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# Climate Change and Land Degradation in Semi-Arid Agricultural Landscapes: A Case Study of Zimbabwean Communal Areas

[1]Parwada Cosmas, [2]Masere. T. Philip, [3]Mandumbu Ronald and [4]Tibugari Handsen
[1]Department of Agronomy and Horticulture, Faculty of Agriculture,
Environment and Natural Resources Management, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe
[2]Department of Lands and Water Resources Management, Faculty of Agriculture,
Environment and Natural Resources Management, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe
[3]Department of Crop Science, Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science,
Bindura University of Science Education, Bindura, Zimbabwe
[4]Department of Crop and Soil Sciences, Lupane State University, P.O. Box 170, Lupane, Zimbabwe

**ABSTRACT**

The nexus between climate change and land degradation in semi-arid regions is closely interconnected, with each exacerbating the other. In these areas, which are already vulnerable due to limited water availability and harsh environmental conditions, climate change leads to increased temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events such as droughts. These changes can cause soil erosion, desertification, and the loss of soil fertility, all of which contribute to land degradation. Conversely, land degradation worsens the impacts of climate change. Degraded land has a reduced capacity to retain water and nutrients, which undermines the resilience of ecosystems and agriculture. This creates a vicious cycle, as degraded lands are more prone to further climate stress, leading to lower productivity and increased poverty in these regions. Effective climate adaptation and land restoration management are crucial to mitigate the combined effects of climate change and land degradation in semi-arid areas. Nevertheless, these linkages are overlooked in the planning of agricultural land management practices in semi-arid areas. This paper explores the linkages between climate change and land degradation, focusing on communal areas in Zimbabwe. A clear understanding of the link between the two aspects will lead to effective land use planning and management.

**KEYWORDS**

Agroecosystems, climate adaptation, desertification, land use, soil quality



## INTRODUCTION

Climate change and land degradation are inextricably linked, particularly in semi-arid regions where the balance between natural and human factors is delicate. Land degradation, the quantitative or qualitative change in soil properties that reduces land productivity, is exacerbated by human pressures and poor land management practices in these regions[1]. Climate change further compounds the issue, altering precipitation patterns, increasing temperatures, and contributing to desertification[1,2]. Estimates suggest

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that 10-20% of the global drylands are affected by land degradation, with an annual global rate of 12 million ha lost to desertification and drought. Climate change and land degradation are intrinsically linked, and their interplay has profound implications for the sustainability of agricultural systems, particularly in semi-arid regions. Disruptions in the balance between human activities and natural processes can accelerate soil degradation, leading to diminished land productivity and increased vulnerability to climate-related stresses[1]. Human activities, such as agriculture, animal grazing, and fuelwood collection, further exacerbate land degradation in these regions. Unsustainable land management practices can lead to desertification, a process that results in the loss of arable land and decreased agricultural yields. This is particularly problematic in semi-arid areas where the balance between human use and natural resilience is already delicate.

The consequences of desertification in semi-arid landscapes are severe. They include crop failures, loss of perennial plant cover, reduced forage for livestock, scarcity of fuelwood and building materials, and decreased water availability due to reduced surface and groundwater flow. Also, desertification can cause greater incursion of dunes into farmlands and settlements, increased flooding risks due to sedimentation, and worsened air and water quality from dust and sedimentation.

In semi-arid regions, climate change impacts agriculture largely due to increasing intensity and frequency of droughts, which can quickly diminish the biological productivity of these ecosystems. Semi-arid regions experience rainfall which is low and largely irregular. These features make such regions sensitive to climate change. Prolonged periods of drought may result in failure of crops or reduced yields in rain-supported farmlands, which is widespread in these regions. In addition, the water stock is smaller due to reduced surface and groundwater flow, making it more challenging for agriculture. These impacts are compounded by unsustainable land management practices, which can accelerate desertification and lead to lasting changes in dryland ecosystems. The consequences of desertification include increased sand dune intrusion onto croplands, heightened flooding risks due to sedimentation, and amplified air and water pollution from dust and sedimentation. Sustainable agricultural practices, such as permaculture and diversification, can help mitigate some of these effects by enhancing the resilience of food systems to climate fluctuations.

