

## Summary of the 19th Session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification: 15-19 March 2021

Healthy land is “our real collective capital” in creating a post-pandemic world of peace, prosperity, and equity. Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), stressed this point at the first-ever virtual meeting of the UNCCD Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). The Committee convened as a non-negotiating, information-sharing session with a shortened agenda. Despite connectivity challenges for some participants, the daily two-hour sessions provided an opportunity to share experiences on issues to be addressed at the next session of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP 15) in late 2021, with a focus on:

- status of implementing Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) projects, including progress with operationalizing the LDN Fund;
- support to the UNCCD Drought Initiative, and policy frameworks adopted by parties relating to drought, gender, and land tenure; and
- the interim report of the Intergovernmental Working Group (IWG) on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought under the UNCCD.

The LDN Fund Manager, Mirova, reported that it has secured over USD 150 million since the Fund’s inception in 2018, with 70% coming from private funding sources, and over 220 projects screened to date. While welcoming the growing capitalization of the Fund, he expressed concern about the need to secure social and environmental safeguards and ensure the involvement of local stakeholders in land governance processes.

During discussion of UNCCD policy initiatives, the issue of drought and how best to manage it, elicited extensive debate. Participants broadly welcomed the interim report of the IWG, which was established at COP 14 in 2019 to take stock of existing policy, implementation and institutional coordination frameworks on drought preparedness and response. African countries were vocal in stressing the severity of drought impacts in the region, in part due to accelerating climate change and human-induced land degradation. They reiterated calls for a UNCCD Drought Protocol, with dedicated financial resources, to ensure drought is given the attention it

deserves. Alternative viewpoints favored enhancing collaboration with existing international programmes and specialized institutions working on drought.

The need to mainstream gender across all UNCCD programmes, including LDN actions was a recurring issue, with many noting the critical role that women play role in sustainable land management (SLM). There were calls to raise current ambition, as set out in the UNCCD’s Gender Action Plan, and to strive towards more systemic approaches.

In his closing remarks UNCCD Executive Secretary Thiaw noted that while the global pandemic has shrouded the timeline for COP 15 in uncertainty, there is a window of opportunity to reposition land at the center of a green recovery.

CRIC 19 convened in daily two-hour online sessions from 15-19 March 2021.

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### A Brief History of the CRIC

The UNCCD is the centerpiece of the international community's efforts to combat desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) in drylands. The Convention, called for by the UN Conference on Environment and Development's "Agenda 21" in 1992, was adopted on 17 June 1994. The Convention entered into force on 26 December 1996 and currently has 197 parties, representing universal ratification.

The UNCCD recognizes the physical, biological, and socio-economic aspects of desertification and the importance of involving local communities in combating DLDD. The core of the UNCCD is the development of national, sub-regional, and regional action programmes by national governments, in cooperation with UN agencies, donors, local communities, and non-governmental organizations. At its adoption, the UNCCD contained four regional implementation annexes for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Northern Mediterranean. A fifth regional annex, for Central and Eastern Europe, was added in 2001.

The CRIC first convened in Rome, Italy, in 2002. During COP 9, held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2009, parties adopted new terms of reference for the review body, making it one of the two subsidiary bodies of the Convention, alongside the Committee on Science and Technology. In addition to conducting regular reviews of implementation of the Convention's 10-Year Strategy (2008-2018), the CRIC was tasked with assessing the status of the Convention's institutional and financing arrangements, communication and reporting procedures, and collaboration with the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Progress reports by country parties and other reporting entities are submitted through the UNCCD's Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) online portal.

### Key Turning Points

**COP 12:** With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UNCCD-related LDN target, a key focus at COP 12 (2015) was how to align the UNCCD's goals and parties' action programmes with the global framework. Convened concurrently with COP 12, CRIC 14 held extensive discussions on how to adapt both the substance, as well as process, of future reporting, with a focus on how to establish and monitor national-level voluntary LDN targets. The meeting agreed that future reporting should focus on three biophysical indicators: trends in land cover, land productivity, and carbon stocks. Delegates also discussed related metrics to measure progress. Among decisions forwarded to the COP for approval, the CRIC called on parties to formulate data-based, quantifiable, and time-bound voluntary targets to achieve LDN "in accordance with their specific national circumstances and development priorities," and to use the concept of LDN as one of the means to foster coherence among national policies, actions, and commitments.

**CRIC 15 and 16:** In 2016 and 2017, the CRIC held extensive consultations on how to improve the procedures for communication as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP. CRIC 16 convened as a special session—dubbed "the methodological CRIC"—with a mandate to develop modalities for future reporting in line with the new four-year cycle proposed at COP 12.

**COP 13:** In addition to adopting the new UNCCD Strategic Framework (2018-2030), with its five Strategic Objectives, COP 13 (2017) approved the move to a four-year reporting cycle. Under the new format, intersessional meetings of the CRIC would undertake an assessment of implementation against progress indicators every four years, and hold narrative reporting sessions every two years. It further requested the Secretariat to consider simplifying the reporting templates and other reporting tools, including through ensuring the PRAIS platform is more user friendly.

**CRIC 17 and 18:** CRIC 17 (2019) considered a set of reports containing preliminary analyses of information submitted related to the new UNCCD Strategic Objectives. The reports were based on default national data for each of the three UNCCD progress indicators, drawn from global data sets and "pre-loaded" onto the PRAIS portal. Delegates called for a number of improvements to the UNCCD's communication and reporting procedures, including to: expand the functionality and reporting tools on the Trends.Earth (managed by Conservation International) and PRAIS platforms to support decision making; and review the methodology used to obtain the aggregate indicator for SDG 15.3.1 (proportion of land that is degraded over total land area) to allow its interpretation to the magnitude of degradation. Held concurrently with COP 14 (2019), CRIC 18 adopted seven decisions on, among other issues, enhancing implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through strengthened capacity building. CRIC 18 further elaborated CRIC recommendations for assessing the implementation of the Convention against the five UNCCD Strategic Objectives

**COP 14:** COP 14 adopted over 30 decisions on, among other topics: how to implement four thematic policy frameworks addressing drought, gender, sand and dust storms (SDS), and DLDD as a driver for migration. The COP also agreed to include land tenure as a new thematic area under the Convention.

