

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Thursday, 5 December 2024

On World Soil Day, the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16) focused on agri-food systems. Recognizing the importance of promoting sustainable land management, the open dialogue session shared firsthand experiences of how civil society is working to ensure healthy soil, sustainable agriculture, and social and environmental well-being. With agriculture needing to produce 50% more food by 2050—and up to 40% of lands already degraded—urgent action is needed to restore lands, protect ecosystems, and meet the demands of a growing population.

In the afternoon, the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) began discussions on the work of the Convention's Science-Policy Interface (SPI) and innovation and technology in ecologically sustainable agri-food systems. In the afternoon and evening, contact groups convened. The Committee of the Whole (COW) contact group discussed draft decisions on drought and land tenure. The CST contact group continued considering the draft decision on sustainable land use systems.

The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) contact group focused on the draft decision on assessment of the implementation of the Convention against objectives 1-4 of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework.

Open Dialogue Session

The COP 16 Presidency opened the civil society dialogue on inclusive and sustainable agri-food systems. Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary, UNCCD, underscored that the UNCCD is the only multilateral environment agreement that devotes nearly one full day to a dialogue with civil society organizations (CSOs). He stated that these sessions create a unique opportunity that integrates CSOs into the UNCCD process.

Mauro Centritto, Moderator, praised the open dialogue, remarking that the session acts as a platform that amplifies on-the-ground perspectives on combating land degradation, advancing land degradation neutrality (LDN), and sustainable development. He lauded the active role CSOs are playing at COP 16 as they push to turn party commitments into action.

On behalf of the accredited CSOs at COP 16, Marioldy Sanchez Santivanez, Association for Integral Research and Development (AIDER), emphasized the urgent need to address the impacts of drought. Their recommendations include: collaboration across ministries and governments; better coordination of information-sharing, monitoring, policies, and budget allocation; concrete actions that support women, youth, small-scale farmers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities; and reallocation of environmentally harmful subsidies toward drought resilience.

Keynote Speaker: Siddhesh Sakore, 2024 UNCCD Land Hero, said, growing up he witnessed the challenges and hardships faced by farmers and their families in India, motivating him to return to farming after obtaining an engineering degree. He described how his research on severe soil degradation led him to found Agro Rangers to bring positive change to farmers' lives while promoting sustainable agriculture and social and environmental well-being.

Panelists: Erimelinda Temba, Islands of Peace, spoke of their work supporting communities in northern Tanzania through agroecological farming. She said their efforts span capacity building in production and post-production to raise consumer awareness and advocacy at the national level. She discussed successes including the diversification of farming practices, the revitalization of traditional seed systems, land restoration activities, and agroecological organic farming. She noted that implementation and land rights remain challenging.

Priyanka Patil, Golden Era Eco Services, shared stories of resilience from rural India. She highlighted that external pressures have led rural farming communities to shift from traditional food systems to monocultures and cash crops, which harm soil and contribute to land degradation and drought, thus threatening food production and harming communities. She said a range of activities, such as crop rotation, mixed cropping, and water management could help address these harms. She introduced their Sacred Seed Initiative on food security and food sovereignty.

Glenda Mangia, Fundación CAUCE, described the “death spiral” of adding fertilizer to soil, using genetically modified seeds, producing food containing multiple toxins, and the resulting soil degradation. She explained that her work focuses on building the capacity of young people to reverse this destructive cycle by introducing crop rotation, reducing monoculture farming, and using less fertilizer and pesticides.

Anand Ethirajalu, Conscious Planet, shared the case study of coconut farmers transitioning to agroecological practices, improving soils and increasing productivity by 55% in a few years. He highlighted farmer-to-farmer peer-learning, and “handholding” through helpline systems as the cornerstone of the transition. He said building back soil health by using animal urine and dung in drip irrigation systems has the highest potential to improve productivity.

Sopike Babalashvili, Caucasus Environmental NGO Network, discussed how to engage youth in the transformation of agri-food systems. She emphasized that youth have unique capacities that allow them to reimagine innovative and creative approaches to food systems. She noted that youth, when equipped with the right tools and accessible funding within an enabling environment, can harness their potential for food system transformation.

Ali Aii Shatou, Mbororo Pastoralists of Cameroon, discussed the deep ecological and spiritual significance of food to

Indigenous Peoples. She described the Indigenous knowledges that support efforts to combat land degradation and desertification. She noted the limitations of an agri-food system approach that narrowly views food as a commodity, stressing the need for a holistic approach that centers the ecological relationship between food, people, and the land as a cultural way of life.

Dialogue: Many delegates emphasized the critical role of CSOs, giving examples of collaborative projects with organizations and community groups. Several called for enhanced civil society participation in decision-making. UN WOMEN highlighted women's land rights, food system transformation, and the care economy as the common thread running across the Rio Conventions.

