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UNCCD COP 17 Highlights
Monday, 24 August 2026

The second week of the 17th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 17) saw the opening of the High-Level Segment, which will carry on until Wednesday. Its first day was dedicated to financial mechanisms, which was the topic of a Ministerial Dialogue, held throughout the day. In the afternoon and running into the evening, the contact groups of the Committee of the Whole (COW), the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC), the Committee on the Science and Technology (CST), and Joint CRIC/CST met to continue text-based negotiations.

Special High-Level Segment

Opening: President of Mongolia Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh reminded participants that land degradation is already rampant around the world, adversely affecting the livelihoods, water, and food of over three billion people. He highlighted Mongolia's Steppe Action Agenda linked to three flagship initiatives on rangelands, the land-water nexus, and nature-based solutions for infrastructure.

Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, highlighted that droughts have increased in frequency and severity, and brought attention to the droughts and dzuds that brought devastating loss among Mongolian pastoralists in 2023-24. She underscored the importance of the right to land, especially for women. She urged Parties to focus on three things at COP 17: scaling action; enabling predictable and sustainable finance; and adopting people-centered decision-making approaches.

Yasmine Fouad, UNCCD Executive Secretary, called for addressing desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) as a risk multiplier for migration. She further emphasized the need for countries to support private sector initiatives, unlock private finance, and for financing to support implementation on the ground.

Carlos Andrés Alvarado Quesada, Former President, Costa Rica, emphasized that markets and international finance institutions are not responding at the scale and speed required to address DLDD, and called for the redirection of harmful subsidies. He lauded communities leading the way in responding to challenges and commended their work to restore ecosystems, protect livelihoods, and adapt to changing landscapes.

Tarja Halonen, Former President, Finland, reflected on when world leaders came together to establish the Millennium Development Goals to ensure that no one be left behind, and stated that this promise must begin with the land beneath our feet. She further highlighted the role of women and girls in supporting sustainable land management (SLM).

Noting the cross-border nature of land degradation and desertification, Moon Jae-in, Former President, Republic of Korea, stressed advancing international cooperation. He highlighted the Peace Forest Initiative that elevates peace and security through land restoration and drew attention to the Korea-Mongolia Greenbelt Project that envisages building "trust and hope for a greener future."

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, President, Association of Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad, said the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists must be a turning point for recognizing pastoralists as right holders and solution providers. Noting the global contributions of pastoralists to biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and the economy, she stressed securing their collective land rights, and protecting pastoralist mobility.

Gandelger Togooch, Mongolian pastoralist, said our future "lays strongly with our compassion and love to mother nature." He stressed nature conservation "as our very root of existence," and called for reducing excessive consumerism.

Sandag-Ochir Tsend, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Mongolia, highlighted the importance of nomadic pastoralism for Mongolia and that rangelands are amongst the few remaining temperate grassland ecosystems that have retained their biodiversity. He drew attention to the COP 17 Rangeland Flagship Initiative and urged using the momentum to recognize pastoralists as equal partners, knowledge holders, and leaders in sustainable rangeland management.

Ministerial Dialogue on Innovative Financial Mechanisms for Healthy Land and Drought Resilience: In his opening statement, Togmidyn Dorjkhand, Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia, on behalf of the COP 17 Presidency, highlighted the annual finance gap of USD 278 billion for addressing DLDD and drew attention to the Rangelands Flagship Initiative.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Mohammed called for redirecting agricultural subsidies while developing financing incentives, such as environmental taxes, payments for ecosystem services (PES), sovereign green bonds, and debt instruments. She also noted the need to develop portfolios of sufficient scale, revenue models with multiple benefits, risk-sharing instruments, and local currency financing.

To attract finance, UNCCD Executive Secretary Fouad urged engaging the right stakeholders, monetizing project plans, creating funding pipelines, converting national drought plans into drought investment plans, and integrating land financing among the Rio Conventions.

The ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK announced the launch of the Financing Investments and Eradicating Land Degradation and Desertification Initiative alongside the Qatar Fund for Development and the Middle East Green Initiative to support sustainable agriculture and rangeland management.

The AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK announced they will mobilize USD 500 million over five years to support food system resilience, livelihoods, and ecosystems in eight African countries.

The INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE announced, in partnership with the UN Environment Programme, the launch of a small and medium-sized grants call under the Global Ecosystem-based Adaptation Fund to expand and diversify its reach in least-developed countries' dryland regions.

LUXEMBOURG announced the launch of the Drought Resilience Investment Facility with EUR two million to

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operationalize the implementation of the Global Riyadh Drought Resilience Partnership.

SPAIN announced a EUR 10 million commitment to the International Drought Resilience Alliance, in addition to EUR 10 million to support the ninth replenishment cycle of the Global Environment Facility (GEF-9).

GERMANY announced EUR 11 million in support of the CompensACTION Initiative to expand the initiative's portfolio and support the mobilization of private financing.

The EU announced a commitment of EUR 20 million to the Thrivelands Initiative to support the ecological restoration, food security, and resilience across the world's drylands.

A panel session on climate finance underscored the need to strengthen public investment to unlock private capital. Discussants noted that despite an eight-to-one return on investment for land restoration projects, investments remain low, and stressed prioritizing treating land as a critical capital asset. They called for making restoration bankable, increasing revenue visibility, and providing policy certainty. They furthermore agreed that investing in combating desertification increases production, strengthens climate resilience, and stressed the cost of inaction is three times more than the cost for land restoration.