### Report of the Meeting

UNCCD CRIC Chair Andrew Bishop (Guyana) opened the session on Monday, stating that while the meeting takes place amidst a global pandemic, "we will not allow these challenges to deter us." He then invited CRIC 19 Vice-Chair Ahmed Senyaz (Turkey) to chair this intersessional meeting on his behalf.

In his opening remarks, Senyaz expressed his hope that delegates will remember CRIC 19 as a successful event for exchanging knowledge and experiences. He underlined the need to translate policies into concrete action on the ground, calling on parties to use innovative methodologies and approaches to contribute to scientifically informed decision making on combatting DLDD.

UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw described this first-ever UNCCD online event as a unique session "for reasons that we would have preferred to avoid," noting that while the pandemic has forced people apart, it has also emphasized the importance of the UNCCD's work. Thiaw stressed that land restoration is vital for a sustainable recovery from the pandemic as it creates green jobs, mitigates climate change, slows biodiversity loss, increases food security, and frees millions of people from poverty and hunger.

**Opening statements:** Representatives of the six UNCCD Regional Implementation Annexes, civil society organizations (CSOs), international agencies, and other interest groups delivered opening statements.

Morocco, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, extended condolences to all Member States for the huge loss of lives and economic devastation caused by the worldwide pandemic. Highlighting the region's priorities, he urged greater commitment from all stakeholders to ensure positive impacts from land restoration efforts, noting this will lead to improved living conditions.

Portugal, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION (EU), reiterated support its support to countries in monitoring and reporting of their LDN target-setting programmes (TSPs), and emphasized that any options to strengthen the framework should build on existing legal and financial mechanisms, rather than developing new mechanisms.

Uzbekistan, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, suggested CRIC 19 is a positive platform for sharing experiences and providing feedback about implementation of the Convention, and addressing priorities and needs of parties. He said the region represents a diverse collection of ecosystems that require customized assistance, and welcomed the comprehensive scope of the IWG interim report on drought.

Nicaragua, on behalf of the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), called for a holistic approach to achieving the 2030 Agenda by linking the UNCCD's LDN target to other crucial goals, including on poverty eradication, addressing hunger, and revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development. She emphasized the importance of considering different country contexts, and supporting the development of gender-sensitive indicators to ensure women and men benefit equally.

Hungary, on behalf of NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN countries, noted the region's vulnerability to rising sea levels, and outlined ongoing efforts to improve the sharing of best practices, and to develop a technology transfer mechanism. He lamented the heavy toll of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, and the impact on rural economies and landowners, which is slowing down land restoration activities.

Belarus, on behalf of CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE), thanked the Global Mechanism (GM) for its support to countries in setting national LDN targets and building partnerships that will contribute to strengthening the UNCCD as an effective international instrument. He said the complexity of the IWG report was concerning, and noted gaps that are not sufficiently covered, including gender equality issues.

Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the ARAB GROUP, reported on the recent G20 meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia. He highlighted the launch of the Global Initiative on Reducing Land Degradation and Enhancing Conservation of Terrestrial Habitats to Prevent, Halt, and Reverse Land Degradation, which aims to achieve a 50% reduction of degraded land by 2040.

INDIA, on behalf of the COP 14 Presidency, commended the UNCCD Secretariat for continuing to work hard during the pandemic, noting that land restoration and nature-based solutions are key to a post COVID-19 recovery. Calling for a renewed focus on multilateralism, he stressed that the UNCCD's leadership in steering global collaboration on land restoration can yield multiple benefits for the 2030 Agenda.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) underscored that land degradation and water scarcity

are becoming international challenges, and offered support to countries to "build back better." She urged countries to adopt nature-based solutions that will provide healthy and balanced diets while protecting the quality of soil and land.

The ARAB ORGANIZATION FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT reported on its support to Arab states in preparing their national reports, noting this represented their first unified approach. He suggested funding under the UNCCD remains problematic when compared to the other Rio Conventions, and called on the GM to review the complex application process for LDN projects, as no Arab state to date has received any funding.

Idea Public Association, on behalf of CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, reiterated CSO priorities to address the gaps between policies and concrete actions at the local level, including by involving CSOs throughout decision-making processes. She urged parties to pay greater attention to agroecology and community-land initiatives as a means to achieve LDN, also in light of concerns about safeguarding land access to minority groups, including women and Indigenous peoples, and accelerating actions to sustain the land and its people.

**Organizational matters:** The Committee adopted the provisional agenda and tentative schedule of work for the session (ICCD/CRIC(19)/1), and confirmed the appointment of Hussein Nasrullah (Lebanon) as Rapporteur for the 19th and 20th sessions.

### *Implementation of the Voluntary LDN Targets and Related Implementation Efforts*

Louise Baker, Managing Director, UNCCD Global Mechanism, introduced the GM's report (ICCD/CRIC(19)/2 and ICCD/CRIC(19)/2/Corr.1) on support to countries' voluntary LDN target-setting processes (TSPs), as well as additional support for the early-stage development of transformative LDN projects and programmes (TPPs). Discussion of this item took place on Monday and Tuesday.