One of the key pathways through which climate change exacerbates land degradation is through changes in precipitation patterns and temperature extremes. Increased frequency and severity of droughts, for instance, can deplete soil moisture, reduce vegetation cover, and accelerate erosion, ultimately compromising the land's ability to sustain agricultural activities. Furthermore, rising temperatures can alter the distribution and prevalence of pests and diseases, further undermining crop yields and ecosystem resilience[3-6]. At the same time, unsustainable land management practices, such as overgrazing, intensive monoculture farming, and improper irrigation, can degrade the land and render it more susceptible to the impacts of climate change. This vicious cycle of climate change and land degradation can severely undermine food security and the livelihoods of communities that depend on the land for their survival.

This paper aims to examine the link between climate change and land degradation in semi-arid regions by analyzing biophysical mechanisms, socio-economic drivers, and sustainability challenges. The study emphasizes a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to addressing the interconnected challenges.

## VICIOUS CYCLE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND LAND DEGRADATION

The relationship between climate change and land degradation is a complex and interconnected phenomenon that has become a pressing global concern in recent years. Land degradation, defined as the systematic decline in land quality due to a mismatch between land use and land quality, is accelerated by human activities and can have far-reaching consequences for the environment and human well-being[4]. Climate change, on the other hand, can exacerbate the problem of land degradation, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that is increasingly difficult to break (Fig. 1).

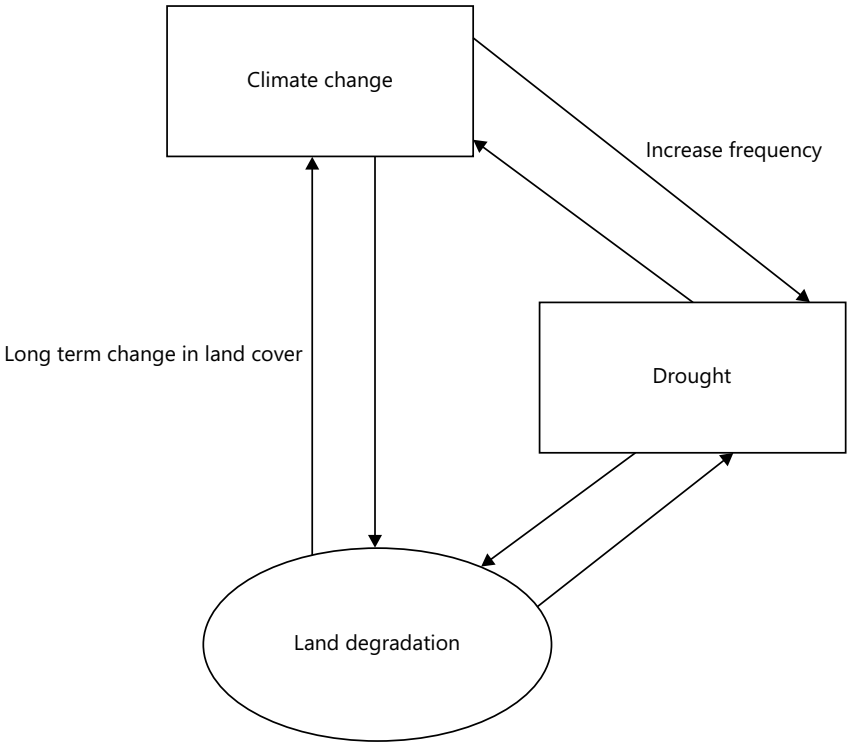


Fig. 1: Simplified intricate relationship between climate change and land degradation

One of the primary ways in which climate change contributes to land degradation is through its impact on precipitation patterns and the frequency of extreme weather events. Climate change is resulting in more uneven patterns of precipitation, leading to increased instances of drought, flooding, and other environmental stressors that can degrade the soil and reduce its ability to support agriculture and other land-based activities. Additionally, climate change can lead to changes in temperature and humidity levels, which can alter the suitability of certain regions for particular crops or land uses, further contributing to land degradation.

