

UNCCD COP 14 Highlights: Tuesday, 3 September 2019

On the second day of COP 14, delegates began consideration of the substantive agenda, convening in parallel sessions throughout the day to review progress reports and proposals for COP 14 decisions. The first session of the Committee of the Whole (COW) was held in the morning. Opening sessions of the two UNCCD subsidiary bodies also took place, with the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) convening in the morning and afternoon, while the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) met in the afternoon.

Committee of the Whole

Opening the meeting on Tuesday morning, COW Chair Trevor Benn stressed the need for the UNCCD to secure more political support and financial resources. He introduced the items to be covered in two proposed contact groups. Parties subsequently agreed to establish, respectively, COW contact groups on budget and on other matters.

Programme and Budget: Programme and budget for the biennium 2020–2021: The UNCCD Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(14)/6, ICCD/COP(14)/7, ICCD/CRIC(18)/2), pointing to a 1.5% budgetary increase to reflect inflation.

Financial performance for the Convention trust funds: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(14)/8, ICCD/CRIC(18)/3, ICCD/COP(14)/9, ICCD/COP(14)/10 and ICCD/COP(14)/11). Christian Edelmann, UN Board of Auditors, presented key findings from the board's recent annual audit of the UNCCD, pointing out that the report is being presented for discussion at a COP for the first time. Among areas for improvement, Edelmann noted the need for standardized templates for contracting and enhancing anti-corruption measures to facilitate transparency.

Report of the Evaluation Office: The Secretariat introduced the report (ICCD/COP(14)/12), noting that it aims to support internal learnings.

Finland, for the EU, expressed appreciation for the increase in domestic and international resources to address land degradation, noting pledges of USD100 million to the LDN Fund by 2019.

SWITZERLAND emphasized that the multi-year work plan should reflect the scope of the Convention, as well as the Strategic Framework, and not only focus on the LDN target. She further noted that the Global Mechanism's objective is not to scale up implementation, and called for clarifying the scope and objective of the Global Land Outlook to avoid overlaps with other global assessments.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - Implications for the UNCCD: Integration of Sustainable Development Goal 15 and Target 15.3 into the Implementation of the UNCCD: The Secretariat introduced the report (ICCD/COP(14)/2) outlining the main achievements, support and recommendations for countries to integrate SDG 15 (life on land) in the implementation of the Convention.

eSwatini, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, highlighted the strong momentum for LDN implementation on the continent, and noted that 50 out of 54 countries have completed their LDN target-setting programmes. He called for a transition to the implementation of transformative programmes, and for financial resources to make this happen. He further noted the need for the LDN Fund to provide criteria on access to allow for all stakeholders, including the private sector, to make use of the Fund to invest in land restoration.

COLOMBIA stressed the need to recognize recent global scientific assessments in order to mitigate the effects of land degradation and resulting biodiversity loss, and for targeted technical assistance and capacity building to achieve this.

The EU stressed that effective implementation goes beyond designing good projects and securing funding and requires political will to address the drivers of desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD), and the enabling environment through ensuring, *inter alia*, land tenure security, and access to technical support.

GUYANA stated that incorporating SDG target 15.3 on LDN into the work of the UNCCD offers a strategic opportunity to increase the Convention's visibility, enhance synergies among the Rio Conventions and accelerate the achievement of the Convention's objectives.

CHINA called for the UNCCD to take the lead in implementing SDG target 15.3, and transformative thinking around governance to generate multidimensional benefits.

The US expressed concern about overemphasis on the LDN target, stating that risks narrowing the Convention's original mandate. BRAZIL, supported by SAUDI ARABIA, emphasized the need for specific consideration of drought.

BELARUS highlighted the importance of peatland restoration in its 2030 targets. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA highlighted its contribution to UNCCD implementation, noting the 2011 Changwon Initiative and the new Peace Forest Initiative to be launched during COP 14 to support effective implementation of LDN programmes.

Several other countries, including SYRIA, VENEZUELA and KENYA highlighted ongoing national implementation efforts.

CSOs highlighted their continued commitment to support local and national-level efforts to enhance resilience to DLDD.

