

UNCCD CRIC 5 HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 12 MARCH 2007

Delegates met on Monday, 12 March in Buenos Aires, Argentina for the opening ceremony of the fifth session of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 5) and heard presentations by the host country, the Executive Secretary of the UNCCD and the Chairman of the CRIC on the importance of this session for the global fight against desertification. Delegates then met in regional groups and presented the results of their deliberations to plenary. Following regional reports, delegates heard panel presentations and discussed participatory processes involving civil society, NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs).

OPENING SESSION

UNCCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo welcomed delegates to CRIC 5 and thanked the Argentine Government for hosting the meeting. He reported that since the seventh Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (COP-7), the Secretariat's activities to widen global support of the Convention have included the advancement of national action programme (NAP) processes and national reporting processes, and the successful celebration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD). He urged participants to work towards ensuring that COP-8 can promote effective and timely implementation of the Convention and said CRIC 5 will move the UNCCD from assessment to action.

Romina Piccolotti, Argentina's Secretary of Environment and Sustainable Development, emphasized the human dimension and the suffering of people affected by desertification. She noted the role of international organizations and finance institutions, including the Clean Development Mechanism of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in forging strategic partnerships to support countries' efforts in the fight against desertification.

Daniel Scioli, Vice-President of Argentina, welcomed participants and highlighted the link between the fight against desertification and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life.

Franklin Moore, Chair of CRIC 5, opened the session, noting that CRIC 5 brings to completion the third review of reports from affected country parties and saying that COP-8 can draw important lessons from this period. Chair Moore emphasized

that as the UNFCCC devotes more attention to adaptation and vulnerability, opportunities to develop synergies with the UNCCD will arise.

Executive Secretary Diallo explained that this session will review measures taken, experience gained and results achieved by country parties of regions other than Africa in the Convention's implementation. He urged parties to foster fruitful interactions at this session in order to identify ways and means for enhanced and effective UNCCD implementation.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: Chair Moore introduced the agenda and organization of work (ICCD/CRIC(5)/1) and the Committee adopted the provisional agenda with a minor correction, and the organization of work, adding a briefing by the Chair of the Intersessional Intergovernmental Working Group (IIWG) on the draft "Ten-Year Strategic Plan and Framework to Enhance Implementation of the UNCCD (2008-2018)".

STATEMENTS BY REGIONAL AND OTHER

INTEREST GROUPS: Following meetings by regional groups, plenary reconvened in the afternoon.

Pakistan, for G-77/CHINA, noted that desertification and land degradation continue to threaten sustainable development, including through overgrazing, deforestation and human demographic expansion, combined with the effects of climate change. He highlighted barriers to the Convention's implementation, including institutional weaknesses and the lack of financial and human resources. He called for: a strengthened Secretariat to improve interaction with other international actors and funding facilities; strengthening the GEF land degradation focal area; and more donor funding for it. On the draft ten-year strategic plan, he highlighted the need to mobilize adequate, timely and predictable financial resources, and urged developed countries to increase technology transfer and technical assistance to facilitate better UNCCD implementation. He added that further investment towards addressing desertification would also help developing countries adapt to the effects of climate change.

Germany, for the European Union (EU), stated that the IIWG will make substantial input on the future mandate and format of the CRIC, which will be decided at COP-8. He questioned whether the seven thematic topics used by the CRIC to evaluate and report on UNCCD implementation should continue to guide its future work. He emphasized, *inter alia*: the need for targets and timeframes; the promotion of more structured civil society involvement; and greater priority for regional coordination meetings.

Syria, for the ASIA GROUP, emphasized the importance of the ten-year strategic plan for better UNCCD implementation, stating that the Asia Group looks forward to reviewing the

preliminary results of the IIWG. He reported on the results of the regional consultation meeting in Asia and the Pacific held last year, which facilitated the national reporting process. He also requested continued financial support for national reporting, stressing that the CRIC is a forum both for exchanging experiences and facilitating UNCCD implementation.

Ecuador, for the LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), pointed out that, notwithstanding insufficient funding for the Convention's implementation, important steps have been taken at the global level to address desertification. He highlighted some key activities in the region, including: the Gran Chaco Americano Subregional Action Programme; the Puna Americana Subregional Action Programme; and the Subregional Action Programme for Hispaniola. He concluded that most actions under NAPs and subregional and regional plans require further international financial support by developed parties and other financial institutions.

Canada, for JUSSCANNZ, emphasized that IYDD events have been instrumental in raising awareness of desertification and land degradation as a serious development issue. While recognizing the extent of land degradation issues in African drylands, he noted that it is a global problem, and urged delegates to share lessons learned and find solutions to common challenges.

