

A publication of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Wednesday, 11 December 2024 | Online at: [enb.iisd.org/sustainable-land-management-emg-uncdd-cop16](https://enb.iisd.org/sustainable-land-management-emg-uncdd-cop16)

**EMG High-Level Roundtable:  
Strengthening Action for Change:  
Promoting Coherence and Synergies for  
Sustainable Land Management  
14 December 2024  
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

The 16th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16) was a landmark event for accelerating action on land and drought resilience. As part of its focus, COP 16 considered pathways for strengthening collaboration among UN entities and other partners. In alignment with the convening of the three COPs of the Rio Conventions in 2024, senior officials of the UN Environment Management Group (EMG), at their 29th meeting in October 2023, agreed to organize a series of dialogues aimed at addressing the drivers of environmental change. The discussions aimed to foster synergies among the three Rio Conventions (UNCCD, CBD, and UNCCD), and other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) addressing pollution, as part of a unified response to the planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, drought, and pollution.

This roundtable followed similar EMG events held during the [2024 UN Biodiversity Conference \(CBD COP16\)](#) in Cali, Colombia, and the [2024 UN Climate Change Conference \(UNFCCC COP 29\)](#) in Baku, Azerbaijan. This third roundtable focused on how the UN system can support the UNCCD's implementation while advancing synergies with other (MEAs). The discussions built on the recently launched [Rio Trio Initiative](#), showcasing the value of coordinated actions and efficient resource allocation for more impactful outcomes. The Initiative, launched as a collaborative effort by the governments of Azerbaijan, Colombia, and Saudi Arabia, aligned the work of the Presidencies of the three Rio Conventions to catalyze coordinated action, setting the stage for more integrated approaches to sustainability.

Discussions during the roundtable focused on how the UN can more effectively promote collective action and synergies to address the interconnected challenges of land degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, and what specific role the EMG can play in enhancing such synergies among MEAs to accelerate action on land and drought resilience. Participants highlighted the importance of country-level coordination for coherent implementation of commitments under these



Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary, UNCCD

conventions, as well as those addressing pollution and wetland conservation, for example. They also underscored the importance of looking to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, children, and youth—not only as people to be helped, but also as partners in guiding implementation.

### **Opening and Welcoming Remarks**

Event moderator Susan Gardner, Director, Ecosystems Division, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), explained that the event would discuss how the EMG can support actions under “the Rio Trio” of the climate, biodiversity, and desertification conventions.

In opening remarks, Inger Andersen, UN Under-Secretary-General, UNEP Executive Director, and EMG Chair, warned that, by 2050, drought could affect three-quarters of the world's population. She reminded delegates that, besides the three Rio Conventions, other MEAs are also connected to land-related issues, for example, those concerning ozone phaseout, the sound management of chemicals and waste, and the forthcoming plastics treaty. She welcomed the particular lens and “mandate ramp” of each UN entity and asked their representatives to address the topic.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, welcomed the launch of the [Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership](#) by Saudi Arabia, as host of COP 16. He expressed appreciation that Saudi Arabia and others have pledged USD 2.15 billion to the new partnership, and that the Arab Coordination Group committed another USD 10 billion by 2030. Noting that no single



**His Highness Prince Moteb bin Fahad bin Faisal Al Saud, Saudi Arabia**

UN agency can address drought on its own, he urged the EMG to give careful attention to the issue. He added, furthermore, that the world may need to produce twice as much food by 2050 and, therefore, land productivity must increase.

His Highness Prince Moteb bin Fahad bin Faisal Al Saud of the Saudi Royal Family highlighted the positive impacts of establishing Royal Reserves in his country, citing the increase in vegetation cover and the return of birdlife.

Participants then met in two consecutive panel sessions.

### **Panel One**

During the first panel, participants from UN entities discussed how the UN can more effectively promote collective action to address the interconnected challenges of land degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), called for addressing sustainable land management from a holistic perspective, noting connections to soil and crop biodiversity for food security.

Musonda Mumba, Executive Secretary, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, cited the ecological value of the Farasan Islands in Saudi Arabia—now affected by sea-level rise, drought, and biodiversity loss—as an example of why the EMG should apply a landscape approach to these challenges.

Midori Paxton, UN Development Programme (UNDP), recommended focusing on “systemic levers” of change, such as action to develop more sustainable supply chains and tackle corruption. She commented that land restoration targets are currently dispersed across countries’ National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and called for a unified approach to land issues across the MEAs. She also urged developing an integrated financing mechanism, and recognizing the critical role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in managing biodiversity, noting the recent establishment of a subsidiary body on Indigenous Peoples at CBD COP 16.

AbdulHakim Elwaer, Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for the Near East and North Africa, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), said transforming



**Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director and EMG Chair**

agrifood systems to be just, equitable, and inclusive would resolve 60% of the land degradation problem.

Stewart Maginnis, Deputy Director-General, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), called for accommodating nature-based solutions (NbS) in national priorities, citing the mandate of [UN Environment Assembly Resolution 5/5](#), which requests UNEP to compile examples of best practice and identify options for supporting sustainable investment in NbS.

Juan Carlos Mendoza, Director, Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), recommended undertaking integrated projects to bring together implementation of the Rio Conventions, aligning funding through common financial mechanisms such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and addressing resilience and peacebuilding in fragile contexts.

Rania Sharshr, Director, Climate Action, International Organization for Migration (IOM), reminded everyone to be guided by the needs of a hypothetical woman suffering from the impacts of being displaced by drought, and who needs the UN to come together “as one hand and one voice.” Explaining that the IOM applies a [Risk Index for Climate Displacement](#) to guide action, she proposed consolidating funds and undertaking



**Juan Carlos Mendoza, Director, Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division, IFAD**





**Juliette Biao Koudénoukpo**, UNFF Director

inter-agency collaboration, including risk mapping, to support countries.

