

Summary of the Twenty-first Session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification: 13-17 November 2023

Globally, over 420 million hectares of land became degraded between 2014 and 2019, which is more than the combined area of five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that if we continue on the current trajectory, we will need to restore the health of “a staggering 1.5 billion hectares of degraded land by 2030.”

It was fitting that the twenty-first session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 21) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) convened for the first time in Central Asia: a region increasingly impacted by sand and dust storms (SDS) and where 20% of the land area is degraded. In his opening remarks UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw explained that, within a single generation, the Aral Sea, a freshwater lake that was once so large it was mistaken for a sea, has largely disappeared and is now filled with sand dunes.

At CRIC 21 delegates were able to see aggregated data submitted by 126 countries as part of the newly-launched UNCCD Data Dashboard on land degradation. This is the first time in the UNCCD’s history that land loss and land restoration trends have been available, enabling a rich exchange on national and regional experiences, with interpreting default global data provided by the Secretariat and further adapting it to local realities. Delegates drew on these experiences to provide feedback on synthesis reports of progress under the Convention’s five Strategic Objectives, as well as progress reports on policy frameworks on drought, SDS, gender, and land tenure.

One of the more robust discussions related to improving the procedures for communication and the quality and formats of reports. Participants expressed their views on: the need for more timely funding to be able to produce reports; gaps in data; and concerns over reliability when having to use default data. The hope is that some of the concerns will be remedied prior to the next reporting period in 2026.

In addition, the CRIC reviewed some of the main findings and recommendations from an independent assessment that was undertaken as part of the mid-term evaluation of the UNCCD Strategic Framework (2018-2030), which will help strengthen implementation of the Convention through 2030 and beyond. Discussions on the assessment addressed, among other things:

political and financial commitments, including the need to elevate the Convention’s political visibility; monitoring and reporting; greater action on the ground; communicating scientific messages so they are easily understood by all; and linkages between the three Rio Conventions. Regarding the latter, the parties reiterated the interlinkages between land degradation, climate change, and biodiversity, and the need for increased synergies. A high-level event on SDS, the first of its kind and convened by the Government of Uzbekistan on 15 November, further affirmed the growing

In this Issue

A Brief History of the UNCCD	2
CRIC 21 Report	2
Organizational Matters	3
Assessment of Implementation: Strategic Objectives 1 to 4	3
Financial Flows: Strategic Objective 5	5
Implementation of Voluntary LDN Targets and Related Implementation Efforts	6
Progress Report of the IWG on Effective Policy and Implementation Measures for Addressing Drought under the UNCCD	6
Improving the Procedures for Communication as well as the Quality and Format of Reports to Be Submitted to the COP	7
Policy Frameworks and Thematic Topics: Sand and Dust Storms, Drought, Land Tenure and Gender	8
Participatory Consultations on the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Independent Assessment Undertaken as Part of the Midterm Evaluation of the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework	9
Sand and Dust Storms High-Level Event	10
Closing Plenary	11
A Brief Analysis of CRIC 21	12
Upcoming Meetings	14
Glossary	14

recognition of the issue's importance with both the current and incoming COP Presidencies, who were both on hand for the event. The issue promises to garner significant attention at COP 16, which will be held in Saudi Arabia in December 2024, where such storms are also common.

CRIC 21 convened in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from 13-17 November 2023. There were just under 1000 registered participants, making it the biggest CRIC to date in terms of attendance. In addition, for the first time side events were held at a CRIC, with over 40 scheduled events elaborating on some of the issues discussed by the Committee.

A Brief History of the UNCCD

The UNCCD is the centerpiece of the international community's efforts to combat desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD). The Convention, called for by the UN Conference on Environment and Development's *Agenda 21* in 1992, was adopted on 17 June 1994. The Convention entered into force on 26 December 1996 and currently has 197 parties. The UNCCD recognizes the physical, biological, and socio-economic aspects of desertification and the importance of involving local communities in combating DLDD. The core of the UNCCD is the development of national, sub-regional, and regional action programmes by national governments, in cooperation with UN agencies, donors, local communities, and non-governmental organizations. At its adoption, the UNCCD contained four regional implementation annexes for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Northern Mediterranean. A fifth regional annex, for Central and Eastern Europe, was added in 2001.

Following its establishment in 2001, the CRIC convened for the first time in Rome, Italy, in 2002. During COP 9, held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2009, parties adopted new terms of reference for the CRIC, making it one of the two subsidiary bodies of the Convention, alongside the Committee on Science and Technology (CST). In addition to conducting regular reviews of implementation of the Convention's 10-Year Strategy (2008-2018) and the current Strategic Framework (2018-2030), the CRIC also assesses the status of the Convention's institutional and financing arrangements, communication and reporting procedures, and collaboration with the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Progress reports by parties and other reporting entities are submitted through the UNCCD's [Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System](#) (PRAIS) online portal.

Key Turning Points

COP 12 and CRIC 14: With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UNCCD-related land degradation neutrality (LDN) target, a key focus at COP 12 (2015) was how to align the UNCCD's goals and parties' action programmes with the global framework. Held concurrently with COP 12, CRIC 14 held extensive discussions on how to adapt both the substance, as well as process, of future reporting, with a focus on how to establish and monitor national-level voluntary LDN targets. The meeting agreed that future reporting should focus on three biophysical indicators: trends in land cover, land productivity, and carbon stocks. Delegates also discussed related metrics to measure progress.

CRIC 15 and 16: CRIC 15 (2016) and 16 (2017) held consultations on how to improve communications as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP. In addition to adopting the new UNCCD Strategic Framework (2018-

2030), including its five Strategic Objectives, COP 13 (2017) approved the CRIC's recommendation to ease the reporting burden for countries by transitioning to a four-year reporting cycle. It further requested the Secretariat to consider further simplifying reporting templates and other reporting tools, including by making PRAIS more user friendly. The COP decision also requested the UNCCD Secretariat and its financial arm, the Global Mechanism, in coordination with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), to harmonize their respective capacity-building support for reporting processes at the global, regional, and national levels.

Ahead of CRIC 17, the PRAIS portal was "preloaded" with default national data for the three UNCCD progress indicators (trends in land cover, land productivity, and carbon stocks), based on available data sources, to help parties prepare their first-ever national reports under Strategic Objective 1.

CRIC 17 and 18: CRIC 17 (2019) considered a set of reports containing preliminary analyses of information submitted related to the new UNCCD Strategic Objectives. Delegates called for improvements to the UNCCD's communication and reporting procedures, including: expanding the functionality and reporting tools on the PRAIS and Conservation International's Trends.Earth platforms to support decision making; and reviewing the methodology used to obtain the aggregate indicator for SDG 15.3.1 (proportion of degraded land over total land area). Held concurrently with COP 14 (2019), CRIC 18 further elaborated recommendations for assessing implementation of the Convention against the five Strategic Objectives.

CRIC 19: CRIC 19, which met virtually in 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, convened daily two-hour sessions. It focused on: the status of implementing LDN projects, including progress with operationalizing the LDN Fund; support to the UNCCD Drought Initiative, and policy frameworks relating to drought, gender, and land tenure; and the interim report of the Intergovernmental Working Group (IWG) on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought under the UNCCD.

CRIC 20: CRIC 2020, which met in parallel to COP 15 in 2022, developed eight decisions for adoption by the COP, including on integration of SDG 15, particularly target 15.3 (combating desertification, restoring degraded land and soil, and striving to achieve a land degradation-neutral world) into implementation of the Convention and LDN, and securing additional investments and relations with financial mechanisms.

CRIC 21 Report

Welcoming participants on Monday, 13 November, CRIC Chair Biljana Kilibarda (Montenegro), thanked the people and government of Uzbekistan for hosting CRIC 21, expressing optimism that this meeting will make progress on the preparations for COP 16. She emphasized the need for accelerated national-level action and the tackling of reporting challenges. She also highlighted the growing importance of drought issues.

Participants then watched a short video describing land degradation challenges in Central Asia, including water scarcity, dust storms, soil erosion, and the need for restoring land in the Aral Sea region.

