

UNCCD COP 14 Highlights: Wednesday, 11 September 2019

In the morning, the Conference of the Parties (COP) held the second open dialogue session with civil society, focusing on intergenerational equity, land tenure, food security, green jobs and migration. The session was organized around two rounds of discussions: inter-generational “testimonies for legacy” aimed at stimulating an exchange between older and younger participants; and learning from civil society initiatives on the ground.

The dialogue closed with a performance by Senegalese musician Baaba Maal, who recalled the rich cultural traditions of the Sahel that pass on messages of peace and love and the imperative to protect the land for future generations.

Contact groups met throughout the day and evening, finalizing the bulk of decision texts.

The Rio Conventions Pavilion featured the Drought Preparedness Day, presenting successes and challenges of current drought tools, methodologies and policies, and featuring the UNCCD Drought Initiative and other important partnerships and frameworks in this area.

Open Dialogue Session with Civil Society Organizations

This morning session was chaired by Jigmet Takpa, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, and moderated by Emmanuel Seck, Environment and Development Action (ENDA). Takpa underscored CSOs’ important role as “land warriors” in bridging the gap between science, policy and practitioners on the ground.

Intergenerational Dialogues: In the first of two intergenerational “conversations,” Kwon Byong Hyon, Future Forest, recalled the hardship and successes of the 18-year-long joint efforts between Republic of Korea and China in planting over 22 million trees in six Chinese deserts to combat dust storms and desertification. In her response, Yugratha Srivasta, UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Major Group for Children and Youth, stressed the importance of inter-generational equity, accountability and monitoring impacts of parties’ mitigation actions. She called for a coherent reporting system across the Rio Conventions and involving youth in decisions they will implement.

In the second conversation, Bhawani Shanker Kusum, Society for Rural Development, shared how youth and women participated in a land restoration project involving the planting of 60,000 trees to restore wastelands in Jaipur, India. Presenting another youth perspective, Alvaro Alfaro, Coordinator, 15th Conference of Youth, underscored river pollution as a social justice matter. He emphasized that water is a human right, against the backdrop of the privatization of water rights in Chile.

Delegates then watched a short film depicting Yacouba Sawadogo, a farmer from Burkina Faso, who successfully restored degraded land using Zaï, a traditional farming method in his county.

Lessons from the Ground: Moses Chabuka, Neno Active Youth in Development, representing African CSOs, discussed success stories in addressing food insecurity, unemployment, and hazardous migration. He shared initiatives aimed at improving the lives of young people and women through agriculture and sustainable land management (SLM) activities, and recommended creating platforms to increase access to technology and markets for local products.

Oindrila Basu, International Forestry Students’ Association, representing Asian CSOs, reflected on the effects of land degradation on food security, jobs and wellbeing. She noted a lack of motivation among youth to return to rural areas, saying this drives rural-urban migration, with attendant challenges. She recommended the formulation of policies that involve youth in ensuring socio-economic development, as well as recognizing tenure rights, building value-chain business models and mainstreaming land restoration.

On behalf of CSOs from Latin America and the Caribbean, Juan Riet, Interdisciplinary Center for Studies on Development, described SLM initiatives for youth, including: training of thousands of young farmers; engaging young people in land restoration; environmental education programmes in rural areas; and knowledge exchange opportunities through inter-generational dialogues.

Speaking for Central and Eastern Europe CSOs, Sophiko Akhobadze, Regional Environmental Center for the Caucasus, noted the direct and indirect impacts of migration, and highlighted achievements in land restoration, including: organic farming markets organized by small farmers in Moldova; agroforestry initiatives involving hundreds of local farmers; and women-managed small nurseries in Georgia.

Mathilde Bourjac, Centre d’Actions et de Réalisations Internationales (CARI), observed that while people living in oases enjoy comparatively good ecological conditions, they are vulnerable to climate change and land degradation. To offset these impacts, she suggested a focus on: restoring degraded oases; promoting inter-generational knowledge transfer; and empowering local communities.

In the ensuing discussion, the EU noted that CSOs play a crucial role in assisting vulnerable groups, stressing that their participation should be actively supported. SWITZERLAND supported strengthening the involvement of CSOs and giving them access to UNCCD contact groups as observers. The ECONOMIC COMMUNITY FOR WEST AFRICAN STATES advocated developing a framework, such as a memorandum of cooperation, to enhance CSO engagement in the UNCCD process.

Drawing on an example from Central Java, INDONESIA highlighted reduced pressure on the land after people moved to the city as a positive aspect of rural-urban migration.

The ARAB CENTER FOR THE STUDIES OF ARID ZONES AND DRYLANDS (ACSAD) shared a success story from Northern Sudan, where sand expansion was halted through collaboration among local CSOs. THE HOLY SEE provided an overview of activities undertaken by the Pope John Paul II Foundation in the Sahel region benefiting nine countries and diverse local communities. He also highlighted an eco-consciousness initiative in India, aimed at encouraging communities to go back to nature.

Reflecting on the discussions, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw recalled the Convention's long engagement with CSOs and thanked participants for the constructive dialogue. He emphasized that the UNCCD cannot be implemented without the participation of CSOs.

