

UNCCD COP 15 Highlights: Wednesday, 11 May 2022

The fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) opened at the Sofitel Hotel in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Following the handover of the COP presidency from the COP 14 host, India, and introductory remarks by COP 15 President and Côte d'Ivoire's former Minister of Water and Forests Alain-Richard Donwahi, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw, representatives of regional and interest groups, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector gave opening statements. The COP established a Committee of the Whole (COW) and Friends of the Chair to consider the outcome of the Conference. In the afternoon, the COW met for the first time to consider the programme and budget, and policy frameworks on migration, sand and dust storms, and land tenure, with the proposal to review these individually. The Committee on Science and Technology (CST) also started its work in parallel, considering two scientific reports on the potential contribution of integrated land use planning and integrated landscape management to positive transformative change, and approaches for assessment and monitoring of resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems to drought.

Opening of the Session

On behalf of the COP 14 Presidency, Bhupender Yadav, Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, opened the session. He said, although devastating, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world to reconsider the way to look at land, water and forests, in particular land, for the fundamental and cross-cutting role it plays. He described land restoration as a key strategy to put the world on a trajectory to a green recovery, through: biodiversity protection; combating drought, land degradation, desertification (DLDD) and climate change; and thereby ensuring jobs and economic recovery.

Delegates then elected Alain-Richard Donwahi, former Minister of Water and Forests, Côte d'Ivoire, as COP 15 President. In his opening remarks, Donwahi described COP 15 as an opportunity for countries to demonstrate their commitment to fight drought and climate change, saying it will require a holistic approach. Citing French author Victor Hugo, he said, "how sad to think that nature speaks and mankind will not listen," he challenged parties to act positively and constructively, focusing on the COP 15 theme of "Land. Life. Legacy: From scarcity to prosperity." Saying that although much was done during the pandemic, he called for a great deal more to be done, particularly in the face of unprecedented consumption and an increasing global economic crisis.

In welcoming remarks, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw referred to the social and supportive characteristics of elephants, the national emblem of Côte d'Ivoire, and encouraged all to put the major disruption of the past two years behind, and demonstrate the resilience of the UNCCD's commitment to continue the fight against DLDD. He outlined some of the initiatives under the Convention, including: Saudi Arabia's cooperation agreement to implement the G20 Global Initiative

on Reducing Land Degradation and Enhancing the Conservation of Terrestrial Habitats; the Great Green Wall in the Sahel and the Great Green Wall Accelerator announced at the 2021 One Planet Summit in Paris. He said the launch of the Abidjan Legacy Programme comes at a critical point in the fight against land degradation.

On behalf of the host country, President Alassane Ouattara called for COP 15 to be an event for action, partnership and solidarity by the international community for those in drought distress, saying progress has been undermined by climate change, security and economic crises, with negative consequences for food, energy and society, consequently increasing migration flows. He said these crises force the world to find solutions, and that the Abidjan Call, adopted during the Abidjan High-Level Segment, intends to restore degraded lands and ensure sustainable land management practices.

Opening Statements

Pakistan, for the GROUP OF 77 AND CHINA (G-77/CHINA), recalled that addressing DLDD is key to human survival and achievement of all UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and that many of its members were severely affected by prolonged and recurrent drought and sand and dust storms (SDS). He called for concrete commitments from COP 15 on drought, including enhanced means of implementation for developing countries.

France, for the EUROPEAN UNION (EU), highlighted the severe global repercussions from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including on food security, strongly condemning the Russian aggression, and expressing full solidarity with, and support for, the people of Ukraine. She highlighted the central role of COP 15 in crafting cross-cutting solutions to the biodiversity, climate and land degradation crises, assuring the EU's full support in reaching a land-degradation-neutral world.

Morocco, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, highlighted the significance of the UNCCD for the African continent, and welcomed the Abidjan Initiative as a platform for practical action. He called for robust institutional arrangements and sustained financial resources to deal with drought. Lamenting that many remained opposed to the target of LDN by 2030, he expressed full support of the implementation of the Convention.

Pakistan, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, highlighted the many large-scale initiatives by its members to combat LDDD, and highlighted the potential for regional cooperation. He called for increased attention, collaboration and support to address the transboundary issues of drought and SDS, and for UNCCD to take the lead on drought on global level.

