

UNCCD COP 14 Highlights: Monday, 2 September 2019

The fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 14) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) opened on Monday, 2 September 2019, at the India Expo Centre and Mart in New Delhi, India. Following the handover of the COP presidency from the COP 13 host, China, and introductory remarks by COP 14 President and India's Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw, representatives of regional and interest groups, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector made opening statements.

The COP established a Committee of the Whole (COW) and Friends of the Chair to consider the outcome of the Conference.

The plenary session was preceded by a formal flag-raising ceremony to symbolize the handing over of the COP premises to the UN by the government of India. Five side events also took place, exploring, among other themes: how to apply the Research in Development approach to scale up land restoration and achieve land degradation neutrality (LDN); how to translate soil and land rehabilitation into action for LDN and sustainable livelihoods; links between land desertification and health; and country experiences in restoring degraded landscapes.

Opening of the Session

Sun Guoji, on behalf of COP 13 President Zhang Jianlong, Minister of State Forestry and Grassland Administration, China, opened COP 14. He noted that desertification and land degradation have a direct impact on food and ecological security. He highlighted achievements since COP 13 and expressed China's continued commitment to combating desertification by offering capacity-building opportunities for developing countries.

Delegates then elected Prakash Javadekar, Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, as COP 14 President. In his opening remarks, Javadekar noted that human actions have contributed to accelerating climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss and that, similarly, strong human intent, intelligence as well as technology will be needed to reverse the damage. Stating some most populous countries, including India and China, have presented their LDN voluntary targets, he called for further joint international commitment on finding new ways, including sustainable development methods and technology to restore degraded land.

Babul Supriyo, Ministry of State of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, made a statement on behalf of the host country in which he presented India's achievements and aspirations relating to desertification and land degradation. Among other issues, he highlighted the country's positive efforts and policies on afforestation, agriculture, conservation, watershed management and the use of new technologies.

Welcoming delegates, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw invited them to follow Mahatma Gandhi's legacy in removing obstacles and spreading well-being of peoples. He encouraged their engagement in interactive dialogues focusing on, *inter alia*, a values-based approach to land stewardship, healthy land and people, and boosting sustainable value chains

for land-based business. Stressing that "science has spelled out what needs to be done, we need to translate this knowledge into policies," Thiaw outlined some relevant findings from recent scientific reports and papers, including: the International Resource Panel of the UN Environment Programme; the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); and the UNCCD's Global Land Outlook and Science-Policy Interface (SPI). Thiaw further noted opportunities to tap the favorable political momentum towards sustainable production and consumption that is being fueled by a new generation of consumers, tax payers and voters. He concluded by highlighting some emerging themes to be addressed during the COP 14 High-Level Segment, noting round tables will focus on: linkages among land, climate and renewable energy; rural and urban communities; and a global movement for ecosystem restoration.

Opening Statements

Palestine, for the GROUP OF 77 AND CHINA (G77/CHINA), warned that if current trends of land degradation continue, they will exacerbate desertification, as well as the scale and frequency of sand and dust storms. Calling for greater integration of measures and actions to combat these and other negative impacts, he suggested that achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15, and especially target 15.3 on LDN, would contribute to improved economic growth, and poverty reduction, while building greater resilience to climate change impacts.

Finland, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS MEMBER STATES (EU), emphasized strong linkages between continuous land degradation, climate change and the biodiversity crisis. Calling for translating countries' LDN voluntary targets into action through proper projects, budget and multilateral cooperation, he highlighted empowerment of women as crucial in solving land-related issues, and noted the need to enhance the UNCCD's outreach to attain wider public awareness.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, highlighted concern about the effects of drought and flash floods and emphasized that reaching agreement on a common indicator for drought at this COP could support the integral achievement of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework. He called for a stronger commitment, in particular to increase support for implementation, and for a more effective organization of intersessional meetings.

Iraq, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, called for means of implementation, support for improving resilience and recognition of special circumstances in the diverse region. She welcomed the focus on, among other topics: migration; pragmatic solutions to sand and dust storms; land tenure; gender; and the links between urban and rural landscapes.

Grenada, on behalf of the GROUP OF LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES (GRULAC), stressed the need for increased ambition to achieve the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and to protect land as earth's most valuable resource. Noting that the region recognizes the need to "conceptually and methodologically refine the LDN target," he pledged GRULAC's commitment to comprehensive capacity-building efforts to ensure implementation of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework.

Malta, on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN GROUP, highlighted the region as a hot spot for land degradation and called for the optimization of the LDN fund to support the implementation of national LDN targets. He stated support for involving local communities, and in particular women, in the design of effective land management programmes.

Belarus, on behalf of CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE stressed the need of continuous support in order to achieve an operative implementation of the Convention. He highlighted the importance of National Adaptation Plans and cooperation among countries at regional and sub-regional levels. He called on the COP to include discussions on the relation between land degradation and migration, peace and security, as well as the topic of land tenure.

Gram Bharati Samiti on behalf of CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs), highlighted the priorities of CSOs during COP 14, including: recognizing that community-led initiatives contribute to LDN; attaining land tenure security particularly for women, young people and vulnerable groups, through a COP 14 decision on implementation of Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure on Land, Forestry and Fisheries; enhancing access to adequate financing and involving CSOs in decision making processes on LDN and National Drought Plans.

Adoption of the Agenda and Organization of Work

The COP adopted the agenda and organization of work (ICCD/COP(14)/1) without amendments. Subsequently, delegates approved the election of Vice-Presidents from the following regional groups: Jean Ilunga Muneng (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Kamaye Maazou (Niger) for African States; Abdulrahman Alfadley (Saudi Arabia) for Asia-Pacific States; Carlos Rodriguez (Costa Rica) and Robert Browne (St. Vincent and the Grenadines) for GRULAC; Andrey Kuzmich (Belarus) and Ashot Vardevanyan (Armenia) for Eastern European States; and Franz Breitwieser (Austria) for Western European and Other States.

COP 14 also appointed Trevor Benn (Guyana) as chair of the Committee of the Whole (COW) and adopted the document on accreditation of intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations and representatives from the private sector (ICCD/COP(14)/15 and ICCD/COP(14)/15/Add.1).

Finally, the COP established a Friends of the Chair group to work matters related to the New Delhi Declaration, which will start meeting on Wednesday.

In the Corridors

As delegates gathered into plenary following a morning of informal consultations and regional coordination meetings, they outlined their hopes for what the Secretariat is describing as the largest COP ever. Outlining her region's priorities for the COP, one delegation head said they placed particular interest on the implementation of transformative LDN projects and programmes, and expressed hope that this session would address the difficulties that countries face in aligning global and national data. Another delegate called for greater global attention to the issues of drought, and sand and dust storms, which cannot be addressed by individual countries or regions alone.

Several other delegates echoed similar interest in capacity-building, technical and financial partnership opportunities. One participant welcomed the presence of international development and science organizations at the venue, suggesting this indicates "growing momentum" for collaboration toward achieving land-related SDGs, particularly in light of the upcoming United Nations Decade for Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030.

As delegates pull up their sleeves to start working through the 30 decision texts on Tuesday morning, negotiations on drought and land tenure have been identified as two priority issues for this COP. Achieving consensus on the latter, in particular, which many expect to be an uphill battle, will be seen as a measure of success for this COP. Several observers expressed hope that the publication of several authoritative scientific reports in recent months, including the IPCC Special Report on Climate and Land will ease this process.



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