Following a question on how to ensure synergies between the three Rio Conventions, CSOs underlined the importance of coordination between all ministries responsible for implementation to ensure alignment of efforts. Ethirajalu argued land can be the common ground linking the challenges across the Conventions, noting that improving soil health helps combat desertification, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

In response to a question on social changes, Patil highlighted that learning circles and seed ceremonies provide an opportunity for communities to elaborate shared strategies, celebrate traditional foods, and diversify crops and food systems. Temba, responding to a question about the Island of Peace's working methods, highlighted that they support over 800 farmers, with a focus on women and youth inclusion.

Mangia, Patil, and Shatou supported a statement by INDIGENOUS PEOPLES asking for parties to change "agri-food systems" to "food systems and agriculture" because the latter goes beyond the concept of a commodity, instead recognizing how food is rooted to culture and "connected to everything."

Mangia and Ethirajalu, responding to questions on knowledge exchange, agreed that sharing experience is "vital," but noted knowledge needs to be adapted to local and regional contexts.

In response to a query about measuring social impacts and scalability, Temba stressed the importance of understanding project impacts, emphasizing monitoring and the importance of knowledge sharing and collaboration between CSOs.

Following questions on land degradation and farming practices, Siddhesh underscored the role of traditional knowledge and local seed varieties as important alternatives for food system resilience compared to agrochemicals. He stressed that food injustice, inequitable food distribution, and food loss due to a lack of storage technology is the true threat to food security.

On increasing the participation of Indigenous Peoples, Ethirajalu emphasized the importance of providing financial and technical support to adapt to the realities of climate change.

Regarding mobilizing resources for youth, Babalashvili called on governments to invest in youth education and leverage partnerships with the private sector at the local level. Ethirajalu agreed, highlighting that farming is typically not taught through formal education but relies on the transfer of knowledge between generations. Noting that the average farmer in India is 52, he argued that the biggest threat to food security is the loss of farmers' knowledge.

Mangia, responding to multiple questions about the role of technology, acknowledged fears around the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) but explained that youth are "digital natives," and that young people are catalyzers who can leverage technology in appropriate ways to promote education.

Concluding the session, CSOs provided recommendations for sustainable and inclusive agri-food systems related to:

- Developing and implementing policies and governance that support agroecological and agroforestry approaches and local practices;
- Limiting water-intensive business practices and land-degrading agriculture;
- Supporting locally-led actions and knowledge exchange through accessible funding mechanisms;
- Supporting the implementation of the COP 14 decision on land tenure;
- Promoting sustainable consumption patterns;
- Strengthening and scaling up community-based initiatives; and
- Building local institutions to support small-scale sustainable food systems and value chains.

Committee on Science and Technology

Items resulting from the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) for the triennium 2022-2024: Coordination activities of the Science-Policy Interface with other intergovernmental scientific panels and bodies: CST Chair Héctor Manuel Arias Rojo (Mexico) opened the session and the Secretariat introduced the documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/4](#) and [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/10](#)).

The SPI Co-Leads presented key messages from the report of the two SPI working groups on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report, with SPI Chair Nichole Barger moderating the session.

Citing the potential risks and co-benefits of large-scale mitigation efforts, SPI Co-Lead Emma Archer cautioned that land is both a source and sink for greenhouse gas emissions, and that the agriculture, forestry and other land use (AFOLU) sector offers significant short-term mitigation potential at relatively low costs.

SPI Co-Lead Nijavalli Ravindranath highlighted recommendations from the report, including: enhancing land use efficiency and land restoration; adopting an integrated landscape approach to minimize trade-offs; and increasing efforts to promote sustainable land management (SLM).

VENEZUELA called on the SPI to incorporate their country's experiences to broaden the science base. The EU recommended the SPI strengthen interactions with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the IPCC. SENEGAL requested the SPI to adopt an integrated approach by focusing on SLM and to bolster private funding.

SWITZERLAND warned that issues such as biofuels can present both benefits and risks for food security. CSOs stressed that effective collaboration in fostering and enhancing synergies with other scientific bodies is key and encouraged including local and Indigenous knowledges alongside scientific findings.

Innovation and technology in ecologically sustainable agri-food systems: The Secretariat presented documents on new emerging issues: grassland and rangeland and ecologically sustainable agri-food systems ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/21-ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/9](#)). He said the US requested this new item on innovation and technology in ecologically sustainable agri-food systems, adding a draft text was prepared by the Secretariat and that it would be made available.

The US noted the draft text was developed in consultation with stakeholders, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO), CST Bureau, and other parties. He added that the goal is to recognize the importance of agriculture for LDN and to motivate individual and collective action.

KAZAKHSTAN highlighted synergies between food production system transformation and actions to address climate change. GRENADA supported the US submission and highlighted an expanding collaboration among 14 Caribbean countries to

tackle land and soil degradation. The CSOs and INDIGENOUS PEOPLES emphasized FAO Agroecology Elements, noting that “agri-food” means commodities. They called for environmental and social safeguards, cautioning the impact of new agricultural technologies on nature.

CGIAR welcomed the US proposal and drew attention to a nature-positive and circular approach, empowerment of farmers, and CGIAR’s agrobiodiversity solution hotspot tool. HONDURAS stressed the importance of microenterprises and training on integrated land management.

