

UNCCD COP 17 Highlights Thursday, 27 August 2026

On the penultimate day of the 17th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 17), Parties went straight into morning negotiations in the contact groups of the joint session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), and the Committee of the Whole (COW), desperately trying to finish discussions on a still long list of unfinished agenda items. While Parties made good progress on certain agenda items, discussions continued after lunch and into the evening in all contact groups, with the tentatively scheduled CRIC and CST Plenaries ultimately not taking place.

Contact Groups

Throughout the day, particular challenges persisted across all contact groups on so-called “cross-cutting issues”, including on whether to “recall” or “note” past decisions, whether and how to reference synergies among the Rio Conventions and other international initiatives, and the inclusion of gender-related concerns.

Joint CRIC-CST: Parties largely agreed to the decision on **improving procedures for the communication of information**, barring some cross-cutting issues. Delegates debated whether a preambular paragraph should recognize that effective national reporting is dependent upon “adequate financial, technical, institutional, and technological capacities” or “a variety of factors.” Some Parties indicated that “variety of factors” is too vague, to which another Party suggested including a reference noting Article 26 of the Convention (communication of information), rather than having an incomplete list of factors. Discussions also revolved around whether the paragraph should explicitly acknowledge these capacity challenges in the context of developing and least developed countries. After extensive discussions, Parties agreed to a compromise text “recognizing that effective national reporting is dependent on a variety of factors, noting Article 26 of the Convention, and that reporting requirements remain responsive to national circumstances.”

The group also largely agreed on a paragraph to support Parties in strengthening national capacity to generate, manage, analyze, interpret, and use national and Earth observation data for monitoring and reporting through technical cooperation. Disagreements remain on whether this should include technology transfer and on what modalities.

COW: In the morning, Parties began and finished their second reading on **rangelands and pastoralists**, making

good progress. On a paragraph recognizing the critical role of pastoralists as stewards of rangeland ecosystems, Parties eventually agreed to mention the importance of transboundary mobility. In a preambular paragraph on welcoming national measures, Parties agreed not to reference the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) Targets. In the same paragraph, Parties also exchanged views on whether to enhance climate resilience, as well as adaptation and mitigation. In the end, “adaptation and mitigation” was removed. On building the evidence base to address knowledge and data gaps, countries disagreed on whether to take into account “traditional” or “local” knowledge, in the end agreeing with “the knowledge accumulated by pastoralists.”

Brackets remained on a paragraph inviting Parties to improve tenure security in rangelands in line with the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT), following one Party requesting its deletion. One party also requested deleting mention of “Indigenous Peoples” and “local communities” in a paragraph on raising awareness and demonstrating the importance of pastoralists and other stakeholders’ practices for combatting desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD).

The Presidency then provided an update that agreement had been reached on **drought** following intense consultations with relevant Parties. Under the draft decision, Parties would agree to continue discussions at COP 18 based on the progress from COP 16 and COP 17 (to be forwarded as Annexes to the decision), with the view to then adopt a decision on the proactive management of drought at all levels. It would also, *inter alia*, request the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) to continue supporting Parties in the implementation of the Convention as it relates to drought during the intersessional period. The Parties agreed to forward the decision to the COW plenary.

Parties then turned their attention to the decision on **sand and dust storms** (SDS). On a paragraph noting SDS are a global challenge, and identifying factors that exacerbate them, one delegation proposed, with many disagreeing, referring to the climate change factor as climate “variability” or “shocks.” Parties eventually decided to omit all the factors. The group agreed on most remaining paragraphs, with only cross-cutting issues remaining.

Delegates then opened the draft decision on the **programme of work for COP 18** for a first reading. One delegation suggested adding an agenda item on the efficiency and effectiveness of procedures and processes of the COP and the Subsidiary Bodies, noting it has proposed a similar agenda item under the CRIC.

One group of Parties expressed their reservation pending regional

consultations and an explanation from the legal advisor regarding its addition under both agendas.

Under policy frameworks and thematic issues, one delegation, supported by some and opposed by others, proposed to add a sub-item on sustainable bioeconomy. Following the agreement on the way forward on drought, a separate agenda item on drought was added. While disagreements remained over which stakeholders to hold interactive dialogue sessions with, Parties agreed to convene all four caucuses, while observing geographical representation.

Delegates also agreed to request the Secretariat for continued implementation of all COP decisions related to the agenda items specified on the work programme, which includes agenda items blocked during this COP.

