

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Monday, 2 December 2024

Following a cultural performance, the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) opened on Monday, 2 December. The COP elected Abdulrahman Abdulmohsen AlFadley, Minister of Environment, Water and Agriculture, Saudi Arabia, as COP 16 President, and heard opening statements and addressed organizational matters. In the afternoon, the Committee of the Whole (COW) convened in parallel to a High-level Ministerial Dialogue.

Plenary

COP 15 President Alain-Richard Donwahi, Côte d'Ivoire, opened COP 16, noting that COP 15 made significant progress in addressing land degradation, focusing on innovation, financing, and involvement of local communities, women and youth. He reiterated the call of African Ministers for the establishment of a legally binding protocol on drought under the UNCCD.

In his opening statement, President AlFadley welcomed everyone and noted the Middle East is one of the regions most impacted by desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD). He stressed the importance of international partnerships. He highlighted Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative, which aims to rehabilitate 40 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.

Faisal bin Abdulaziz bin Ayyaf, Mayor of the Riyadh Region, emphasized the role of local governments in complementing strategies and policies developed at the national level. He said the balance between urbanization, the rapid development it requires, and protecting a country's natural resources remain a constant challenge.

Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, via video, noted 40% of the world is affected by land degradation and urged COP 16 to prioritize: strengthening international cooperation on reversing land degradation and boosting rehabilitation of degraded lands; ramping up restoration efforts, which will accelerate many sustainable development priorities, such as generating green jobs for youth; and prioritizing financial investment in fighting drought and desertification.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, reminded participants that land degradation and drought affect all life on earth, threaten food and energy security, force migration, and obstruct trade. He highlighted inequalities facing farmers and women in land ownership. Noting that COP 16 is about our reliance on land, but also our resilience, he expressed hope this will be remembered as the COP that adopts the most important decisions on addressing drought.

Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai, Prime Minister of Mongolia, stressed the need to safeguard land, which is "the future of humanity." He expressed gratitude that the UN General Assembly (UNGA) declared 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists. He welcomed delegates to COP 17 in Mongolia.

Johan Rockström, Director, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, presented the Special Report on Land, underlining the links between land, resilience, and planetary health. He emphasized the importance of decarbonizing energy systems while also improving sustainable stewardship of land to limit global temperature rise.

Osama Ibrahim Faqeaha, Deputy Minister of Environment, Saudi Arabia, announced the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership, to be supported by USD 150 million from Saudi Arabia. He said the partnership will promote multilateral efforts to take a preventative and proactive approach to drought. He noted the Partnership activities will include the transfer of knowledge, the use of drought resilient crops, financing water infrastructure, and helping small farmers, with the overall goal to increase resilience and limit economic and social impacts.

Muhammad Sulaiman Al Jasser, Chairman, Islamic Development Bank Group (IsDB), on behalf of the Arab Coordination Group Member Institutions, reaffirmed their partnership with the UNCCD and discussed shifting from reactive responses to proactive resilience measures to collectively address the challenges of DLDD.

Regional and Interest Group Opening Statements: Morocco, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, noted the increasing frequency and severity of drought, calling for adoption of a legally binding protocol. He drew attention to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially target 15.3 on reducing land degradation, accelerating sustainable land management (SLM), addressing sand and dust storms (SDS), and implementing the UNCCD Strategic Framework.

The EU urged delegations to promote SLM, addressing the challenges of drought and desertification through enhancing the resilience of communities, and urged delegates to call attention to the destructive impacts of unsustainable agricultural practices and harmful subsidies. Reminding participants that droughts are exacerbated by climate change, he called for urgent efforts to tackle the drivers of drought and land degradation, while: addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation, building national capacities, and valorizing local knowledge systems.

Bhutan, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, noting the range of issues his region faces are "within the crosshairs of this Convention," called for international collaboration to overcome the multiple challenges caused by desertification, drought, and land degradation. He said the region looked forward to the forthcoming guidance from the mid-term evaluation of the UNCCD Strategic Framework, for direction on where actions should be redirected by 2030.

