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Beyond LDN Targets:

Why Land Restoration Needs Key Transformation Indicators (KTIs)

How can we know whether transformation will endure?

Following COP17 from Cotonou - the first UNCCD COP I have missed since 2000 - I offer a backward glance at the journey from zero net land degradation to LDN and a forward-looking proposal for determining whether today's restoration efforts will endure.

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A COP followed from a distance

I am following COP17 from Cotonou. It is the first UNCCD Conference of the Parties I have not attended since I first engaged with the Convention process as Benin's Minister of Environment in 2000.

Since then, I have accompanied the Convention as a minister, as its Executive Secretary from 2007 to 2013, as an advocate of the ambition first expressed as zero net land degradation and later developed into Land Degradation Neutrality, and now as the elected Mayor of Cotonou and a member of Commonland's Supervisory Board.

For the first time in more than a quarter-century, I am observing a UNCCD COP from outside the conference. Distance can sharpen a question that proximity to negotiations sometimes obscures: amid the texts, targets, finance announcements and implementation initiatives, what will tell us that the underlying system is actually changing?

The theme of COP17, "Restoring Land. Restoring Hope," is well chosen. Yet restoration restores hope only when its gains can survive the end of a project, a funding cycle or a political mandate. That is the perspective from which I read the discussions in Ulaanbaatar - partly retrospectively, but above all prospectively.

The decisive test of transformation is not only what has changed, but whether the system has become capable of continuing to produce change.

What COP17 is telling us

As COP17 enters its final two days, its final decisions are still being negotiated. It would therefore be premature to pronounce on its outcome. But the debates through 26 August already reveal where the Convention's attention is converging - and where an important gap remains.

First, implementation has become the dominant language. Parties are seeking to translate commitments into programmes, investment and results on the ground. The ministerial dialogue on finance has emphasized predictable resources, investable restoration and drought-resilience programmes, private-sector engagement and the redirection of incentives that continue to drive degradation.

Second, drought remains a test of collective resolve. The disagreement carried forward from COP16 - including whether the global response should take a legally binding form - has not disappeared. Yet the political message is increasingly clear: countries must move from reactive crisis management to anticipatory resilience, supported by early warning, stronger institutions, integrated land-water planning and accessible finance.

Third, Parties are looking beyond the current 2018-2030 Strategic Framework. The agenda item on the future framework, initially blocked, was reopened on 26 August and referred for further work. The discussions on that framework, science-policy relations, reporting, capacity-building and institutional coordination are fundamentally discussions about the Convention's ability to deliver. COP17 has also highlighted rangelands and pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth, cities and regions not merely as beneficiaries, but as implementation partners and stewards of land.

The Ulaanbaatar Declaration adopted by mayors and other local and regional leaders is especially significant. Its call for a stronger and more permanent role for cities and regions recognizes that land degradation, water stress, food security, livelihoods and human mobility meet in territories - and that transformation ultimately has to be governed there.

COP17 is therefore discussing many of the necessary means of change: targets, finance, science, governance, participation and implementation. The missing connective question is whether these means are changing the capability of the system itself. This is not to diminish the subjects before the Parties. It is to invite them to place at the centre of their deliberations a question that remains insufficiently addressed: **how will we know whether restoration is becoming capable of enduring?**

From zero net land degradation to LDN

That question follows a path that began during my service as Executive Secretary of the UNCCD. In 2008, I introduced an ambition I then called "zero net land degradation." The proposition was simple but

demanding: the world should stop treating the continuing loss of productive land as inevitable and aim instead to balance new degradation with the avoidance, reduction and reversal of land degradation.

The proposition evolved into Land Degradation Neutrality, or LDN. It was advanced at Rio+20, developed scientifically under the Convention and ultimately embedded in Sustainable Development Goal target 15.3. LDN changed the policy conversation because it established a measurable destination against which action could be organized and progress assessed. Its indicators - land cover, land productivity and soil organic carbon - help countries understand whether the quantity and quality of land-based natural capital are stable or increasing.

That achievement remains indispensable. But reaching a measurable destination requires more than measuring the destination. We must also understand whether the institutional and social capabilities required to stay on course are taking root.

The lesson of leading a city

This challenge became newly concrete when I was elected Mayor of Cotonou in February 2026. Transforming a city cannot consist only of launching projects, improving services or meeting annual delivery targets. A mayoral term is finite. Urban transformation must therefore be judged by whether it creates relationships, institutions, incentives and locally owned dynamics capable of carrying change beyond the mandate and beyond the individuals who initiated it.

The same is true in landscapes. During my first deliberations as a member of Commonland's Supervisory Board, the question arose in a different form: how can we recognize when long-term landscape regeneration is becoming autonomous and durable - no longer sustained principally by an external organization, but embedded in local institutions, communities and ecological and economic dynamics?

