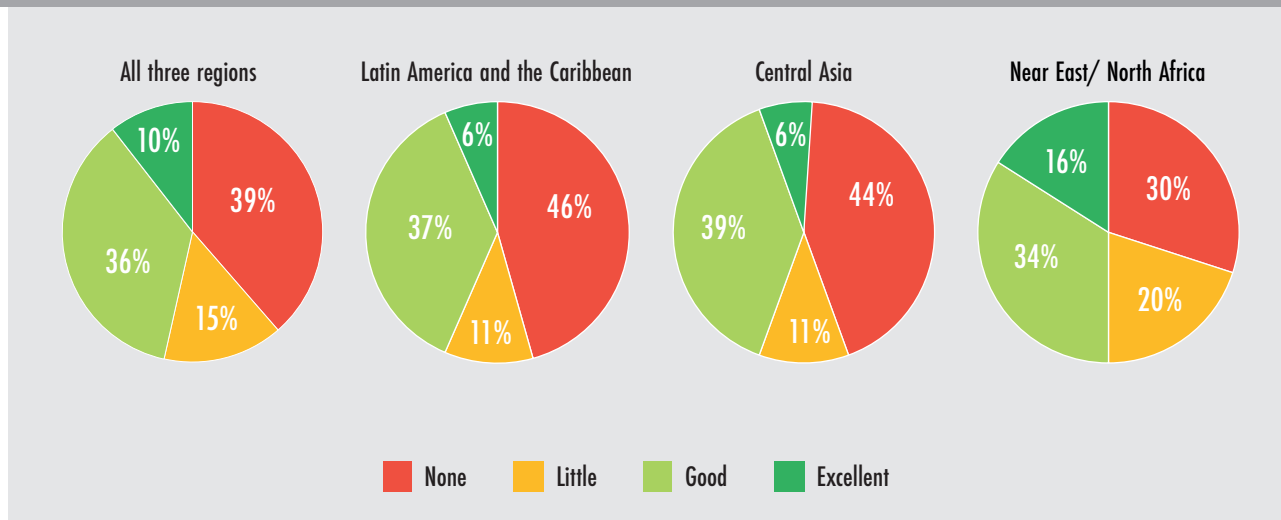
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

TABLE 4: PRIORITIES FOR LAND USE TYPES. RESULTS FROM ALL THREE REGIONS

	Good to excellent expertise	Medium to high interest in exchange
Average [n=104]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (61 percent) • Forest/ woodlands (59 percent) • Protected area (56 percent) • Grazing land (53 percent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (53 percent) • Protected area (51 percent) • Forest/ woodlands (49 percent) • Grazing land (48 percent)
NENA [n=45]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (62 percent) • Grazing land (51 percent) • Protected area (49 percent) • Unproductive land (44 percent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (64 percent) • Grazing land (58 percent) • Forest/ woodlands (56 percent) • Protected area (49 percent)
CA [n=16]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (69 percent) • Protected area (56 percent, excellent: 50 percent) • Forest/ woodlands (56 percent, excellent: 50 percent) • Grazing land (50 percent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cropland (75 percent) • Grazing land (69 percent, high: 56 percent) • Protected areas (69 percent, high: 31 percent) • Settlements, infrastructure (69 percent, high: 31 percent)
LAC (n=40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest/ woodlands (73 percent) • Protected area (68 percent) • Grazing land (60 percent) • Cropland (58 percent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protected area (45 percent) • Forest/ woodlands (38 percent) • Unproductive land (35 percent) • Waterways, waterbodies, wetlands (33 percent)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

FIGURE 1: EXPERTISE OF ORGANIZATIONS IN LOCAL FINANCING MECHANISMS – AND AVERAGE OF ALL THREE REGIONS



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

FINANCING SLM: WHERE IS THE MONEY?

The primary limiting factor in scaling up SLM under this study has been cited as lack of finance. To advance SLM implementation, it is essential to identify and promote innovative financing and incentive mechanisms. This could be through tapping into existing schemes or funding from different sources, including public budgets and private sources.³ Countries have much to learn from each other's experience – even when this is limited. As demonstrated through the pie charts in Figure 1, expertise regarding local financing mechanisms was not very high in any of the three regions. On average, about 55 percent had no or little experience/expertise, 36 percent had good expertise but only 10 percent had “excellent expertise”, which would be especially valuable for knowledge provision. In the NENA and LAC regions, expertise related to public funding is most pronounced, followed by not-for-profit sources. For the CA region, there is no clear main expertise.

³ <https://www.fao.org/in-action/eu-fao-flegt-programme/news-events/events-details/es/c/1310999/>

Clearly, there are imaginative options for funding SLM – and even to finance SSC itself. Existing, diverse and local financial mechanisms are a topic that fits very well under SSC since such mechanisms are often similar in neighbouring countries, or at the regional level, and there is considerable potential to tap into such experiences and replicate them elsewhere in the region.

