

## UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Tuesday, 3 December 2024

During the final day of the High-level Special Segment, ministers and other officials went from dialogue to dialogue at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16). In the morning, the ministerial dialogue addressed finance for land restoration and drought resilience. The afternoon dialogue focused on the relationship between land degradation, drought, migration, security, and prosperity. The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) also held their first meetings.

### Ministerial Dialogues

**Unlocking public and private finance for land restoration and drought resilience:** This dialogue was co-chaired by Aziz Abdulkhakimov, Minister of Ecology, Uzbekistan, and Pasi Hellman, Under-Secretary of State, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, said twice as much food will need to be produced by 2050. He said that USD 1 billion per day is needed to contribute to land restoration by 2030, while also drawing attention to the fact that USD 2.6 trillion is spent every year to subsidize activities harmful to the environment.

Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme (UNDP), underlined that addressing desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) requires USD 23 trillion by 2050. He emphasized that the Global Environment Facility (GEF), Green Climate Fund (GCF), and Adaptation Fund offer significant opportunities, public finance offers untapped potential, and banks have identified new related risks in nature-related financial disclosures.

Muhammad Sulaiman al Jasser, President, Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), noted they have mobilized over USD 5 billion from private capital markets to address land degradation, drought, and water scarcity. He highlighted the IsDB's pledge of more than USD 1 billion to the Riyadh Drought Resilience Partnership.

Abdulhamid Alkhalifa, President, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund, said the OPEC Fund allocated 34% of financing to climate action in 2023, with the aim of reaching 40% by 2030. He called on public and private sectors to align frameworks to de-risk investments and enhance the attractiveness of sustainable land management (SLM).

Mahmoud Mohieldin, UN Special Envoy on Financing the 2030 Agenda, emphasized finance, technology, and behavioral change, and stressed that addressing land tenure is essential as 30% of the world population does not have land rights.

Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), drew attention to the climate finance goal agreed at UNFCCC COP 29. He said multilateral development banks have a crucial role to play in public finance

and should deploy funds in tandem with national implementation ambitions across the Rio Conventions.

Muhammad Sulaiman al Jasser, on behalf of the Arab Coordination Group (ACG), committed to support the UNCCD's land restoration agenda. He emphasized that the IsDB and ACG's investments will play a pivotal role in mobilizing funds to support coordinated global action.

Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), stressed the need to source finance from diverse sources to address the triple threat of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. She called for subsidy reforms and fiscal incentives.

Khalid Al-Falih, Minister of Investment, Saudi Arabia, called for: setting a clear, united vision for land and water preservation; a clear policy framework; inspiring stakeholders and coalescing action; bringing together local and international partners to address shared challenges; and mobilizing finance.

Gelsomina Vigliotti, Vice President, European Investment Bank (EIB), emphasized partnerships for sustainable land practices, the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, frameworks for payment for ecosystem services, de-risking instruments, and mobilizing financing that contributes to all three Rio Conventions.

Valerie Hickey, Global Director for Environment, World Bank, stressed the importance of domestic public budgets, private capital, and streamlining access to international finance. Highlighting that USD 635 billion is spent every year to subsidize the use of fertilizers, she advocated that funding should instead be spent to support farmer's actions to reduce land degradation, and improve land security and public health.

In ministerial statements, many focused on: simplifying access to finance, the need for grant-based funding, green bonds, public-private partnerships, new financial support and technology transfer, synergies across the Rio Conventions, the benefits of existing partnerships and financing mechanisms; the need for long-term, robust financing strategies; collaborative policy frameworks; a legally binding instrument on drought under the UNCCD; and repurposing subsidies.

**Impacts of land degradation and drought on forced migration, security, and prosperity:** The afternoon dialogue was co-chaired by Adrian Ryan Forde, Minister of Environment and National Beautification, Green and Blue Economy, Barbados, and Hugo Alfonso Morán Fernández, State Secretary for Environment, Spain.