On behalf of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of Uzbekistan, Tanzila Narbaeva, Chairperson of the Uzbekistan Senate, welcomed participants. She stressed the need for strong partnerships and emphasized the importance of collective action in response to the challenges faced.

UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw delivered the “first ever” message from the UN Secretary-General to a CRIC session. In his message, UN Secretary-General António Guterres cited an annual loss of 100 million hectares of healthy land between 2015 and 2019, an area “twice the size of Greenland.” Guterres urged UNCCD parties to step up ambition and action on their LDN targets or face the prospect of needing to restore “a staggering 1.5 billion hectares of degraded land by 2030.”

Aziz Abduhakimov, Minister of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Uzbekistan, described his country’s efforts to plant more than 400 million trees and shrubs, increase protected areas from 4 to 14% of his country’s total land area, and spearhead regional efforts to restore the Aral Sea region and mitigate worsening incidences of SDS.

In his opening address, Executive Secretary Thiaw noted the global recognition of Samarkand as a crossroads of cultures, stressing that while previous civilizations have bequeathed us with the resources on which we depend, environmental disasters such as the degradation of the Aral Sea demonstrate how much can be destroyed in just one generation. Among anticipated highlights of this session, Thiaw pointed to the launch of the UNCCD Data Dashboard and the mid-term review of the UNCCD Strategic Framework.

Opening Statements: Morocco, for the AFRICAN GROUP, highlighted progress made by the IWG on drought. Stating drought is no longer just an African phenomenon but a global one, he expressed support for a legally binding instrument on drought. He further underscored the importance of financing for achieving the LDN target and thanked partners for their technical and financial support for drafting national reports.

Spain, on behalf of the EU, emphasized the importance of synergies and cooperation among the three Rio Conventions. Noting the world’s proportion of degraded land has increased, he called for strengthening the reporting process and increased involvement of civil society and the private sector in meeting the LDN target. He further pointed to the increased global relevance of drought and the importance of the IWG’s work in this regard.

Pakistan, for the ASIA PACIFIC GROUP, stressed the need for improved support for reporting and the importance of the IWG’s work on drought. He underscored the importance of sharing experiences on implementation and further mobilizing resources and international financing.

Ecuador, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), said ambition must be met with timely and predictable financial resources, technology transfer, capacity building, and strong scientific support and cooperation. He emphasized the need for improved reporting processes and voluntary targets on mitigation and resilience.

Hungary, on behalf of the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, stressed the significance of collective efforts to address land degradation, saying more must be done to achieve the Convention’s Strategic Objectives. He identified data and reporting platforms, capacity building, and gender indicators as key issues to be addressed.

Armenia, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, said global coverage of the UNCCD reporting process is needed, proposed expansion of the Convention’s mandate to all territories of the world, and urged that this be considered at COP 16 and that a working group be created to address the issue.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) said current agrifood systems are not sustainable and are increasing pressure on land. She emphasized the centrality of land tenure security in achieving LDN.

A representative of CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) called for, *inter alia*:

- LDN plans that complement climate change and biodiversity plans;
- improving monitoring, reporting, and communication processes for local LDN actions;
- implementing drought policies that, among others, support community-led conservation;
- including all stakeholders in LDN decision-making processes; and
- incorporating CSO recommendations into COP 16 decisions.

Organizational Matters

The CRIC adopted the agenda and tentative schedule of work ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/1](#)) and approved the nomination of Abdu Alsharif (Saudi Arabia) as Chair of the contact group on matters related to the Committee. Philippine Dutailly (France) was confirmed as Rapporteur for CRIC 21 and 22.

A contact group met throughout the week to prepare recommendations and conclusions on the CRIC 21 agenda items. These were based on comments made during the plenary sessions, were adopted by the CRIC, and will provide the basis for the CRIC’s contributions to COP 16.

Assessment of Implementation: Strategic Objectives 1 to 4

This agenda item was discussed on Monday through Thursday.

Strategic Objective 1: On Monday, the Secretariat introduced its report containing a preliminary analysis of Strategic Objective 1 (improving the condition of affected ecosystems, combating desertification/land degradation, promoting sustainable land management (SLM), and contributing to LDN) ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/2](#)). He said it synthesizes reporting on the three land-based progress indicators—land cover, land productivity, and soil organic carbon stocks—from a global and regional perspective and includes an analysis of national voluntary targets and information related to SDG indicator 15.3.1 (proportion of land that is degraded over total land area). She noted opportunities for progress towards achieving LDN by rehabilitating hotspots as functional vegetated lands, as well as potential to strengthen reporting synergies with the other two Rio Conventions on shared land indicators.

Spain, for the EU, proposed additional voluntary indicators, such as those currently being considered under the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). While calling for improvements to the PRAIS portal to support state of the art reporting efforts, he cautioned that “more frequent submissions of data to PRAIS may not necessarily be useful.” PERU said the PRAIS reporting platform is an important resource that needs improvement particularly regarding technical issues.

Speaking for ASIA PACIFIC, the Cook Islands said the results presented are “alarming” and called for better analysis of the main drivers of degradation at all levels, as well as efforts to improve low reporting rates in some regions. SAUDI ARABIA attributed low reporting rates to low financial and human resource capacities.

MEXICO and ARGENTINA encouraged use of national rather than global data, which are often imprecise for smaller countries. They both called for adopting a new sub-indicator on land erosion. MEXICO also favored reverting to a two-year reporting cycle.

VENEZUELA thanked the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism for their support on reporting and stressed the need for building institutional capacity and continued work on land-based indicators.

MOROCCO, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, IRAQ, TUNISIA, and KENYA, among others, underscored the role of finance and capacity building to assist with reporting and to enable countries to measure and analyze their own data.

ECUADOR said if reporting is increased to a biannual basis without an increase in financing for capacity building, default data will be used and realities on the ground will often not be reflected. He called for: improvements that do not undermine the comparability of reports produced during different reporting cycles; and a working group to address transitioning from one cycle to the next.

The US noted limitations with the use of default data and stressed it should not be used without the consent of the party in question.

ARMENIA said national reports contain important information that is used by decision makers, but noted gaps regarding data on land productivity and carbon soil stocks. BRAZIL stressed the need to support countries in building strategies to combat degradation and drought and to ensure they have adequate resources for reporting in line with their specific needs.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) discussed linkages and the compatibility of its programmes with those of the UNCCD. She discussed the CBD's partnerships to coordinate reporting on ecosystem restoration and the value of consistent data among processes.

FAO described collaborative efforts to implement SDG 15.3, its work on enhancing national reporting processes, the importance of integrated land use planning for decision making, and its support for national drought plans and forest and landscape restoration plans.

The ARAB ORGANIZATION FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (AOAD) questioned the quality and accuracy of the data that is often relied on in reporting and said the slow provision of financial support to developing countries for preparing national reports has resulted in reporting delays.

CSOs said data gaps on the full range of degradation processes and on impacts on ecosystems and communities must be addressed. She said further data must be generated through participatory processes and called for ending incentives that harm ecosystems.

Responding to the issues raised, the Secretariat highlighted its close collaboration with the CBD under the auspices of the [UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration](#), stating this includes improving interoperability across reporting platforms. Regarding proposals for more frequent reporting, she clarified the intention is not to make changes to the current four-year cycle, but to provide greater flexibility for intersessional reporting where interim data is available, notably for countries refining their LDN targets. She said a two-year reporting cycle would be onerous on parties as well as on the Secretariat and that the nature of land degradation processes is better suited to a four-year monitoring cycle as it provides a better picture of gradual change.

Strategic Objective 2: On Tuesday morning, the Secretariat presented the synthesis and preliminary analysis of information submitted on Strategic Objective 2 (improving the living conditions of affected populations) ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/3](#)). She highlighted the three indicators associated with this objective, related to trends in:

- population living below the relative poverty line and/or income inequality in affected areas;
- access to safe drinking water in affected areas; and

- the proportion of the population exposed to land degradation, disaggregated by sex.