Delegates then watched a short film on Reserva: Youth Land Trust, the winner of a global competition to depict positive local action on climate change and land degradation.

Summarizing the discussions, Moderator Seck noted that migration from rural areas is linked to low income from the agricultural sector. He highlighted the need for: direct access to funding for marginalized groups; promoting good practices that draw on traditional knowledge as well as modern technology; and securing access to land for young people and women.

Closing the meeting, Chair Takpa noted that the knowledge of adults and youth has to come together in order to achieve land restoration. He pointed to the numerous success stories presented by CSOs, calling for their replication.

Committee of the Whole

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - Implications for the UNCCD: Implementation of the UNCCD communication plan and the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020): COW Chair Trevor Benn opened the meeting and introduced document ICCD/COP(14)/4.

BRAZIL, INDIA and SWITZERLAND agreed on the importance of ensuring synergies with the 2030 Agenda in outreach activities of the Convention, with BRAZIL and SWITZERLAND noting such linkages would help to make complex UNCCD terminology more accessible.

Effective Implementation of the Convention at National, Subregional and Regional Level: Promotion and strengthening relationships with other relevant conventions and international organizations, institutions and agencies: The Secretariat introduced its report (ICCD/COP(14)/5), highlighting, *inter alia*, the launch of the UNCCD GEO-LDN initiative, collaboration with UN Women, new partnerships on drought, and sand and dust storms, and legacy initiatives of various COP presidencies.

INDIA emphasized the need to integrate means of implementation to joint work among the Rio Conventions, citing recent guidance from the UNCCD Science Policy Interface on land-based indicators as a good practice in this regard.

The RAMSAR CONVENTION ON WETLANDS underscored that land health and productivity are closely linked to the quality of wetlands, including peatlands, and welcomed recognition of this link in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Climate and Land.

The UN FORUM ON FORESTS outlined how progress on the UN Strategic Plan for Forests – notably the target to increase global forest cover to 120 million hectares by 2030 – contributes to LDN.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA reported on the launch of the Peace Forest Initiative at COP 14. ACSAD expressed its willingness to provide support for UNCCD implementation in the Middle East and Northern Africa region.

Both ENDS, for CSOs, called for strengthening the UNCCD's existing partnership with FAO to enhance, among others, capacities on land governance, and inclusion of women and youth.

Procedural Matters: Participation and involvement of the private sector in meetings and processes of the UNCCD and the business engagement strategy: The Secretariat introduced the document (ICCD/COP(14)/14). Chair Benn proposed, and parties agreed, that this agenda item will be incorporated into the work of the Sustainable Land Management Business Forum.

INDIA and BRAZIL supported the initiative to engage business. BRAZIL noted that the private sector can help stimulate improved practices in the agricultural sector "since it is in their interest to be sustainable." Both ENDS, speaking for CSOs, stressed, however, that due diligence and transparency are needed.

Participation and involvement of CSOs in meetings and processes of the UNCCD: The Secretariat introduced document ICCD/COP(14)/13 and reiterated the UNCCD's support for CSO participation. CSO Representative, China Green Foundation, read out the updated membership of the CSO selection panel, and highlighted the Panel's initiatives and progress on such issues as land tenure and gender.

INDIA expressed appreciation for CSOs' involvement in the UNCCD process and suggested that enhancing their involvement in the implementation of the Convention should be subject to the availability of financial resources in line with national circumstances. The Secretariat took note of the suggestion.

Programme of work for the COP 15: This item (ICCD/COP(14)/5) was introduced without comment.

Contact Groups

In the afternoon, the contact group preparing draft decision texts by the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) concluded its work, forwarding five decision texts to the COP for approval.

Meanwhile, the Committee of the Whole (COW) contact group on other matters finalized draft decisions on collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) and the private sector. In the evening the group reconvened to continue work on drought, SDGs and land tenure.

The COW contact group on budget also worked through the afternoon on the programme and budget for the biennium 2020-2021.

In the Corridors

Wednesday kicked off on an engaging and inspiring tone, as CSOs shared success stories and testimonials of work being done at grassroots level during the COP dialogue aimed at addressing land degradation. The zeal and passion of many of the younger CSO representatives, objecting to "youth washing," did not go unnoticed. This prompted calls for opening up contact groups for them to participate in decisions they will implement. An older panelist, acknowledging his generation's excessive exploitation and consumption of resources, opined "the youth are holding up a mirror, showing us the road we all have to walk towards land rehabilitation."

In the afternoon, and despite dry expectations arising from the day before, delegates buckled down and the Contact Groups made a final push to complete their work. One delegate mentioned that the hurdles along the way were mostly because of inexperienced delegates putting agreed language back on the negotiating table, causing some understandable frustration among UNCCD veterans. A casualty of this was a draft decision on LDN that was allegedly a copy-paste from an older one. The budget discussions, while moving briskly and cordially over less contentious issues, tended to grind to a halt every time any "increases" had to be considered. With only two negotiating days left, it's going to be a sprint to finish all outstanding issues, although "at this stage no delegate wants to place a bet on the COP's closing time."