

UNCCD COP 14 Highlights: Monday, 9 September 2019

The opening ceremony of the two-day High-Level Segment of COP 14 took place in the morning. Following addresses by UN leaders and Heads of State of India and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, ministers representing regional groups delivered special statements.

In the afternoon, three ministerial roundtables convened, addressing: land, climate and renewable energy; rural and urban communities – “failing or flourishing together”; and fostering a global movement for ecosystem restoration.

In parallel with the roundtable sessions, contact groups continued negotiations on draft decision texts, addressing matters relating to the budget, as well as the policy advocacy frameworks.

Other events of the day included a dialogue with UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner addressing linkages between climate change and human development, a breakfast meeting on the Great Green Wall for the Sahel initiative, and a high-level luncheon on the Climate Action Summit.

Opening of the High-Level Segment

Prakash Javadekar, Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, and COP 14 President, opened the session. He discussed India’s leadership in environmental and land management, highlighting: achievement of 50% of the 2030 target of generating 175 gigawatts of electricity from renewables; levying a tax on coal production that is invested in climate action; and restoring nearly 15,000 square kilometers of degraded land in five years. He pledged India’s commitment to use its COP Presidency to reverse the negative contribution of human activities to land degradation.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, reminded delegates of the common goal of ensuring a safe, prosperous and equitable society for every child born today. He underlined how investment in the transition to sustainable land use fuels multiple virtuous cycles and emphasized the benefits of actions based on the principle of gender equality, public-private partnerships and multi-actor collaboration.

Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, reflected on the consequences of the Rio Conventions not realizing their full potential. She called for greater collaboration across the UN system, deploying and investing resources wisely and scaling up collective ambition, to bring solutions that “let people thrive, not just survive.”

Highlighting the success of several domestic environmental policies, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister, India, announced his government’s support for, among other actions:

- an initiative for enhanced South-South Cooperation that aims to share India’s experiences with cost-effective and sustainable land management strategies; and
- a “Global Water Action Agenda,” to maximize synergies through holistic land and water management.

Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, lauded India’s leadership and capacity to stage “a path-breaking and epoch-making COP” and, highlighting the vulnerability of Small Island Developing States, called for sufficient resources to be allocated to the UNCCD to reflect the critical role of land restoration in climate change mitigation and resilience.

Zhang Jianlong, Minister of State Forestry and Grassland Administration, China, and COP 13 President, outlined a series of intergovernmental and national actions that have been achieved since the last COP.

Palestine, for G77/CHINA, emphasized that combating desertification has profound impacts on the eradication of poverty and hunger, resource conflicts, inequalities and stimulates economic development and called for sharing of best practices and adequate financial sources.

Finland, on behalf of the EU, stated that it is essential to raise the profile of the UNCCD and emphasized the need to use the momentum it has gained to enhance collaboration among all stakeholders, including the Rio Conventions.

Niger, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for a common global indicator on drought, and a global commitment to increase support for this strategic objective, including improving early-warning systems and preparedness for, and response to, disasters.

Fiji, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, highlighted the need to take bold steps to implement the aspirations of the Convention and to focus on transformative change to create an enabling environment for sustainable land management (SLM).

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, for GRULAC, called for a focus on institutionalized capacity building under the Convention. He noted the land degradation neutrality (LDN) concept requires methodological and conceptual refinement to inform national reporting processes.

Malta, on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION, highlighted the importance of prioritizing actions that create green job opportunities and enhancing synergies among the Rio Conventions.

Egypt, for the ARAB GROUP, identified the lack of a liaison body between the UNCCD Secretariat, national agencies and regional centers as a barrier in the implementation of the UNCCD Strategic Framework.

Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA), on behalf of CSOs, highlighted the importance of community-led initiatives, as well as equity, inclusivity and sustainability, and stated that land tenure security is essential to achieving LDN.

Ministerial Roundtables

Land, Climate and Renewable Energy: Chair Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, welcomed ministers and delegates. Facilitator Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson, Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources, Iceland, identified land as the connecting piece in the implementation of the Rio Conventions. Ovais Sarmad,

Deputy Executive Secretary, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), added that recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) help provide a starting point for collective actions.

Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator, stressed the need for a fundamental economic transformation and rethinking of policy frameworks, including those relating to fiscal policies, subsidies and consumption and production patterns. He explained that an early transition could contribute to several SDG targets through reducing pressures on land and lowering carbon emissions, among other benefits.

Hoesung Lee, Chair, IPCC, called for the deployment of technology and finance and increased investment in carbon-neutral economic pathways and energy efficiency.

In the ensuing discussion, speakers shared climate change impacts in their countries, including: decreasing water resources and related increases in water prices and water borne diseases; rising frequency and intensity of catastrophic weather-related events; and growing exposure of vulnerable coastal areas to tidal flooding.