Summarizing some of the data extracted, she said while globally the number of people living below the international poverty line has decreased, poverty has increased in Africa, with 55 million more people living below the poverty line. On safe drinking water, she cited large regional disparities, with 100% access to safe drinking water in Northern Mediterranean countries and only 40% in Africa. Noting that the indicator “trends in the proportion of the population exposed to land degradation disaggregated by sex” was only recently provisionally adopted, she urged parties to fully adopt it.

The EU supported the integration of SDG indicators to assess progress made on land tenure issues and gender equality. He stated that disaggregation by gender, age, and location, and social and economic factors should be addressed. ECUADOR supported the use of SDG data and broadening indicators to include gender, age, and location, and the need to consider differences between urban and rural areas.

ARGENTINA proposed complementary indicators that consider structural poverty to, among other things, properly reflect poverty in rural areas. VENEZUELA called for guidelines on indicators and criteria to improve conditions of affected populations and to address social and economic implications.

The US raised concerns about the complexity and costs of increasing the number of indicators, noting money spent on reporting is money diverted from funding action on the ground.

ESWATINI emphasized the need for capacity building to develop mapping using disaggregated data to properly identify affected populations and for further delineating population exposure hotspots.

AOAD said national reports must provide an analysis of projects employed to implement action to demonstrate the links between the Strategic Objectives and the accomplishments achieved.

CSOs urged more emphasis on Africa where poverty levels and the number of vulnerable populations are high. She called for improving reporting methodologies, tackling tenure issues, and assessing progress made in national reports.

Responding to comments, the Secretariat noted limitations in existing reporting with respect to identifying the causal relationship between land degradation and living conditions of affected populations. She noted the frequent lack of availability of specific national-level social and economic data on poverty and emphasized the importance of improved mapping of land degradation and socio-economic conditions.

Strategic Objective 3: This subitem was addressed on Tuesday. The Secretariat introduced the preliminary analysis of information submitted by parties on Strategic Objective 3 (mitigating, adapting to, and managing the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems) ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/4](#)). He noted the report offers global and regional perspectives on the three progress indicators of drought hazard, exposure, and vulnerability. Among its findings, the Secretariat highlighted that roughly two-thirds of the reported global population was exposed to drought in 2018 and that the results underline the variable nature of drought intensity over time.

In the ensuing discussion, many countries welcomed the reporting process under this objective, with most underlining the global nature of drought and the need for coordinated action as well as greater solidarity with those most impacted.

The EU highlighted continued methodological challenges, including low reporting levels, limited data comparability, and the need to improve default data sets. He urged greater coordination between the CRIC, the CST, and the Science Policy Interface (SPI) to explore additional indicators such as on drought resilience.

Speaking for the AFRICAN GROUP, Eswatini stressed that drought “has become a pandemic” affecting two out of three people worldwide. While welcoming the Secretariat’s recommendations, he urged going beyond business as usual towards genuine commitment and aggressive approaches to win the battle against drought.

PERU, IRAQ, MOROCCO and others called for more systematic approaches and additional support to countries to gather contextualized data addressing the various dimensions of drought. VENEZUELA called for increased support to develop national data addressing specific areas of vulnerability, possible risks, and impacts on vulnerable sectors.

ECUADOR observed that the UNCCD is the only Rio Convention currently assessing drought data, noting this could contribute to synergies with its sister Conventions.

KENYA urged adopting a global instrument on drought. MEXICO suggested creating a “standing global programme” on drought resilience in partnership with specialized international institutions.

With NIGERIA, GHANA highlighted the link between drought, land-based conflicts, and forced migration. He called for investment in early warning systems, prudent SLM practices, and empowering communities to become more resilient.

PAKISTAN discussed its recent experience with drought-induced forest fires, urging increased capacity building for affected parties, including in early detection and mitigation measures. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA offered to share its experiences with large-scale tree planting programmes, noting this approach can substantially mitigate drought.

Underscoring the severe impact of drought on the most vulnerable populations, CSOs noted the importance of addressing equity in risk mitigation measures. He called for focusing on “the real levers to act” by demonstrating solidarity with farmers, youth and women, the private sector, and other actors on the ground.

In response, the Secretariat took note of calls for expanding drought indicators and continuing to review and update good practice guidance in collaboration with the CST and SPI.

Strategic Objective 4: The Secretariat introduced the subitem ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/5](#)) on this Objective (generating global environmental benefits through effective UNCCD implementation), noting the three indicators used in reporting, namely trends in: carbon stocks above and below ground; abundance and distribution of selected species; and proportion of important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity covered by protected areas. He said reporting reflected a downward trend in IUCN’s Red List Index, which shows trends in overall extinction risk for groups of species, and an upward trend in the proportion of terrestrial key biodiversity areas (KBAs) covered by protected areas.

PAKISTAN called for greater synergies with data for the SDGs and the Data Report Tool (DaRT) used for the CBD and other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), noting the latter can be of significant benefit for the UNCCD. ARGENTINA said if geospatial data is approved, its quality must be ensured and verified prior to its use so as not to undermine its reliability.

INDIA highlighted the need to: streamline reporting processes; balance conservation and sustainable development objectives; and develop research partnerships with NGOs and local communities, who play a role in protecting KBAs.

The EU said achieving LDN, as well as the use of nature-based solutions, can contribute to enhancing synergies among the three Rio Conventions. She urged further assessment of how the proposed KBA indicator benefits the UNCCD, noting lack of a clear link to the Convention.

SAINT LUCIA and SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS said the situation of Caribbean small island developing states (SIDS) was not adequately represented in the generation of quantitative data.

AUSTRALIA described its creation and funding of Indigenous protected areas, which provide for sustainable environmental management with positive environmental outcomes. The US stressed the importance of sustainable land use planning to achieve UNCCD objectives and urged parties to increase the percentage of their lands under protection to prevent land degradation.

The RAMSAR CONVENTION highlighted the importance of wetlands and their continuing degradation and loss. He discussed linkages between the Ramsar Convention and the UNCCD and the tools for assessment and reporting used under the Ramsar Convention.

CSOs said the importance of land conservation in protecting biodiversity is understated, highlighted the value of pastoral lands in protecting biodiversity while providing a sustainable food source, and urged curtailing investments that cause land degradation.

In response to comments, the Secretariat noted, among other things: the need to address concerns expressed by SIDS; a general desire to approve the KBA indicator; and the need for harmonization and complementarity of tools. He noted initial discussions with UNEP to integrate the UNCCD Strategic Framework into DaRT, and with the FAO and the CBD on harmonization with PRAIS, and said they were happy to explore further synergies with the Ramsar Convention.

Financial Flows: Strategic Objective 5

On Thursday, Louise Baker, Managing Director, Global Mechanism, introduced the preliminary analysis of Strategic Objective 5 (mobilizing substantial and additional financial and non-financial resources to support the implementation of the Convention by building effective partnerships at global and national levels) ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/6](#)). She highlighted proposals for enhanced support to, among other things, consider including a specific finance output under the GEF-funded Enabling Activities Project addressing the strengthening of national-level institutional and professional capacities of parties.

The AFRICAN GROUP, supported by ASIA PACIFIC, CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, and MEXICO, called for better integration of science into the Convention through funding participation of Science and Technology Correspondents. The US, agreeing, added that parties will be required to increase their contributions for this to happen.

ARGENTINA and MEXICO lamented the continued underfunding of Convention activities in the GRULAC region. JAPAN expressed concern that its financial contribution of more than USD 400 million for the reporting period was omitted from the report and called for rectifying this.

The EU welcomed the inclusion of the new provisionally adopted indicators but expressed concern that the “bottom-up” approach had created challenges for comparability. He called for efforts to

boost robust and harmonized methodologies to enhance the profile of DLDD in international development cooperation and enhance synergies with other MEAs. Recalling the fundraising success of the [Great Green Wall Accelerator](#), he welcomed a review of the project and the sharing of lessons learned.

Morocco, for the AFRICAN GROUP, describing the Global Mechanism as “a facilitation mechanism,” called for creating a financial instrument dedicated to the UNCCD. He further called for enhanced cooperation with the GEF and the Green Climate Fund in recognition that a focus on LDN can contribute to achieving 30% of climate targets.

ECUADOR called for: establishing a global financing target that specifies individual country needs; paying more attention to gender; and countries to share success stories on technology transfer and innovative financing models.

