The thirteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 13) opened in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, China, on Wednesday, 6 September. The Committee of the Whole (COW) and the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) began a review of the draft documents in the afternoon.

**OPENING PLATEFORM**

Cemal Noyag, on behalf of COP 12 President Veyssel Eröğlu, Minister of Forestry and Water Affairs, Turkey, opened COP 13. He noted that national land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets are being set in 110 countries, and highlighted the food security, biodiversity and climate change co-benefits of combating land degradation, especially for the rural poor.

Delegates then elected Zhang Jianlong, Minister of State Forestry Administration, China, as COP 13 President. In his opening remarks, Zhang noted that over 1.5 billion people in more than 100 countries are exposed to desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD), which endangers global peace. He announced China’s intention to declare its LDN voluntary target during COP 13.

Bu Xiaolin, Chair, Inner Mongolia People’s Government, highlighted the achievements of Inner Mongolia in combating desertification in recent years, with a reduction of 2.9 million hectares of affected land since 2000.

Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary, expressed fears that the window of opportunity created from aligning the Convention with the 2030 Agenda is limited and expectations are “huge,” therefore efforts at this COP and thereafter need to focus on implementation, and translating the LDN targets into action.

**STATEMENTS BY REGIONAL AND INTEREST GROUPS AND UN AGENCIES:** Ecuador, for the Group of 77 and CHINA (G77/CHINA), noted that the 2018 session of the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development will offer an opportunity to showcase countries’ progress towards LDN, and stressed the need to align the LDN Fund with other financial mechanisms.

Estonia, on behalf of the EU, emphasized their support for the LDN Fund. He stated that gender mainstreaming, scientific research including effective translation, and considerations of local conditions and communities, were critical to achieving desired outcomes.

Kenya, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for COP 13 to consider specific measures to deal with the impacts of drought in the region, and to strengthen the CRIC as an interactive body for sharing of country experiences.

Bhutan, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, welcomed the inclusion of drought as a specific objective in the new Strategic Framework and underscored the importance of LDN for the implementation of the Convention, as well as the need for transparent and fair resource allocation.

Argentina, on behalf of the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), emphasized the importance of the new Strategic Framework in addressing DLDD, noting this requires means of implementation, especially finance.

Armenia, on behalf of the CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE GROUP (CEE) stressed the need to align LDN target setting with SDG reporting. He supported the four-year CRIC reporting cycle and called for the CST’s involvement in identifying topics for the inter-sessional CRIC meetings.

Italy, on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN GROUP, welcomed the technical and financial efforts made towards LDN target setting, and stated her support for the four-year reporting cycle and improved role of the CST through the Science, Technology and Implementation unit.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP), for UN ORGANIZATIONS AND ITS SPECIALIZED AGENCIES, emphasized UNDP’s role in assisting countries through, *inter alia*: capacity building and policy advocacy; supporting local approaches; and resource mobilization.

The China Green Foundation, on behalf of CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs), highlighted the impacts of DLDD worldwide, including food insecurity, and displacement and migration; and stressed that land tenure security is a prerequisite for land rehabilitation.

The Adoption of the Agenda and Election of Officers: Delegates adopted the agenda and organization of work without amendments (ICCD/COP(13)/1).

Delegates postponed the election of Vice-Presidents to await selection of candidates from all regions.

Delegates then established a Committee of the Whole (COW) to consider the following agenda items: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and implications for the UNCCD; effective implementation of the Convention; programme and budget; procedural matters; and any other matters.

Delegates also adopted the document on accreditation of intergovernmental organizations, CSOs and representatives from the private sector (ICCD/COP(13)/17), noting, *inter alia*, that seven business and industry entities, and 492 CSOs were accredited for COP 13.

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE (COW)**

Interim Chair Skumsa Mancotywa (South Africa), standing in for COW Chair Nosipho Ngcaba (South Africa), introduced the items to be covered in the two contact groups on budgetary matters, chaired by Marcelo Borges (Brazil), and non-budgetary matters, chaired by Luis Domingos Constantino (Angola).

The EU announced that it would table text on the links among DLDD, migration and stability. GUYANA, supported by GRENADA and SAINT LUCIA, said they would propose text for a decision on capacity building, while TURKEY expressed concern about the proliferation of new decisions.

**PROGRAMME AND BUDGET: Programme and budget for the biennium 2018-2019:** The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(13)/7 and ICCD/COP(13)/8-
Regional Statements and Interest Groups:
The EU emphasized science as a prerequisite for combating DLDD, and monitoring and reporting on land restoration. They welcomed ongoing efforts to make information accessible to all stakeholders through the Scientific Knowledge Brokering Portal (SKBP).

IPBES, welcoming future collaboration with the SPI, noted the land degradation and restoration assessment where SPI made regular contributions.

Nigeria, for the AFRICAN GROUP, recommended: considering African specific issues in the LDN conceptual framework; linking LDN indicators to poverty and indigenous knowledge; and capacity development, particularly on monitoring soil carbon stocks.

Desert International, for CSOs, welcomed the inclusion of issues related to responsible governance, protection of user rights and gender issues in the conceptual framework, and supported the extension of the SPI.

Adoption of the Agenda and Organization of Work:
Delegates adopted the agenda and organization of work (ICCD/COP(13)/CST/1).

Election of Officers Other Than the Chair of the Committee on Science and Technology:
Delegates nominated Jean-Luc Chotte (France), as rapporteur.

Items Resulting from the Work Programme of the Science-Policy Interface for the Biennium 2016–2017:
The Secretariat introduced this item (ICCD/COP(13)/CST/2). Presenting the framework, Barron Orr (US) and Annette Cowie (Australia) highlighted it was developed by the SPI through a collaborative process involving also external experts and feedback from the LDN Target Setting Programme of the UNCCD.

Delegates and the presenters discussed, inter alia: harmonizing indicators across the environmental conventions and including additional indicators; including a focus on cultural values and traditional knowledge; and improving mechanisms for monitoring, reporting and verification. Switzerland stated that scientific findings should not be reviewed by political bodies such as the COP Bureau.

The GM described how the framework has been used in practice to support countries participating in the LDN Target Setting Programme.

Benin, Colombia, and Turkey presented on best practices of LDN implementation in their countries.

The CST established a contact group on matters related to the CST, and appointed Jean-Luc Chotte as group facilitator.

In the Corridors
As COP 13 delegates arrived in Ordos, there was universal admiration for the gleaming buildings, magnificent sculptures, efficient transport, beautifully laid out parks and friendly local hosts. It was clear that China has left no stone unturned to ensure a successful COP. But this COP is also very much targeted at the domestic audience, with the Chinese delegation emphasizing to a roomful of local journalists that Ordos was selected to provide a “yes we can” moment, strengthening China’s self-confidence about its capacity to reverse desertification.

Many delegates echoed this renewed enthusiasm to engage in the Convention, saying the “stars are aligned,” now that the UNCCD finally has a concrete target and deadline. However, many noted that it will take hard work over the next 10 days to fully seize this opportunity and ensure the new Strategic Framework is fully operationalized. With “business as usual” resuming in the afternoon, delegates will need to work hard to maintain their initial enthusiasm amidst the expected battles over the programme and budget, strategic priorities, and how to balance private investments with land rights. Some expressed fears that the relatively manageable agenda will rapidly fill up with new draft decisions.