

2nd Extraordinary Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification: 6-9 December 2021

The second extraordinary session of the Conference of the Parties (COP ES-2) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) convened under a silence procedure to adopt an interim budget for the UNCCD in 2022. This followed the postponement COP 15, originally scheduled to take place in 2021, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

With no written comments received within the 72-hour silence procedure stipulated by UNCCD rules, the budget was formally adopted following a communication from the COP President at 1:30 pm CET (UTC+1) on Thursday, 9 December 2021. The interim programme and budget will allow the Convention and its Secretariat to continue operating in 2022.

COP 15 is expected to take place in Côte d'Ivoire in May 2022.

A Brief History of the UNCCD

The UNCCD is one of the three Rio Conventions—along with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)—and was called for in Agenda 21, the programme of action adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or Earth Summit).

The intergovernmental negotiating committee for the elaboration of a convention to combat desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, convened five times between May 1993 and June 1994. The draft UNCCD text, as well as four regional implementation annexes for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Northern Mediterranean, was adopted on 17 June 1994. The Convention entered into force on 26 December 1996, and currently has 197 parties. A fifth regional implementation annex, for Central and Eastern Europe, entered into force in 2001.

Key Turning Points

The COP convened for the first time in Rome, Italy, in 1997, in parallel with the first meeting of the Convention's Committee on Science and Technology (CST). Delegates selected Bonn, Germany, as the location for the UNCCD's Secretariat and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) as the organization to

administer the Global Mechanism (GM). Established under Article 21 of the UNCCD, the GM assists countries in the mobilization of financial resources to implement the Convention and address desertification, land degradation and drought.

At the **5th meeting of the COP** in 2001 in Geneva, Switzerland, the UNCCD established the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). **COP 6**, held in Havana, Cuba, in 2003, designated the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as a financial mechanism of the UNCCD.

Parties adopted the first ten-year UNCCD strategic plan at **COP 8** in Madrid, Spain, in 2007. Despite protracted negotiations, the session failed to adopt a decision on the budget, leading to the first-ever UNCCD extraordinary session in November 2007 in New York. At **COP 10**, which convened in 2011, in Changwon City, Republic of Korea, delegates agreed to restructure the UNCCD Global Mechanism by transferring accountability and legal representation of the Mechanism from Rome-based IFAD, to the UNCCD Secretariat in Bonn.

Aligning the Convention to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: UNCCD **COP 11** took place in 2013 in Windhoek, Namibia. Discussions centered on the Convention's role in achieving land degradation neutrality in the context of sustainable development, as agreed at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, or Rio+20). The session established a UNCCD science-policy interface (SPI), as well as an *ad hoc* working group to provide guidance on how to refine impact indicators for monitoring the Convention's implementation.

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At **COP 12** in Ankara, Turkey, soon after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, discussions focused on how to align existing programmes to the aspiration for land degradation neutrality (LDN), and other relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets. Parties agreed to strive to achieve a single, unified objective, with a focus on how to establish and monitor national-level voluntary LDN targets.

Held in Ordos, China, in 2017, **COP 13** adopted a new, SDG-aligned UNCCD Strategic Framework (2008-2018), as well as a set of thematic policy frameworks to guide programmes on gender, drought, sand and dust storms, and migration. The COP also launched the LDN Fund—co-managed by the UNCCD's Global Mechanism and investment management firm Mirova—to spearhead large-scale land restoration projects. Other key outputs focused on entry points for linking the new UNCCD Strategic Framework (2018-2030) to the 2030 Agenda.

COP 14 took place in New Delhi, India, in 2019. Substantive negotiations focused on proposed work programmes on new thematic areas agreed at COP 13. Due to a lack of consensus on how to implement the drought policy framework, delegates agreed, subject to the availability of resources, to establish an intergovernmental working group to explore effective policy and implementation measures. The COP also agreed to include land tenure as a new thematic area under the Convention. With the forthcoming launch of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), discussions at the High-level Segment further explored how to build momentum towards a global movement on land restoration.

