

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Wednesday, 4 December 2024

Wednesday was “Land Day” at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16). But, in a sense, every day at the COP is land day, as the Convention itself tackles the urgent issue of land degradation, which threatens food security, biodiversity, and climate resilience. In the morning, the Gender Caucus held a dialogue with delegates and UN agencies on women’s leadership for sustainable land management (SLM).

A joint session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) addressed monitoring and indicators, including on land degradation neutrality (LDN). In the afternoon, the CRIC discussed financing, and the Committee of the Whole (COW) tackled migration and land tenure. Three contact groups also began negotiations on draft decisions.

High-level Interactive Dialogue: *HerLand: Women’s Leadership for Sustainable Land Management*

Tarja Halonen, UNCCD Land Ambassador and Co-Chair of the UNCCD Gender Caucus, opened the session, underscoring that women and girls in rural communities bear the greatest burden of desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD), and their empowerment is crucial for addressing urgent land challenges.

COP President Abdulrahman Abdulmohsen AlFadley noted that women’s empowerment enhances SLM, the preservation of ecosystems, and builds community capacity for long-term resilience against DLDD.

Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary, UNCCD, highlighted the “shocking figure” that women produce up to 80% of food in developing countries but only own 13% of agricultural land in the world. He highlighted a recent UNCCD report which showcases women’s leadership in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Maimoonah Al Khalil, Family Affairs Council, Saudi Arabia, highlighted the Sustainable Agricultural Rural Development (Saudi Reef) Program, which empowers rural women by enhancing their skills in managing sustainable small and medium enterprises.

Razan Al Mubarak, President, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), noted that, based on current trends, it will take 162 years to achieve gender parity in environmental leadership within ministries.

Imaan Sulaiman-Ibrahim, Minister of State for Police Affairs, Nigeria, emphasized investing in women while adapting to a just transition, calling women “a catalyst for resilience.” She highlighted Nigeria’s Climate Change Gender Policy.

Alvaro Lario, President, International Fund of Agricultural Development (IFAD), called investing in women a “strategic solution and moral imperative.” He noted improved gender balance between food production and land ownership would increase farm yields and reduce hunger.

Retno Marsudi, UN Special Envoy on Water, recognized the importance of women’s rights and women as agents of change in

land management. She noted that women are known to make more environmentally sustainable decisions and are less likely to use harmful pesticides and growth promoters.

Neema Lugangira, Member of Parliament, Tanzania, advised the Gender Caucus to connect with parliamentarians in the global climate finance chapter of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s parliamentary network. She proposed the UNCCD have a land restoration parliamentary group.

Odontuya Saldan, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Mongolia, proposed establishing a global coalition of future rangelands and pastoralism solutions, focused on gender equality and the role of youth, children, and women. She said Mongolia would make gender a priority at COP 17.

Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), recalled that data overwhelmingly shows that women who own and control their land are better able to provide for their families and invest in their communities.

Thani Mohamed Soilihi, Minister of State for Francophonie and International Partnerships, France, noting that women face structural barriers in relation to property rights, stressed that “we must go beyond treating the symptoms” and instead tackle the core reasons for these inequalities.

Mira Lee, Korea Forest Service, noted her country’s efforts to reverse traditional discrimination against women through targeted policies directed at enhancing their engagement across society, including in the labor market and across sectors.

Fatimata Cheiffou, Ambassador of Niger to Italy, addressed rural women in Africa and the world as “the beating heart and architects of our resilience.” She called for turning environmental solutions into pathways for empowerment.

Participants then watched the premiere of the *HerLand* film presented by Inna Modja, UNCCD Land Ambassador.

Interventions from the floor highlighted: the need to address discriminatory practices and systemic barriers restricting women’s empowerment; National Gender Strategies, gender mainstreaming, integrated gender-responsive policies, and gender-responsive budgeting; women’s participation in the blue, green, and circular economies; links between the gender gaps and food insecurity; and the role of women in peacebuilding and as agents of change.

In closing remarks, Halonen said investing in women’s empowerment is a “legal imperative and makes good business sense” that yields economic growth and enhances resilience.

Baaba Maal, UNCCD Goodwill Ambassador, closed the session by serenading the panel.