In his keynote address, Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Climate Envoy, Saudi Arabia, stressed that land degradation and drought does not just impact people and countries with arid climates and landscapes, but affects everyone on Earth. He highlighted Saudi Arabia's initiatives to restore or reduce land degradation by 50% by 2040.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, brought attention to the correlation between land degradation, forced migration, and conflict. Highlighting that 40% of interstate conflicts are linked to disputes over natural resources such as land, minerals, and water, he encouraged actors to focus on the root causes of conflicts.

Baaba Maal, UNCCD Goodwill Ambassador, recalled his experiences speaking with people facing land degradation, drought, and famine, resulting in forced migration through dangerous regions. He shared stories of impressive work by women's associations and youth with hope and plans for their regions, calling for greater support for these groups at the local level.

Carlos Andrés Alvarado Quesada, former President of Costa Rica, reminded participants that we live in an era of complexity, and that narratives used to frame issues and solutions tend to simplify reality. He warned that a failure to embrace the nexus between land degradation, desertification, and migration will lead to false debates and false solutions. He urged actors to place people at the center of the debate, ensure appropriate funding to improve land quality or allowing people to move with dignity, and embrace these discussions with empathy.

Ugochi Daniels, Deputy Director-General for Operations, International Organization for Migration (IOM), highlighted the Kampala Declaration on Migration, Environment, and Climate Change, and the Baku Call on Climate Action for Peace, Relief and Recovery as examples of powerful frameworks for bridging the gap between migration, environmental change, and peace.

Ministers highlighted how increased climate change, DLDD, and water scarcity have led to forced internal and international migration. They also illustrated how DLDD and floods present a threat to food security and lead to increasing urbanization. Some described increased land degradation and water scarcity due to migrants flowing into their countries and how this is a national security threat. Several ministers highlighted how armed conflict can also increase the risk of land degradation, undermine agricultural capacity, and force migration.

Others illustrated their efforts in restoring landscapes to reduce migration, improving climate resilience, and creating sustainable livelihoods. In this regard, one minister underscored that natural restoration is an investment that pays off, saying that for every euro invested they receive eight in return. Another highlighted that Western countries with capitalist economies drive the climate crisis and environmental destruction, and called for a new, civilization-based approach to protect nature.

Many called for collective global action for vulnerable and marginalized communities and a 360° approach to address these complex, interconnected problems. Examples of initiatives included: youth and livelihood programmes, microfinancing for agroforestry activities in traditional farm holdings, and supporting local economies to enhance community resilience; inclusive food system approaches; developing alternative livelihoods; synergies among the Rio Conventions and other environmental agreements; and drawing on local and ancestral knowledge.

**Closing of the High-level Segment:** The Co-Chairs of the ministerial dialogues provided short summaries of each session. Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, announced that 141 ministers and vice ministers participated. He also announced that the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership now had pledges of more than USD 3 billion. Osama Ibrahim Faqeeha, COP 16 Presidency announced that the Riyadh Political Declaration would be annexed to the COP 16 report. He closed the meeting, thanking ministers for their active participation.

### ***Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention***

CRIC Chair Mirko Knežević (Montenegro) called on parties to provide inputs on: the report prepared by the intergovernmental working group (IWG) on the mid-term evaluation of the Strategic Framework (2018-2030); the procedure for communication and evaluation; and ensuring data consistency and making harmonized recommendations to the COP.

Andrea Meza Murillo, Deputy Executive Secretary, UNCCD, reminded parties that the CRIC represents the "heart of the Convention" where "data drives decisions." Noting that the

UNCCD Data Dashboard established since CRIC 21 has enabled a clearer picture, she called on parties to use CRIC 22 as a springboard for transformative actions.

China, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, noting the UNCCD Data Dashboard is a critical tool to address the region's DLDD challenge, reported almost 58% of the region was able to submit their national reports, although some experienced challenges with the complexity of the national data submission methodology.

Angola, for the AFRICAN GROUP, stressed the need to upscale financial contributions and urged parties to adopt a legally binding instrument on drought.