The AFRICAN GROUP described the adoption of the LDN concept as a remarkable achievement as it provides a suitable framework for addressing desertification in an integrated way, including through enhancing inter-ministerial collaboration, introducing integrated planning tools for land-use optimization, and providing targeted goals for resource mobilization. Lamenting that current efforts are off-track for achieving LDN by 2030, he called for enhanced interventions to: develop appropriate tools to improve coordination of different land-use resources; mobilize additional funding for TPPs; and build capacity for implementing and monitoring LDN projects. He highlighted opportunities to build synergies with major initiatives, such as the Great Green Wall of the Sahel, noting it has received financial pledges of around EUR 12 billion.

The ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP said 31 parties had developed LDN targets, but more support was needed for developing TPPs. He highlighted concerns on how best to support countries with varying levels of capacities to achieve LDN, calling for further support to countries to speed up the TPP pipeline right from concept development and project preparation to effective monitoring of, and knowledge sharing on, TPP implementation. He further called for increased awareness raising on LDN financing windows, and how to design TPPs for a post-pandemic world. He underscored the role of regional partnerships in such capacity-building efforts, commending



the Changwon and Peace Forest Initiatives of the Republic of Korea, and China's work on advanced monitoring tools, He further noted the importance of availing high-resolution global data sets to small island developing states that are particularly vulnerable to climate-induced land degradation.

GRULAC reported that 31 countries, representing 95% of the region, had submitted voluntary LDN targets, and called for substantial support to ensure an equally robust implementation process. While welcoming efforts to mobilize funding at the global level, including under GEF-7, the Green Climate Fund and Adaptation Fund, he said these are not sufficient to bridge the gap in forecasting and planning capacities. He further called for support to implement LDN at local level, and to better link such efforts to broader poverty reduction and climate-resilient development objectives. Underscoring the importance of systematic approaches to knowledge creation, dissemination, and learning, he requested the GM to support countries in identifying opportunities to strengthen national and regional capacities in data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The CEE described LDN as a strong lever for driving UNCCD implementation, stating this requires maintaining focus at the highest political level, and welcoming the High-level Dialogue on DLDD convened by the UNCCD and UN General Assembly. He highlighted the importance of establishing multi-stakeholder working groups as one of the lessons learned from seven LDN-TSPs completed so far, and called for additional support to turn targets into concrete actions by developing TPPs. He reported that of the four countries that have applied to the TPP Facility, one has successfully launched a project with an LDN component.

The ARAB GROUP thanked the GM for providing technical support in developing concept notes and TPP pipelines. He noted countries face challenges in financing and expressed concern at the technically complicated nature of the TPP process. He highlighted that very few projects have been launched thus far and suggested considering the geographical distribution of such projects and undertaking interventions where gaps are identified. Affirming that the document has been well prepared, he said progress should be linked to COP resolutions to identify the lessons learned and appropriate recommendations.

The EU expressed strong support for LDN as a principal goal of the UNCCD, noting the role of land in linking and aligning UNCCD activities with other planning processes such as nationally determined contributions under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the national biodiversity strategic action plans under the Convention on Biological Diversity. She supported ongoing efforts to set baselines to support a systematic approach to monitor LDN progress using the best available national data, as well as processes to facilitate knowledge sharing and peer learning. She called for increased coordination with all relevant ministries involved in land management to mainstream LDN in national policy making. She welcomed amplified fundraising efforts for the LDN TPPs, and further encouraged the UNCCD Secretariat and GM to continue to support capacity of countries to assess and map degraded lands.

Reaffirming its commitment to supporting ambitious LDN target achievements, the INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN) outlined key findings from

its 2019 review of policy convergence between LDN and forest land restoration projects in over 30 countries. He noted the low priority given to rangeland restoration despite constituting 80% of drylands, concluding that this presents a significant risk to achieving the Convention's objectives. He explained that the multi-actor dialogue convened in partnership with WWF and UNCCD in December 2020 aimed to address this gap by raising global awareness of the role that rangelands can play in achieving sustainable development. He stressed the importance of strengthening investments in rangeland restoration in alignment with LDN goals, including at the upcoming UNCCD COP 15 and the UN Food Systems Summit.

CARI Association, for CSOs, underscored that preventing land degradation is the best approach to combat desertification, and called for quantified targets for land restoration. While congratulating countries that have embarked on their TPPs, he called for transparency in reporting on areas targeted for LDN activities, with increased inclusion of women and other marginalized groups, as well as CSO participation in setting national LDN targets and monitoring of TPPs. Recalling the close link between land and human health, CSOs called for a rapid transition to more sustainable agricultural practices that promote biodiversity conservation and avoid further land degradation.

The GEF provided an overview of the current GEF replenishment cycle, and reported that an additional USD 2 million has been made available through the GM for capacity building.

FAO highlighted ongoing capacity-building efforts including a joint initiative with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) on sustainable land management in drylands, and harmonizing restoration strategies under the Great Green Wall of the Sahel project, including through linking knowledge systems of pastoralists and other local communities.

In additional inputs, country parties and other delegates highlighted some lessons from ongoing LDN projects, including the need to:

- provide more high-resolution data on the three LDN sub-indicators, with accompanying technical support and capacity building for effective monitoring through Google Earth and other platforms;
- ensure that voluntary LDN targets are commensurate with countries' socio-economic aspirations and other development priorities, and serve as a synergy point linking the three Rio Conventions;
- expand sub-regional and regional capacity-building workshops to promote knowledge exchange, including through exploring the use of virtual channels to enhance efficiency and participation;
- consider integrating nature-based solutions as a mechanism for implementing the Convention in line with ecosystem-based approaches;
- request the UNCCD's Science-Policy Interface (SPI) to conduct a comparative analysis of implementation of LDN projects, and existing National Action Plans;
- develop relevant quantitative and qualitative indicators at the national level linked to the three UNCCD sub-indicators to generate more accurate and policy-relevant results;
- develop harmonized SDG indicators to support the integration of LDN targets into national and subnational programmes and

enhance synergies with climate and biodiversity processes, as well as with water security; and

- review and adjust current LDN targets in light of the global pandemic.