Joint CRIC and CST Sessions

Improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/7-ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/8](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/ICCD/CRIC(22)/7-ICCD/COP(16)/CST/8) and [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/8](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/ICCD/CRIC(22)/8)).

Science-Policy Interface (SPI) Chair Nichole Barger described how data-driven technologies and cutting-edge artificial intelligence (AI) computations have allowed prompt, effective, and responsive decision-making capabilities over the past decade.

Presenting on Sustainable Development Goal 15.3.1 (proportion of degraded land over a total land area) and its link with the UNCCD land degradation neutrality (LDN) indicator, Neil Sims, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Co-Chair of the Group on Earth Observations' LDN Initiative, discussed the research on drought reporting. He outlined the process, including: developing the Framework and Guiding Principles for a Land Degradation Indicator; producing a Good Practice Guidance to derive the sub-indicators and build reporting capacity; contextualizing global and regional data sets with national and sub-national levels; and validating research with stakeholders.

Lucy Barker, UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, introduced the Good Practice Guidance on calculating the extent of land degradation for reporting on Strategic Objective 3 (SO3, on drought, to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems). She noted the difficulty in determining the impacts of drought on populations and ecosystems, which is the "missing piece" in drought research.

Ward Anseeuw, Senior Land Tenure Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), discussed three areas of UNCCD work that are synergistic with other UN monitoring frameworks: land tenure, agri-food systems, and gender. He highlighted ongoing initiatives and monitoring activities across different UN organizations and conventions, and outputs for monitoring information.

CST Chair Héctor Manuel Arias Rojo, on behalf of the bureaus of both Committees, described the 2026 UNCCD reporting process and agreement to set up an ad hoc expert group to work on enhancing indicators and shape a post-2030 monitoring framework.

KAZAKHSTAN described how they are improving monitoring, measurement, and assessment of land and soil resources. Alongside MEXICO and CSOs, they stressed the importance of working with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. MEXICO, UGANDA, and VENEZUELA described their work on land tenure.

CHINA stressed the importance of regional data, emphasized the importance of listening to the views of regional experts, and expressed concern about discrepancies between national, UN, and NGO reporting.

LESOTHO highlighted the importance of ensuring coherence and consistency within reporting mechanisms. The EU called for assessing the budgetary implications of reporting tasks and communicating this to parties. The US supported efforts to improve reporting and reduce costs. LEBANON requested national workshops and, alongside SYRIA, stressed the need for additional financing for reporting. ARGENTINA called for a streamlined process and additional and improved indicators, including on drought and carbon stock trends. ARGENTINA, LEBANON, and ALGERIA called for improving national capacity.

FAO added that they are looking to align the data on land tenure with the FAO's Fisheries and Resources Monitoring System (FIRM). The EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY highlighted the availability of Copernicus satellite data and its contributions to improving baseline data and land degradation assessments.

The PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE ON SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT described their collaborative work with FAO and Global Environment Facility (GEF) to support soil mapping and increase resilience to droughts and climate change across 14 Caribbean small island developing states (SIDS).

The CBD expressed appreciation for the support the UNCCD has provided for the development of a methodology for monitoring and reporting for Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) Target 2 (restore 30% of all degraded ecosystems).

CSOs called for the implementation of key measures for monitoring and reporting, including: developing inclusive and participatory reporting frameworks; standardizing reporting

templates; enhancing the quality of information; demographic sensitive reporting; and innovative technology solutions.

Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

Securing of additional investments and relations with financial mechanisms: Update on the Global Support Programme to assist UNCCD reporting: CRIC Chair Mirko Knežević asked the Secretariat to introduce the documents ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/7-ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/8](#) and [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/8](#)).

Cathrine Mutambirwa, Global Mechanism (GM), described the work of the GM to enhance technical and institutional capacity for land degradation and monitoring, as well as indicate timelines for national reporting.

Ulrich Apel, GEF, introduced the report on financing DLDD programmes and projects ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/4](#)). He highlighted the steps the GEF has taken to implement recommendations made at the last CRIC meeting, including to: increase funding levels to support parties to meet their reporting obligations, and make this funding available earlier; enhance synergies across GEF implementing agencies; simplify procedures to access funding; and support parties through a GM-led global support project.