VENEZUELA said the needs assessment should pinpoint areas where funding is lacking and potential sources of funding.

CSOs said access to resources must be flexible and appropriate to help communities achieve LDN and the SDGs. She requested more details regarding donor actions and called for more support for Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and local communities and organizations.

In response, Baker said the Global Mechanism is refining and improving its methodologies, encouraging the funding of multi-sectoral and multi-country projects that can attract financing from multiple sources and windows, and undertaking an assessment to better understand needs and identify available resources and financing gaps.

Implementation of Voluntary LDN Targets and Related Implementation Efforts

On Monday, Global Mechanism Managing Director Baker introduced the Mechanism’s report on this issue ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/8](#)), noting the document provides an update on the LDN target-setting process, and conclusions and recommendations for consideration by CRIC 21.

The EU acknowledged the “remarkable steps” taken by the setting and implementing of voluntary LDN targets, welcoming the launch of the second phase of target setting. Noting the cross-cutting nature of LDN, she called for strengthening coordination with national focal points in other areas, such as biodiversity, climate change, forestry, and disaster risk management.

ARGENTINA said it was one of 18 countries to undertake the second phase of voluntary LDN target setting. While welcoming private funding, she said it should not replace funding by multilateral institutions. MOROCCO said adoption of the LDN target created an appropriate framework to address DLDD.

Noting many countries that have set voluntary LDN targets have so far not received support, EQUATORIAL GUINEA called for targeted funding to countries that did not benefit from the first round of projects, “so no country is left behind.” The SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC noted his government’s establishment of a programme for addressing degraded land and linking it to the SDGs.

China, for the ASIA PACIFIC, lamented that the UNCCD receives less attention and funding than the other Rio Conventions, and called for more timely and effective access to funding sources and the streamlining of the process.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA expressed hope that the [Peace Forest Initiative](#), an initiative by the UNCCD and the Korea Forest Service launched in 2019, will catalyze cooperation in restoring land and forests in conflict affected areas.

The INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN) outlined the organization’s work to restore rangelands, noting they cover more than 30% of global land area.

AOAD discussed support for land restoration projects in Yemen and Oman, noting plans to roll out support to more countries.

CSOs highlighted some “missing” numbers in the current reporting round, noting, *inter alia*, 48 parties did not submit national reports, while another 44% have not validated their data. She urged parties to set and implement more ambitious LDN targets in an inclusive and participatory manner.

Responding to the issues raised, Baker highlighted:

- increased efforts to forge partnerships to secure additional financial support for countries, with a growing focus on larger-scale regional projects;
- ongoing work to explore more innovative funding sources, such as a pilot debt swap for Sri Lanka; and
- exploration of dedicated funding streams for CSOs.

Progress Report of the IWG on Effective Policy and Implementation Measures for Addressing Drought under the UNCCD

On Tuesday morning, Michael Brüntrup, Co-Chair of the IWG on Drought, presented the IWG progress report ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/10](#)). He explained that 48 initial proposals had been reduced to eight key policy options for consideration by the COP.

Many parties welcomed the progress report and reiterated the importance of the IWG’s work. The EU noted the list of policy options is comprehensive and diverse. She emphasized the need for an integrated approach to drought given its interrelationships with other environmental challenges, such as wildfires and climate change, as well as socio-economic impacts, including food security and migration. She said drought management solutions should incorporate nature-based solutions and sustainable water practices, and promote gender equality and close coordination and cooperation with other processes.

AUSTRALIA called for practical solutions that can be promptly and effectively implemented. He supported strengthening existing financial mechanisms and using current financial flows more effectively. He also urged avoiding duplication of technical options for a new global drought target and work programme, citing similar work in fora such as the CBD and the [G20 Global Land Initiative](#).

Eswatini, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for a global binding instrument on drought. ARGENTINA stated that regionally-focused efforts and the strengthening of existing instruments should be pursued before a globally binding instrument is considered. ECUADOR cited the complexity of legally binding options and supported further consideration of the added value of such an instrument.

The US emphasized the value of focusing on drought resilience and described the work of the [International Drought Resilience Alliance](#).

MADAGASCAR said her country hoped to establish a national drought plan with the Global Mechanism’s support. LIBERIA stressed the need for decisive and immediate action on drought, noting shortcuts may result in insufficient results. KYRGYZSTAN said greater attention must be given to UNCCD activities, since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) often gets more attention.

ECUADOR said IWG options require further discussions and elaboration prior to COP 16. He said the various options, especially those on financing, can be treated in a complementary manner to

support UNCCD themes. VENEZUELA stated that technology transfer is key for addressing drought, as is fostering coordination and partnerships with institutions at the national and international levels.

CSOs emphasized the need for knowledge exchange and SLM using proven approaches and technologies to tackle drought. He said relief measures must be designed to avoid causing perverse effects.

In conclusion, IWG Co-Chair Brüntrup cited overlaps among the options, which will be further narrowed. Regarding ongoing discussions on binding and non-binding options, he emphasized learning from the experiences of other multilateral agreements, as well as from regional organizations with experience in drought management.

Improving the Procedures for Communication as well as the Quality and Format of Reports to Be Submitted to the COP

The Secretariat introduced the progress report ([ICCD/CRIC\(21\)/7](#) and [INF.2](#)) on Thursday, outlining opportunities and challenges of the current PRAIS 4 reporting process as well as proposals for improving future reporting. A panel then provided experiences with the reporting process from regional, technical, and financing perspectives.

Panel presentations: Speaking for GRULAC, Ecuador described the reporting process via PRAIS as “not just an academic exercise,” but a tool to devise, prioritize, and institutionalize SLM policies, and demonstrate that land degradation is a global issue. He said many countries were unable to undertake comprehensive reporting processes due to funding delays and called for greater attention to countries’ financial needs in future monitoring.

Cameroon, for the AFRICAN GROUP, reported a 14% drop in country reports compared to the previous round, which he attributed to organizational as well as financing challenges. He underscored the importance of recognizing disparities among countries, as well as scaling up technical support and financing to build capacity to collect context-specific data.

Ingrid Teich, World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT), provided reflections on an initiative to facilitate inclusive reporting processes in Türkiye, Bhutan, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. She noted, despite the short time frame, countries were able to integrate default data with more in-depth analysis, enabling the reclassification of data categories to better reflect local realities.

Ulrich Apel, GEF, said under the GEF-7 cycle, USD 475 million was allocated to the Land Degradation Focal Area (LDFA) and 122 countries were approved for UNCCD Enabling Activities umbrella projects. Apel said efforts are underway to collaborate with a broader set of partner agencies and highlighted a planned 30% increase in LDFA funding.

Susan Mathew, Conservation International, discussed efforts to support parties’ reporting processes through ensuring interoperability of [Trends.Earth](#)—an online land degradation monitoring platform—and PRAIS4. She highlighted: finalization of default data for all geospatial indicators to pre-populate national reports; enabling seamless upload of data to PRAIS 4; and supporting UNCCD parties to correct default calculations for SDG indicator 15.3.1.

Discussion: While thanking the GEF and various technical service providers for supporting the preparation of national reports, many countries revealed they still faced financial and technical constraints. Several countries, including ARGENTINA, PERU, and the COOK ISLANDS, called for upfront disbursement of funds in the future to facilitate a more thorough reporting process.

Several delegates, including CHINA, the EU, and the ASIA PACIFIC, emphasized the need to verify and validate default data. The US said unverified default data should not be included in reports and hoped the next reporting round would be simpler and the quality of reports improved.

HAITI said default data are useful, but local data are needed to address national priorities.

The EU stated that the inability of some states to submit national reports had hampered efforts to compile comprehensive global data. GUATEMALA indicated their desire to submit national reports with data reflecting local conditions, but stated that default data had to be used due to lack of domestic data.

GHANA said land is the “mother of all cross-cutting issues” as land restoration provides both climate and biodiversity benefits. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC) described his country’s plans to employ land use planning and management tools to better map and identify land degradation with reliable data.

