

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Thursday, 12 December 2024

The penultimate day of a Conference of the Parties (COP) is always fraught with anxiety and exhaustion. COP 16 to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was no exception. The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) concluded its work and convened in an afternoon plenary session to adopt all eight decisions and forward them to the COP Plenary.

Progress was much slower in the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) and Committee of the Whole (COW) contact groups. Despite the new “rules of engagement” distributed by the COP Bureau for contact groups, aimed at speeding up the pace of negotiations, the groups made very slow progress during the day.

Just before 6:00 pm, the COW contact group split into two: one to address the draft decision on drought and the other to finish up all other remaining draft decisions. The CST returned to its final draft decisions and concluded its work. The hope was that all work could be concluded Thursday night to allow the CST and the COW closing plenaries to convene on Friday to approve all the decisions and forward them to the COP for final adoption.

Contact Groups

COW: The contact group resumed discussion on **enhancing the implementation of the Convention and its 2018-2030 Strategic Framework**. In the discussion, many asked questions about operational matters, with the Secretariat underscoring that the text was prepared based on the outcomes of the intergovernmental working group (IWG), and aimed to address operational gaps. During discussions on the preambular paragraphs, one on mobilizing resources attracted prolonged debate.

On the operational texts, delegates agreed to a paragraph on integrating implementation of the UNCCD into national policies, planning, and budgetary systems, and a paragraph requesting the Executive Secretary, and inviting relevant regional and international organizations, to support capacity building for national focal points, Science and Technology Correspondents (STCs), and “their offices.”

On a request to the Secretariat to prepare a generic list of main tasks for national focal points and STCs, parties agreed the Secretariat would instead assist in national efforts to effectively coordinate and share information about the Convention at the national and local levels to support implementation. Parties also struggled to find agreement on the language calling on the Secretariat, the Global Mechanism (GM), parties, and others to assist with this work, highlighting the risk for limited resources and the need to be realistic in what certain parties can achieve.

Regarding defining and promoting the use of approaches and practices for environmental and socio-economic gains, some parties disagreed with the reference to nature-based

solutions, preferring “ecosystem-based approaches.” The term “regenerative” agricultural practices also drew reservations, with some suggesting replacing it with “sustainable,” which others argued was not the same.

Lengthy discussions ensued on retaining a paragraph encouraging those parties categorized as “non-affected” to enhance their implementation of the Convention and the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework including setting voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets. There was much debate over whether this was an expansion of the mandate of the Convention and if it was appropriate to include this language in the decision. Ultimately, there remained bracketed text noting a significant portion of land degradation occurs beyond arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas.

They ultimately agreed to request the Secretariat to initiate comprehensive discussion among parties on how to best reaffirm the global role of the UNCCD in deepening “political” commitments and cooperation to address desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD). Parties also agreed that the Secretariat would present recommendations stemming from this process at COP 17.

On the launch of the development of the next strategic framework, delegates agreed to consider the need to establish goals and targets. They also agreed to earmark the placement of a variety of paragraphs that delegates previously agreed to negotiate under the relevant agenda items. Finalization of the draft decision is pending these texts, along with ongoing discussions on whether to reference “regenerative” agricultural practices.

Parties moved onto the draft text on **rangelands**. Following discussions on, among other things, reference to the importance of rangelands for Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth, and people in vulnerable situations, the need to improve land tenure security in rangelands, and the development of initiatives for sustainable rangeland management, parties finalized the text.

As of 9:00 pm, the contact group planned to continue with the draft decisions on the private sector, programme of work for COP 17, gender, synergies, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Regarding the draft decision on **drought**, an informal group drafted text for several days and presented it to the COW contact group on drought in the evening. The second paragraph was parked and termed “sensitive” since it referred to the nature of the policy instrument, which has not been agreed: either to negotiate a “framework” or a “protocol.” The contact group considered and agreed to a small number of paragraphs. The majority of paragraphs, however, generated new amendments, which led to long debates about whether text agreed in other draft decisions can be replicated, or whether drought should be considered a “special decision” for which more ambitious language is required. Discussions continued into the night, at times resulting in heated debates, and while many attempted to find compromise text.

Joint CRIC-CST: The contact group finalized negotiations on the draft decision on improving procedures for the **communication of information**, as well as the quality and format of reports. A delegate reported back on progress in an informal group that discussed establishing and preparing the terms of reference for an *ad hoc* expert group to conduct preparatory work for the development of a post-2030 UNCCD strategic framework and corresponding monitoring framework. The group agreed to forward the draft decision with all related amendments to the joint CRIC-CST plenary.

CST: The CST contact group met in the morning to wrap up informal negotiations on the draft decision on the **work programme for the Science-Policy Interface (SPI)** for the biennium 2025-2026. The text was agreed swiftly following a reminder from the Secretariat that it is standard text used at all previous COPs. Delegates agreed to the text.