Conversely, land degradation can also increase the vulnerability of a region to the impacts of climate change. Land degradation, particularly in the form of deforestation and soil erosion, can reduce the land's ability to act as a carbon sink, exacerbating the greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change. Furthermore, land degradation can have significant socioeconomic impacts, as it can limit the ability of human beings to obtain goods and services from the natural environment, increasing the risk of poverty and food insecurity. Scientists have identified numerous ways in which these two global issues are interconnected and have emphasized the need for holistic, cross-disciplinary approaches to address the problem. The relationship between climate change, hydrology, and land degradation, for instance, is intricate and multifaceted; climate change can impact hydrologic processes, which can then lead to land degradation, according to a study that looked at land degradation in major African port cities[5].

Another study on the impacts of climate change on agriculture production highlighted the role of land degradation in reducing the potential for agricultural production and the need for sustainable land management practices to address this issue. Overall, the existing research on the climate change and land degradation vicious cycle underscores the importance of developing comprehensive strategies to address these interrelated challenges. Effective solutions will require a combination of policy interventions, technological innovations, and behavioral changes at both the individual and societal levels.

Addressing this challenge requires a multifaceted approach that integrates climate change adaptation and sustainable land management strategies. Promoting organic farming, implementing conservation agriculture techniques, and restoring degraded lands through reforestation and other ecosystem-based approaches can all contribute to building more resilient agricultural systems. Understanding the complex interplay between climate change and land degradation is crucial for developing effective solutions to safeguard the long-term productivity and sustainability of semi-arid agricultural landscapes.

By implementing a combination of climate-smart agricultural practices, policy interventions, and community-based initiatives, it is possible to break the cycle of climate change and land degradation, ensuring a more secure and sustainable future for the communities that rely on these fragile ecosystems[1,3,6]. The impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures, unpredictable precipitation patterns, and an increase in extreme weather events, combined with the persistent problem of land degradation, have presented a formidable challenge for agricultural communities in semi-arid regions[7]. Severe dry spells, heat waves, and shifts to seasonal precipitation patterns are important physical drivers of land degradation and are anticipated to be more frequent due to climate change[8]. Semi-arid regions, which are often characterized by fragile ecosystems and limited resources, are particularly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of these interconnected issues, which threaten food security, livelihoods, and the overall well-being of local populations[6,9].

Variations in yearly rainfall, average temperature, heat waves, changes in weeds, pests, or microbes, Worldwide shifts in atmospheric $CO_2$ or ozone levels, and variations in sea level are only a few of the ways that climate change impacts the land and its agriculture. Global crop output and food security may be jeopardized by these climate changes. Soil degradation of the soil will happen in a few years if human demands and improper land usage upset this equilibrium. Numerous tactics, including organic farming, the Surjan method, food diversification, planting huge trees, and water pond production, can be used to lessen the effects of climate change and land degradation[6]. Furthermore, the only method to lessen the adverse effects of climatic changes is through climate-smart agriculture.

**Climate change:** Climate change is one of the most pressing global challenges facing humanity today, with far-reaching consequences that threaten the very foundations of our societies and the delicate balance of our planet's ecosystems. The scientific evidence is overwhelming-rising temperatures, ocean warming and acidification, more frequent and severe extreme weather events, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels are just a few of the tangible manifestations of this crisis[10].

