

## UNCCD COP 15 Highlights: Monday, 9 May 2022

The fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) opened on Monday, 9 May, at the Sofitel Hotel in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. The opening ceremony of the two-day High-Level Segment of COP 15 took place in the morning. Following addresses by UN leaders, Indigenous Peoples and Youth, the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara delivered opening remarks. The official opening was followed by a Presidential Dialogue during which Heads of State, governments and delegations gave statements. After a segment where high-level country representatives pledged contributions towards the Abidjan Initiative, governments adopted the Abidjan Call. In the afternoon, Côte d'Ivoire's First Lady chaired the first Gender Caucus. The Youth Forum also met throughout the day.

### Opening Ceremony

Following a ceremonial greeting from the people of Côte d'Ivoire, Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, provided welcoming remarks, lauding the hospitality of Côte d'Ivoire and its social and political achievements. He highlighted the economic risks from continued loss of fertile land and vulnerability of small producers, women and youth to environmental degradation, as well as their important role for solutions. Saying that the health of the economy depends on healthy soils, he stressed that investment in land restoration is an ecological necessity that makes economic sense.

Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, spokesperson for Indigenous Peoples, stressed that in the 30 years since UNCCD was conceived, temperatures, desertification and land degradation in Africa have continued to rise. Acknowledging how indigenous peoples have used their traditional knowledge to combat these effects, while nourishing and supporting the land and their communities, she called for a move from talk to actual support, saying "we cannot do this alone."

Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General, called for accelerated investment in solutions that exist today. Pointing to the escalating climate crisis, rising food prices, and the detrimental impact of fossil fuel use, she highlighted the need to transform food systems, the important role of women and girls in sustainable land management, the significance of initiatives such as the Great Green Wall for Africa, and the importance of empowering Youth and Indigenous Peoples.

Patricia Kombo, YOUTH, reminded that countries are gathered in Abidjan because they believe in the importance of land as that is where they will find prosperity. Noting "now is the best moment,"

since the world needs land restoration more than ever, she said "we will never be forgiven by the next generations if we fail to reverse the current trend."

Abdulla Shahid, President of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, emphasized the crucial role of land restoration in fighting climate change, saying parties must build on momentum from the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and initiatives to restore degraded lands to develop effective drought policies to address water scarcity.

Following a song by Senegalese singer Baaba Maal, Alassane Ouattara, President of Côte d'Ivoire, thanked the UNCCD and Ibrahim Thiaw for the work done, stressing its importance for the African continent. Pointing out the negative impacts of climate change, land degradation, drought and desertification for his country, Africa and the world, he highlighted how the war in Ukraine and the pandemic have fueled vulnerability and energy and food crises. He recalled the need for decisive climate action and for delivering on climate finance commitments. Calling for a "summit of hope," he stressed the need for a broad mobilization of new partners and finance, saying that each dollar invested in land restoration can generate USD 7-30 in return.

**Official Declarations by Heads of State, Heads of Government and Heads of Delegations:** Discussions during this segment focused on: policy responses to safeguard human security from the multi-faceted consequences of drought and land degradation; private sector partnerships to restore degraded land; and mobilization of resources needed for a land restoration industry.

Several speakers began by extending condolences to host country Côte d'Ivoire for the passing of its National Assembly President Amadou Soumahoro.

African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat lamented unfulfilled pledges and promises to address land degradation and climate change. Noting every moment lost means deadly consequences for food and livestock, he called for action in a "race against time".

President Ismail Omar Guelleh, Djibouti, spoke of the nomad populations and their animals being decimated due to increasing recurrent droughts, shared solutions like drip-feed irrigation, and called for systemic approaches involving all stakeholders to develop integrated green technologies.

Namibian President Hage Geingob shared Namibia's experiences scaling up early-warning systems, providing seeds and fertilizers to vulnerable communities, and championing land restoration as a pathway to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He emphasized involving women and youth, and invited replicating the Great Green Wall in other regions.

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari appealed for USD 19 billion in financial and technical pledges to enable the Great Green Wall members to fulfill their commitments.

Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo shared programmes to create two million green jobs, strengthen land access and tenure rights, and enhance early-warning systems as part of the 3S Initiative: Sustainability, Stability and Security.

Liberian President George Weah urged for the establishment of an African carbon trading mechanism so Africa can benefit from its forest resources equitably, commensurate with its positive contribution to fighting climate change.

Democratic Republic of the Congo President Felix Tshisekedi sought needed technology and financing for rainwater collection to enable water-stressed countries to serve as oases of peace rather than conflict.

President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, Mauritania, reflected on the impacts of land degradation, specifically for women and children, and encouraged participants to “take fate in our hands” and mobilize financial resources and implement multi-country projects such as with the Great Green Wall.

