

UNCCD COP 15 Highlights: Thursday, 12 May 2022

Delegates knuckled down to the core tasks at hand as the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 15) reconvened with the opening of the 20th session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). Delegates heard opening remarks in CRIC and then considered the effective implementation of the Convention at national, subregional and regional levels, concluding with improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP. The Committee on Science and Technology (CST) continued its meeting in parallel. CST moved swiftly through its agenda, continuing first its consideration of the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) for the biennium 2020–2021, focusing on: the coordination of activities of the SPI with other intergovernmental scientific bodies; ways of interfacing science and policy, and sharing knowledge; and in the afternoon, modalities for reporting on the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. Delegates reconvened for an open dialogue session under the theme, ‘Lands we use, lands we protect, lands we own - Opportunities and solutions to equity and equality’ and side events were held throughout the day, and a joint CRIC/CST contact group met in the evening, in addition to a CST contact group and the programme and budget contact group.

Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

Opening of the Session: CRIC Chair Andrew Bishop, Guyana, underscored the need to promote and execute sustainable solutions, specifically bold initiatives to match finance activities on the ground. UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw encouraged participants to ensure all activities and aspirations are infused with the aim to improve the lives of all people. He commended the 129 countries that have committed to set land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets, and looked forward to sharing knowledge on capacity building to advance implementation.

Angola, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, welcoming the Abidjan Call, emphasized the need to: increase finance to scale

up implementation activities related land desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD); and explore establishment of a formal legally binding instrument on drought.

France, on behalf of the EU, welcomed new tools to enable and measure efficacy of land restoration programmes and prevent land degradation, calling for development of national capacities to improve implementation and accountability based on reliable data and knowledge sharing.

Pakistan, for the ASIA-PACIFIC GROUP, called on all parties to mobilize substantial financial resources and for the Global Mechanism (GM) to support acceleration of project development through knowledge sharing at the sub-regional level, identifying the need for customized support, guidance and capacity building.

Belize, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), noted the need to intensify efforts to build capacity to implement the voluntary LDN targets, and supported promotion of awareness raising on responsible land governance among vulnerable communities, such as Indigenous Peoples and youth.

Turkey, for NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, called for coherence among national plans and policies, SDG 15 and related target 15.3, and other Rio Conventions and Agenda 2030, welcoming work to secure additional investments.

Georgia, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE), called for additional funding, new funding partners, resource mobilization and knowledge sharing to improve UNCCD implementation.

Saudia Arabia, for the ARAB GROUP, looked forward to engaging on: strengthening targeted capacity to promote implementation; and enhancing references to providing high-resolution satellite imagery to improve data collection and reporting.

CSOs called for consideration of agroecological approaches and regenerative practices to improve soil health, and urged inclusive and effective stakeholder participation.

Organizational matters: Adoption of the agenda and organization of work: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (ICCD/CRIC(20)/1) and CRIC adopted the agenda and organization of work, including the tentative work schedule, as orally revised by the Bureau.

Election of officers other than the Chair of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention: Bishop announced Vice-Chair Hussein Nasrallah (Lebanon) can only participate in the second week, so the CRIC Bureau decided that Saliha Fortas (Algeria) will act as rapporteur for this meeting.

Effective implementation of the Convention at national, subregional and regional levels: Review of the report of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention on its nineteenth session: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/CRIC(19)/6 and ICCD/CRIC(20)/10).

Multi-year workplan for Convention institutions and subsidiary bodies: The Secretariat introduced the interlinked relevant documents (ICCD/COP(15)/6, ICCD/CRIC(20)/2, ICCD/CRIC(20)/3 and ICCD/COP(15)/21).

Performance of Convention institutions and subsidiary bodies: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(15)/CST/7-ICCD/CRIC(20)/8, ICCD/CRIC(20)/9, ICCD/CRIC(20)/INF.1, and ICCD/CRIC(20)/10). EU asserted that it is not possible to implement decisions effectively without peace and security, supporting work to *inter alia*: integrate the LDN objectives and other targets related to capacity building and data sharing; improve transparency and use of the LDN Fund; and support the Gender Action Plan (GAP). On strengthening capacity building activities, several parties underscored the need for further support to sustain credible data flows.