The EU highlighted the importance of a range of CRIC 21 outcomes, including the call to enhance the flow of information, transparency, and accountability through reporting. They noted success will not depend on individual actions, but on the strength of global partnerships.

Hungary, on behalf of the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, said although significant progress has been made towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 15.3, more needs to be done to close the gap on data collection, reporting, and national capacity.

Armenia, for the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE), underscored the importance of adequate, timely, and predictable financial resources to ensure parties can promptly meet their reporting obligations. Palestine, on behalf of the ARAB GROUP, called for global cooperation, stating that greater capacity building can help communities and countries make informed decisions and adopt progressive policies.

BOLIVIA and VENEZUELA called for an indicator to monitor drought and its impacts. BRAZIL expressed commitment to adopt voluntary targets for achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN) and called on others to do the same.

The MARSHALL ISLANDS emphasized the challenges linked to land and water scarcity facing their country, and highlighted efforts to reduce land erosion and food security risks. BURUNDI highlighted that land degradation hinders the wellbeing of their country, with over 90% of the population living in rural areas facing reduction in soil fertility. TIMOR-LESTE noted their efforts to collect data on the status of land degradation and called for greater support.

TOGO, TURKMENISTAN, and LEBANON expressed regret at the rate of land degradation causing loss of soil fertility, forest and grassland ecosystems in their countries, with LEBANON highlighting the threat this poses to food security. YEMEN hoped to continue on their trajectory to rehabilitate 20% of the country by 2030, restore 90,000 hectares of degraded land, and 1 million hectares of rangeland.

CUBA called for moving forward on the Strategic Framework's implementation through transparent, inclusive, and innovative approaches. SAUDI ARABIA outlined their country's approach to alleviate land degradation through an awareness-raising campaign aimed at reforestation; expanding their green spaces; and reducing water pressures through their water management plan.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) called for: strengthening the engagement of groups in vulnerable situations, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and local communities; aligning UNCCD efforts with the objectives of the other Rio Conventions; and integrating disaggregated data on LDN indicators and land tenure security indicators.

**Adoption of the agenda and organization of work:** The CRIC adopted the agenda and organization of work, including the tentative work schedule ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/1](#)). A contact group was established, facilitated by Alwin Dornelly (Saint Lucia).

**Election of officers other than the Chair:** Rodrigo Andrade Ramírez (Chile), Abduvokhid Zakhadullaev (Uzbekistan) and Biljana Kilibarda (Montenegro) were elected to serve as CRIC 22 Vice-Chairs.

**Effective implementation of the Convention at national, subregional and regional levels: *Review of the report of the CRIC at its twenty-first session:*** The Secretariat introduced the document ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/3](#)). The CRIC 21 Rapporteur introduced the CRIC 21 report ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/11](#) and [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/8](#)).

CSOs reiterated the points from their opening statement above, adding the need to prioritize advancing gender equity, and enabling financial support to enable local and community-led action.

### **Committee on Science and Technology**

CST Chair Héctor Manuel Arias Rojo (Mexico) urged parties to reflect on the need for policies and procedures to guide effective programmes. Andrea Meza Murillo, UNCCD Deputy Executive Secretary, encouraged parties not to lose sight of the impact of their work and praised the CST for the hard work undertaken.

Egypt, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, commended the Committee for improving efficiency of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI), and highlighted the achievement of the drought report. They called on the Committee to recognize the regional and global scientific bodies, enhance data collection methodologies, and support integration of Indigenous knowledges.

Hungary, on behalf of the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION, emphasized the importance of the SPI to engage, exchange scientific findings, and enhance synergies with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), particularly on SLM. They called for establishing the SPI as a permanent body.

Iran, on behalf of the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, highlighted the critical need for SPI to expand on science-based approaches to tap into the best available science, while also including Indigenous knowledges.

Belarus, on behalf of the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR THE CEE, noted to reach SDG 15.3, parties to the UNCCD need to expand the scope beyond arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid lands to consider the full extent of the planet's ecosystems. They suggested enlarging the SPI work programme to also include social and economic scientists.