ARGENTINA called for clarity on the concept of land degradation, noting its broad scope, and for smart design to avoid contradictory outcomes from mitigation measures. He further highlighted difficulties that countries may face sub-regionally in dealing with both drought and floods.

Responding to the issues raised, the Secretariat highlighted its role in supporting countries to identify and utilize financial resources and develop good quality programmes, emphasizing the need to ensure that projects are based on scientific considerations. He noted the key role of databases and lessons learned from countries, adding that the LDN Fund is one of many financial mechanisms aimed at assisting in the implementation of the Convention. He explained that efforts are being made

to clarify the LDN concept and increase synergies with the other Rio Conventions to maximize efficiency in programme implementation.

Modalities, Criteria and Terms of Reference for a Midterm Evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework:

The Secretariat introduced the item (ICCD/COP(14)/3), noting that the mid-term evaluation should be completed by COP 17 in 2025 and that COP 14 would only provisionally adopt the item. He said that the matter would be considered further and completed in 2023.

UKRAINE called for ensuring participatory consultation in the mid-term evaluation. South Africa, for the AFRICAN GROUP, expressed hope that drought indicators would be agreed at COP 14.

CHINA noted that: further input on the scope and items for evaluation should be elicited from parties; international dynamics such as the UNFCCC process should be considered; and that experts should be representative to reflect achievements and issues relating to strategic implementation.

SWITZERLAND noted that scope and criteria should address impact and sustainability and questioned why the component addressing efficiency does not address the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework in its entirety and only focuses on national reporting.

The PHILIPPINES stressed the need for developing National Action Plans within the context of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework.

Securing of Additional Investments and Relations with Financial Mechanisms: Global Mechanism: Juan Carlos Mendoza, Managing Director, Global Mechanism, introduced the item (ICCD/COP(14)/7- ICCD/CRIC(18)/2, ICCD/COP(14)/8), highlighting its focus on: supporting the establishment and strengthening of enabling environments; facilitating access to existing funding; and fostering new funding and innovative pilot projects.

Committee on Science and Technology (CST)

Opening of the Session: CST Chair Carl Fiati welcomed delegates and introduced the three technical papers prepared by the SPI. UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw noted the SPI team had fulfilled its CST 13 mandate, drawing attention to proposals for action, based on the synthesis and assessment of the latest science contained in the technical papers. He highlighted the need to increase positive impacts of land restoration and rehabilitation and to address links between land, and consumption and production patterns and flows.

eSwatini for the AFRICAN GROUP, noted that the recent assessment reports from the IPBES and IPCC highlight land use change as the largest driver of biodiversity loss with the greatest impact on the environment.

The EU welcomed the SPI's publications, as well as partnerships aimed at avoiding duplication of work. He noted, *inter alia*, the focus on: drought management; guidance on creating enabling frameworks and disincentivizing unsustainable land practices; and on workable rather than theoretical solutions.

Bhutan for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, welcomed the SPI recommendations on land, drought and water linkages and further called for cooperative work at all levels to disseminate and translate identified technologies and knowledge into direct benefits for local land users.

Colombia, on behalf of GRULAC, recognized the potential impact of research by scientific panels, urging for improved technologies and mitigation strategies to reduce the direct impacts of drought on ecosystems and soil degradation.

Malta, on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN GROUP, called for a comprehensive understanding of the causes of DLDD and noted the role of science in generating tools to avoid, manage and reverse degradation of land and ecosystems, and provide an approach to achieving LDN.

Russia, on behalf of CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, stressed the role of science and outlined the establishment of technical centers in the region to support: the generation

of scientific evidence to prevent and manage droughts; the sustainable use of forests and peatlands; and monitoring of sand and dust storms.

The Environmental Monitoring Group, on behalf of CSOs, observed that while the earth is in a climate crisis, scientific knowledge is also expanding exponentially. He urged “moving on” from exclusively focusing on LDN as the “mantra” of the past years to optimize land use through finding practical solutions to ensure carbon “stays in the soil.”

Adoption of the Agenda and Organization of Work: The CST adopted this item (ICCD/COP(14)/CST/1) and elected Ahmet Senyaz of Turkey as Rapporteur.