Nicaragua, for the GROUP OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (GRULAC), highlighted GRULAC's priority to strengthen mechanisms to guarantee the Convention's effective implementation in the context of SDG 1 (poverty eradication) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in accordance with parties' national circumstances. He expressed hope that developed countries will provide effective means of implementation synergistically with the CBD, UNFCCC and other UN agreements, particularly by strengthening financial mechanisms.

Turkey, for the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, emphasized regional priorities, including drought, and encouraged building additional tools and mechanisms, as well as providing mutual support through the sharing of best practices, science, and technological achievements. Lamenting the Ukraine conflict could worsen the negative impacts of land degradation with widespread consequences for human life and wellbeing, he said land restoration can contribute to economic recovery, food security and job creation.

Belarus, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, looked forward to in-person discussions on priority issues including land degradation neutrality (LDN), drought, SDS and gender. He welcomed the transition to LDN Target Setting Programme (TSP) 2.0 and called on the Global Mechanism (GM) to engage with new financial partners and to further mobilize additional financial resources to enable parties to achieve their voluntary LDN targets.

US, for AUSTRALIA, CANADA, ICELAND, ISRAEL, JAPAN, NORWAY, REPUBLIC OF KOREA, SWITZERLAND, and UK (JUSCANZ) called on Russia to act consistently with international obligations, noting the Ukraine crisis is affecting food security in the Global South. He urged a holistic landscape approach at the national and subnational levels, with meaningful participation of local stakeholders, and said COP 15 decisions should be based on latest science and provide flexibility for country-specific implementation.

Saudi Arabia, for the ARAB GROUP, associated himself with the ASIA-PACIFIC and AFRICAN GROUPS' statements and highlighted the importance of following up on policy frameworks and themes like drought, SDS, land possession, and migration. Noting Middle Eastern countries will host upcoming climate negotiations and highlighting initiatives launched at the 2020 G20 meetings in Saudi Arabia, he expressed support for Saudi Arabia's request to host UNCCD COP 16.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION urged parties to stop using international forums to challenge Russia.

The WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION (WMO) highlighted forecasting and early-warning systems as essential to mitigating drought. He looked forward to working with partners on a major new initiative announced by UN Secretary-General António Guterres to develop early warning systems against extreme weather and climate change within the next five years, and to prepare the SDS global atlas, and the SDS Toolbox.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO) requested UNCCD support for regional efforts to promote sustainable land management and consider environmental impacts of climate change.

MOLDOVA appealed to donor countries and partners to establish a global soil fund to directly support developing and under-developed countries to reach LDN.

UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE urged delegates to reflect a rights-based approach to all decisions.

INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN) encouraged the adoption of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) and investment in land restoration to support LDN.

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO) reflected the State of the World's Forests report signals pathways for green recovery by halting land degradation, restoring degraded lands and building green value chains, and noted the launch of the technical guide on the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of National Food Security (VGGT).

GLOBAL GREEN GROWTH INSTITUTE (GGGI) expressed optimism for solutions that address challenges, outlining work to mobilize finance to deliver transformational services in both developed and developing countries, such as establishing green bonds, debt for nature swaps, and green hydrogen pilot programmes.

YOUNG VOLUNTEERS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT recommended establishing an early-warning committee to manage drought; strengthening access and rights of women as landowners; and funding drought management.

Organizational Matters: The COP adopted the agenda and organization of work, including the subsidiary bodies' sessions (ICCD/COP(15)/1) without amendments.

Delegates approved the election of Vice-Presidents from the following regional groups: Stephen Muwaya (Uganda) for the African Group; Abdu Alsharif (Saudi Arabia) and Jin Sun (China) for Asian States; Edgar Hunter (Dominica) and Reina Sotillo for Latin America; Nino Chikovani (Georgia) and Narine Hakobyan (Armenia) for Central and Eastern European States; and Patrick Reilly (US) and Juliane Wiesenhütter (Germany) for Western European and Other States.

COP 15 appointed Francisco Jose Avila (Guatemala) as Chair of the Committee of the Whole (COW) and adopted the document on accreditation of intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations and representatives from the private sector (ICCD/COP(15)/14 and Add.1). Finally, the COP established a Friends of the Chair group chaired by Ambassador Malan Niamke Benjamin and Bieke Antonin to consider matters related to the Abidjan Declaration.