SAINT LUCIA lamented a lack of spatial data in SIDS and said a national geospatial portal would improve report quality. With SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS, he mentioned mechanisms to facilitate reporting, such as the [Partnership Initiative on Sustainable Land Management](#) (PISLM), which supports reporting efforts of Caribbean SIDS and enables them to report on time. He encouraged other SIDS to use these mechanisms. The COOK ISLANDS supported the continued use of various tools, including online tutorials and webinars, and, with SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES, said SIDS need support to facilitate measuring soil organic carbon.

HAITI described challenges in using PRAIS 4, with PERU expressing the need for improvements. AUSTRALIA said her country found PRAIS 4 to be user friendly and accessible to multiple sub-national actors and that PRAIS tutorials and review and assistance provided by the Secretariat were helpful.

CHAD thanked the UNCCD Secretariat for its “tremendous support” when drafting its national report. He cited difficulties in quantifying the carbon stock in the ground and called for capacity building for georeferenced data.

URUGUAY discussed some negative impacts of land use changes on biodiversity, including the conversion of pastures to forests, and commercial plantation forests replacing Indigenous forests. He said expertise on how to tackle these kinds of conversion is needed.

VENEZUELA supported maintaining the Trends.Earth training programme, noting its importance for obtaining data for addressing SDG indicator 15.3.1. DRC said it could not complete its report on the PRAIS 4 platform due to a lack of funding.

CSOs stressed the importance of communication and engagement with stakeholders and stakeholder training.

In conclusion, Mathew stated that Conservation International is working to enhance the processing capacity of Trends.Earth. Apel said the GEF is committed to making funding available as early as possible for the next reporting cycle. UNEP noted efforts to streamline its funding practices to reduce delays and noted that PISLM provided a streamlined and coordinated tool that resulted in the timely delivery of funds. Teich stressed the importance of integrated data and processes and of developing methodologies and guidelines to validate data.

Policy Frameworks and Thematic Topics: Sand and Dust Storms, Drought, Land Tenure and Gender

This agenda item was addressed on Tuesday and Wednesday, with discussions based on a Note by the Secretariat, which provides a summary of activities undertaken by the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism on the policy frameworks and thematic issues related to SDS, drought, land tenure, and gender.

Drought: The Secretariat introduced this subitem on Tuesday, noting the report ([ICCD/CRIC21/9](#)) focuses on implementation of the UNCCD [Drought Initiative](#) in the 2022-2024 triennium, and capacity-building and knowledge exchange activities, such as the UNCCD [Drought Toolbox](#).

Welcoming the report, the EU underscored the importance of prioritizing drought resilience at the national level. She proposed that COP 16, among other things: call for reviewing implementation of existing and planned drought initiatives, including their funding status; and mandate the Global Mechanism to explore options for funding drought resilience as a crosscutting issue for the three Rio Conventions.

CHINA highlighted its technical capacities and experience in the integrated management of drought hazards and offered support to parties to strengthen their drought responses. She called for additional efforts to secure drought financing and a focus on impacts and losses from drought in the policy framework.

ARGENTINA underscored the importance of linking drought management to responsible land governance, including through access to justice for affected communities, citing the Escazú regional agreement on access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental matters as a good model.

Fiji, for PACIFIC SIDS, described drought in the Pacific as a “creeping disaster” with a profound impact on food security and freshwater availability. Noting the UNCCD Drought Initiative is only being undertaken in one of the subregion’s 15 countries, he urged more dedicated programmes for SIDS, which lack capacity for drought preparedness and mitigation planning.

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC proposed establishing a regional early warning center for drought. ECUADOR echoed calls to prioritize resilience and targeted approaches that link climate change, sustainable development, and disaster risk reduction. He called for technical assistance to foster knowledge exchange, including through the Community of Practice on Integrated Drought Management.

The US emphasized links between drought and poor land management practices, proposing increased support for whole-of-government drought planning to strengthen resilience. He highlighted the Abidjan Legacy Programme as a model for how to enhance political will at the highest levels.

EGYPT called for focusing on regional coordination at the river basin level. CHAD stated that accelerating water scarcity and hydric stress will lead to forced migration and increased conflict, and urged parties to adopt a binding instrument on drought.

FAO highlighted its support for national drought plans, including through a global portal on drought financing. CSOs stressed that the increasing frequency and severity of droughts and their impacts call for knowledge sharing and solidarity-based instruments at all levels for their proactive management.

In response, the Secretariat highlighted an ongoing GEF-supported project implemented by FAO and the Global Mechanism for enabling activities in a pilot group of countries. Responding to a request for information, he confirmed discussions are underway

for organizing the 2024 High-Level Meeting on National Drought Policy +10, with the UNCCD coordinating two of the nine workstreams.

Sand and dust storms: Introducing this sub-item on Tuesday, the Secretariat said the report ([ICCD/CRIC21/9](#)) highlights implementation efforts relevant to SDS and provides recommendations, including on how to manage their sources. He highlighted the recent declaration of 12 July as International Day of Combating SDS, which was commemorated for the first time this year with the Secretariat launching an [SDS Toolbox](#) to support policymakers and practitioners. He also highlighted the establishment of the [UN Coalition to Combat Sand and Dust Storms](#), which was launched at COP 14.

Many countries welcomed establishment of the Coalition, the International Day on SDS, and the launch of the SDS Toolbox, all of which they said underscore the increasing importance of SDS at the global level. The EU encouraged the Secretariat to promote use of the Toolbox. He underscored the importance of involving SDS-affected countries in the development of anticipated SDS policy guidelines and underscored the importance of SDS adaptation and source mitigation actions, such as SLM and combating drought.

LEBANON, PAKISTAN, and NIGERIA underscored the transboundary nature of SDS, which requires knowledge exchange and cooperation at the regional and subregional levels, and the need for adequate financing. LEBANON described a recent trip by representatives from 12 countries to observe China’s efforts to fight SDS, lauding the country’s efforts in addressing, for example, sand encroachment into cities.

FAO mentioned a forthcoming guide on combating SDS in agriculture, noting this issue is triggering international concern. CHINA stressed the importance of increasing research and establishing efficient research systems to study the human impacts of SDS.

ARGENTINA highlighted the rising frequency of SDS in Argentina and Chile and called for regional cooperation. The US expressed support for UNCCD work on SDS impacts on air quality, infrastructure, and soil health, and invited parties to make use of relevant studies carried out in the US.

TUNISIA stressed the importance of appropriate support to countries affected by SDS and the sustainable management of land and soil to reduce SDS impacts. CHAD called for technical expertise to control SDS. IRAQ said concerted collaborative international efforts were needed to combat SDS and its health and environmental impacts.

The ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO) described the adverse impacts of SDS on health, agriculture, industry, tourism, and transportation, and stressed the need to tackle its root causes, including environmental degradation and climate change.

Responding to comments, the Secretariat noted the need to further raise awareness of SDS and said the SDS Toolbox should be enhanced to include an accessible inventory of tools and technologies.

Gender: The Secretariat introduced the progress report on this policy framework ([ICCD/CRIC21/9](#)), summarizing national actions taken and strategies for engaging women and youth in SLM and land restoration activities, including through participation in decision-making processes and financial incentives.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA emphasized the need to remove legal and cultural restrictions on gender rights, particularly regarding

land tenure, inheritance, and ownership. ARGENTINA described the role of women in SLM and stressed the need for, among others, project financing, and protection of the rights to life, water, and the environment. Zimbabwe, for the AFRICAN GROUP, said empowering women and youth will foster improved implementation of the UNCCD.

The EU stressed the importance of promoting activities that boost synergies on gender policies in the three Rio Conventions and called for higher visibility of gender issues and the Gender Caucus at UNCCD meetings. She called for, among other things, strengthening actions to secure tenure rights, increased access to funding, and better reporting on gender.

CHAD said DLDD affects men and women differently and that while they are the most impacted, women also play an important role in combating these problems. ESWATINI supported increased empowerment of women, especially in rural areas where they play an important role in addressing land degradation.

NAMIBIA said land degradation projects should consider gender equality and ensure women and youth are involved in decision making. CUBA called for mainstreaming gender policies across state and sub-state levels to empower women and reduce gender gaps. He described legislation in his country to foster gender equality for rural women and said training and economic empowerment are critical.