Mohamed El Zarkani, UN Resident Coordinator in Saudi Arabia, urged UN agencies to engage and consult with UN country teams to maximize the impacts of planned activities.

Juliette Biao Koudénoukpo, Director, UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), reflected that landscape restoration “is not just about planting trees” but must also address the drivers of deforestation. She argued that a coherent approach among UN agencies will be insufficient if it only addresses environment ministries. Thus, she proposed that the EMG provide a platform for involving ministries of finance, agriculture, mining, and forestry in land restoration. She bemoaned the practice of ministerial dialogues that only feature prepared statements and recommended involving other actors in addition to ministers.

Stephen Anderson, Director and Representative to the Gulf Cooperation Council, World Food Programme, supported Biao’s comments. He recommended: having light structures for interagency coordination so as to avoid “getting lost in process”; identifying what scalable solutions are already in place; and focusing on issues on the ground.

Valerie Hickey, Global Director for Environment, World Bank, argued that competition for funding among international organizations is “cannibalizing” the multilateral system. As a remedy, she proposed that the EMG select one country at a time to map out, in relation to an issue such as drought, what activities are being carried out by which organizations, including information about location, budget, and impact. This, she said, will help identify overlaps and redundancies, as well as potential gaps where no agencies are providing support.

### **Panel Two**

This panel addressed what specific role the EMG can play in enhancing synergies among MEAs to accelerate action on land and drought resilience.

Carol Chouchani Cherrane, Director, Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), called for a joint focus on sand and dust storms (SDS), as the issue is related to all of the Sustainable Development Goals. She invited all UN agencies to support the

work of ESCWA, as well as the work of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific as the incoming Co-Chairs of the [UN Coalition on Combating SDS](#). She recalled that 2025-2034 has been approved by the UN General Assembly as the [UN Decade for Combating SDS](#) and is set to begin in July 2025.

Cecilia Scharp, Director of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), stressed the importance of ensuring that children’s rights, education, prosperity, and wellbeing are not negatively affected by climate change and SDS. Reminding all delegates that women and children are disproportionately affected by problems, such as insecurity of land tenure as a barrier to food security, she urged all present to work more with local communities and women to unlock their potential as agents of change. She noted the existence of the UN system-wide strategy for water (UN-Water) and UNICEF’s collaborative implementation plan, which, she suggested, could be reviewed to see how well they support the Rio Conventions.

Marieta Sakalian, Global Coordinator, Nature Action, UNEP, supported joint programming to help countries fulfil their obligations on land degradation neutrality, NBSAPs, NAPs and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by bringing together agriculture, health, and energy ministries at the country level. She pointed to UNEP’s track record of working across agencies, including with FAO, the UN Development Programme, and others, and proposed replicating this approach on land issues.

Remy Sietchiping, Chief, Policy, Legislation and Governance Section, UN-Habitat, reflected that, while joint agency planning and programming is already an established practice, it could be carried out more in the context of the Rio Conventions.

Alexey Alekseenko, Head of Laboratory, UN University Institute for Integrated Management of Material Fluxes and of Resources (UNU-FLORES), highlighted the UNU’s work in several areas, including: conducting hands-on workshops on land restoration; securing funding for 64 scholars from the Global South to undertake PhD studies in Germany; and activities relating to the “Resource Nexus,” for example on food, feed, and



**Marieta Sakalian**, Senior Programme Management Officer, Global Coordinator, Nature Action, UNEP



fiber. He suggested the EMG could act as a platform for scientific research projects.

Rina Kuusipalo, Environment and Climate Change Team, UN Human Rights (OHCHR), called for advancing rights-based environmental action across the MEAs by integrating the right to a healthy environment and ensuring participation of those most affected by climate-induced harm.

Mette Grangaard Lund, Just Transitions Specialist, International Labour Organization (ILO), urged bringing the conversation back to people and jobs, noting that climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation are making the employment situation increasingly difficult. She emphasized that 1.2 million jobs globally depend on well-functioning ecosystems, and that “the greatest threat is inaction.” She drew attention to the existing [Green Jobs for Youth Pact](#) as a basis for collaboration between the ILO and UNEP.

Francesca Bernardini, Chief, Transboundary Cooperation, UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), cautioned that efforts to improve coordination should not result in over-ordination. She reminded everyone that national action cannot necessarily be resolved at the national level, but sometimes requires a regional approach—for example, actions related to managing pollution, SDS, transboundary water, and environmental safety.



**Francesca Bernardini**, Chief of Transboundary Cooperation Section, Environment Division, UNECE

### ***Closing Remarks and Summary of Key Points***

Hossein Fadaei, Head, EMG Secretariat, briefly summarized participants’ views. He noted that land is a connector across different planetary challenges and can be a priority for action in countries’ own plans and strategies. He also called attention to colleagues’ suggestions to focus on issues concerning women, children, and youth, as well as looking to these groups for solutions. He recognized the importance placed on engaging with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and with those affected or displaced by natural disasters. He further stressed the emphasis on human rights and accountability, and the importance for UN agencies to achieve positive impacts at the local level. He cautioned that joint programming is not new and has its own challenges; nevertheless, he welcomed the possibility of integrating action through country strategies for implementation of the Rio Conventions.

In closing the session, Fadaei identified several emerging themes: understanding new and innovative ways of cooperation; applying technology for integrated solutions; and addressing human rights challenges. He expressed hope that all colleagues present will build on each others’ complementarities in addressing the challenges ahead.



**Hossein Fadaei**, Head, EMG Secretariat