Nancy Soi, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), commended the collaboration between the GEF and GM, as well as the efforts of parties to implement the Convention through the national reporting process.

Hernan Gonzalez, FAO, introduced a proposal to support national reporting. He explained that the proposal uses a consolidated participatory process to assess and formulate responses to land degradation.

ARGENTINA, BOLIVIA, and VENEZUELA emphasized the importance of flexibility around national reporting. PANAMA and ECUADOR urged parties to strengthen financing mechanisms so reporting and LDN targets can be effectively reached. PANAMA expressed interest in hosting CRIC 23.

LESOTHO and ERITREA expressed appreciation for the financial and capacity-building support from the GEF and partners. ECUADOR emphasized the need to address the effects of climate change and its links to DLDD.

BOLIVIA and VENEZUELA called for additional investment towards capacity building and reporting. KAZAKHSTAN called for support from the GEF to finetune reports with more current data to combat land degradation.

CSOs called on the GEF to provide more financial support for: capacity building for stakeholders; including local voices and ensuring their expertise and knowledge are captured; strengthening reporting tools and reducing administrative requirements; and disaggregating gender and social data to ensure impacts are fully captured and addressed.

Report by the Global Environment Facility on the financing of programmes and projects concerning desertification/land degradation and drought: Chair Knežević invited the GEF to introduce the document ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/4](#) and [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/8/Add.1](#)). Apel shared progress made during the recent replenishment period, citing: the approval of 201 projects connected to land degradation, totaling USD 1.6 million, and covering all UNCCD regional annexes; and eight enabling activities, 20 land degradation focal area (LDFA) stand-alone projects, and 173 multifocal area projects, amounting to USD 1.5 billion. He said the GEF-8 replenishment achieved a record level of USD 5.33 billion, of which USD 618.37 million was allocated to the LDFA.

The EU expressed their appreciation for the GEF-UNCCD partnership but noted that multiple challenges remain. He stated that the UNCCD financial mechanisms must be strengthened. He called on parties to contribute to replenishing the GEF-9 fund and to allocate additional resources to combat land degradation.

SYRIA described progress on existing projects and called on the GEF to support national reporting and achieving LDN targets.

CSOs recommended the GEF: increase funding for DLDD; support locally-led initiatives; ensure access to financing; align initiatives with the SDGs; strengthen monitoring and evaluation; and contribute to capacity building and knowledge sharing

Committee of the Whole

Migration: Chair Anna Luise (Italy) asked the Secretariat to present the document on DLDD as a driver of migration ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/18](#)) and the corresponding decision ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)).

ALGERIA said to address DLDD as a driver of migration requires an integrated approach to strengthen resilience. They called for investing in the reclamation and rehabilitation of land, and in economic systems.

The EU stressed that all ecosystems are fundamental for food and freshwater security. She promoted regenerative agriculture and agroforestry, including silvopasture and active grazing.

VENEZUELA highlighted unregulated urban development, advocated for legal and social protections to avoid displacement and internal migration, and integrated land tenure systems. She called for financial and technical assistance to build capacity.

FAO stressed the critical need to develop durable solutions for people facing forced displacement. He reaffirmed FAO's commitment to continue developing agrifood systems for a more resilient and peaceful future for all.

CSOs called for: prioritizing investment in land restoration practices to mitigate against forced migration; inclusive governance; aligning integrated strategies national migration and land use policies with international frameworks; accessible funding mechanisms; and investing in data production and Indigenous knowledge.

Land Tenure: The Secretariat presented the document on land tenure ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/19](#) and the associated draft decision [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)). Ghana, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, supported by BOTSWANA, MADAGASCAR, and KENYA, called for the establishment of national focal points for land tenure, highlighting a gap between those attending UNCCD negotiations and those in charge of land tenure nationally.

The US recognized that gender equitable ownership furthers women's economic security and the adaptive capacity of their communities. They asked for more research on the link between land tenure security and good land governance, in line with the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT).