Report of the Meeting

In an opening statement (ICCD/COP(ES-2)/L.1) sent to parties on Monday, 6 December, COP President Bhupender Yadav, Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, India, declared COP ES-2 open at 12:30 pm CET. The provisional annotated agenda (ICCD/COP(ES-2)/1), communicated earlier by the Executive Secretary, was also considered formally adopted.

In line with the prevailing extraordinary circumstances, participation at the virtual session was on the basis of a letter issued by the respective National Focal Point, or a list of intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations recommended for accreditation (ICCD/COP(ES-2)/3).

In addition to agreeing to postpone the next COP, the April 2021 meeting of the COP Bureau (2/COP.1, OP.4) set out an intersessional process to comply with the UNCCD's financial rules that stipulates "the [COP] shall, prior to the commencement of the financial period that the budget covers, consider the budget estimates and adopt by consensus a core budget authorizing expenditure..."

The process set out by the Bureau included, among other steps:

- official notification to all parties, on behalf of the COP 14 President, seeking their approval to hold an extraordinary session for the adoption of an interim programme budget, with a deadline of 30 September 2021 for at least one third of parties to support it;
- a second notification confirming the convening of the session and encompassing further information on the session, including

on the envisaged procedure to participate in the informal group on the budget;

- distributing official pre-session documentation for the COP(ES-2), including a provisional annotated agenda and the main document for the session addressing the interim programme budget for 2022, in all UN languages, at least six weeks before the opening of the session;
- convening the informal group on budget through a virtual meeting from 15 October to 15 November 2021, with participation open to all delegations;
- submitting the draft decision on the interim programme budget prepared by the informal contact group to the President of the COP; and
- an email notification from the COP President on 6 December 2021 at 12:30 pm CET to all registered parties and observers, including a written statement and draft decision text for consideration, commencing the silence procedure until 12:30 pm CET on 9 December 2021.

Interim Budget for 2022

As stated in the COP President's communication, the 72-hour session subsequently opened to consider the draft decision text (ICCD/COP(ES-2)/L.2) developed by an informal budget group that met virtually. According to the decision text, the objective of the interim budget is "to make exceptional arrangements" to allow for the continued functioning of the processes of the Convention, including its Secretariat, the Global Mechanism, and the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies. The decision further states that should the silence remain unbroken, an outline of the draft report, together with the COP President's communication, would be conveyed to delegates at 1:30 pm CET on Thursday, 9 December 2021.

Silence remained unbroken and the budget was adopted.

Final Decision: The interim programme and budget for 2022 approved by COP ES-2 (ICCD/COP(ES-2)/L.2), *inter alia*:

- takes note of the proposal of the COP Bureau that, on an exceptional basis and without setting a precedent, parties consider and approve an interim programme and budget for 2022 through agreed modalities;
- approves, on an exceptional basis, an interim programme budget for 2022 amounting to EUR 8,215,452;
- expresses appreciation to the German government for its annual voluntary contribution to the core budget of EUR 511,292 and its special contribution of EUR 511,292 (Bonn Fund) as host government to the Secretariat;
- approves the staffing table for the interim programme budget;
- decides to maintain the level of the working capital reserve at 12% of the estimated annual expenditure in the Trust Fund for the Core Budget of the UNCCD;
- authorizes the UNCCD Executive Secretary, on an exceptional basis, to draw upon the available unspent balances in an amount up to EUR 121,411, provided that the use of the balance does not reduce the working capital reserve, and that any such utilization be distributed to programmes and the Global Mechanism, proportionate to the approved budget;

- adopts the indicative scale of contributions for 2022 contained in an annex to the decision;
- requests COP 15 to consider applying an updated scale of assessments for the 2022-2024 triennium, in line with expected revisions by the UN General Assembly in December 2021;
- invites the UN General Assembly to include sessions of the UNCCD COP and its subsidiary bodies in the calendar of conferences and meetings envisaged for 2022;
- approves a contingency budget of EUR 1,578,495 for conference servicing, to be added to the programme budget for 2022 in the event that the UN General Assembly decides not to provide resources for these activities in its regular budget;
- requests the Executive Secretary to present a status report on the UNCCD's income, expenditure, and budget performance for 2020-2021, using a results-based approach; and
- requests the Executive Secretary to prepare a results-based budget and work programme for the biennium 2022-2023, presenting two budget scenarios and a work programme based on the projected needs for the biennium in (a) a zero nominal growth scenario; and (b) a scenario based on further recommended adjustments to the first scenario and the added costs or savings related to them.