MEXICO called for local and regional capacity building workshops and VENEZUELA suggested increased frequency of these. Saudi Arabia, for the ARAB GROUP, specified the need for support to collect necessary data in arid land regions and BRAZIL emphasized national reports should consider national circumstances. CHINA raised the issue of data sovereignty, supporting monitoring data on a national basis, urging all parties to submit reports on time.

A contact group on CRIC matters was established, with Julius Smith (Trinidad and Tobago) facilitating.

Improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties: This item was forwarded to a joint CRIC/CST contact group, also facilitated by Smith.

Committee on Science and Technology (CST)

Items resulting from the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface for the biennium 2020–2021: Coordination activities of the Science-Policy Interface with other intergovernmental scientific panels and bodies: CST Chair Bongani Masuku opened the session and invited the Secretariat to introduce the relevant documents (ICCD/COP(15)/CST/4, and ICCD/COP(15)/CST/8).

SPI members Ravindranath Nijavalli (India) and Graham von Maltitz (South Africa) presented key conclusions based mainly on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2019

Special Report on Climate Change and Land, which contains dedicated chapters on desertification, land degradation, and food security. They emphasized the most central conclusion was that land and climate are directly interlinked in multiple ways. Other key messages included: climate change leads to intensification of land degradation; most land-management measures have co-benefits; demand and supply side mitigation options, such as reducing food loss and waste, or dietary change, provide co-benefits without requiring land; land-based mitigation options at very large scales can have trade-offs due to increased competition for land and degradation, but SLM practices can help to address these; Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) has many co-benefits in terms of human well-being and food security, but also for mitigation and adaptation; and delaying mitigation will make adaptation in the land sector increasingly difficult.

Several parties discussed national plans and activities, the need for capacity building and financial support, the importance of focusing on drought, desertification, and sand and dust storms (SDS), more attention to attribution to drivers as well as to gaps in knowledge. The US lauded clarification of the roles of climate-related and directly human-induced factors for land degradation in the report. Supported by SWITZERLAND, he called for a reduction of the draft decision text, since it was too complex and difficult to interpret. CHINA asked for the inclusion of wetlands, and queried a finding on adverse side-effects of carbon dioxide removal measures. MOROCCO and the EU asked for scenarios information pertaining to regions and land restoration under different climate futures. CSOs urged to: overcome academic and institutional silos; make knowledge accessible to those on the ground; and include agro-ecological and regenerative practices in the next SPI work programme.

Interfacing science and policy, and sharing knowledge: The Science-Policy Interface, the dissemination and accessibility of best practices, and the UNCCD Knowledge Hub: The Secretariat introduced documents ICCD/COP(15)/CST/5 and CST/8, reminding that the Knowledge Hub had been incorporated into the UNCCD website at the beginning of 2022.

SWITZERLAND requested that the web-based tool should be further developed and enhanced, and the next COP be informed of the use and effectiveness of this tool, in particular regarding drought and SDS.

US offered technical support to strengthen the Knowledge Hub and NIGER urged dissemination of experiences and best practices from countries across the world.

SOUTH SUDAN requested assistance to combat desertification and droughts and NIGER requested detail about the efficacy of land restoration implementation strategies to ensure only successful tools are implemented.

On cooperation at international level, CHINA noted the value of South-South cooperation where they share best practices, and requested deletion of a phrase on “countries in the position to do so” as it confuses the responsibilities of developing and developed nations, thereby negatively impacting implementation.

JAPAN cautioned against duplication of effort between the Knowledge Hub and the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) and suggested seeking complementarity instead.

On the term “Nature-based Solutions (NbS)”, BRAZIL highlighted that NbS is a subject of ongoing debate and that the COP should first test its validity and mutually accept it. ESWATINI cited a resolution taken in the recent fifth UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5) in which the term is considered appropriate for advancing sustainable development.

Work programme of the Science-Policy Interface for the biennium 2022–2023: The Secretariat introduced the documents (ICCD/COP(15)/CST/6, ICCD/COP(15)/CST/8). The US cautioned about the workload implied in the work programme and mentioned there could be additional requests from the GM which should be discussed by the COP.