SHARING ACTIVITIES: WHO HAS WHAT EXPERIENCE WITH THE WAYS AND MEANS OF EXCHANGE?

There was close consistency regarding the various mechanisms of sharing. Whether organizing study tours, setting up demonstration sites, managing farmer field schools or establishing discussion forums, “good-excellent experience” ranged from 52 percent to 77 percent and demand/interest ranged from 35 percent to 40 percent. Thus, the most striking finding is a well-rehearsed capacity to organize and implement sharing activities, as well as a strong and widespread potential to train others where requested, which provides a firm foundation for SSC.

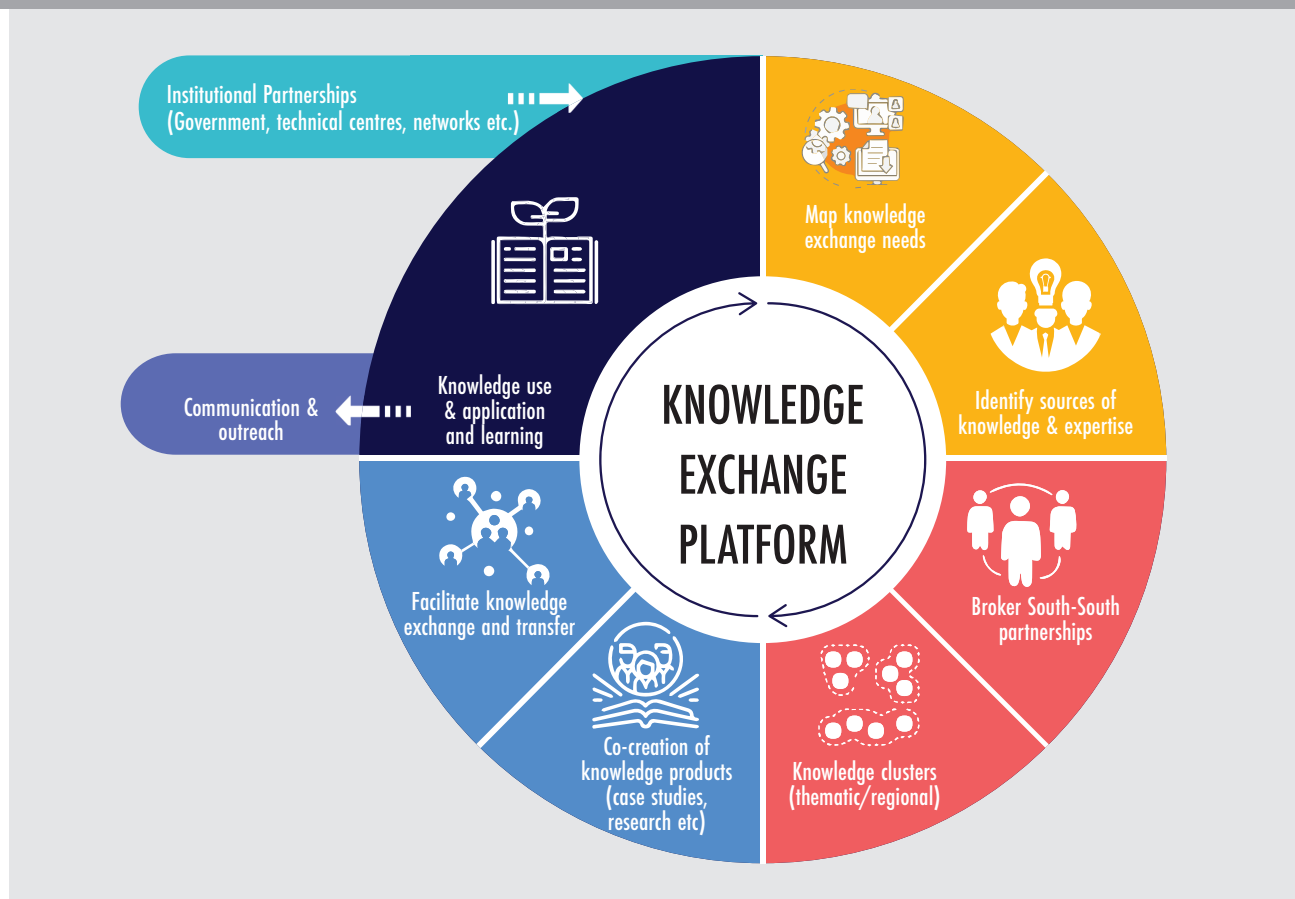
A question regarding “type of knowledge exchange” highlighted a strong preference for physical meetings in the field (65 percent), followed by short-term training/fellowships (51 percent) with conferences (39 percent) in third place. Trailing in the last position was online video meetings (16 percent). SSC needs to be, wherever possible, boots-on-ground rather than virtual. There was also a strong preference for a series of exchange events (allowing follow-up) rather than one-off events.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE PLATFORM: A SPACE FOR SHARING