President Mohamed Bazoum, Niger, underscored the importance of sustainable management of arable lands, sharing efforts to evaluate national ecosystems and encourage sustainable value chains and rural enterprises.

Emmanuel Macron, President of France, expressed hope to reverse global crises, calling for greater synergy of the Rio Conventions to be incorporated in all public policies and welcomed increased engagement with the private sector.

Wang Yi, Foreign Minister, China, reflected that his country has achieved land degradation neutrality (LDN), and called for increased efforts to strengthen international cooperation, support green development and coordinate among the Rio Conventions.

Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon lamented that global GHG emissions are rising even though “we all know we are recklessly heading for a cliff,” urging collaboration across sectors, generations and governments.

Prime Minister Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda, Gabon, shared a statement from President Ali Bongo Ondimba, drawing attention to the Congo Basin as the “heart and lungs” of Africa, and outlined efforts to adopt policies to optimize sustainable land and forest management.

ALGERIA described efforts to integrate sustainable land management in policies and underlined the need to foster cooperation among developing and developed countries.

SAUDIA ARABIA welcomed the theme of COP15, and expressed optimism that restored lands can bring about prosperity, and shared national initiatives to enhance biodiversity and engage the private sector.

ANGOLA expressed hope that the UNCCD proceedings be fulfilled with urgency for adequate measures to establish legally binding instruments, created with the engagement of civil society.

EGYPT spoke on collaboration and complimentary plans of action to forge partnerships required to address global challenges, and engage the private sector.

**Presentation of the Abidjan Initiative and Adoption of the Abidjan Call:** Prime Minister Patrick Achi, Côte d’Ivoire, presented the “Abidjan Initiative” as a global and integrated response to restore degraded land and increase agricultural production in Côte d’Ivoire by 2050. He explained how the programme can be adapted and applied to all countries facing desertification. Aiming to mobilize USD 1.5 billion over five years, Achi described the four axes of the “Abidjan Initiative” to:

- fight deforestation, restoring degraded forests and promoting agroforestry;
- ensure food security through sustainable intensification of food production;
- make existing value chains more sustainable without desertification; and
- identify new value chains that are climate resilient.

The AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK outlined existing commitments to support agriculture technology in Africa, welcoming the “Abidjan Initiative” as an important milestone and announced plans to mobilize USD 500 million to support implementation.

TEAM EUROPE, comprised of the EU and its member states with the European Investment Bank, supported the Legacy Programme through mobilizing 502 million Euro, considering efforts to influence both supply and demand.

GERMANY added support with Euro 50 million, emphasizing that “societies with strong women and girls are stronger and more resilient.”

MOROCCO pledged support through coordinated actions and solidarity and ARGENTINA referred to the programme as “an example of hope.” The WORLD BANK committed to support, reflecting efforts to promote sustainable value chains through forest investments and restoration, as well as supporting small share producers.

INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (IFAD) offered partnership through specialists based in the regional office, highlighting efforts to counter land degradation and intensify investments in strengthening resilience of small producers. UN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP) welcomed the programme and offered to contribute expertise in stakeholder engagement and conduct a mapping exercise to better understand entry points for engagement and partnerships.

CHAD emphasized the dire consequences of constant exposure to dust storms from the Chad basin, and called for rapid assistance from the Green Climate Fund to enable the country to honor its environmental commitments.

GLOBAL GREEN GROWTH INSTITUTE (GGGI), pledged mobilizing USD 100 million over the next five years, highlighting the GGGI’s commitment to explore setting up a carbon platform to support equal trading.

SENEGAL outlined his country’s largescale programmes, such as supporting the Great Green Wall, and said his country’s national contribution will support climate change initiatives and enhance soil productivity.

President Ouattara provided closing remarks, saying that the Abidjan Legacy Program is not just an SLM model, but aims to improve sustainable production of agricultural products, and create dignified working conditions, particularly for women and girls.

### ***Gender Caucus***

The Caucus, chaired by Dominique Ouattara, First Lady of Côte d’Ivoire, comprised three segments, two of which are summarized below.

Calling COP 15 the most important conference in the history of UNCCD, Executive Secretary Thiaw stressed gender equity is a key to a balanced foundation. Highlighting that sustainable development cannot be achieved if half of the population and the producers are left behind, he invited governments to join the Abidjan Declaration on Achieving Equality for Successful

Restoration on gender and commit to improve the lives and rights of women and girls.

Abdulla Shahid, President of the 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA, lamented that women and girls, while bearing the brunt of negative impacts from climate change and land degradation, are often not recognized as farmers or value chain actors and excluded from agricultural extension services and rights to land. He called upon governments to walk the talk and put gender equality at the heart of all forthcoming discussions.

Amina J. Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary General, highlighted three key steps towards gender equity: including women on all decision-making forums; designing gender responsive sustainable development and land frameworks; and accelerating efforts to eliminate discrimination and violence, especially against rural women. Referencing the widening gender gap in food security as a sign of worsening conditions, she noted sustainable land management is a key enabler for gender equality and prosperity.