Items Resulting from the Work Programme of the Science-Policy Interface for the Biennium 2018–2019: Refined guidance for implementation of LDN under objective 1: The Secretariat introduced the item (ICCD/COP(14)/CST/2) and the SPI presented key findings from its two thematic assessments and correlated two technical reports: Realizing the Carbon Benefits of Sustainable Land Management Practices: Guidelines for Estimation of Soil Organic Carbon in the Context of LDN Planning and Monitoring; and Creating an Enabling Environment for LDN and its Potential Contribution to Enhancing Well-being, Livelihoods and the Environment.

SPI member Mariam Akhtar-Schuster explained the reports were prepared under the leadership of the SPI Co-Chairs with two parallel working groups. She further noted that the reports had passed through a peer review process, including internal and external scientific reviews, with a final review by the COP Bureau.

In the ensuing discussion, INDIA and SENEGAL called for specifying the economic benefits of sustainable land use and LDN policies, with INDIA stressing the importance of technology in policy implementation, and SENEGAL emphasizing the need for capacity building within countries to raise awareness on LDN. The US pointed to unique sustainable land use challenges experienced in drylands, with ARGENTINA seeking clarification on the role of arid lands in carbon storage.

MOROCCO emphasized the need for: linking land tenure security to LDN; preventing land grabbing; and ensuring respect for the ecological capacity of nature on land. THAILAND called for further developing restoration options, increasing technical capacities at national level, and identifying hot spots and suitable areas for interventions.

SWITZERLAND, with SOUTH AFRICA, lamented the late release of SPI reports. Noting the importance of soil organic carbon (SOC), SWITZERLAND highlighted that other indicators, such as economic and social criteria, should also be included when researching drivers of DLDD.

SAUDI ARABIA raised concerns about the lack of access to recent research information related to all environmental processes. NIGER, with IRAQ, called for resource mobilization, particularly for monitoring activities, and for establishing baselines and observatories. IRAN stressed the need for technology to improve monitoring.

EGYPT mentioned challenges that arise from the lack of precision in the reports, including the lack of consistent definitions on drought. SOUTH AFRICA emphasized the need to include reference to youth in the report in the context of inclusive land governance.

BANGLADESH noted that LDN targets are sometimes linked to water resources, which can be transboundary in nature, and called for mobilizing additional resources for capacity building.

ITALY recommended establishing Rio Convention synergies at the national and international level, and that the national tools and called for programmes to review and collect data keep pace with communication technology.

Niger, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, proposed a set of recommendations for the report.

SUDAN, with SYRIA, stated that the UNCCD pertinent information on SOC was difficult for countries to access. INDONESIA asked about different methods to assess the dimension of soil organic matter. OMAN stressed the need for a mechanism that relates to soil organic carbon.

Responding to delegates' feedback in the afternoon, the Secretariat highlighted relevant recommendations from the SPI, including on how to: ensure LDN targets are mainstreamed in national strategies and action programmes; cooperate with partners on science-policy aspects to enhance awareness and understanding of LDN; and collaborate with technical and financial partners to assess finance and capacity development needs.

On challenges in monitoring changes of SOC stocks, the SPI explained the technical report provided a framework and a 'decision tree' for selecting the most appropriate approach to SOC assessment and monitoring when a high level of certainty is required.

On the economics of LDN, the SPI pointed to its recommendation on developing national leverage plans to maximize multiple benefits from LDN and minimize trade-offs or unintended consequences.

On synergies with other conventions, the Secretariat outlined initiatives taken by UNCCD Executive Secretary Thiaw, including introducing joint townhall meetings with staff of UNFCCC and CBD.

Coordination activities of the Science-Policy Interface work programme 2018–2019: Chair Fiati introduced the item (ICCD/COP(14)/CST/4) and SPI member Mariam Akhtar-Schuster highlighted the SPI's cooperation with other intergovernmental scientific panels and bodies, including with IPBES, IPCC, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, the International Resource Panel and Global Land Indicators Initiative.

Presenting the key conclusions and recommendations ensuing from analyses of the different scientific reports, SPI member Nichole Barger highlighted the need to develop national, sub-national and regional capacities to assess land potential to facilitate better land use practices.