Uganda, for the AFRICA GROUP, underscored the need to maintain a focus on addressing the main barriers to UNCCD implementation such as the lack of adequate resources and institutional capacity at local and national levels. He expressed his region's willingness to learn from other regional approaches, in particular the measures being put in place to: address challenges of decentralization; involve civil society and the private sector; and empower local people threatened with loss of livelihoods. He also called for: identifying opportunities for South-South cooperation; looking for synergies with the UNFCCC and CBD; and enabling GEF to provide sufficient resources to support action programmes, particularly in African country and least-developed country parties.

ASPAN, for the International Network of NGOs on Desertification, lamented that the structural, institutional and procedural mechanisms of the Convention are not as effective as they could be in facilitating participation. She urged national and regional focal points to give thought to more effective participation, noting that NGOs will propose mechanisms that promote formal contact between governments and civil society at COP-8.

PANEL 1: PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

The Secretariat introduced and facilitated the first thematic panel on item 3 of the agenda (review of the implementation of the Convention and of its institutional arrangements) on participatory processes involving civil society, NGOs and CBOs.

The Secretariat gave a presentation on behalf of Bhutan that stressed the importance of participatory processes in NAP preparation, and explained that Bhutan has established a multi-sectoral taskforce to prepare guidelines for thematic papers on land issues to guide its work. The presentation outlined lessons learned including the need for consensus on identification of root causes of land degradation and the need for a good enabling environment. He highlighted challenges including traditional values and beliefs in subsistence farming systems, and the widely varied needs of stakeholders.

Ernesto Reyna, Vice Minister for Environment, Dominican Republic, presented on the NAP development process in his country, including organizing consultations, dialogues and workshops at national and local levels. He noted that international organizations such as GEF, UNEP, UNESCO and bilateral development agencies provided support and said that

the NAP is integrated into national development and poverty reduction plans. He stressed the need for: disseminating more information to grass-root levels; attaining more resources; achieving more transparency and a high level of political commitment; and harmonizing policies.

Ana Almeida (Portugal) presented on the democratic process for the establishment of Portugal's NAP, explaining the different actors that take part in the Portuguese policy process, their objectives, results and degrees of success. Regarding participation by NGOs and CBOs, she noted that few organizations are working on desertification. She highlighted the contribution of participatory processes to the identification of priorities and the dissemination of results to the community.

Viorel Bludjea (Romania) presented a systematic approach for strengthening the involvement of the scientific and technical community in sustainable land management and combating land degradation. The approach includes a national land resource monitoring programme, targeted research to assist policymaking and technical guidelines and kits for sustainable land management. She recommended that countries strengthen and link existing research resources and stimulate research with innovative financing.

Juan Luis Merega (Argentina) stressed that active civil society participation is enabled by a sufficient level of democratization, strong political will to ensure participation over time and adequate institutional support. He cited reasons for successful civil society engagement in Argentina's NAP, including: development of necessary institutional space to ensure cooperation and consensus between government and civil society; adequate commitment of technical and human resources; and creation of a national assessment convention.

Discussion: During ensuing discussions, participants stressed that reports and presentations to CRIC 5 suggest that participation remains low, and recommended that COP-8 review and consider ways to strengthen the participatory process. One country suggested that theoretical concepts of participation do not match on-ground realities in Africa, citing lack of facilities, awareness and education, as well as low purchasing power, as major barriers to participation in Africa's rural areas. Others proposed strengthening the role of special groups such as women and youth, noting that participation includes giving people the power to make decisions and understand their responsibilities, and added that limited participation can be addressed by linking NAPs to national development strategies. One participant highlighted that continuity in policy-making is necessary to overcome stakeholder mistrust and to strengthen subsequent participation, and another stressed the importance of participation of enterprises and scientists. NGO groups advocated full participation and noted that although it is expensive, participation is a key to effective implementation of the Convention.

IN THE CORRIDORS

As delegates reunited with colleagues from their regions on the first day, some worried faces revealed concern for the future of the UNCCD in light of the dwindling financial resources assigned for its implementation. During regional meetings held throughout the day, many participants discussed and shared experiences on their respective successes and failures in mobilizing financial resources from international financial institutions such as the GEF and regional development banks, with some revisiting the long-running debate over the need for a specific fund for the UNCCD.

Looking further down the spacious "La Rural" corridors towards the Convention's future, several participants predicted that the newly-released draft ten-year strategic plan for the Convention would dominate informal discussions during the days to come.