### ***Update on the Operationalization of the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund***

The Secretariat introduced the documents (ICCD/CRIC(19)/3 and ICCD/CRIC(19)/3/Corr.1) on Tuesday. Consideration of this item continued through Wednesday.

Gautier Quéru, Mirova, representing the LDN Fund Manager, recalled that the Fund aims to support entrepreneurs and project developers to scale up their activities by providing long-term financing, linked to positive impacts in terms of LDN, climate, biodiversity, combating poverty and promoting gender equality. He underscored the importance of translating the Scientific Conceptual Framework for LDN into practice, and to this end, urged countries to access the online impact monitoring methodology to measure the impacts of their LDN activities.

Morocco, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, emphasized that attention to the national and regional level financial needs is urgently needed, and noted the LDN Fund submissions deadline will be difficult to achieve. He called for a simplified guide on the LDN Fund process, and to explore the possibility of leveraging the Green Climate Fund's resources and organizing a high-level conference to garner further funds.

Portugal, on behalf of the EU, encouraged the LDN Fund administrators to take steps to accelerate implementation, and called for safeguards to promote land tenure security and adoption of transformative approaches in areas that are most vulnerable.

Bhutan, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, called for greater awareness-raising efforts to attract private sector investments, and provide guidance to such investors, reiterating that development of a project proposal guide is essential. He further noted the importance of ensuring a regional balance in project selection, calling for the development of toolboxes and sharing lessons and experiences.

Panama, on behalf of GRULAC, welcomed the approval of a fifth project for the region, submitted by Nicaragua. He expressed concern with the process used to select the LDN Fund administrator, saying it did not take into account the views of UNCCD parties.

Georgia, on behalf of CEE, requested a webinar to support regional exchanges on relevant LDN activities, such as eco-tourism, noting that many planned activities were postponed due to the global pandemic.

Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the ARAB GROUP, emphasized the need for a fair distribution of resources allocated to capacity-building processes, and sharing lessons across countries and regions. He said the region is in dire need of funds to develop a framework for project implementation, and to link projects to feasibility studies.

CHINA described efforts to plant 223 million trees to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 12 million tons, calling for the LDN Fund to not only focus on small- and medium-sized projects, but also initiatives that can have a global impact.

In other contributions, delegates called for guidance during the proposal preparation stage, acceleration of implementation, and further awareness raising among potential private-sector investors,

and warned about the impact of COVID-related trade restrictions on project implementation.

Particular issues raised included that the LDN Fund should ensure mosaic approaches in forest restoration initiatives, rather than large monoculture plantations. Questions on the report included how the global pandemic has affected the risk management of projects, and whether any compensation for lost time and activities can be considered. Others requested more guidance to countries at all stages of the project pipeline, and to ensure greater transparency in LDN project selection and Fund management. Mirova reiterated that “greenwashing” would not be considered, and committed to ensuring strong environmental and social integrity, and monitoring and applying standards robustly.

CANADA said the LDN Fund showcases how the public and private sectors can collaborate to support natural resource restoration, requested gender-responsive programming more broadly and announced the country's USD 55 million contribution to the Fund. COLOMBIA requested information about selection of a particular sustainable land management project, to which Mirova explained that the selection process had recently concluded, and the necessary information will be shared imminently. BRAZIL asked that established approaches, such as landscape approaches to restoration and sustainable land use management, guide project selection rather than newly emerged concepts such as nature-based solutions.

SWITZERLAND requested regular updates on LDN Fund projects during CRIC meetings and called for a balanced approach to include agroforestry, agroecology and especially projects that have the potential to transform unsustainable food production practices, which mostly affect women.

GHANA lamented the fact that the only LDN Fund-supported project in his country supports the timber sector and called for extending the programme to benefit the dryland area that is more degraded in his country.

FAO offered technical support to assist countries in scaling up their SLM initiatives, and in selecting suitable land degradation-neutral projects that ensure a landscape approach to improve food security.

The Center for Sustainable Development and Environment, for CSOs, highlighted large-scale plantation projects in Kenya and Sierra Leone, stating they are negatively impacting ecosystems. She welcomed further initiatives to develop alliances and partnerships, disseminate lessons, and create greater synergies between policies and actions.

### ***Update on the Implementation of the Drought Initiative and Related Implementation Efforts***

On Wednesday, the Secretariat introduced a progress report on follow-up activities related to three UNCCD policy frameworks adopted at COP 14, on drought, gender, and land tenure (ICCD/CRIC(19)/5). Discussions on this item continued through Thursday.

In a first round of discussion, representatives of regional and interest groups, civil society and international agencies highlighted their perspectives on the three topics.

**Drought:** Lebanon, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, welcomed the establishment and upgrading of the drought toolbox, and related UNCCD capacity-building initiatives, including on early warning

and drought monitoring. He noted that issues of drought and SDS are issues that are intricately linked and need to be addressed adequately to mitigate their growing impacts in many countries.

The European Commission, on behalf of the EU, noted the UNCCD Drought Initiative has shown promising results, welcoming the introduction of regional projects in southern Africa and central Asia. They called for additional work on national drought plans (NDPs), the drought toolbox, data sharing, and linking drought initiatives to humanitarian responses to identify more long-term solutions.

Namibia, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, emphasized the importance of the UNCCD Drought Initiative, noting the region is particularly hard hit by the socio-economic consequences of recurring and accelerating drought cycles, which are exacerbated by climate change. She reiterated calls for a UNCCD drought protocol—modeled on the CBD’s Nagoya Protocol—to ensure adequate action.

The Russian Federation, on behalf of CEE, reported that eight countries have joined the Drought Initiative, and five have successfully developed NDPs. TURKMENISTAN further noted that the region’s vulnerability to drought is closely linked to its dependence on agriculture, which is mostly managed by rural populations with limited economic means.