In the ensuing discussion, some delegations highlighted gaps between the main text and the recommendations, particularly on youth and gender issues, the inclusion of indigenous communities, as well as the need for a regional and multi-level scope for information sharing. In response, the Secretariat noted that while some of these issues are being addressed by other bodies, they could be considered further in the future. Responding to calls for addressing means of implementation in the reports, the SPI pointed out that such recommendations would be beyond the scope of their assessment.

At the close of the session, Chair Fiati announced a CST Contact Group with Matti Nummelin (Finland) as facilitator.

Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC)

Opening of the Session: Following welcoming remarks by CRIC Chair Samuel Contreras, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw highlighted some goals for the meeting, including: setting process indicators and baselines; measuring progress; and securing funding for implementation.

Namibia, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP emphasized focusing on ground action to reverse DLDD and the need for capacity building and technology transfer.

Lebanon, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP emphasized support required for Small Island Developing States, mountainous, arid and semi-arid states to collect ground data, and called for capacity building to boost regional science to combat desertification.

Guyana, for GRULAC, noted the divergent needs and realities across countries and regions and called for the design of context-specific interventions and promotion of alternative solutions to counter DLDD.

Malta on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN GROUP, highlighted the importance of quality data and noted growing scientific recognition that LDN is an SDG accelerator.

He welcomed efforts made towards implementing the Gender Action Plan and the progress made by the Global Mechanism in mobilizing funding for implementation.

Georgia, for the CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE GROUP, described CRIC 17 as an important milestone in tracking progress under the new UNCCD Strategic Framework, but expressed concern about the shortened duration of the meeting which makes it difficult to accommodate the expanded CRIC agenda. She highlighted the role of the SPI in developing drought indicators in partnership with WMO and others and the need to keep reporting on progress.

Finland, for the EU, described reporting on countries' LDN progress as one of the first successes in monitoring the new UNCCD Strategic Framework. He welcomed growing international collaboration around sand and dust storms, drought and migration, and the focus on long-term actions rather than emergency responses.

Both Ends, for CSOs, lamented that local communities' efforts to manage land sustainably is often unrecognized by decision makers. She highlighted land tenure security, knowledge on sustainable practices, and access to financing to support land restoration as three crucial elements of an enabling environment at the local level. She further called for more earmarked funds under small grants windows of the GEF, Green Climate Fund and others towards this end.

Adoption of the Agenda and Organization of Work:

Following an update from the Secretariat about changes to the schedule of work, the CRIC adopted the agenda (ICCD/CRIC(18)/1) and agreed to establish a contact group on matters relating to the Committee chaired by Skumsa Ntshanga (South Africa).

Effective Implementation of the Convention at National, Subregional and Regional Levels: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documentation on the multi-year workplan for Convention institutions and subsidiary bodies (ICCD/COP(14)/7-ICCD/CRIC(18)/2) and performance of the Convention institutions and subsidiary bodies (ICCD/CRIC(18)/3 (ICCD/CRIC(18)/7). There was no discussion of these items.

Contact Groups: Contact groups discussing matters related to the CST and CRIC held initial consultations in the evening

In the Corridors

In a first for the Convention, UN auditors delved into key findings from their audit of fiscal year 2017. One delegate welcomed this presentation as an apparent step toward greater transparency in UNCCD budgetary issues. Delegates expressed relief at the overall positive budgetary position and outlook.

Later, reflecting on divergent views about the predominance of LDN in discussions, one delegate commented that while the concept has been useful – and work on its metrics has added value – it might be time to move on from what some here are describing as an “outdated and unambitious concept.”

Given interlinkages to many SDGs, another observer noted, “keeping focus on LDN means to keep moving in the right direction.” Speaking as an agricultural economist, one delegate emphasized that involving youth in land restoration on a large scale would create jobs and opportunities for rural youth. But observing the Conference's sprawling urban setting – attendees barely make a ripple among New Delhi's 32 million inhabitants – another wondered how to empower urban youth and looked forward to seeing what new ideas will emerge from the high-level round tables on rural-urban linkages later in the week.

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