Others discussed negative as well as positive effects of climate change on energy security. While some pointed to reduced capacity for hydropower generation due to decreasing water flows, others emphasized the value of biofuels and cogeneration in achieving cleaner and more efficient energy use.

Speakers highlighted co-benefits from implementing the UNCCD, such as the links between afforestation, LDN, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. They also outlined their national determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, with some countries highlighting willingness to share their expertise in, *inter alia*, developing renewable energy projects and responsible investments.

Other national strategies highlighted included the use of smart policy designs that combine solar and agricultural systems, and building on Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT).

The discussions also outlined resource mobilization strategies by the Green Climate Fund and others aimed at closing the USD 300 billion gap in financing SLM, including through: providing equity funding for small- and medium-sized enterprises engaged in SLM practices; and “derisking” SLM projects that seek to earn certified emission reduction credits.

Rural and Urban Communities – “Failing or Flourishing Together”: The roundtable was chaired by Ana Cristina Quirós, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Livestock, Costa Rica, and moderated by Almoustapha Garba, Minister of Environment, Urban Safety and Sustainable Development, Niger.

In a keynote address, Josefa Leonel Correia Sacko, Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, African Union, stressed women’s rights to access land in rural areas.

Naoko Ishii, CEO and Chair, Global Environment Facility (GEF), called for reconfiguring land planning to include local communities. In a video message, Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director, UN-HABITAT, presented toolkits for integrated rural and urban planning.

In the ensuing discussion, participants acknowledged the importance of linkages and cooperation between urban and rural areas, noting it creates economic opportunities and optimizes land use planning. They noted opportunities for SLM through: developing circular economy activities; enhancing resilience through better land management; and prioritizing green work opportunities.

The mismatch between fast-growing urban populations and the slow development of urban infrastructure was highlighted as a key constraint and a cause of pollution, as well as a driver of wetlands and green area destruction. The discussion also featured strategies to mitigate negative impacts on ecosystems and resources for both rural and urban dwellers, through, *inter alia*, strengthening

action and policy measures aimed at managing severe droughts and minimizing food waste through sustainable consumption and production.

Specific challenges for rural areas mentioned in the discussions included vulnerabilities due to non-indigenous cropping, chemical use, and unsustainable infrastructure. Participants called for: education and awareness raising; a comprehensive restoration plan for land, water bodies, and forests to rejuvenate rural areas; development of medium-sized towns to stimulate employment and entrepreneurship; and initiatives to preserve the rural identity.

Fostering a Global Movement for Ecosystem Restoration: Chair Nestor Batio Bassiere, Minister of Environment, Green Economy and Climate Change, Burkina Faso, suggested following the example of his 80-year-old countryman, Yacouba Sawadogo, who received the alternative Nobel Prize for turning barren land into a forest landscape, helping to reduce hunger in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Inger Anderson, Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), compared life on earth to “living in a house on stilts while using the wooden poles for firewood.” She challenged the COP to: use the coming decade to implement sweeping economic and land-use shifts; use the untapped potential of restoration practices; find the necessary resources through innovative financial solutions; and take seriously the responsibility to boost food and water security and resilience.

Co-chair Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Development, Waterways and Environment, Fiji, challenged participants to consider the scope of their country’s ambition in restoration efforts and how to ensure the multiple benefits of restoration and ensuring it becomes a way of life.

In the ensuing discussion, speakers highlighted various factors in promoting and scaling up ecosystem restoration initiatives, including through: sound scientific management through ecosystem-sensitive approaches; enabling policies that mobilize entire societies to address DLDD; institutional innovation; involving all actors, including the private sector; fostering South-South cooperation; and ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment. One participant cautioned that gender responsive approaches need to go beyond involving women in projects and require: thorough gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data, knowledge exchange on good practices, and dialogue between men and women.

On ensuring multiple benefits of ecosystem restoration, many parties identified: ensuring synergies among scientific panels of the three Conventions; the carbon benefits of restoration and rehabilitation; involving scientists and information holders to avoid exacerbating land degradation, such as planting inappropriate or invasive species.

Numerous examples of ecosystem restoration were highlighted, including: developing legislation to avoid land degradation, prohibiting logging in natural forests; promoting equitable land tenure; and promoting knowledge sharing to support farmer-managed regeneration.

In the Corridors

As ministers and leaders of intergovernmental organizations descended on the venue, delegates made a mental switch from technical to political work. The opening speeches were rousing and emotive at times, with COP host India, expressing commitment to scaling up ambition. However, some were left wondering whether ministers would have an opportunity to meet informally to discuss what effective signal or declaration could emerge from Delhi. Meanwhile, contact group negotiations slowed, suggesting the focus was on supporting and advising ministers and other high-level representatives in various parallel afternoon roundtable sessions. Reflecting on roundtable discussions, some suggested the deliberations reflected a willingness to take further steps at UNFCCC COP 25 in Chile.