The impacts of climate change are particularly severe on vulnerable populations, including farmers and those dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. As climate change disrupts weather patterns and affects resource availability, it can potentially exacerbate global food insecurity, especially in developing nations[11]. In Zimbabwe, for instance, climate change is already posing significant threats to various agricultural activities, from crop yields to livestock production.

The complexity of the climate change challenge requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes, mitigates the ongoing effects, and builds resilience within our food systems. Governments, businesses, and civil society must work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and invest in climate-smart technologies to help farmers adapt to the changing environmental conditions[11]. The scientific literature offers valuable insights into the relationship between climate change and food security. Climate change and land degradation are two of the most pressing global issues facing humanity today, and their combined impact on food security has become a topic of increasing concern. As the World's population continues to grow, the need for sustainable and reliable food production has become more critical than ever[3]. The effects of climate change on agriculture are well-documented. Variations in annual rainfall, average temperature, and the frequency of extreme weather events can have a significant impact on crop yields and productivity[3,5].

Moreover, climate change can also contribute to the spread of pests and diseases, further exacerbating the challenges facing agricultural producers[3]. Land degradation, a process characterized by the deterioration of soil quality and fertility, also poses a significant threat to food security. Land degradation can have a significant influence on biodiversity, living standards, and the security of food and energy. It is caused by a variety of human activities as well as climate change. Land degradation and climate change have a complicated and interconnected relationship. Land degradation may result from the impact of climate change on hydrologic systems[5]. On the other hand, a region may become more susceptible to the effects of climate change because of land degradation.

**Land degradation:** Land degradation, a global phenomenon, is particularly acute in semi-arid areas, where overgrazing, unsustainable agricultural practices, and the effects of climate change have resulted in the loss of productive land. This degradation not only contributes to climate change through the release of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) but also increases the vulnerability of communities, particularly the poor, women, and children, who are disproportionately affected[12]. Rural women are more vulnerable to the devastating effects of land degradation as this can directly affect their food production levels. Low soil fertility and soil erosion have resulted in a significant reduction in agricultural productivity in the communal areas of Zimbabwe[13]. Hence, acknowledging the crucial role of women in land management and decision-making can support the alleviation of land degradation and facilitate the adoption of integrated adaptation and mitigation measures[14].

The nexus between climate change and land degradation in semi-arid agricultural landscapes in Zimbabwean communal areas is a pressing issue, as these regions grapple with increasingly severe climatic conditions. The impacts of climate change manifest through extreme weather events, such as prolonged droughts and elevated temperatures, which exacerbate existing vulnerabilities within these communities[13,15]. High temperatures are increasing the rate of evapotranspiration in the already drier soils, making it difficult to grow crops under rainfed agriculture. The granitic sandy soil prevalent in many communal areas also poses significant challenges for agricultural productivity, limiting water retention and nutrient availability. Consequently, farmers face declining maize yields averaging only 0.62 ton/ha, which further underscores the detrimental effects of both climate change and land degradation on food security[13].

Moreover, the relationship between climate change and land degradation is evidenced by the unsustainable agricultural practices that have emerged in response to environmental stressors. As farmers adapt to changing conditions by employing strategies such as soil water harvesting and tree planting, the underlying issues of soil erosion and nutrient depletion remain unaddressed[13]. To combat the adverse effects of climate fluctuations, farmers have adopted practices such as soil water harvesting, mulching, and tree planting[13]. However, these measures often fall short of mitigating land degradation effectively. Despite their efforts to improve yields through better management practices such as fertilizer application, improved seed varieties, maize yields remain critically low at an average of 0.62 ton/ha[13,16]. This persistent underperformance suggests that while adaptation strategies may offer some relief from immediate climatic impacts, they do not address the underlying issues contributing to land degradation.