Denise Nyakéru Tshisekedi, First Lady of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, emphasized that women account for half the labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa's agricultural value chain, yet hold only 18% of land titles. She called on all stakeholders to brainstorm and identify long-lasting solutions to address this injustice.

Dominique Ouattara, First Lady of Côte d'Ivoire and Chair of the Gender Caucus, lamented that desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) and climate change push women into an endless poverty cycle, yet expressed "real hope" that the Gender Caucus can provide practical solutions. Noting women empowerment is at the heart of solutions, including the Abidjan Legacy Programme, she called for increased participation of women in economic life and agriculture, especially through land tenure security and the creation of gender-sensitive banks.

Lorena Aguilar Revelo, former Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Costa Rica, presented a study on DLDD's differentiated impacts on women which, among others, analyzed structural problems such as inequitable access to land. She called for dismantling power structures that allow gender discrimination, violence, and economic hardship, and emphasized the need for women's land rights. She called for a narrative shift to recognize women and girls as leaders and agents of change.

Following an artistic performance, Gabrielle Lipton, Global Landscapes Forum, moderated a ministerial dialogue that showcased regional progress towards gender equity.

Bangladesh's Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change Shahab Uddin highlighted the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in anchoring equal opportunities for women in all aspects of life Bangladesh's constitution. He recalled the Gender Action Plan adopted at COP 13 and the core SDG principle of leaving no one behind.

Jochen Flassbarth, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation, Germany, stated that the challenge of land degradation cannot be solved without gender equality. He highlighted Germany's recent turn to a feminist development policy approach. With education, land rights and access to technical assistance as examples, he laid out Germany's "reach, benefit and empower" approach, stressing strong women and girls also make societies more resilient.

Malcom Stufkens, Vice-Minister for Energy, Natural Resources and the Environment, Honduras, pointed to the strong gender and environmental agenda of the country's first female president. Highlighting shared challenges in Central America, he called land degradation both a cause and a consequence of poverty. He voiced

strong support for the Abidjan Declaration on Achieving Gender Equality, explaining how Honduras is implementing strategic gender action plans across all policy areas.

Makhotso Magdeline Sotyu, Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, South Africa, highlighted DLDD is not gender neutral. She demanded stronger commitments from all to include women's voices in every aspect of sustainable development, specifically in addressing the lack of property rights. She highlighted South Africa's efforts focused on economic transformation to better the lives of women and girls, including providing green jobs and building rural women's capacity for entrepreneurship.

Vicky Ford, UK Ministry for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, called on parties to deliver on the important promises made during the Glasgow Climate Conference. Lamenting that women are often excluded from decision making, disinherited as surviving spouses, and prevented access to and control over the land needed to feed their families, she called for gender-responsive climate action to champion women and girls' agency and advance gender equality in all actions.

Nassénéba Touré, Ministry for Women, Family and Children, Côte d'Ivoire, hailed the brave women in Côte d'Ivoire's agricultural sector that face, among others, land degradation related to drought and illegal gold mining, and fewer arable lands. She highlighted programmes addressing gender inequality and enhancing women entrepreneurial skills to build resilience against climate shocks, food crisis, and post-Covid recovery, to achieve a world of equal access to wealth, free of discrimination.

A third panel, moderated by Maxime Houinato, UN Women, addressed rights, representation and resources. Panelists representing financial institutions and UN agencies discuss issues of policy, capacity and financing, access to information and infrastructure for water and energy as related to women.

### *In the Corridors*

Delegates reunited after the long, Covid-induced pause in in-person gatherings with a sense of excitement and "high hopes". These weren't dashed despite one speaker noting that "Covid might have stopped us meeting, but the global challenges did not take a break." Clearly the increasing pressures of climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss, especially as experienced in Africa, compounded by broken promises, put everything in a "race against time".

Mandatory masks did not hold back emphatic embraces. Nor did they hide some looks of bewilderment as participants tried to reconcile standard logistical challenges of settling in and establishing effective communication with new Covid safety measures and heightened security protocols due to the presence of numerous dignitaries.

Halfway through the Summit, Baaba Maal broke language barriers with his passionate musical interlude, and just like a family, participants seemed to fall in step.

President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire set the tone for the two weeks, calling for needed "collective mobilization of states and partners." By the time the "Abidjan Initiative" was introduced and met with pledges of support, and the Youth Forum and Gender Caucus went into full swing, a strong signal for solidarity could already be felt in the hotel's hallways. Despite a long first day trying to make sense of the proceedings due to the lack of translation services in the plenary room, and trying to avoid stepping on the long swathes of red carpet laid out, morale felt high as delegates rolled up their sleeves in anticipation of work ahead to review 26 draft decisions.