The US highlighted signals that the Initiative is benefiting parties, welcoming links to the work of the IWG on drought risk financing.

Welcoming the Secretariat’s work on the toolbox, CHINA suggested that regional projects should focus on the ecological and human impacts of drought. UKRAINE reported on an initiative to develop a conceptual basis for integrated drought management planning involving a broad spectrum of partners. He said the intention is to mainstream it into existing policies, rather than as a stand-alone instrument.

MEXICO expressed interest in knowledge sharing on drought. SWITZERLAND called on parties to integrate their NDPs with climate and other relevant policy frameworks.

VENEZUELA highlighted the need to continue refining monitoring indicators, noting the importance of participatory research on vulnerability to extreme drought to better understand the underlying drivers. ESWATINI, supported by ANGOLA, emphasized that drought is intensifying on a daily basis and affecting communities in new ways. He said this calls for new, more tangible approaches in monitoring and mitigating drought, noting, in this regard, that the proposed Drought Protocol would help ensure drought is given the seriousness it deserves.

SYRIA proposed that the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands become a focal point for integrated monitoring of drought, and SDS to enhance regional cooperation in dealing with these cross-border phenomena.

ISRAEL underscored that interventions such as compensating farmers will not solve the underlying problem of drought in the long term, noting it is a natural and recurring challenge. He called for an emphasis on proactive approaches, in particular improved water management and conservation.

**Land tenure:** Ghana, for the AFRICAN GROUP, said the region endorses the conclusions and recommendations of the Secretariat’s report. He noted that while it is the responsibility of individual states to ensure good land governance, there is need for strong

support in building national capacities to enact and implement legal frameworks in line with the FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (commonly referred to as the Voluntary Guidelines, or VGGT).

The EU underlined the need to mainstream land rights, especially for women, Indigenous peoples, and local communities, across all LDN projects, and commended ongoing work on a FAO technical guide on this topic to be shared at COP 15. CANADA welcomed progress towards integrating the VGGT and emphasized its commitment to reform restrictive laws to ensure gender equity. The US took note of the collaboration with the FAO and looked forward to seeing planned capacity-building activities on use of the technical guide to further leverage UNCCD collaboration with technical partners.

The ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP stressed the importance of aligning land governance frameworks to countries’ laws and national circumstances. He called for a flexible approach needed in developing the technical guide, and engagement of national and regional perspectives when adapting the VGGTs to the UNCCD context.

Saudi Arabia, for the ARAB GROUP, noted the importance of including country inputs in the review of proposed technical guidelines. CHINA called for full consideration of inclusion, appropriateness, and flexibility when implementing such global frameworks, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

**Gender:** Benin, for the AFRICAN GROUP, emphasized the need to collect gender-disaggregated data on access to land and other elements of inclusive land tenure security; define best practices for gender inclusion; ensure a gender lens when developing transformative activities for LDN inclusion; address discriminatory practices; and raise awareness and capacity of women to lead their own empowerment.

The EU noted that women’s critical role in SLM cannot be overemphasized, and hence effective actions will need to go beyond the Gender Action Plan to ensure interventions at the systemic level. They called for more concrete actions to mainstream gender in the implementation of the Convention, and encouraged the Secretariat to continue its advice to parties in achieving their gender-related objectives.

Speaking on behalf of GRULAC, Brazil highlighted the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and vulnerable groups. He stressed the importance of addressing gender as a crosscutting issue in all sustainable development policies, noting this will be the theme of an upcoming gender workshop in Panama.

SWITZERLAND underscored that COVID-19 is likely to deepen existing gender inequalities, calling for a more proactive approach in applying online tools to bridge this gap. Concurring, the US welcomed the shift to virtual formats at the UNCCD, and called for further efforts in this direction to avoid the loss of momentum, especially with regard to training and capacity building. While appreciating work on the Gender Action Plan, she expressed concern about an “over-focus” on LDN compared to drought, calling for the policy framework to address all aspects of DLDD equally.

CANADA highlighted the disproportionate impact of land degradation and climate change on women and girls, with the pandemic further exacerbating such inequalities. He called for



gender norms, roles, and relations to be addressed through an intersectional lens, and announced a contribution of CAD 50 million to support gender mainstreaming in UNCCD activities as part of the Gender Action Plan to work with women as key actors of change.

ARGENTINA echoed concerns about an over-emphasis on private sector investments to the LDN Fund, calling for a higher proportion of public funding to ensure the Fund is aligned to countries' land restoration priorities and strategies. Noting the risk of further marginalization of the most vulnerable groups, he called for the Fund to focus more on environmental and social, "rather than financial indicators." He said women and girls need to be fully involved in developing any plans, and, referring to paragraphs 52 and 53 related to suspension of workshops due to COVID-19, suggested hosting these virtually as they are essential for supporting the gender dimension.

BRAZIL highlighted a national census that found only 19% of land in the country is women-owned, and that women manage only 8% of commercially oriented agricultural activities. He said this underscores the need to strengthen women's access to land, and called for better gender balance in professional workshops and training events focusing on land restoration, and related funding opportunities.

BENIN lamented that women are often only given access to degraded land, signifying the importance of approaching LDN, land tenure and gender in an integrated way.

Misión Verde Amazonia, for CSOs, called for continued support to countries that are drafting their NDPs, while ensuring the inclusion of women and marginalized groups.

Responding to delegates' input on gender issues, Miriam Medel García, UNCCD Secretariat, highlighted the UNCCD's support to parties in developing their gender-related objectives as per the UNCCD Gender Action Plan. She informed the Committee of the Secretariat's intention to schedule a second Gender Caucus on the margins of COP 15, and to continue to strengthen support to mainstream gender into the LDN TPPs and all activities related to gender and land tenure.