The EU and VENEZUELA called for expanded national consultations on land governance using an inclusive and participatory process. The EU and BOTSWANA called for guidance on how to integrate land tenure in LDN target-setting efforts. The UK described efforts to work with other governments to develop more transparent and effective land governance systems and land tenure.

AUSTRALIA noted that land security provides economic security, while enhancing gender equality and the empowerment of women, girls, and Indigenous Peoples. MEXICO stressed the need for integrating land tenure, gender mainstreaming, and programmes focused on women, Indigenous Peoples, and youth.

KENYA highlighted key entry points for integrating land tenure into land restoration initiatives and using land tenure data to inform LDN plans. BURKINA FASO noted, despite efforts, they are far from being on track with LDN. CHAD said limited progress on land tenure is due to the lack of investment.

FAO said it has mobilized partners with its own resources to support parties on land tenure and described the UNCCD-FAO joint initiative on land tenure launched in 2022.

GUYANA drew attention to their legislation on Indigenous land tenure, and called for increased financial and technical support and for the VGGT to remain voluntary. CHINA noted land tenure is in their constitution.

UN HABITAT and MEXICO underscored the importance of documenting land tenure rights through gender disaggregated data. CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) and INDIGENOUS

PEOPLES called on parties to: respect and reinforce customary and informal rights; ensure land tenure alignment of the VGGT, the GBF, and the Paris Agreement; integrate indicators; and empower Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, and local communities to limit conflict.

Follow-up on the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD Strategic Framework 2018-2030: The Secretariat introduced the agenda item, and Daniel Van Assche, Chair of the Intergovernmental Working Group, introduced the documents ([IWG\(ICCD/COP\(15\)/2](#) and [ICCD/COP\(15\)/21](#)).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, discussed the importance of extending the Convention's mandate beyond arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas, as crucial for achieving LDN. The EU, supported by AUSTRALIA, preferred a shortened draft decision, with recommendations addressed under their respective agenda items to avoid the risk of duplication.

VENEZUELA expressed support for a recommendation for reforming the UNCCD science-policy guidance approach to ensure better visibility and responsiveness to country-level needs, highlighting a regional need to include Indigenous Peoples' knowledges. BANGLADESH highlighted the need for a recommendation to address the gap between land degradation and the pace of financial investment.

Contact Groups

CST: Facilitated by Joseph Noel (Grenada), the CST contact group worked on two draft decisions on science-policy recommendations on sustainable land use systems (SLUS), and aridity trends, projections, and impacts. Following agreement on minor changes to the preamble of the SLUS decision, delegates deliberated on the first two operative paragraphs (integrating SLUS into LDN planning and implementation; and integrating SLUS into existing national and local management systems).

Joint CRIC/CST: Facilitated by Alwin Dornelly (Saint Lucia), the joint contact group considered a draft decision on improving procedures for the communication of information as well as the quality and format of reports to be submitted to the COP. Delegates advanced preambular text with an addition on countries that have been excluded from receiving funds from the GEF. Discussions continued.

COW: Facilitated by Asher Nkegbe (Ghana), the COW contact group considered the draft decision on drought ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)). Parties considered the modalities of an instrument on drought. Views differed on whether to develop an amendment, protocol, or other option, and whether a process would be agreed to develop the instrument for adoption at COP 17. Delegates then discussed the preamble, debating how to refer to climate change and other drivers of drought. Discussions continued.

In the Corridors

At the Gender Caucus's high-level event, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw exclaimed that it was "time to change the equation on gender inequality." After the event, many celebrated the renewed attention to gender at the UNCCD. A seasoned participant noted, "You don't have to scratch much to unearth the many ways that women are disproportionately impacted by land degradation, while also being crucial agents of change in our communities." Reflecting on the low number of women participating in decision making, another said it was "ridiculous that so many are being excluded," continuing that "for real solutions, we need everyone at the same table, in the same chair, and with the same powers."

Whether delegates are able to ensure their words turn into action remains to be seen. As one gender expert highlighted, none of the provisions on gender contain strong legal language, with another saying that although progress has been made in elevating gender at the UNCCD, "we're still missing stronger targeted gender advocacy across its different negotiating streams." Hopefully, momentum continues to build towards COP 17 where Mongolia has signaled gender will be a priority.