FAO described some of its activities aimed at empowering women, including through capacity development and the provision of learning spaces for women leaders to share experiences.

CSOs urged, *inter alia*: establishing priorities and strategies to empower women and to facilitate access to technologies to improve women's working conditions; fully recognizing women's rights to access land and land tenure; and gender-responsive priorities to tackle desertification.

Land tenure: The Secretariat introduced the progress report on this policy framework ([ICCD/CRIC/21/9](#)), which encourages parties to integrate secure land tenure in UNCCD implementation.

Ghana, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for ensuring social and environmental safeguards and mechanisms for redressing grievances. He noted the critical role of financial empowerment for women, stating this is intrinsically linked to land assets. THE GAMBIA urged support for comprehensive programmes that contribute to women's land rights.

JORDAN highlighted the link between land tenure security at the local level and the Convention's objective of improving the living conditions of local populations.

The EU said insecure land tenure is a barrier to LDN progress, calling for more explicit reference to it across the LDN 2.0 target-setting process, and recognizing all legitimate land tenure rights, whether formal or not.

AUSTRALIA highlighted ongoing policy initiatives to strengthen land rights for Indigenous Peoples, who manage more than 50% of Australia's land area.

MEXICO noted the need for intergenerational approaches in Indigenous managed land. GABON emphasized the importance of ensuring that increased access to land does not lead to adverse impacts on biodiversity conservation.

FAO highlighted links between tenure security, access to markets, and technical support in the long-term management of land, forests and other natural resources and generating economic opportunities along value chains. Among new projects, he mentioned awareness-raising materials on the LDN-tenure nexus and the addition of a module on land tenure to WOCAT's Global SLM Database.

CSOs urged parties to prioritize data collection on legitimate rights prior to developing LDN plans, noting responsible land governance is a prerequisite for combating DLDD.

In response, the Secretariat acknowledged the LDN Target Setting Programme 2.0 was initially focused on integrated land use planning and noted efforts to integrate land tenure and environmental and social safeguards into the new phase of country projects.

Participatory Consultations on the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Independent Assessment Undertaken as Part of the Midterm Evaluation of the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework

These consultations took place on Thursday and Friday and were facilitated by Co-Chair of the IWG on the Mid-term Evaluation, Daniel Van Assche (European Commission). Van Assche presented a summary report containing the main findings and recommendations ([ICCD/CRIC/21/CRP.2](#)) extracted from a longer report of an independent assessment that was undertaken to further improve performance during the remaining time of the Strategic Framework (2018-2030). He said the IWG will prepare its report for COP 16 based on comments from participants and the findings of the assessment.

During general comments, many parties commended the work of the IWG and welcomed the independent assessment. Many also supported increased scientific involvement in the UNCCD, and the need to increase the Convention's visibility and influence on national budgetary processes.

Ecuador, for GRULAC, called for simplifying science-policy messages and tools and, in light of future evaluation processes, improving the monitoring process. The EU regretted gender responsiveness did not have a stronger focus in the summary report of the assessment.

Pakistan, for ASIA PACIFIC, stressed the need for enhanced visibility of the Convention and for options on budgetary support for the Secretariat.

Uganda, for the AFRICAN GROUP, expressed concern with countries taking action guided by other frameworks, blaming this mindset for "diminishing" the status of the UNCCD. He also lamented the inability of the UNCCD to influence national budgetary processes.

VENEZUELA said the Secretariat should support advocacy work at all levels for the implementation of the Strategic Framework. CSOs called for their greater engagement in the review of the Strategic Framework and in decision making, given their experience and expertise in implementation and policy dialogue.

Ansgar Eussner, Independent Consultant, then introduced each component of the assessment followed by comments from the floor.

On **political and financial commitments**, Eussner stated that, while the UNCCD is viewed as relevant, it is politically overshadowed by the other Rio Conventions, resulting in less influence in national budgeting. He said the assessment recommended, among others, establishing more global targets to facilitate implementation and enhancing the effectiveness of resource mobilization.

The EU said the UNCCD has the potential to position itself as the global reference point for sustainable land use and management. The Cook Islands, for ASIA PACIFIC, called for establishing a global target to rally political and financial commitments at all levels. Uganda, for the AFRICAN GROUP, with ARGENTINA, said quantifiable targets are useful but they should be practical and

realistic, with the AFRICAN GROUP stressing they must apply to both affected and developed country parties. He said non-affected parties must be required to fully complete their reports to help provide a global picture and share best practices.

CSOs stated that the links between land degradation, climate change, food security, and biodiversity must be emphasized by the UNCCD to inspire serious political commitment.

Introducing the subsection on **action at a bigger scale on the ground**, Eussner said land restoration must become a “whole-of-government approach,” noting the assessment recommended: improving the availability and targeting of information; building a “restoration industry”; and reconsidering the UNCCD’s substantive focus to enable it to become an effective catalyst for restoration work.

The EU said UNCCD goals can best be implemented at the national level through collaboration with policymakers, focal points, and stakeholders. He said identifying economic aspects of land degradation and drought would provide a powerful way to inform political decisions. ARGENTINA said the bottom-up approach lies at the heart of the UNCCD and must be considered with respect to land restoration. Uganda, for the AFRICAN GROUP, said local actors, including the private sector, must be engaged to achieve impacts on the ground. In response to requests for clarification on “restoration industry,” Eussner said the concept is still being developed.

On **linkages between the three Rio Conventions**, Eussner said the assessment found that interlinkages between land degradation, climate adaptation and mitigation, and biodiversity (and the respective Conventions) are increasingly recognized. He noted recommendations to get other ministries beyond environment ministries involved, and for increased global awareness about the benefits of synergies.

The EU proposed reinvigorating the Rio Conventions Joint Liaison Group to provide a roadmap for further synergistic action. He also supported the interoperability of monitoring and reporting under the three conventions, using DaRT, for example.

The Cook Islands, for ASIA PACIFIC, called for considering the special needs of subregional groups, as well as the feasibility of joint implementation of the Rio Conventions prior to taking any decisions at COP 16.

ALGERIA lamented the process to access funding is laborious and underscored the long-term nature of land restoration and the need for those holding the purse strings to understand that such issues affect global security.

UNEP mentioned a joint project on synergistic activities and reporting among the three Conventions, noting they have not received a mandate from the UNFCCC COP. He hoped for reducing the reporting burden on parties to facilitate an elaborated process for working together that parties at all COPs can agree on.

CSOs said, while always sought, stronger synergies have not yet been achieved at the national level, as, for example, various ministries in countries “do not speak same language.”

In his introduction on **science-policy updates**, Eussner stated the need to simplify scientific input for policymakers. He recommended: integrating new disciplines in the SPI, such as economics; better aligning the SPI with CRIC and COP agendas; and engaging regional scientific networks.

Several interventions focused on the need to simplify scientific messages so they can be communicated to and understood by a

range of stakeholders, from policymakers to farmers, as well as the need to expand the SPI’s scope.

The EU suggested: science-policy communication tools to help implement the Convention; and reassessing the SPI’s composition and terms of reference to ensure decision-making processes under the UNCCD are based on the best science available.

ARGENTINA supported strengthening participation of focal points, as well as strengthening and establishing regional scientific cooperation initiatives. Uganda, for the AFRICAN GROUP, urged increased participation of UNCCD Science and Technology Correspondents in Convention processes to help effectively communicate the SPI’s work at the national level. He agreed with the need for: increased interaction of the SPI in the CRIC and COP processes; and increased engagement with regional scientific networks and other experts. CSOs called for their continued involvement in the SPI.

On **monitoring and reporting**, Eussner said the assessment recommended: including economic and social information in indicators; including information on progress on land restoration outside the UNCCD; focusing on monitoring causal links to land degradation and drought; and establishing a transition process to the next Strategic Framework.

The EU supported enhancing the current reporting system and including economic and social dimensions, such as gender and land tenure. He said national reports have the potential to be effective communication and awareness-raising tools, but their format must be improved.

Uganda, for the AFRICAN GROUP, called for greater involvement of non-affected parties in voluntary reporting for Strategic Objectives 1-4 as it would provide a more complete global picture and provide affected parties with learned.