On land tenure, Medel García said the Secretariat will integrate comments raised by several parties regarding the work on the technical guide currently being prepared by FAO. She informed delegates that the Secretariat would facilitate a series of consultations in coming weeks to incorporate all views into the final document for consideration at COP 15, and will explore the best way to facilitate capacity building and knowledge exchange on the topic of land tenure.

Addressing drought-related issues, Camilla Nordheim-Larsen, UNCCD Global Mechanism, informed delegates of a GM support package, currently under development, that builds on prior experience in designing the LDN-TPPs. She encouraged countries that have finalized their NDPs to submit requests to the GM to identify potential funding and implementing partners. Nordheim-Larsen also highlighted a GEF enabling activity project with the FAO for implementation of UNCCD COP drought decisions for the period 2021-2023 through, *inter alia*: supporting the IWG on effective policy and implementation measures; enhancing the Drought Toolbox through data sets for monitoring and early warning, improved risk assessments, and gender responsive tools for risk mitigation; enabling NDPs through case studies in six regions;

and conducting drought vulnerability assessments and preparedness for mitigation measures. She informed delegates that the GM intends to host a series of e-learning and virtual sessions on the toolbox, and highlighted work on drought risk financing, including the preparation of a technical report on various options for drought mitigation that will provide a menu of financing options.

### ***Interim Report of the Intergovernmental Working Group on Effective Policy and Implementation Measures for Addressing Drought under the UNCCD***

On Thursday, IWG Co-Chair Gaius Eudoxie presented the IWG's report (ICCD/CRIC(19)/4). He said the IWG's mandate included reviewing existing policy, implementation, and institutional coordination frameworks on drought preparedness and response, and considering options for appropriate policy, advocacy and implementation measures, bearing in mind the need for a holistic approach to disaster risk reduction. Eudoxie outlined the focus of the four IWG task groups working on: policy and governance; resources and incentives; vulnerability and assessment; and monitoring and early warning. He urged parties to provide further guidance to IWG members to facilitate decision making at COP 15.

Discussions on this item took place on Thursday and Friday.

NAMIBIA, on behalf of the African Group, reiterated calls for a global legally binding instrument on drought, saying it is a global phenomenon that significantly impacts a large area of the world, with the probability of increasing in frequency and severity due to climate change. She said the current framework does not adequately address the region's needs, as shown by the aftermath of the 2015 El Niño event during which 36 million Africans became food insecure.

The European Commission, on behalf of the EU, proposed that the IWG focus its efforts on identifying gaps and strengthening existing policies and frameworks. He called for adequate resources to develop innovative financial tools, such as risk management.

The Philippines, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, said their region prioritized drought response and recovery activities, as well as the integration of drought management programmes and strong capacity building across the three pillars of monitoring, assessment, and mitigation.

Ecuador, for GRULAC, suggested changing the terminology of "fighting drought" to "understanding drought," and to avoid using terminology that has not been endorsed by multilateral environmental agreements. He said that the next steps should include a review of existing national plans and operational management plans.

Montenegro and Uzbekistan, on behalf of CEE, noting the complexity of the drought issue, recommended that the IWG provides examples of practical and proactive drought management practices. They called for greater attention to regional characteristics, such as climate and geographic features when developing effective drought management plans. They further called for enhanced policy coordination across sectors impacted by drought, as well as strengthening scientific research to fully understand how anthropogenic factors contribute to drought and desertification.

Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the ARAB GROUP, supported Africa's call for a global drought protocol, saying droughts cause enormous socio-economic and environmental impacts and affects biodiversity

and infrastructure, thus affecting countries across national boundaries. He said developing countries cannot face these impacts alone and the responsibility should be shouldered by all.

CHINA discussed the key elements of integrated drought management, noting the importance of giving special attention to marginalized communities, and expressing its willingness to join efforts discussing global commitment on drought. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION offered to share its expertise in drought management, which it said was gained through decades-long experience in creating a forest belt across over 100,000 kilometers covering 2.5 million hectares.

Other interventions reiterated the need for more proactive responses in light of the significant economic burden associated with frequent drought events. Most speakers agreed that existing drought-related experiences should be captured and shared to ensure best practices are replicated, particularly concerning drought management practices, such as climate-smart water and land restoration activities.

FAO welcomed the CRIC decision establishing the IWG, noting the agency supports the task group exploring measures to strengthen drought resilience. The WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION (WMO) said the complexity of drought requires collaboration across many entities, and offered support to countries in developing indicators on drought and early-warning systems.

Speaking on behalf of CSOs, the Environmental Monitoring Group looked forward to intensifying the work of the IWG, and called for the technical advice provided to incorporate local knowledge as context-specific sustainable practices such as agroecology and water conservation can help strengthen resilience. He emphasized the importance of facilitating inclusive governance of natural resources, and addressing environmental drivers that are exacerbating social fragility, conflict, and migration.

Reiterating support for a drought protocol, ESWATINI observed that those opposed to new instruments have not provided options for strengthening existing mechanisms. He called for a balanced IWG report that provides options for decision making at COP 15.

Responding to the interventions, Gunilla Björklund, IWG Chair, thanked delegates for their concrete inputs and assured them these will be reflected in the final report. She highlighted recommendations relating to:

- the importance of capacity building and sharing of best practices to mitigate the impacts of drought;
- incorporating Indigenous knowledge and ensuring gender inclusiveness in drought initiatives;
- exploring drought insurance and bankable projects;
- strengthening global and regional incentives and the use of new technologies, including the integration of drought-related measures into development cooperation programmes; and
- fostering synergies among the three Rio Conventions and relevant UN agencies.

Björklund also welcomed specific proposals for the IWG report to:

- recommend the establishment of an interagency mechanism on drought under the UN Environmental Management Group;
- analyze links between drought, and land and soil degradation;
- make a stronger economic case for drought mitigation;

- explore the development of an LDN equivalent of the drought resilience fund; and
- focus on regional specificities and tailored guidance for effective drought plans.