The parallel between cities and landscapes was striking. Both are territorial systems. Both contain competing interests, unequal power, formal and informal institutions, infrastructure, ecosystems and long time horizons. In both, implementation success can be mistaken for transformation.

That experience as mayor led me to the idea of Key Transformation Indicators, or KTIs: a complementary way of assessing whether transformative capability is emerging.

What KTIs would add

Key performance indicators remain essential. They tell us whether organizations and governments are delivering what they promised. Impact indicators tell us what has changed in land condition, livelihoods or other outcomes. KTIs ask a different but complementary question: what does the combined evidence tell us about the system's capacity to sustain and accelerate a different future?

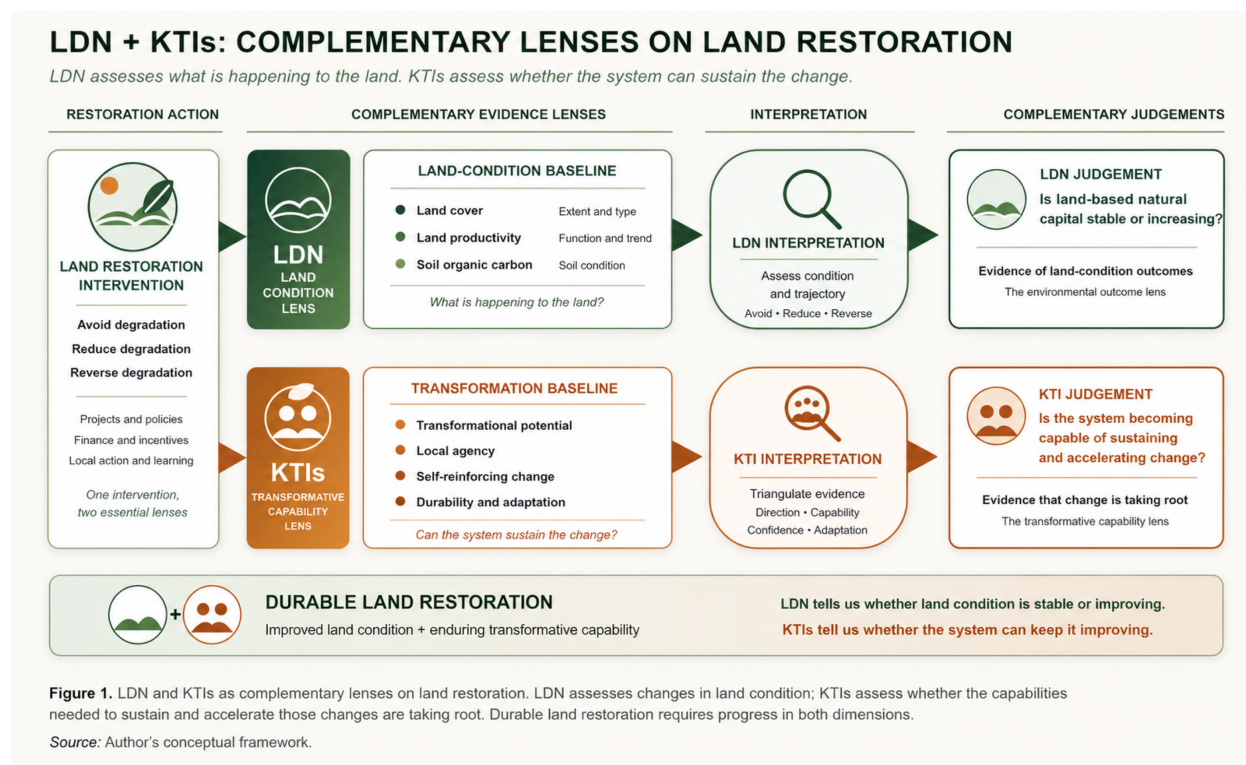
KTIs are structured, evidence-based judgements about whether the capabilities required for transformation are emerging, becoming institutionalized and likely to endure. The framework proposed here applies KTIs specifically to territorial and social-ecological transformation, including land restoration.

KPIs ask: Are we delivering? Impact indicators ask: What changed? KTIs ask: Is the system becoming capable of sustaining the change?

This is not an argument for another global index or a universal transformation score. Transformation is contextual, political and partly qualitative. KTIs should organize disciplined judgements around observable signals, supporting and contradicting evidence, confidence and plausible alternative explanations.

Nor should an existing activity metric be relabelled as a KTI simply because it is associated with an ambitious programme. Partnerships formed, policies adopted or people trained may indicate reach and performance. The transformational question is what those achievements enable: whether partnerships alter decision-making, policies redirect incentives and learning generates independent action. A KTI-based assessment therefore interprets evidence across levels of change rather than selecting a single attractive number. Four questions provide a practical starting point.