The Cook Islands, for ASIA PACIFIC, called for an independent evaluation of PRAIS to determine how to best strengthen it. Hungary, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, called for consistency and alignment among indicators, more robust monitoring tools, and including economic and social dimensions in reporting.

Sand and Dust Storms High-Level Event

An initiative of the Government of Uzbekistan, this event was held on Wednesday morning and consisted of a Ministerial Segment and an Interactive Dialogue with representatives of governments, UN agencies, and international organizations. The concept note for the event can be found in [ICCD/CRIC\(21\)CRP.1](#). Akmal Akramkhanov Senior Scientist, Science for Resilient Livelihoods in Dry Areas (ICARDA), Uzbekistan, moderated the event.

Ministerial Segment: Welcoming participants, Aziz Abduhakimov, Minister of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Uzbekistan, described the prevalence and impacts of SDS in Uzbekistan. He called for: education and awareness raising; science-based policies and solutions; regional cooperation, dialogue, and data exchange to address the transboundary nature of SDS; and improved financing and mobilization of resources.

Alfred Prospere, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Rural Development, Saint Lucia, described the health, economic, and environmental impacts from Saharan dust that is seasonally blown across the Atlantic Ocean and deposited on Caribbean states. He called for a global framework for early warning systems to prepare vulnerable people in the Caribbean for SDS.

Osama Ibrahim Faqeeha, Deputy Minister of Environment, Saudi Arabia, described initiatives his country is undertaking to combat SDS and its root causes, including the [Middle East Green Initiative](#) in which Central Asian and African states are tackling SDS through collaboration, sharing best practices, and creating synergies on the ground.

Alain-Richard Donwahi, Minister of Water and Forests and President of the Nawa Regional Council, Côte d'Ivoire, and UNCCD COP15 President, said 11 of the 17 SDGs are affected by SDS, with 35% of the sand and dust deposited onto land and the rest into the ocean. He called for educating policymakers to “arm them with knowledge,” as well as the need to foster grassroots movements, empower local communities, and leverage social media to raise awareness on SDS.

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, began his presentation with a video showing a devastating sandstorm in Uzbekistan. He said no region is spared and, while SDS originate in 45 countries, more than 150 countries are affected. He said he has seen yellow snow in Europe from SDS originating in the Sahel and elsewhere. He said when SDS invade communities, schools and ports often must close, affecting education and trade, respectively. He said the time is now for a global action plan on SDS.

Huseyin Avni Bicakli, ECO, said his organization's members are exploring the development of a joint mechanism to address regional environmental degradation, including SDS.

Interactive Dialogue with representatives of governments, UN agencies, and international organizations: Moderator Akramkhanov noted discussions would focus on options for regional and global cooperation to reduce impacts and elevate the political profile of SDS at the global scale.

In a keynote address, Feras Ziadat, FAO and UN Coalition to Combat SDS, said about two billion tons of dust enters the atmosphere annually, with damage from some SDS events costing hundreds of millions of dollars. He said the Coalition aims to promote a UN system-wide response that facilitates knowledge exchange, capacity building, and resource mobilization. Ziadat mentioned specific knowledge products such as newly launched guides on combating SDS in the agricultural sector based on case studies in Algeria, China, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Mongolia.

Zhifang Tu, China, outlined his country's experience in developing and implementing techniques to combat SDS domestically, as well as its support for diverse regional and global mechanisms to share knowledge and monitor source areas.

Mavlodod Abdulqodir, Tajikistan, discussed the growing contamination of mountain glaciers by SDS and subsequent consequences for water security in Central Asia.

Yong-Kwon Lee, Republic of Korea, highlighted national and transboundary reforestation initiatives to combat the spread of yellow dust in northeast Asia, notably a collaborative project with China and Mongolia and the Peace Forest Initiative.

Sylvie Goyet, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, highlighted the nexus between environment and security, discussing how her organization takes a comprehensive approach to disaster preparedness and strengthening resilience to SDS and other environmental events.

Asferachew Abate, World Bank, stressed the need for collaboration, an integrated approach, and investment to effectively combat SDS.

Bakhriddin Nishonov, Uzbekistan, described the increased frequency of SDS across Central Asia and the consequent need for,

among other things, regional cooperation in and further scientific research on monitoring, forecasting, and early warning.

Nurettin Tas, Türkiye, underscored the importance of synergies, capability building, and regional cooperation in mitigating SDS and their impacts.

Odbayar Odonchimed, Mongolia, shared his country's experiences in establishing monitoring and early warning systems, and said developing countries require support for strengthening such systems at the regional level.

Moderator Akramkhanov closed the session by stressing the significance of SDS and their impacts and emphasizing that the transboundary nature of the problem requires united efforts, knowledge exchange, innovative solutions, and immediate action.

Closing Plenary

Adoption of reports of the meeting: On Friday afternoon, CRIC Rapporteur Philippine Dutailly introduced the draft report of the meeting (ICCD/CRIC(21)/L.2), as well as ten related documents synthesizing key conclusions and recommendations on the various CRIC 21 agenda items, based on discussions during contact group meetings. She further noted that the outcome documents list potential actions that could be undertaken by parties and other stakeholders to enhance implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Framework. The CRIC then adopted the report, as orally revised. The respective reports are on:

- Strategic Objective 1, which discusses: continued work towards supporting efforts to achieve LDN; improved land-based progress indicator data and methods; and continued work toward reporting on spatial data;
- Strategic Objective 2, which stresses: supporting efforts towards improving the living conditions of affected populations; continued work towards improved reporting procedures and systems; and continued work towards improved understanding of the socio-economic impacts of land degradation and drought;
- Strategic Objective 3, which emphasizes continued work towards mitigating, adapting to, and managing the effects of drought to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems;
- Strategic Objective 4, which mentions: continued work towards: generating global environmental benefits through effective implementation of the UNCCD; synergies in reporting; and improved understanding of the linkages between land use change, land degradation, and biodiversity;
- Strategic Objective 5, on the mobilization of financial and non-financial resources to support the implementation of the Convention;
- Implementation of voluntary land degradation neutrality targets and related implementation efforts;
- Follow-up on policy frameworks and thematic issues on land tenure and gender and sand and dust storms;
- Follow-up on the progress report of the IWG on Drought and on the policy frameworks and thematic issue of drought;
- Implementation of voluntary LDN targets and related implementation efforts; and
- Improving the procedures for communication as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP.

Closing statements: Speakers thanked the Government of Uzbekistan for hosting the meeting in such an exemplary manner. Morocco, for the AFRICAN GROUP, welcomed progress made during discussions on drought and reiterated the group's support for a binding instrument on this issue. The EU reiterated the need to continue to improve the reporting process, address gender and

social equality issues, and tackle drought issues. Pakistan, for ASIA PACIFIC, called for increased capacity building, mobilization of resources, and knowledge sharing.

Ecuador, for GRULAC, said data gaps create uncertainties for decision making and action, which constitute a barrier that must be overcome. He said investing in training and technical support is crucial to ensure accurate and complete information and emphasized the need for comprehensive financial mechanisms.

Hungary, for the NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN, stressed the need for robust financing mechanisms and innovative and productive solutions to halt land degradation.

Georgia, for CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, emphasized: growing synergies between the UNCCD and other international conventions and initiatives; the need to consider a post-2030 globally binding target on land; and the need for sufficient funding to enable parties to report in a timely manner.

MOLDOVA announced its plan to hold an interregional workshop on drought and LDN and requested the UNCCD's support for this initiative.

CSOs stressed the value of the Gender Caucus and its work, and urged the continued inclusion of CSOs in national and regional consultations.

YOUTH stressed their commitment to addressing desertification and land degradation issues and, with CSOs, the need for enhancing youth engagement in UNCCD processes.

CRIC Chair Kilibarda thanked participants for a successful CRIC, the outcomes of which will contribute in a positive manner to the negotiations at COP 16. She urged participants to stay connected and continue discussing the issues informally, stressing that a collective effort is vital to the shaping of the future.