Addressing the proposal on strengthening economic analyses of drought, Björklund stated that the IWG will benefit from an ongoing partnership of the WMO, Global Water Partnership and World Bank addressing the economics of drought preparedness.

### **Closure of the Meeting**

On Friday, CRIC Rapporteur Hussein Nasrullah presented the draft report of the meeting, inviting parties to submit further recommendations for a period of two weeks, following which a final version will be made available online.

Executive Secretary Thiaw noted concerns that the global pandemic has shrouded the timelines for COP 15 in uncertainty. Citing smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples, and women producers who commit to careful use of natural resources while growing more food on less land, and rangers who protect beautiful natural tourist destinations, he said they are the “unsung heroes of the global economy.” He noted opportunities to unlock the food production potential of vast areas if current commitments to restore up to one billion hectares of land through various national, regional, and global initiatives are met. Thiaw concluded by describing healthy land as “our real collective capital,” in creating a post-pandemic world of peace, prosperity, and equity.

**Closing statements:** Morocco, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, welcomed the progress made by the IWG on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought, but emphasized that a protocol on drought remains the best way to focus the attention of the world on the devastating impacts of recurring drought events. Urging the Secretariat to maximize the synergies among the three Rio Conventions, he said achieving the LDN goal by 2030 is unattainable unless parties remain committed and maintain momentum.

The European Commission, on behalf of the EU, stressed the importance of gender mainstreaming and secure land tenure policies, as well as concrete actions on drought and risk management strategies. He pledged continued EU support to countries in implementing NDPs, building on existing frameworks.

Pakistan, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, called on the Secretariat to ensure all views are reflected in the final CRIC 19 report, and to strive for a balance between regional and sub-regional interests. He noted the region’s prioritization of feasibility studies, new technologies and mobilizing funding, as well as thematic LDN workshops to build capacity for LDN target setting and TPPs.

Nicaragua, on behalf of GRULAC, expressed commitment to continue its recently approved LDN initiative implementation, to address DLDD challenges, and ensure the region’s actions remain in step with the SDGs.

Hungary, on behalf of CEE, acknowledged that land tenure security is the most effective strategy to ensure sustainable land management. Noting the usefulness of the Drought Toolbox, as well as work underway on the land tenure technical guide, he urged stronger implementation of the Gender Action Plan.

ARMENIA expressed regret that the CRIC discussions had not been as interactive as hoped for, and highlighted the importance of hosting an in-person COP 15 when the global pandemic allows it.



Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the ARAB GROUP, underscored the importance of documenting the constructive opinions expressed by all groups and regions in the CRIC 19 report. He cautioned that many developing countries struggle to meet the LDN Fund's criteria and called for support for project preparation.

CARI Association, on behalf of CSOs, echoed calls for strengthening UNCCD monitoring and evaluation processes. She suggested exploring carbon stocks as an additional resource mobilization tool, and highlighted sustainable practices that can contribute to LDN, such as regenerative agriculture.

In his closing remarks, CRIC Vice-Chair Senyaz thanked delegates for their flexibility in contributing to this first-ever virtual meeting. While expressing regret that no coffee-break conversations could take place and that the meeting was not as interactive as he had hoped for, he suggested that parties made significant progress in reviewing core UNCCD activities. He thanked the IWG for its work on developing an effective policy for addressing drought, noting further planned work to propose concrete activities and indicators for discussion at COP 15.

Jigmet Takpa, on behalf of the COP 14 Presidency, complimented the Secretariat for a successful meeting despite many challenges. Senyaz then declared the meeting closed at 1:53 pm CET (GMT+1).

Following the closing session, the Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Group on Earth Observations (GEO) announced Team N as the winner of the LDN technology innovation award of USD 100,000, for designing a land-use planning solution for LDN.

### **A Brief Analysis of CRIC 19**

Technology-mediated interactions have become the new normal in all spheres of life. It was therefore inevitable that the latest intersessional meeting of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) would have to meet in virtual format. Originally scheduled to take place in late 2020, and with the next meeting of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP 15) looming, further postponement would not enable the CRIC's assessment of progress to be completed in time.

This brief analysis examines the week-long session to see if it offered a glimpse of a brave new virtual world of efficient multilateralism or if it simply reaffirmed the need for in-person diplomacy.

#### ***Connecting without Really Connecting?***

Well aware of the possibility of connectivity hiccups, the Secretariat made elaborate technical preparations to ensure a seamless experience, in collaboration with the platform host, the UN Office at Geneva. Delegates were encouraged to do a trial run prior to the start of each session, and technical staff were adept at reassuring nervous delegates and showing them how to raise a virtual hand and turn on their microphones.

At face value, the elaborate preparations appeared to have paid off. While the Chair quickly adapted to asking, "Are you there?" and speakers prefaced their interventions with the inevitable "Can you hear me?" delegates did manage to contribute to the information-sharing session. For those unable to connect—which, surprisingly seemed to be almost equally divided between developed and developing country participants—there was an option to submit

statements in writing to be uploaded to the UNCCD website, in an attempt to create a level playing field for all. The CRIC Bureau also made efforts to lighten the agenda, deferring discussion of national reporting and capacity building to CRIC 20.

So, did it feel like a regular reporting session? According to one insider, while this abbreviated session was not a perfect way of doing things, it had to be done to maintain momentum, not only in the lead up to COP 15, but also due to the countdown to the mid-term review of the UNCCD Strategic Framework that has to be finalized by 2025. With the CRIC calendar already running one year behind schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau needed to move forward. As one Bureau member noted, "every one of these pieces was dependent on this first move."