Committee of the Whole

Chairperson Francisco Jose Avila (Guatemala) opened the meeting, introducing items to be covered in two proposed contact groups. Parties established COW contact groups on: programme and budget, chaired by Stephane Pailler (France); and other matters, chaired by Ahmed Abd El-Ati (Egypt).

Programme of work for COP 16: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (ICCD/COP(15)/CRP.1/Rev.1). On whether to hold COP 16 in 2023 or 2024, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, supported by several parties and groups, expressed preference for 2024. The EU preferred the second semester of 2023. Namibia, for the AFRICAN GROUP, asked the Secretariat to prepare a thorough analysis of each option. This will be further considered in Contact Group 1 (programme and budget).

Programme and budget: Programme and budget for the biennium 2022–2023 and financial performance for the Convention trust funds: The Secretariat introduced the programme and budget for the biennium 2022–2023 (ICCD/COP(15)/5) and the comprehensive multi-year workplan for the Convention (2022–2025) and two-year costed work programme for the Convention (2022–2023) (ICCD/COP(15)/6, ICCD/CRIC(20)/2), referencing draft decisions (ICCD/COP(15)/21). The Secretariat highlighted two scenarios: zero nominal growth or recommended adjustments to the first scenario and the added costs or savings related to them. The Secretariat also invited consideration of the financial performance for the Convention trust funds (ICCD/COP(15)/7, ICCD/CRIC(20)/3, ICCD/COP(15)/8, ICCD/COP(15)/9, ICCD/COP(15)/10).

BRAZIL queried why the relevant draft decision included only the scenario with adjustments. The Secretariat confirmed that the draft was intended to be used during negotiations to be amended by parties. BRAZIL and JAPAN supported zero nominal growth noting contributions to the GEF replenishment.

CHINA considered the indicative scale of assessment addressed sufficiently and encouraged focusing discussions on the budget for COP 16. The EU recognized the need to prioritize effective action on drought and looked forward to deliberations.

Namibia, for the AFRICAN GROUP, reiterated support for an ambitious work programme to provide impetus for achievements on drought, expressing deep concern that the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework's implementation is not on track.

Youth Foundation of Bangladesh for CSOs urged parties to contribute funds to support, *inter alia*: CSO engagement; a drought resilience roadmap; and increased initiatives for youth, women and Indigenous Peoples.

Report of the Evaluation Office: The COW took note of the relevant document (ICCD/COP15/11 ICCD/COP15/21) introduced by the Secretariat.

The contact group on programme and budget convened in the evening.

Policy frameworks and thematic issues: The Chair enumerated thematic issues including migration, gender, SDS,

and land tenure, then proposed that the COW review each issue individually.

On drought, the Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(15)/15, ICCD/COP(15)/20 and ICCD/COP(15)/21). The Chair of the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought (IWG) presented their report and recommended draft elements for a decision on drought (and ICCD/COP(15)/21) for parties' consideration.

SAUDI ARABIA and others thanked the IWG for their conclusions and recommendations.

EU highlighted using existing mechanisms to avoid duplication. UGANDA urged following other Rio Conventions' examples to adopt complementary policy instruments to address "marginalized issues" like drought.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC and others called for financial and capacity-building support to address drought. CHINA expressed readiness to share China's experiences.

Committee on Science and Technology

Opening Session: The Committee appointed Bongani Masingo (eSwatini) as Chair of the 20th session of the CST.

The session then adopted the agenda and organization of work and Chair Masingo invited opening remarks.

Ibrahim Thiaw commended the scientific community for ensuring a scientific foundation that underpins UNCCD's work, despite the global pandemic. He emphasized the significance of CST deliberations to allow a comprehensive analysis of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports and direct the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) for the biennium 2022-23. Urging a spirit of consensus, he looked forward to recommendations for actions to achieve all 17 SDGs, as "we need to convince the world that actions on land are the best chance we can have to achieve these."

France, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS MEMBER STATES, commended the work of the SPI for being founded on solid scientific knowledge and urged sustainable land management that includes safeguarded land tenure.

Argentina on behalf of LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN noted concern about drought and desertification, and urged remaining focused on the Sustainable Development Agenda, strengthening the systems and institutions that can achieve the SDGs, and addressing the need for fuels necessary for society. He called for greater effort in building capacity at the national level, including financial and technical support for sustainable land management to help in the fight against desertification.