The CST then resumed deliberations on the draft decision on **knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and innovation**. One delegate proposed a new paragraph inviting parties to explore the benefits, costs, and procedures of having CST sessions take place in parallel or back-to-back with intersessional meetings of the CRIC. Following strong opposition, the proposed paragraph was deleted. The draft document was then agreed and forwarded to the CST.

Delegates opened discussion on a new draft decision on avoiding, reducing, and reversing land and soil degradation on **agricultural lands**. After first attempting to agree on preambular paragraphs, delegates agreed to “park” several paragraphs since many amendments and several new paragraphs could not find agreement. Views differed on consideration of agricultural land practices that contribute to degradation as well as those that contribute to solutions. Delegates needed more time to consider paragraphs on climate change, agriculture as a driver of degradation, and on the role of farmers and smallholders.

On operative text, delegates made steady progress on several sections, including: improving the health of agricultural lands and soils; integrative water resource management in agriculture; and promoting responsible governance as well as sustainable diverse cropping systems and crops for food security and nutrition. After a short break and finalizing the preamble, delegates were able to agree on operative language on investment in the development of innovative science-based sustainable solutions and partnerships. The agreed draft decision was forwarded to the CST.

CRIC Plenary

During its final meeting, the CRIC Chair, Mirko Knežević (Montenegro), presented, and the CRIC adopted, eight draft decisions.

Montenegro, on behalf of ANNEX V countries, expressed appreciation for the expansion of the Convention’s usual boundaries during COP 16 and the work done by the UNCCD family to enhance the Convention’s visibility. They noted, however, that many challenges remain, including the need to expand the Convention’s mandate beyond arid, semi-arid, and dry, sub-humid areas.

Angola, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, welcomed the results of the session. They highlighted the ongoing efforts of the CRIC to strengthen capacity building to further the implementation of the Convention, but called for the development of a comprehensive strategy.

Ecuador, on behalf of the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), expressed their appreciation for the contributions of the GM to the analysis of financial flows and requested the GM to continue facilitating parties’ access to financial resources. They supported Panama’s offer to host CRIC-23, noting that it reflects their commitment to scientific

and technical cooperation, resource mobilization, and the development of strategic capacity.

Guatemala, supporting GRULAC, emphasized the need for: mitigating against the impacts of drought and strengthening the resilience of communities; financial flows supported by the GM to scale up implementation; partnerships with Indigenous Peoples and local communities; and greater synergies with the Rio Conventions.

CSOs called on the UNCCD to enhance: disaggregated data on DLDD impacts; participatory approaches that include women; community-led and locally-driven projects on land restoration; alignment of the CRIC’s work with global agendas and frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, and the Global Biodiversity Framework; and promoting South-South collaboration in sharing tools.

Adoption of the report of the CRIC: Parties approved the report of CRIC without comment.

Election of officers other than the Chair of the CRIC: The CRIC approved the election of Vice-Chairs, for its twenty-third and twenty-fourth sessions: Charles Lange (Kenya), Xiaoxia Jia (China), and Pablo Hernán Viegas Aurelio (Argentina).

Chair Mirko Knežević gavelled CRIC 22 to a close at 5:27 pm.

In the Corridors

Delegates who consulted the daily schedule on Thursday were quite surprised to find only a three-hour COW contact group scheduled in the morning and a closing CST plenary in the afternoon. So, when the joint CRIC-CST contact group tried to meet at 10:00 am, few delegates were in the room. When delegates finally started trickling into the room, one bleary-eyed delegate was heard complaining that she “cannot even remember the title of the joint decision, never mind describing what it should accomplish.”

It was clear that the contact groups still had work to do. This was especially the case for the COW, which, as of late afternoon, still had very few draft decisions ready to submit to the plenary, and several drafts that had still not even had a first reading. In spite of a stern announcement by the Chair in the morning that delegates would only spend one hour per decision, the parties proceeded to spend nearly nine hours discussing one decision. As one delegate noted, “Unless we pick up the pace, we will have a number of good decisions that will not even be considered.”

Delegates kept checking the monitors to find CRIC and CST plenaries being postponed, first to 4:00 pm, then to 4:30, with the CST plenary postponed entirely. One participant expressed “relief” when the CRIC contact group finished its work in the morning, noting that the “outcomes are good.” But it wasn’t as easy in the CST contact group, which got caught up debating a draft decision submitted by the US on agricultural land. Upon exiting dense and highly technical conversations in the group for a brief rest, one participant called agricultural land the crux of the DLDD problem “that has us on our knees,” but is also the “unifier” between the Rio Conventions.

Meanwhile, the COW continued plodding forward, sometimes spending over an hour on a single paragraph. During a break where parties were told “Please refuel, it’ll be a long night,” one person joked “Perhaps delegates confused the one-hour-per-decision rule, thinking it was instead one hour per paragraph.” Thank goodness for Saudi hospitality!” said delegates in the hallway, munching on snacks ordered in by the COP hosts to energize parties through the long evening hours.

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of UNCCD COP 16 will be available by Tuesday, 17 December 2024 at enb.iisd.org/convention-combat-desertification-unccd-cop16