#### ***Did CRIC 19 Meet (deliberately low) Expectations?***

It is common knowledge that to avoid disappointment, one should set low expectations. In a sense, CRIC 19 did just that. It was billed as a "non-negotiating" session, with a scaled-down agenda. Perhaps by a stroke of fortune, this session happened to fall in a two-year intersessional cycle, which, under the new CRIC structure adopted at COP 13, is designed to reduce countries' reporting burden by breaking up the reporting template into two parts, hence reporting on the "narrative" elements every two years, with a more "quantitative" report against the Convention's progress indicators once every four years. Thus, while the agenda was shortened to fit in with the two-hour daily sessions, it did largely achieve what it was supposed to: provide a platform where parties and other stakeholders can highlight their progress, and learn about experiences in other countries and regions.

In their closing remarks, many delegates did express the general sense that they were able to do this. Through the views expressed, the session also took the pulse of country positions and priorities. According to a Bureau insider, this will go a long way in helping the Secretariat to develop scenarios for COP 15. As he noted, "It's a backdoor approach to creating draft recommendations—ultimately you achieve the same goal."

A possible glimmer of hope from this session is that it does reveal that perhaps not everything needs to return to business as usual. At CRIC-19, voices emerged calling for the Convention to consider moving towards a "hybrid" approach, where some activities, especially information sharing and training events, can take place online. Some optimists even went as far as envisioning such a model for future COPs, perhaps even helping to leapfrog some of the financing and capacity issues that continue to haunt some smaller delegations. As one developing country delegate speculated, "... imagine having just one delegate participating in person at the COP, but with a technical team back home supporting the delegate virtually ... even helping to answer technical questions and provide backstopping during contact group sessions."

Others see potential for making progress on non-controversial, or largely technical issues, in virtual formats, leaving conventional negotiations to focus on more politicized issues that require some form of in-person mediation. An example of this is the diametrically opposed views on how to address drought under the Convention, with battle lines firmly drawn between those calling for a drought protocol and those insisting that existing mechanisms are sufficient.

### What about Implementation?

International conferences and negotiations are one thing, but ultimately, the Convention's progress will be measured on the ground. It was clear that even without quantitative data, the pandemic has considerably slowed down implementation. During discussions on the gender policy framework, for example, various speakers noted that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women, with attendant impacts for pursuing gender-inclusive land restoration activities.

But as repeatedly emphasized by Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw, the pandemic also provides an opportunity to reposition the Convention—with its emphasis on land health—as a core part of the solution. It is possible to make the case that zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19 are directly linked to unsustainable land-use changes, such as destroying forests for monoculture, hence displacing wild animals and bringing them in close contact with human populations. By calling for a return to more natural mosaic landscapes, the UNCCD can enhance synergies with the Convention on Biological Diversity to provide part of the solution.

### Have We Caught a Glimpse of the UNCCD's Future?

For delegations, the hustle and bustle of traditional multilateral negotiations—including the late-night contact group sessions or impromptu huddles to hammer out consensus on that one crucial phrase—are an essential part of global “democracy.” As noted by one seasoned negotiator, even warring parties sent emissaries to test the waters and prepare for peace.

Many CRIC participants echoed this sentiment when they made it clear that they saw this virtual session as, at best, a temporary diversion from business as usual. Reflecting on what this session has achieved, one attendee suggested that a reason for the relatively smooth process is that the faces are well known. For a moment, it felt like seeing old friends, albeit at a distance. But many do question whether this will work for hard core negotiations. It is hard to envision technology fully replacing traditional trust-building, although some processes (such as the recent [UN-Water meeting](#)) are experimenting with informal virtual discussion spaces.

For this reason, those responsible for maintaining momentum towards COP 15 as well as the many other looming events on the UN calendar are facing the same concerns about an extension of COVID-19 lockdown scenarios. Out of the many scenarios currently being considered, it is hard to find anyone who can imagine convening a fully virtual COP.

But it is still early. If the current uncertainty continues unabated, this first tentative step may be remembered as the day the UNCCD ventured into a brave new world of virtual diplomacy.

### Upcoming Meetings

#### Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2021:

This event will be held under the theme “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific.” The Forum aims to play a unique role as a catalyzer of solutions and peer learning on how to accelerate transformations for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda while recovering from COVID-19. **dates:** 23-26 March 2021 **location:** Bangkok, Thailand (both in-person and virtual sessions) **www:** <https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/8>

**Arab Regional Forum for Sustainable Development:** The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) will host this Forum in a hybrid format that will provide for both in-person and virtual participation. **date:** 29-31 March 2021 **location:** Beirut, Lebanon and virtually **www:** <https://www.unescwa.org/event/arab-forum-sustainable-development-2021>

**High-level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought:** In accordance with General Assembly resolutions 74/220 and 75/218, the President of the General Assembly will convene a High-level Dialogue to assess the progress made in the fight against DLDD, and map the way forward in view of the end of the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification. **date:** 20 May 2021 (TBC) **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** <https://www.un.org/pga/75/event/high-level-dialogue-on-desertification-land-degradation-and-drought/>

**UNCCD COP 15:** COP 15 is expected to take place in the final quarter of 2021. Further announcements will be made as the global COVID-19 pandemic subsides. **dates:** TBC **location:** TBC **www:** <https://www.unccd.int>

For additional meetings, see <https://sdg.iisd.org/>

### Glossary

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
COP	Conference of the Parties
CRIC	Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention
CSO	Civil society organization
DLDD	Desertification, land degradation and drought
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GM	Global Mechanism
GRULAC	Latin American and Caribbean Group
IWG	Intergovernmental Working Group
LDN	Land Degradation Neutrality
NDP	National drought plan
PRAIS	Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDS	Sand and dust storms
SLM	Sustainable land management
TPP	Transformative projects and programmes
TSP	Target-setting programme
UNCCD	UN Convention to Combat Desertification
VGGTs	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security
WMO	World Meteorological Organization