Ecuador, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), called for a progressive and balanced approach to drought, paying special consideration to the needs of developing countries, rather than a legally binding agreement, that is adaptable for all countries. They also called for a dedicated financial mechanism for drought-related projects, and the development of indicators and targets aligned with national priorities.

Hungary, on behalf of the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, underscored that land-based solutions play a pivotal role in addressing environmental challenges, including their social and economic implications. They welcomed the efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment of all women, highlighting the crucial role of women in reaching the Convention's objectives.

Azerbaijan, for the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, emphasized enhancing global collaboration and synergies across the Rio Conventions. He said UNCCD should extend beyond arid and semi-arid areas, and that the full range of terrestrial ecosystems should be included in the mid-term evaluation. He further emphasized enhancing gender action plans, land tenure, and public-private partnerships for land restoration.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS drew attention to strengthening land tenure, investing in integrated approaches to land restoration, including agroecology, and ending harmful subsidies. She stressed the importance of small grants and fiscal incentives to mobilize local actions and called for establishing an Indigenous Peoples' caucus, including a gender expert in the science-policy interface, and appointing national gender focal points.

Adoption of the Agenda: The COP adopted the agenda and the programme of work, as orally amended ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/1/Rev.1](#)). The COP agreed to establish a Friends of the Chair Group facilitated by the COP Presidency to work on a ministerial declaration.

Election of Officers: The plenary elected the following Vice-Presidents: Angola and Morocco (African Group); Mongolia (Asia-Pacific); Chile and Trinidad and Tobago (GRULAC); and Germany and Switzerland (Western European and Others Group). The election of the remaining officers will take place at a later date.

Establishment of Subsidiary Bodies: The plenary agreed to establish a Committee of the Whole (COW) to address Agenda Items 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7, to be chaired by Anna Luise (Italy).

Accreditation of intergovernmental organizations, civil society organizations and representatives from the private sector, and admission of observers: The COP adopted [ICCD/COP\(16\)/14](#).

Committee of the Whole

On Monday afternoon, COW Chair Anna Luise opened the meeting, emphasizing the need for a collaborative approach to reach common objectives. The COW established two contact groups: one on programme and budget, facilitated by Mongolia, and one on other matters, facilitated by Ghana.

Programme and Budget: Delegates then considered the budget for the biennium 2025-2026 ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/5](#) and [6](#)); financial performance of the Convention trust funds ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/7](#) and [10](#) as well as draft decisions ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/6-ICCD/CRIC/22/2](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)).

The Secretariat introduced the report on the performance of Convention institutions and subsidiary bodies (2022-2024) and proposed the budget ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/3](#)) for the biennium 2025-2026 and multi-year work plan 2025-2028. He outlined two budget proposals, one for zero-nominal growth and a second that addressed existing budgetary shortfalls, mainly for unfunded human resource needs. The UN Board of Auditors then provided an overview of the annual audit ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/8](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/9](#)).

South Africa, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, lamented that a zero-growth core budget cannot fund UNCCD's programmes and does not fulfill the needs of the Secretariat. He said the budget should be commensurate with the two-year work programme and supported an increase.

JAPAN expressed preference for a zero-growth budget to ensure funding is managed in a cost-effective manner and

encouraged remaining activities be covered by voluntary resources. She indicated the UNGA scale of assessments be applied to assess contributions for 2025-2026.

The EU noted the two online consultations for the budget this year and underscored using the scenario notes of the Secretariat to take a consensus decision.

CHINA said an increase in budget should be used to meet the unmet and urgent needs of parties. The Secretariat introduced the report of the evaluation office ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/11](#)), noting that, between 2022-2024, six evaluations were done: midterm evaluation of the strategic framework by an intergovernmental working group; external review of the UNCCD Science Policy Interface; independent evaluation of progress on UNCCD gender action plan; review of the Great Green Wall Accelerator; Land for Life evaluation; and strengthening coordination of the Great Green Wall Initiative.