This cycle perpetuates a state of land degradation that hampers long-term agricultural viability. Furthermore, without adequate research into effective management practices, including fertilizer use and improved crop varieties, efforts to combat both climate change impacts and land degradation may fall short[13,16]. Moreover, further research is essential to understand fully how farmer-applied management practices correlate with low agricultural yields and land degradation in Zimbabwe's communal areas. By investigating this relationship more comprehensively, it may be possible to develop targeted interventions aimed at enhancing both resilience to climate change and restoration of degraded lands. Addressing this nexus will be crucial for sustainable agricultural development amidst a changing climate.

Zimbabwe's communal areas are increasingly threatened by the dual challenges of climate change and land degradation, which jeopardize agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. The vulnerability of these regions is exacerbated by erratic weather patterns, including prolonged droughts and inconsistent rainfall, leading to food insecurity and economic instability[15]. In addressing these pressing issues, it is imperative to explore effective strategies that not only mitigate the impacts of climate change but also promote sustainable land management practices. Community-based conservation initiatives represent a promising avenue for fostering resilience among local populations while enhancing environmental stewardship. These initiatives often emphasize participatory approaches that empower communities to take charge of their natural resources, thereby encouraging sustainable practices tailored to local conditions[16]. However, existing literature reveals a notable gap in specific strategies designed for Zimbabwe's communal areas; most national policies focus on broader objectives without addressing localized needs[17]. It is important to develop strategies aimed at mitigating the impacts of climate change and land degradation within these vulnerable communities. The ideal framework should start examining community-based conservation efforts alongside the barriers they face, this analysis, therefore contributes valuable insights into developing targeted interventions that align with both local realities and global sustainability goals. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is crucial for crafting effective responses that enhance resilience in Zimbabwe's communal landscapes amidst ongoing environmental challenges.

## OVERVIEW OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND LAND DEGRADATION IN SEMI-ARID REGIONS

The interplay between climate change and land degradation in semi-arid regions presents a significant challenge for sustainable development. These areas, characterized by limited precipitation and high evaporation rates, are particularly vulnerable to the increasing temperatures and erratic weather patterns induced by climate change. This vulnerability exacerbates soil erosion and nutrient depletion, leading to deteriorating agricultural productivity and threatening local food security. The research underscores that vegetation changes can significantly impact local temperatures, with studies indicating that greening effects in Central Asia may induce cooling, highlighting a vital relationship between land management practices and climate resilience[18]. Furthermore, the IPCC's extensive analysis emphasizes that effective land management strategies are crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of both climate change and land degradation, ultimately promoting ecosystem sustainability and enhancing the resilience of communities in semi-arid regions[19-26]. Addressing these interconnected issues is essential for fostering adaptive capacities in these ecologically sensitive areas.

The impact of climate change on semi-arid ecosystems is profound and multifaceted, primarily characterized by altered precipitation patterns and rising temperatures that exacerbate land degradation. Semi-arid regions, being particularly sensitive to climatic variations, experience significant shifts in vegetation cover, which are crucial for monitoring ecosystem health. Studies indicate that vegetation in these landscapes is vulnerable to the dual pressures of climate change and anthropogenic activities, leading to measurable degradation of natural resources. For instance, the application of multi-scale remote sensing methods has revealed distinct spatial patterns in vegetation cover across semi-arid savannas in Africa, indicating that increased variability due to climate change significantly affects both woody and herbaceous plant distributions[20]. Moreover, the IPCC identifies desertification and land degradation as critical challenges in these areas, highlighting the need for sustainable land management practices to mitigate adverse effects on biodiversity and food security[19,27].

The intricacies of changes in precipitation patterns and temperature fluctuations are vital in understanding the nexus between climate change and land degradation, especially in semi-arid regions. These areas are particularly sensitive to shifts in climate, which can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. For example, increased variability in precipitation can lead to both droughts and floods, disrupting the balance necessary for sustainable land management. Such disruptions further threaten vegetation, critical for maintaining ecological stability, as evidenced by studies indicating that precipitation and temperature

extremes correlate with vegetation health, with NDVI values demonstrating strong positive correlations with climatic indices[28,29]. These interdependencies underline the role of climate factors, as outlined by the World Meteorological Organization, in contributing to land degradation, thereby reinforcing the need for integrated approaches in addressing these challenges[18]. Consequently, effective management strategies must prioritize the understanding of these climatic changes to mitigate their impact on semi-arid ecosystems.