Several clear points emerged from discussions about a “knowledge exchange platform” or “space” visualized in Figure 2. In summary, the aim is a platform characterized by:

- A “neutral” space with no hierarchy, and no sense of a top-down process or conventional teaching/training.
- Informality so that participants feel free to interact and exchange in ways that they are comfortable with.
- Multistakeholder involvement: from practitioners to policymakers to allow for interactive flow of ideas along non-conventional channels.
- Topics for exchange to be determined by “bottom-up” demand, and room to explore new areas/ideas that might emerge.
- Language compatibility to ease the process and flow.
- Online platforms to supplement on-the-ground exchange and assist follow-up: open access and user-friendly.
- Intra-regional exchange before inter-regional though flexibility should be built in: and inter-regional may be stressed during a later stage.

FIGURE 2: KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE PLATFORM



Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

BOX 3: EXAMPLE: SOUTH-SOUTH COLLABORATION IN SLM

LAC EXCHANGE WORKSHOP ON LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY

In June 2023, FAO organized the 4-days “Regional workshop to improve South-South cooperation in GEF-funded projects in Latin America and the Caribbean Common challenges and lessons learnt in LDN and SLM” in Quito, Ecuador. The Regional Workshop brought together 50 representatives from 13 countries that have pursued LDN projects, including Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Türkiye, Uruguay, and Venezuela, along with UNCCD’s focal points and representatives of other organizations. Throughout the workshop, practitioners and technical experts shared their experiences implementing LDN in different countries. Meetings with stakeholders from different projects in LAC region were held, as well as with GEFSEC, WOCAT and the UNCCD Global Mechanism. The workshop contributed to:

- Facilitate knowledge exchange by stakeholders and GEF projects in LAC
- Raise awareness on LDN in the region
- Discuss ways to improve and increase impact of the actions towards LDN in the region
- Strengthen coordination between GEF projects and national processes
- Identify common challenges in monitoring progress towards LDN

Note: More info: In Ecuador, learning about Land Degradation Neutrality in practice | GEF (thegef.org)

FOLLOW-UP ACTION

- Regional clusters (RCs) are being set up as part of WOCAT’s 2020+ strategy, to represent and anchor WOCAT in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and within existing institutions. The RCs will be catalysts for mainstreaming SLM and LDN in strategic agendas and for enhancing capacities, through SSC, with other RCs in implementing and scaling up SLM.
- The survey is currently repeated globally to support the design and define the priorities of the RCs. All actors involved in SLM and ER are invited to fill out the survey.
- FAO’s South-South and Triangular Cooperation Division (PST) has developed a new knowledge exchange and collaboration platform. As a follow-up to the survey, thematic knowledge groups/communities of practice/working groups on SLM and ER can be set up on the platform. The platform can be a preliminary exchange mechanism and offers the functionalities of discussion groups, as well as showcasing technical expertise/rosters of experts.

FAO AND SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

FAO engages with stakeholders and partners, such as the WOCAT network, to develop tools to assess the status of land, facilitate data-based decision-making, integrate SLM into strategies and programs, and facilitate knowledge management and exchange. FAO also supports its members and stakeholders to integrate governance of tenure within policy. It aims at achieving social inclusion and gender equality in its efforts to achieve LDN. A key requirement is for stakeholders to produce knowledge and exchange it directly. South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) is a powerful instrument. FAO has over four decades of experience, in implementing over 100 projects supporting the sharing and exchange of knowledge, good practices, policies and technology in the global South. Today, SSTC is fully integrated within FAO’s Strategic Framework and is a key delivery modality in FAO’s projects and programs.

WOCAT AND SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

WOCAT is dedicated to facilitating knowledge sharing amongst multiple SLM stakeholders: specialists, decision-makers, researchers and land users. Its knowledge products are aimed at fostering the exchange of knowledge and expertise and the co-design of new solutions. WOCAT hosts the UNCCD-recommended open Global SLM Database (DB) where 85 percent of the 1906 documented SLM good practices are from the global South. The DB is a resource that Southern partners have contributed to, and made use of, the most. Standardization of data recording

and presentation in the DB is a keystone to coherently organizing knowledge. It also supports exchange and comparison between countries and concrete SLM project interventions, facilitating learning from both successes and failures. WOCAT is a voluntary SLM network that welcomes the participation of individuals and institutions. This flexible and informal platform supports SSC since it functions without hierarchies and embraces multi-actor exchange. ■



**Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations (FAO)**
Viale dell Terme di Caracalla,
00153, Rome, Italy
www.fao.org

Co-published by:
World Overview of Conservation Approaches
and Technologies (WOCAT)
Mittlestrasse 43, 3012 Bern, Switzerland
www.wocat.net



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence.

©FAO/FAO Ecuador

©FAO, 2024
CC0000EN/1/05.24