Turkey, for the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN GROUP, said the SPI had met high expectations and expressed hope that its contributions will pave the way for a more effective approach to the important issue of drought.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, expressed gratitude for the development of tools for SDS and drought, and encouraged further capacity building and inter-regional knowledge exchange.

US commended the high quality of work produced under challenging circumstances, but expressed concern about the compressed schedule and the number and complexity of agenda items.

KENYA expressed support for the CST's work, highlighting the need for a good decision on drought.

CSOs highlighted the importance of science and technology for transformative change, and called for co-creation of knowledge with affected communities.

Following the opening statements, the CST adopted the provisional agenda (ICCD/COP(15)/CST/1) and accepted the appointment of Abdul Hamid (Bangladesh) to the CST Bureau, replacing the Vice-Chair from Pakistan, and elected Anna Luise (Italy) to serve as rapporteur.

Items resulting from the SPI work programme for the biennium 2020–2021: Evidence on the potential contribution of integrated land use planning and integrated landscape management to positive transformative change, achieving land degradation neutrality and addressing desertification/

land degradation and drought issues: The Secretariat introduced the report contained in documents ICCD/COP(15)/CST/2 and CST/8. Ermias Betemariam, World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), presented the summary, noting the rationale for developing the report is that land is a limited resource and it is therefore crucial to support the development of policies, tools and practices focused on ILUP and ILM. He outlined two proposals, including: to frame the role of land use planning in implementing SDG targets and reconciling competing claims on land; and to embed LDN in land use planning; and to build capacity for land use planning and learning from experience, using tools to inform land use planning and LDN integration, and collaboration between academic and research practitioner communities through generation and sharing of experiences in ILUP and ILM to achieve LDN.

Several countries expressed concerns about lack of consultation, and the RUSSIAN FEDERATION highlighted that the new terms "ILUP" and "ILM" pose challenges in interpretation in different languages and contexts.

On the use of tools, ESWATINI asked about support mechanisms and barriers to using the proposed tools, and SOUTH AFRICA asked whether the team applied any modeling or scenario-setting during the research.

Many countries raised concerns about the specificity of local and national contexts, and the need for local ownership to ensure implementation of the recommendations.

Items resulting from the SPI work programme for the biennium 2020–2021: Evidence on the approaches for the assessment and monitoring of the resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems to drought: The Secretariat introduced the background and rationale for document ICCD/COP(15)/CST/3.

SPI members Sergio Vicente-Serrano (Spain) and Mark Svoboda (US) summarized key findings, emphasizing the report's novelty. They highlighted that drought impacts are modulated by resilience, and that proactive risk mitigation is more cost effective than reactive relief measures, and that no universal metric exists for measuring drought resilience. The report provided an inventory of drought resilience indicators. They introduced a roadmap for drought resilience assessment based on five forms of capital, and ecological and social resilience.

During discussions, delegates commended the important work undertaken by the SPI and highlighted: increasing and severe effects of drought in their countries; the need for financial support and capacity building; the importance of Ocean phenomena when assessing drought; specific data limitations and vulnerabilities in low-income countries; and remaining gaps in assessment of drought risk and ecosystem resilience.

A contact group on budget, chaired by Stella Gama (Malawi), met in the evening.

In the Corridors

UNCCD Executive Secretary Thiaw started the day envisioning the grace and power of Côte d'Ivoire's emblem: the elephant. He related the delegates' reunion after years apart to not only the joy, but also the impressive capacity for mental and emotional intelligence, of these large animals. While some delegates' eyes seemed to dance above their masks, others' communicated a feeling akin to clumsy little elephant calves.

Just as the pace picked up, a wave of pings alerted everyone to a cultural performance, which was also delayed. One anxious delegate stood up and yelled, "Start already, you are stealing our time!" The intergenerational dances, songs and acrobatics were worth the wait—the performance transcended language and spoke directly to the heart.

Day three was also designated by the Rio Convention Pavilion as Drought Day. While some people may need to be prompted to consider drought, many UNCCD parties need no reminder: their families, farms and futures are at stake. Delegates arrived poised to unlock barriers to genuine enabling environments, as expressed by one, "now is the time to mobilize resources with generosity." It is no wonder that Russia's plea to stop statements about the Ukraine conflict was barely acknowledged.