The group then turned to **land tenure**. In an operative paragraph encouraging Parties to continue integrating land tenure considerations into their plans to combat DLDD, one country disagreed with giving special consideration to women and girls, and other vulnerable groups. Similarly, in a paragraph encouraging Parties to support inclusive and participatory dialogues on land tenure with the aim of improving the livelihoods of people in vulnerable situations, the same country disagreed on specifying these to include Indigenous Peoples, local communities, people of African descent, women, youth, and people with disabilities, opting to refer to “all people.”

Following lengthy discussions, it was instead agreed to add the list of vulnerable groups at the end of a preambular paragraph that notes that strengthening tenure security contributes to enhancing resilience among populations affected by DLDD.

CRIC: Parties spent the afternoon and much of the evening exchanging views on **capacity-building**. Delegates worked to streamline the draft by attempting to remove paragraphs or integrate proposals from across the decision text into other paragraphs. Extensive discussions ensued on an operative paragraph requesting the Secretariat and GM to assess lessons learned from the regional support architecture established for the 2026 reporting process and to explore options for defining the possible future, role, scope, and modalities of regional hubs and centers of excellence. Some Parties expressed concerns regarding the budgetary implications of, among others, the consultation process needed to assess expanding these hubs and centers. A group of Parties noted that the availability of finances and resources will always be a concern, but stressed it is important to undertake a consultation process to ascertain if and how Parties wish to expand these roles, scope, and modalities.

On another operative paragraph encouraging Parties to make full use, among others, of digital tools developed under the Convention, some Parties requested an inclusion noting that use of such tools “is not mandatory,” and to ensure “that a contracting Party or observer does not present information relating to another contracting Party.”

Parties continued to exchange views on cross-cutting issues across the preambular and operative paragraphs. In an operative paragraph inviting the Earth observation communities to continue strengthening capacity-building amongst Parties for the implementation of the Convention, one Party called for the deletion of references to gender responsiveness, youth inclusivity, and specific initiatives, including the Earth Observations LDN Flagship Initiative. They also requested the deletion of references to synergies across the Rio Conventions.

CST: Parties completed the first reading of the draft decision on **agricultural lands**, moving immediately to its second reading.

Lengthy discussions concerned, among others, streamlining terminology throughout the draft text. In a preambular paragraph on the role of agricultural lands and soils in achieving LDN, delegates debated over the exact formulation in reference to agricultural and food systems. One party stated that “food systems” alone is not sufficient as it does not cover other agricultural sectors, such as animal feed and fiber production and proposed “agricultural production systems” as a more neutral term, to which many agreed. The discussion was picked up again in the operative paragraph regarding forward-looking analysis to inform country responses to degradation. The same Party added that “food systems” at large also include distribution and storage, which have no direct connection with land, and as such, go beyond the core mandate of the Convention.

In the operative paragraph on land management practices, Parties deliberated on whether or not to identify individual sustainable practices to combat land degradation. Diverging Party positions included: replacing nature-based solutions with sustainable land management (SLM) as an umbrella term; deleting the list of individual practices because it would not be comprehensive vis-à-vis the UNCCD repository of SLM practices; SLM not being included in the original decision text; and removing reference to SLM and leaving only “evidence-based approaches.”

Parties also debated extensively over the term “health” in the context of agricultural lands and soils. One Party maintained “health” is too vague and abstract. Another counterargued that “healthy rangelands” has been agreed upon in another contact group. They also noted “soil health” is established language, referring to the upcoming UN Decade on Soil Health. Discussions continued into the night.

In the Corridors

“We’ve been talking about this for years... I mean days,” remarked one exasperated delegate as Parties continued to spin their wheels trying to overcome red lines on cross-cutting issues, including “recalling” or “noting” previous decisions, the modalities of technology transfer, as well as references to sticking point verbiage like gender and synergies with other multilateral Conventions.

However, progress could be seen in some decisions, albeit not to the extent some would have preferred. Just before lunch, the Presidency announced — after late night negotiations lasted until 4:00 am — that a decision had been reached on drought. “This is not what we expected, but it guarantees that the discussions remain alive,” responded one delegate when Parties agreed to forward the progress to date to the next COP, calling on Parties to “see the urgency and stop postponing.”

Discussions barely broke for lunch as negotiations trudged on, with the hopeful tentative scheduling of CRIC and CST plenaries in the afternoon appearing further and further away, and ultimately not happening at all. As the day grew long, the Secretariat urged Parties to hasten the pace of negotiations by finding compromises.

“There is hope yet that the gavel will not come down at an unsightly hour tomorrow night,” said one delegate wishfully as they waited in line for a late supper at the food court, which began operating around-the-clock as negotiators buckled in for a late night, or early morning.