SWITZERLAND, urging greater consultation prior to publication, suggested the work programme should be less generic, particularly regarding weak policies, and expressed hope the quality of reporting will improve during the next biennium.

EU supported the focus on SLM and drylands expansion, while urging specifics on operationalization. CHINA noted the formulation of targets and asked that parties’ opinion be factored into the work programme. MONGOLIA called for synergy across the different environmental knowledge platforms. NIGER said the role of armed conflict in driving land degradation and halting restoration efforts should be taken into account.

MOROCCO asked that sand storms be included in the second objective and called for a broader focus on LDN financing. EGYPT emphasized the impact of dam construction on neighboring countries and GABON stressed that forested countries also suffer from droughts and this should be considered by the Convention.

Interfacing science and policy, and sharing knowledge: Information on modalities for reporting on the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (ICCD/COP(15)/CST/7-ICCD/CRIC(20)/8, ICCD/CRIC(20)/10).

Responding to the US, the Secretariat clarified there will be no technical presentation. The US noted general concern about addition of new reporting requirements, reserving more detailed comments for the joint contact group.

Procedural matters: Programme of work for the sixteenth session of the Committee on Science and Technology: The Chair referred this agenda item to the next CST contact group to which the US announced they will propose a new paragraph for the decision.

Inclusion of activities of civil society organizations within the official programme of work of the COP: *Open dialogue sessions: Lands we use, lands we protect, lands we own - Opportunities and solutions to equity and equality:* Sabina Gasimova, International Dialogue for Environmental Action, moderated.

Participants paid posthumous homage to Khadija Catherine Razavi, Bhawani Shanker Kusum, and Marc Bied-Charreton, followed by a moment of silence.

Thiaw expressed gratitude for CSOs’ valuable contributions to the UNCCD process. He said they are being heard, as the COP-14 land tenure decision demonstrates.

Ismaël Allahi Bizo, Youth Association for the Environment and Civic Education, for African CSOs, called for collaborative efforts to address pressing challenges of soil degradation, referencing the harbingers of hope in Africa that bring solutions to be scaled.

Hemantha Withanage, Centre for Environmental Justice, representing Asian CSOs, discussed bringing global policies to the national and regional levels, and solutions such as collaborative management of land to ensure the rights of nature and future generations.

Ruth Spencer, Zero Waste Antigua and Barbuda, representing Latin American and the Caribbean CSOs, clarified that solutions exist, advocating for greater engagement and the empowerment of local communities to support actions needed to build resilience.

Beth Roberts, Landesa, for Western European and Others Group CSOs, recognizing land tenure as a fundamental element to enabling LDN, highlighted steps for awareness raising: drafting an action plan; identifying partners and key audiences; adopting key messages; and evaluating successes, learning and adapting.

Oscar Soria, Avaaz, representing international NGOs, called for including Indigenous Peoples and local communities in policy dialogues and providing them direct financing as frontline workers in addressing ecological debt and improving planetary health.

Interventions included gratitude for this unique forum and the CSOs’ work.

In the Corridors

After a veritable thunderstorm hit the city Wednesday night, delegates awoke to a cooler, albeit foggy, Thursday, reflecting the mood at the venue where they buckled up to fly through an agenda made turbulent by complex substantive issues and politics.

Delegates from Africa arrived with a clear ask: a legally binding instrument on drought. Despite the first three days’ fireworks, the resolution of this issue remained hazy, prompting one increasingly frustrated expert to exclaim, “We have given them so many recommendations, but no one listens!”

Similar fiery sentiments were heard yesterday at the Rio Conventions Pavilion, where someone remarked: “You’ve been working on this for 30 years, why are people still hungry?”

Perhaps today’s Food Day signals a silver lining? The Rio Conventions Pavilion saw an impressive line-up of dignitaries and events highlighting the Second Global Land Outlook’s clear message that a food system transformation is urgently needed to address the food-biodiversity-land-climate crisis, with the opening speaker saying, “without land, there will be no food.” The open dialogue with CSOs, where representatives spoke with the “echoes of millions of women, youth and farmers,” made it clear that they are the real agents of change – offering solutions to scale.