Drought: COW Chair Luise pointed to the relevant documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/15](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/20](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)). Alfred Prospere (Saint Lucia), Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought, introduced the Group's report ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/20](#)) on behalf of Co-Chair Michael Brüntrup (Germany). The report outlines seven proposed options on drought including: an amendment to the Convention; a COP decision on collaboration with the Global Environment Facility (GEF); COP guidance to the Global Mechanism (GM); a global framework on drought resilience; political declarations; the development of protocol; or a special and ambitious COP decision on drought.

The Secretariat presented [ICCD/COP\(16\)/15](#) on the policy framework and thematic issues related to drought. The report provides an overview of actions taken to support parties in the development and implementation of the Drought Initiative through capacity building, the establishment of communities of learning and practice, and the creation of regional drought management strategies.

Eswatini, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, supported by ALGERIA, noted there is agreement that droughts are increasing in frequency, intensity, and area coverage, but that divergent views remain regarding the level of commitment needed to address drought. Alongside TONGA, the AFRICAN GROUP called for a comprehensive and robust legally binding instrument that will allow countries to meet their national priorities and commitments.

The US, EU, ARGENTINA, and the FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) supported solutions arising from existing frameworks. The US reflected on existing platforms, such as the Secretariat's Drought Toolbox, and collaborative projects, like the Riyadh Global Drought Partnership, Global Alliance for Drought Resilience, the Vision for Adaptive Crops and Soils, and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) as effective partnerships for creating dialogues and sharing resources to address complex challenges. He stressed that while business-as-usual is not the correct approach, neither is a legally binding, one-size-fits-all policy. ARGENTINA called for addressing drought through a regional approach. The EU and FAO praised the work of the Secretariat and the GEF, and called for continued collaboration with other international organizations, institutions, and agencies to leverage synergies.

BRAZIL, MEXICO, and the MARSHALL ISLANDS called on parties to be sensitive to the need for increased resource mobilization to ensure that financial and technical support is channeled to address the collective challenges parties face. The MARSHALL ISLANDS noted their ongoing support to empower women as land users.

CHINA urged parties to consider that the legally binding and non-binding options presented in the report are not mutually-exclusive and supported parties following both tracks simultaneously.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS urged parties to prioritize inclusive, rights-based and community approaches addressing drought and strengthening the participation of women, youth, local communities, and Indigenous Peoples. They called for: accessible funding, including small grants; a science-based approach; incentivized drought preparedness; integrated action; and enhanced data and monitoring.

Ministerial Dialogue

A High-level Ministerial Dialogue convened in the afternoon on the theme “From Geneva to Riyadh and beyond: enhancing global and national policy instruments for a proactive drought management approach. COP 16 President AlFadley stressed the importance of adopting a new approach to tackle drought, underscoring that adequate financing and capacity building are needed to build national resilience.

Co-Chair Cary Fowler, UN Special Envoy for Global Food Security, noted that the success of tackling droughts will come from deploying a range of options from farm-level to landscape and government level.

Co-Chair Bernice Swarts, Deputy Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, South Africa, underscoring the significance of mitigating against drought, urged participants to demonstrate strong political will to reach consensus on ambitious goals and strong targets before the end of COP 16.

In his keynote address, Achim Steiner, UN Development Programme (UNDP) Administrator, said drought is amplified by climate change and fuels conflicts, forcing families to abandon their homes and livelihoods. He called for a risk-informed approach and efforts to strengthen drought resilience building initiatives by improving understanding of drivers of drought.

Saroj Kumar Jha, Global Director, Water Global Practice, World Bank Group noted that, while drought is a phenomenon caused by a deficit in water, it creates far greater deficits in degraded lands and deserts, affecting developing countries ten times more than developed countries. He urged ministers to tackle drought through smart policies and whole-of-government approaches.