## CONSEQUENCES OF LAND DEGRADATION IN SEMI-ARID AREAS

Land degradation in semi-arid areas presents profound consequences that exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and disrupt local ecosystems. The deterioration of soil quality, often driven by unsustainable agricultural practices, leads to diminished land productivity and food insecurity, severely impacting the livelihoods of communities reliant on traditional farming methods. This degradation is further intensified by climate change, which introduces variability in weather patterns and exacerbates drought occurrences. As outlined in Halbac-Cotoara-Zamfir *et al.*[20], these regions require a nuanced understanding of socio-ecological interactions and policy responses tailored to mitigate such risks effectively. Furthermore, the IPCC highlights the intricate ties between climate change and land conditions, emphasizing that sustainable land management is essential for fostering resilience against degradation impacts[19,26]. Ultimately, addressing land degradation in semi-arid areas not only serves to safeguard environmental health but also enhances community resilience against the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change.

The intricate relationship between biodiversity and local livelihoods in semi-arid regions is significantly affected by climate change and land degradation. These environmental stressors lead to a decline in ecosystem services essential for pastoral and agropastoral communities, thereby exacerbating food insecurity and threatening their sustenance. For instance, livestock, which are vital for economic stability and cultural identity in these communities, suffer from reduced forage availability and changing disease patterns due to altered climate conditions. Furthermore, the lack of a definitive framework for assessing returns on land use presents challenges to local governments in prioritizing investments that would optimize benefits for vulnerable populations[22,26]. Additionally, the increasing vulnerabilities faced by pastoralist communities complicate the four pillars of food security: Availability, access, utilization, and stability[23]. Addressing these interconnected issues is crucial to fostering resilient livelihoods and preserving biodiversity in semi-arid ecosystems.

The complex relationship between climate change and land degradation in semi-arid regions underscores the urgent need for adaptive management strategies. As severe droughts and altered precipitation patterns intensify, the vulnerabilities of these ecosystems become increasingly pronounced. The IPCC Special Report highlights that effective land management practices are vital to mitigate adverse impacts on food security and biodiversity, particularly in areas experiencing significant environmental stress[24,28]. Furthermore, the analysis of water scarcity in semi-arid Mediterranean regions reveals the critical challenges posed by reduced rainfall and competition for water resources, leading to conflicting demands between agriculture and ecosystem maintenance[25,30]. Ultimately, a multifaceted approach that combines sustainable land management with an enhanced understanding of climatic impacts is essential for preserving the fragile balance in these ecosystems, as well as ensuring the resilience of local communities facing the dual threats of climate change and land degradation.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing the link between climate change and land degradation requires integrated policies that promote sustainable land use and adaptive farming practices. Restoring degraded lands can enhance ecosystem resilience, improving agricultural productivity and carbon sequestration. Investment in restoration activities and scientific research is crucial for long-term sustainability. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders can develop effective frameworks to mitigate climate impacts while ensuring the health of semi-arid landscapes.

## SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

The linkages between climate change and land degradation are usually overlooked in the planning of agricultural land management practices in semi-arid areas. This paper explored the linkages between climate change and land degradation, with a focus on semi-arid regions in Zimbabwe. The relationship between climate change and land degradation is a complex and interconnected phenomenon that has become a pressing global concern. To address these challenges, a holistic, multidisciplinary approach considering the complex social, economic, and environmental factors is required. This cyclical relationship underlines the critical need for integrated policy and land management strategies that address both issues simultaneously. Future approaches must prioritize sustainable land use practices, adaptive agricultural methods, and investment in restoration activities that enhance ecosystem resilience.

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