The EU expressed their support for science-based evidence, endorsing all initiatives that strengthen the role of science and the SPI. He noted that scientific knowledge and the SPI are key for parties to adopt locally and regionally appropriate solutions for climate and biodiversity.

SYRIA supported the exchange of scientific knowledge and praised the efforts of the SPI in preparing relevant scientific reports.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN noted that the increased degradation of agricultural lands is putting agri-food systems under unprecedented pressure. He said participatory and integrated approaches to land management and restoration tools are critical for enhancing food security and advancing sustainable land use systems.

The US detailed the importance of scientific representation, stating "there is an awful lot of science in this Convention that is not considered within the CST." The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC noted those who lack access to scientific information face more difficulties, underscoring the importance of engaging in participatory research.

CSOs called on parties to develop evidence-based strategies that suit local contexts at the scale of landscapes or territorial systems and to ensure the participation of all relevant stakeholders. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES acknowledged the advances of Western science and technologies in addressing land degradation and land grabbing, adding this should not undermine the value of Indigenous Peoples' knowledges, innovations, sciences, and technologies.

**Items resulting from the work programme of the SPI for the triennium 2022-2024: *Evidence on sustainable land use systems and their potential to address desertification/land degradation and drought:*** The Secretariat presented the report ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/10](#)). SPI Co-Chair Nichole Barger (US) invited SPI Co-leads Annette Cowie and Elisabeth Huber-Sannwald to present their findings. Cowie defined a sustainable land use system (SLUS) as a dynamic mosaic of integrated land uses located within a landscape that balances the many, and sometimes competing, demands on land to support environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social justice. Huber-Sannwald elaborated on key messages, including that SLUS should support achievement of LDN, help achieve multiple SDGs, need to be tailored to each location, and require an enabling environment.

Responding to the reports, parties: stressed the importance of ensuring the results of the CST's reports are feasible and applicable for every country; called for the concept of sustainable land management to be considered alongside SLUS; called for expansion of the reports of the SPI, specifically regarding the operationalization of the voluntary LDN target; and urged developing culturally-relevant strategies.

***Evidence on historical global and regional aridity trends and future projections that may contribute to expanding drylands and affected populations and the adaptation approaches:*** The Secretariat introduced the document ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/3](#)).

SPI Co-lead Sergio Vicente-Serrano (Spain) presented the report, *Global Threat of Drying Lands*, saying over 40.6% of the Earth is classified as drylands. Globally 77.6% of the Earth experienced drier climates since 1990, with 4.3 million km<sup>2</sup> of humid lands transformed into drylands during the past 30 years. He reported that human-induced climate change is the likely culprit behind these trends.

SPI Co-lead Narcisa Pricope (US) described the impacts associated with aridity, including child stunting and malnutrition, saying the globe will have to deal with significantly less water over the next 70 years. As recommendations on how to adapt to aridity, she cited: assessing aridity vulnerabilities; and implementing enabling conditions and actions for adaptation.

Delegates engaged in a discussion about: holistic approaches to resilience strategies; establishing an integrated approach to land, water, and soil to support robust agri-food systems; and the need to connect the recommendations of the SPI with other recommendations under the Convention.

### ***In the Corridors***

The fast pace continued Tuesday, with the CRIC and the CST getting their teeth into the matters that affect implementation of the Convention and the research that underpins it. The high level of participation in the ministerial dialogues hopefully signified that momentum is building for the matters at the heart of the Convention.

In the Committees, the issues bubbling under the surface quickly percolated to the top. Some delegates, for instance, lamented the introduction of new terms and definitions, muttering under their breath that the "pot is brimming over." Informal discussions on whether or not to expand the scope of the Convention beyond arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid land prompted exasperation and clearly divides opinions. The proposal to introduce rangelands and grasslands as a new issue has some concerned that this may risk sidelining existing issues. In the words of one African delegate, "We have not even reached the finish line on drought!" And so, the stew will thicken over the coming days, as the contact groups begin potentially lengthy deliberations.