A Brief Analysis of ES-2

For only the second time in its history, extraordinary circumstances precipitated a special session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) on budgetary matters. While the first extraordinary session (ES) in 2007 was necessitated by particularly contentious budget negotiations at COP 8, ES-2 was the unavoidable consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Does the relatively smooth process offer hope for COP 15 negotiations, currently scheduled for 2022? Will excitement at being let out of “virtual jail” lead to increased goodwill, or will delegates be itching to exercise negotiation muscles left unused for so long? According to a Bureau insider, the inclusive informal contact group process over the past few months—with any interested party free to join—did help to ensure that all concerns were taken on board. He further noted efforts to avoid any surprises in the draft decision text by ensuring was in line with agreed language for transitioning the UNCCD through the COVID-19 crisis: a topic that has been on the Bureau's agenda since 2020.

Similarly, looking at the outcome of the first-ever virtual CRIC session in March 2021 offers few clues. In keeping with the format, the agenda was short and focused on an exchange of experiences, without touching on contentious issues. It is therefore necessary to look further back to COP 13 and 14. While COP 13 adopted four policy frameworks to guide the Convention's future work on gender, drought, sand and dust storms, and migration, and COP 14 completed hard-fought decisions on land tenure and a UNCCD Drought Initiative, the true indicator of success is if countries will place their money where their mouths are by agreeing on substantial work programmes on these and other core implementation areas.

How the UNCCD picks up the pieces of its stalled substantive agenda may therefore be one of the key tests facing the COP 15 Presidency. Another test will be determining the impact of

COVID-19 on implementation of the Convention. For now, the jury is still out on whether the COVID-19 shock will translate into a more urgent and consensual approach to Convention implementation.

Upcoming Meetings

Fifth UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDCs):

This conference will undertake a comprehensive review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the LDCs for the decade 2011-2020. **dates:** 23-27 January 2022 **location:** Doha, Qatar **www:** un.org/ldc5/

Resumed Fifth Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA 5.2): UNEA 5.2 will take place under the theme “Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the SDGs.” Its aim will be to connect and consolidate environmental actions within the context of sustainable development and motivate the sharing and implementation of successful approaches. At this Conference, UNEA will also discuss whether to establish an intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) towards a new agreement on marine litter and plastic pollution. The in-person session of UNEA-5 will be followed by a Special Session of UNEA, on 3-4 March 2022, to commemorate UNEP's 50th anniversary. **dates:** 28 February - 4 March 2022 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** unep.org/environmentassembly/unea5

The XV World Forestry Congress: Under the theme, “Building a Green, Healthy and Resilient Future with Forests,” the Congress will follow up on outcomes of major global events including the respective Rio Conventions' COPs, the IUCN World Conservation Congress, and the UN Food Systems Summit. **dates:** 2-6 May 2022 **location:** Seoul, Republic of Korea **www:** wfc2021korea.org

Second Part of the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15): The second part of CBD COP 15, the 10th meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, and the fourth meeting of the COP serving as the MOP to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing are scheduled to reconvene in a face-to-face meeting in Kunming, China. Among a range of policy, implementation, administrative and financial items, COP 15 is expected to adopt a post-2020 global biodiversity framework. **dates:** TBC **location:** Kunming, China **www:** cbd.int/meetings

UNCCD COP 15: COP 15 was originally expected to take place in the final quarter of 2021. Due to the global pandemic, the Bureau decided to reschedule it to take place between May and October 2022. By letter dated 14 June 2021, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire confirmed its willingness to host COP 15 during the second and third weeks of May 2022. **dates:** 9-21 May 2022 (TBC) **location:** Côte d'Ivoire **www:** www.unccd.int/

For additional upcoming events, see sdg.iisd.org/