Figure 1 illustrates this complementarity between LDN's land-condition lens and the transformative-capability lens provided by KTIs.



1. Are interventions creating transformational potential?

The first question looks beyond activity. Are restoration investments creating new relationships among land users, local authorities, scientists, businesses and financiers? Are they changing incentives, building trust, enabling experimentation and aligning action with the LDN response hierarchy of avoiding, reducing and reversing degradation? A nursery established or a watershed plan completed may be valuable outputs. Their transformative significance depends on the new possibilities they create.

2. Are local actors becoming agents of transformation?

Training and consultation are not the same as agency. The stronger signal is that pastoralists, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, women, young people, municipalities and local organizations begin initiating action, mobilizing resources, influencing decisions and holding institutions accountable. Transformation becomes more credible when those most affected are not merely beneficiaries or consultees, but co-authors and stewards of the pathway.

3. Is change becoming self-reinforcing?

Positive change becomes more durable when policies, budgets, tenure arrangements, markets, knowledge systems and financial flows reinforce one another. A restored area is vulnerable if maintaining it depends on a single grant. It is more secure when local budgets, viable livelihoods, trusted governance arrangements, extension services, land rights and monitoring systems support its continued stewardship.

4. Can the transformation endure and adapt?

Durability does not mean preserving a fixed model. Climate, markets and political conditions will continue to change. A transformed system must be able to learn and adapt while protecting its ecological and social foundations. Evidence of durability includes continuity across leadership changes, resilience to shocks, locally financed maintenance, institutional memory and the spread of successful practices beyond the original intervention area.

A transformation baseline

LDN establishes a baseline for the condition of land-based natural capital. KTIs would add a baseline for transformative capacity. At the beginning of an intervention, partners would assess not only where land condition stands, but also the strength of local agency, collaboration, institutional alignment, finance, learning and self-reinforcing mechanisms. Subsequent assessments would examine direction of travel, not simply current position.

No new evidence bureaucracy is required. Monitoring data, participatory observation, outcome harvesting, policy analysis, financial information and independent evaluation can be triangulated. Each

KTI judgement should state the transformation claim, the evidence for and against it, the confidence attached to the judgement and its implication for strategy. Such transparency is more useful than false precision.

KTIs must also reveal whose transformation is being measured and who benefits. A system can become more efficient while reproducing exclusion or insecure land rights. Power, justice, participation and the knowledge of land stewards must therefore be integral to any KTI assessment. This is especially relevant at a COP that has placed rangelands, pastoralists, local communities and territorial governance so visibly on the agenda.

From Ulaanbaatar to what matters

As Parties shape the closing outcomes of COP17 and begin considering the Convention's future Strategic Framework, the question is no longer only what targets should be adopted or how much finance should be mobilized. It is also whether the capabilities, relationships and institutions required to translate them into enduring transformation are taking root.

COP17's Action Agenda seeks to connect political decisions with real-world solutions. The Ulaanbaatar Declaration calls for a stronger role for cities and regions. Together, these developments create an opportunity to test KTIs where transformation actually happens: in landscapes, municipalities and communities.

I propose a bounded learning initiative, not immediate standardization. Volunteer countries, cities, landscape partnerships and development organizations could apply the four KTI questions alongside LDN monitoring, establish transformation baselines, review evidence with local stakeholders and publish short assessments of what is emerging, what remains externally dependent and where strategy must adapt.

The purpose would not be to rank countries or certify transformation, but to test whether a shared framework helps distinguish successful implementation from deeper system change. A pilot including a city such as Cotonou and one or more regenerative landscapes could reveal which signals travel across contexts and which must remain locally defined.

This learning could also improve restoration finance. Beyond delivered outputs and outcomes, funders should ask whether an investment reduces dependence on external support, strengthens local stewardship and aligns the institutions that will protect restored land. Measurement then becomes part of transformation rather than merely an account of it.

Restoring the capacity to hope

Land Degradation Neutrality taught us to account for the balance between losses and gains in the land resource base. The next frontier is to account for the capacity of societies and institutions to protect and extend those gains when conditions change. This does not diminish hectares restored, soil carbon retained or productivity improved; it connects them to the human and institutional systems that make them durable.

Restoring land restores hope only when the change can outlive the project, the funding cycle and the leaders who began it.

That is the promise of Key Transformation Indicators: not a replacement for LDN, performance or impact measurement, but a missing lens for determining whether land restoration is becoming a self-sustaining transformation.

From Cotonou, as I follow the first UNCCD COP I have missed in twenty-six years, this is the prospective question I would place before the Parties: beyond what we have pledged and delivered, are we building the capacity to keep transforming?

Sources and further reading

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