During ministerial interventions, several countries highlighted national initiatives and requirements for innovative financing mechanisms to combat DLDD.

EGYPT, COTE D'IVOIRE, KYRGYZSTAN, BANGLADESH, and TAJIKISTAN called for green bonds, debt-for-nature swaps, guarantees, insurance systems, and PES, while RUSSIAN FEDERATION, ALGERIA, and CIVIL SOCIETY also urged public-private partnerships. Others, including SUDAN and MADAGASCAR, urged simplified, faster, accessible, predictable, concessional, and transparent funding and investments. PHILIPPINES noted the need for financing mechanisms that respond to national circumstances.

The MALDIVES, SOLOMON ISLANDS, MARSHALL ISLANDS, and SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES noted the unique challenges facing small island developing states (SIDS) and called for financing mechanisms to address them.

KENYA called on multilateral development banks and financial institutions to implement shorter turnaround periods and for innovative business models to attract the private sector.

NIGERIA encouraged the private sector to participate in addressing land degradation and, with UGANDA, IRELAND, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, and the UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, noted that blended finance can unlock private capital to help close the finance gap. TUVALU, ECUADOR, and ZIMBABWE stressed that innovation cannot become the excuse to transfer the responsibilities of states to private actors.

MALI urged transforming national priorities into bankable projects that can mobilize investment at a large scale. SIERRA LEONE, BHUTAN, and others stressed land is not only an environmental concern but also a strategic economic asset.

Among national initiatives, URUGUAY noted the launch of a sovereign bond indexed to climate change indicators, COSTA RICA highlighted the introduction of a PES scheme for coastal and marine resources, and INDONESIA recalled its new regulation on carbon economic value and forest carbon trade. INDIA highlighted their Green Credit Programme, and ZAMBIA a green finance taxonomy for agriculture, forestry, mining, tourism, and water sectors.

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC encouraged strengthening South-South cooperation and capacity-building, while NEPAL and IRAQ called for transfer of appropriate and affordable technologies. TOGO suggested investing in digital technology, including satellite data to secure performance-based financing. GUATEMALA called for a proactive financial architecture that invests in resilience.

KYRGYZSTAN proposed establishing a dedicated financial window for mountain land and river basin resilience. FRANCE highlighted the role agricultural banks play in accessible finance.

CZECHIA and CGIAR noted the need to shift from small and fragmented projects to investable programmes and portfolios. Several civil society organizations called for, among others: pooling of regional funds to avoid scattering of resources; considering Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and pastoralists as economic partners and not mere beneficiaries; and treating land restoration as investment in economic and social security and stability.

Contact Groups

Joint CRIC/CST: Parties continued to exchange views on **improving procedures for communication**. Regarding a preambular paragraph on effective national reporting, Parties had differing views on explicitly referring to whether this is dependent on "adequate financial, technical, institutional, and technological capabilities," or merely "a variety of factors." Discussions also revolved around whether to explicitly request the Secretariat to facilitate collaboration amongst the Earth observation community in cooperation with the Group on Earth Observations Land Degradation Neutrality Flagship Initiative.

COW: The COW contact group on other matters addressed **drought**, resuming discussions on the basis of three text options: the bracketed text from COP 16 that aims to establish an international instrument; one focusing on national efforts; and another which launches a programme that would seek to strengthen the implementation of existing provisions, identify gaps, and their underlying causes. Despite lengthy debates and extended informal negotiations, delegates did not reach agreement, with discussions set to continue on a bilateral basis between the Presidency and the Parties.

CRIC: In the first reading of the draft decision on **Collaboration with the GEF**, delegates exchanged views on, *inter alia*, whether to include references to the Sustainable Development Goals in a preambular paragraph, and, in an operative paragraph, whether to note the reduction in funding allocated to the Land Degradation Focal Area under the GEF-9 replenishment cycle. Delegates also debated whether to request the GEF to improve the granularity of its tracking and reporting of resources, including by separately identifying allocation and utilization of resources addressing DLDD.

CST: Parties continued to deliberate on the **future functioning of the Science-Policy Interface**, reaching agreement on the three tables summarizing the proposed procedures to be annexed to the decision, which now include clarification on the purpose and process for preparing flagship reports and fast-track assessments, and specifying the approval process of the Summaries for Policymakers. Countries continued into the evening with further amendments to the draft decision.

In the Corridors

It's never a good sign when a contact group is scheduled to run until 3:00 am. Yet that's the schedule that greeted participants Monday morning for the COW contact group on other matters. It seems that while the weekend negotiations yielded results on some agenda items, the decision on drought remains a challenge. This became apparent on Monday, with some observing the nearly "antagonistic" positions of Parties, and one delegate, when highlighting the risk that they may again leave a COP without a meaningful outcome on drought, said "We are far better than that."

However, hopeful signs of progress could be seen in other contact groups, like the CST, where Parties reached compromises on a decision pertaining to the work programme of the CST and SPI, which has implications for other decisions. "Once this decision is agreed, the others should be easier," noted a delegate. As one observer quipped, "This COP is about restoring land, hope… and patience," and indeed, the latter is a virtue as the final week of COP 17 ushers in late nights and, hopefully, eventual compromises.