Commending the launch of the Riyadh Drought Resilience Partnership, Muhammad Sulaiman Al Jasser, Chairman, IsDB, pledged USD 1 billion to strengthening drought resilience approaches by 2030. He called on ministers to strive together towards ensuring a future where justice and equity can ensure prosperity for all.

Shaimaa Al-Sheiby, on behalf of Abdulhamid Alkhalifa, President of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund, noted that although land is the foundation of our food systems, drought and land degradation are primary threats to food security. They highlighted steps through which land restoration and sustainable land management (SLM) can be achieved, including proper financial instruments aimed at resilience-building actions, research, and innovative financing.

During ministerial interventions from the floor, all countries reported that droughts are becoming more frequent and severe, underscoring their focus on developing early warning systems, and ensuring water systems are more efficient and resilient, including by introducing water saving technologies and irrigation.

Several countries highlighted their individual efforts to address the impacts of drought. Initiatives included:

- disseminating real time meteorological information to the public;
- geographical information mapping efforts, which help inform country planning for combating drought;
- integrated water management, which considers the interconnectedness between land, water, and ecosystems;
- establishing early warning systems through a strong collaboration between institutions and a whole-of government approach to prepare communities for drought;
- establishing drought-resilient crops and agricultural systems;

- using drought-resistant seeds, water irrigation systems, and recycling and reusing water; and
- establishing a national department and committee on drought adaptation.

On the need for strong global and regional collaboration to share experiences and knowledge on drought responses, URUGUAY, among others, highlighted key practices and levers for combating drought, including investing in high-tech water stations for real-time data analysis, and establishing monitoring and early warning systems to support vulnerable communities. The EU shared its development of a dedicated water strategy for implementation in 2025, and its nature-based approaches to enhance SLM and restore degraded natural areas.

Many interventions recognized that drought is not merely an environmental issue, but also a societal challenge. Drought requires scientific approaches to land management and SLM, reactive drought responses rather than proactive initiatives, and engaging in sustainable agricultural practices.

SAMOA highlighted that their region is likely to experience greater weather extremes in the coming decades, including escalating threats from drought. He called for the development of regionally-specific strategies and greater investment in the region to help enhance community resilience.

Many developing countries stressed the need for financial support to combat recurring sand and dust storms, address reduced soil fertility and loss of fertility in animals due to drought, and build capacity of communities facing the compounded effects of climate change, biodiversity loss, degradation and drought. TUNISIA drew attention to diverse challenges, such as desertification, rising water levels, increased soil salinity, and emptying aquifers, that require diverse initiatives in water and land management. The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC underscored that as result of battling over 800 fires, his country’s dams held only enough water for one week.

A number of countries endorsed a drought protocol, noting women and children are the most affected by DLDD.

BANGLADESH urged that the world step up to protect the right to water, as a matter of equity. They also asked for greater protection of watersheds, highlighting the threat to lower riparian countries. COLOMBIA highlighted that ecosystem restoration is important to stabilizing the hydrological cycle to reduce the risk of drought.

FINLAND, with many others, called for governments to ensure the full, equal and effective participation of all of society, including women, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, civil society, and persons and groups in vulnerable positions. BURKINA FASO said drought is a true threat to its cultural heritage.

In the Corridors

One of the key issues at COP 16 is drought. While mitigating the effects of drought is mentioned in the Convention, drought has not been prioritized and long remained in the background. To rectify this, in 2018, the UNCCD established the Drought Initiative, which promotes shifting drought management from being reactive and crisis-based to a proactive approach; one that prioritizes prevention and preparedness. At COP 16, the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought presented seven options to move forward on drought, including a proposal to begin negotiations on a drought protocol or amendment to the UNCCD. Yet, already on Monday, it was clear there was no consensus on the way forward. While all parties support a proactive rather than a reactive response, some, including the African Group, argue that a legally binding protocol must be negotiated. Others prefer non-legally binding measures, such as supporting the development of national drought plans and more financial support for drought resilience. Many predict the decision on drought may face some of the most protracted negotiations in Riyadh.