FAO called for prioritizing this item in all multilateral environmental agreements, national strategies, and policy processes. He stressed that mobilizing investments and enabling environments would support restoration of agricultural land, integrated land use planning, responsible land tenure, and local employment.

CAMBODIA called for the SPI and the UNCCD Secretariat to further develop tools and innovations based on science, and make those freely available to parties for SLM and agri-food system transformation. MOROCCO noted the need for guidelines on forest pastures that address broad interests of pastoral stewardship and carbon sequestration. He called for mobilizing investments for the use of local pastoral genetic resources.

The CST Chair referred the draft decision to the CST contact group.

Review of the work conducted by the Science-Policy

Interface: Arias Rojo introduced the item ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/6](#) and [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/10](#)).

The CST Bureau proposed that: the SPI should be established as a continuous, standing body; the future SPI work programme focus on the delivery of high-profile, science-based information products; the work programme be extended to four years from two; the SPI extend its role in the UNCCD to the provision of practical, rapid, scientific advice to the work of the Bureau and Secretariat; a procedure be developed for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI work programme, as well as procedures for developing information products; parties be provided with more information and opportunities to contribute to the work of the SPI; and that the five CST Bureau members serve on the SPI. It was also recommended that the Secretariat intensify its efforts to secure more financial resources and technical support for the SPI.

The EU and CÔTE D’IVOIRE supported all recommendations put forward by the Bureau, emphasizing its support to establish the SPI as a permanent standing body of the UNCCD. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION suggested that parties consider the restoration of scientific conferences under the auspices of the Convention and that the composition of the SPI should not just be based on regional diversity but also the scientific competencies of individuals.

JAPAN cautioned against establishing a standing body if the core budget does not allow its effective operation. In addition, they asked whether there is sufficient additional scientific value for this.

AUSTRALIA, with NAMIBIA, ALGERIA, and MALAWI supported transitioning to a standing body. The US acknowledged the complexity of the decision and supported the proposal with the trust that it will be done in a cost-neutral manner. CSOs reiterated the need to integrate local and Indigenous knowledges into the science on desertification, land degradation, and drought.

Chair Arias Rojo referred further discussions to the Contact Group.

Contact Groups

COW: Facilitated by Asher Nkegbe (Ghana), the COW contact group continued consideration of the draft decision on

drought. While they reached agreement Wednesday night not to consider an amendment to the Convention, there was still no agreement on which option or combination of options to choose (protocol, declaration, global framework on drought resilience, COP guidance, or COP decision). Some argued that they first need to determine what needs to be done to address drought and then what options are best. After much discussion on the way forward, they established an informal group, made up of four delegates per region. The group will meet Friday and report back to the contact group on Saturday.

Parties then began negotiations on **land tenure.** A lengthy discussion ensued on a proposed additional paragraph on land tenure being an enabling factor for synergistic implementation of the Rio Conventions, which drew diverging opinions on whether to retain or delete. The proposal to add “in line with national circumstances and priorities” in relation to the continued integration of land tenure in line with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines attracted criticism and disagreement. Parties also began discussions on an additional paragraph proposing the establishment of national focal points for land tenure.

CRIC: The CRIC contact group, facilitated by Alwin Dornelly (Saint Lucia), opened discussion on the draft decision on assessment of the implementation of the Convention against objectives 1-4 of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework. Delegates expressed concern with the drafting and editing procedure for the text. After prolonged discussion of the procedure, and debate as to whether to reopen previously agreed text, delegates agreed to instead resume discussion based on bracketed text from Tuesday evening. Delegates then considered preambular text on concerns, including whether to refer to overexploitation of “resources,” “natural resources,” “sustainable” or “unsustainable” land use intensification, or sustainable land use systems. Discussion continued.

CST: A CST contact group, facilitated by Joseph Noel (Grenada), met in the evening. Parties continued considering the draft decision on sustainable land use systems (SLUS). Delegates deliberated references to categories of land use systems and building technical capacity to assess and track individual land use systems. A final paragraph with multiple sub-paragraphs on creating an enabling environment for SLUS elicited many proposals for additional text but steady progress was made.

In the Corridors

On Thursday, the focus shifted to the work CSOs are doing to support the implementation of the Convention. Many celebrated that the UNCCD devotes a full day of the COP to CSOs, reflected in the record number of CSOs registered for COP 16, totaling 1,150 organizations and nearly 4,000 delegates. The COP Presidency lauded the institutionalization of CSO engagement since COP 1 as a testament of the bottom-up approach that is at the heart of the Convention.

CSOs reflected on the morning’s session, with one calling it “a strong discussion that set the stage for further talks next week.” Another expressed some trepidation, pointing out that “there were a lot of empty chairs, but the discussion was still rich and highlighted the importance of engaging Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth.” While parties agree that engaging many voices is vital to fulfilling the aims of the Convention, one CSO emphasized that “mere acknowledgment is not enough; these conversations need to be translated into the negotiations.” As CSOs left the plenary eager to gather for their family photo under the desert sun, they were in high spirits that the longstanding approach to engage CSOs will translate into meaningful outcomes for those most affected by—and perhaps best suited to—combat the impacts of desertification, land degradation, and drought.