Obid Kudratov, First Deputy Minister of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Uzbekistan, thanked participants for attending CRIC 21, and reiterated the transboundary nature of the challenges we face and the need for international and regional cooperation.

Reiterating his appreciation for the host country, UNCCD Executive Secretary Thiaw stated that delegates will be leaving Samarkand with “full hearts and bellies.” He congratulated parties on a successful session, which will help pave the way to COP 16. He highlighted the recent launch of the Data Dashboard and the extensive media coverage of the session.

CRIC Chair Kilibarda closed the session at 6:53 pm.

A Brief Analysis of CRIC 21

It's not the starting or end point, but the change that matters –
Barron Orr, UNCCD Chief Scientist

As the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) approaches the half-way point of its current Strategic Framework (2018-2030), delegates were keenly aware of this meeting's importance. The first in-person session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) since 2019 had the clear and urgent task of kickstarting the year-long preparation and assessment process that will culminate with the next Conference of the Parties (COP 16) in December 2024.

Echoing increasingly dire warnings that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are seriously offtrack, the first-ever synthesis of data from country reports in the UNCCD Data Dashboard added a sense of urgency by providing concrete evidence

that worsening land degradation could seriously undermine one of the Convention's core targets: achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN) by 2030.

Against this backdrop, the significance of the meeting's location in Samarkand, a historically important stop on the Silk Road linking east and west, was observed in many statements, which were peppered with references to journeys and the importance of moving forward together.

This brief analysis outlines what is at stake ahead of COP 16 and assesses whether CRIC 21 has embarked on a journey that will make the critical decisions needed to speed up achievement of the Convention's objectives.

Land Degradation as a Global Problem: Unpacking the Data

Over the past two decades, the UNCCD has successfully demonstrated the centrality of land degradation to achieving multiple global goals, many of which became enshrined in the SDGs that were adopted in 2015. By endorsing the UNCCD's current Strategic Framework at COP 13 in Ordos, China, the CRIC expanded on the set of “global” themes to be included in countries' monitoring efforts, by incorporating new policy areas on such topics as drought, sand and dust storms, land tenure, and gender.

With the launch of the UNCCD's Data Dashboard just prior to CRIC 21, parties were able, for the first time, to base their discussions on global trends in desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD), marking the first serious attempt to “compare apples with apples.” While the number of reporting countries (126) was lower than in 2019, the Secretariat's synthesis of the country reports revealed:

- land degradation is advancing at an astonishing rate across all regions, with the world losing at least 100 million hectares of healthy and productive land annually between 2015 and 2019;
- sub-Saharan Africa, Western and Southern Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean experienced land degradation at rates faster than the global average;
- if current trends persist the world will need to restore 1.5 billion hectares of degraded land by 2030 to reach the LDN target;
- there are some “bright spots,” such as Botswana's success in rehabilitating nearly 1.5 million hectares, reducing degraded land in its territory by 50%, and the Dominican Republic reducing the proportion of its degraded land from 49% to 31%; and
- between 2016 and 2019, approximately USD 5 billion in bilateral and multilateral financing was channeled towards efforts to combat DLDD.

There was broad consensus that—despite some data gaps—the information submitted offers conclusive evidence that land degradation is outpacing restoration efforts, underscoring the need for urgent action to prevent the further destabilization of markets, communities, and ecosystems around the globe.

At the same time, many countries continued to emphasize the risk that continued technological challenges with the reporting process and comparability of country data poses for developing robust policy guidance for the COP. These calls could be seen as offering a new impetus for strengthening the voice of science in the Convention's decision-making processes: one of the areas historically seen as a weak aspect for the UNCCD.

Charting New Innovative Paths

Despite recurrent concerns about inadequate funding, methodological and capacity issues, and other implementation and monitoring challenges, discussions at CRIC 21 were described by many as substantive and focused. African and small island developing states, in particular, showed a new assertiveness in discussing their strategic priorities, notably in their push for a global indicator for, and a robust instrument to, address drought resilience.

Over the past decade, the UNCCD demonstrated its leadership in building consensus around the concept of LDN as a core target for the three Rio Conventions. As one participant noted, by operating “under the radar,” the UNCCD has perhaps enjoyed the space to innovate where its sister conventions have not. A case in point is the swiftly concluded negotiations and adoption of progressive policy frameworks on gender and land tenure at COPs 13 and 14. Various CRIC 21 statements also revealed a growing willingness to bridge technical and institutional silos to harmonize reporting processes at the national level, for example by accepting validated data on land-related indicators from other reporting processes rather than reinventing the wheel.

One example of growing reporting synergies was the six-country pilot project facilitated by the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) that brought together experts and stakeholders at the local level to review global data provided by the Secretariat. Participating countries praised the technological support provided by UNCCD partners for enabling them to make substantial improvements to their country data and noted the potential for seizing similar low hanging fruit through technological partnerships to strengthen the quality of land degradation data available at all levels. Other proposals for ensuring more synergies at the national level included calls to harmonize the UNCCD’s Performance Review and Appraisal Information System (PRAIS) online platform with the Data Reporting Tool for Multilateral Environment Agreements (DaRT), launched by the UN Environment Programme in 2020.

While it remains to be seen whether countries will truly put their money where their mouths are and fully implement these frameworks, discussions in plenary as well as nearly 40 side events (organized for the first time at a CRIC session) provided some indications about a spirit of collaboration and a willingness to work across sectoral boundaries that is critical in achieving much needed transformation on the ground. This was particularly evident in discussions at side events, which, as is the case with other multilateral processes, are increasingly becoming the space to push forward innovative ideas and discuss lessons learned that can then be fed back into the intergovernmental negotiations.

Towards Political Convergence

Even with the best science and policy frameworks, little progress can be made without political will. The high-level discussion on sand and dust storms was perhaps the best demonstration of how a shared commitment to address transboundary challenges can trigger swift and decisive action. “What a farmer does in Afghanistan can impact the air we breathe,” said Uzbekistan’s environment minister, who described how leaders in the region were taking practical steps to jointly tackle sand and dust storms using innovative means, including updating each other in real time using Whatsapp and other messaging platforms. The significance of holding a CRIC session in Central Asia was also highlighted, with the host Uzbekistan credited with driving regional efforts to tackle environmental degradation in the Aral Sea.

Ahead of the UN Climate Conference (COP 28) in December, the unprecedented [joint statement](#) issued by the Presidents of all three Conferences of the Parties (COPs) to the Rio Conventions lends additional weight to such efforts. With this joint declaration, the three Presidents hope to “open a new chapter in the fight against climate change, desertification, and biodiversity loss, one of coordinated efforts to face the urgency.”

But while major progress has been made in updating the PRAIS platform which was introduced a decade ago and is now in its fourth cycle, countries still have a way to go to adopt harmonized indicators and methodologies in order to draw more meaningful conclusions for decision makers. According to one scientific observer, one of the missing links is generating better data on land potential in order to make a compelling case for the “return of investment” of land. This is a key objective of the UNCCD’s Global Land Outlook, the second edition of which was published just prior to COP 15 in 2022, as well as the [GEO LDN flagship programme](#) launched in 2022 with the aim of supporting the global target of restoring one billion hectares of land by making a business case for sustainable investments in land restoration.

An Agenda for COP 16 and Beyond

Three decades on, the UNCCD is increasingly demonstrating that despite enjoying less than optimal resources, it is making a strong contribution to global understanding of the links between DLDD and human wellbeing at the global scale. As delegates visited the host city’s remarkable ancient buildings and retraced the footsteps of famous Uzbek warriors, many no doubt felt a sense of accomplishment at the role they have played in pointing COP 16 negotiators in the right direction.

Notwithstanding, COP 16 will have a heavy and substantive agenda. One of the key issues facing negotiators will be reviewing a number of policy and financing options put forward by the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought to comprehensively tackle rising impacts of drought in all world regions. These options, which overlap to some degree, include financial, technical, legally binding, and non-legally binding ways forward.

Another major unresolved issue for parties is how to strengthen the role of science in the Convention’s decision-making and implementation processes. While the UNCCD’s Science Policy Interface has been credited for raising the profile of core issues such as LDN, the Convention still needs to enhance the role of science. Some hope exists that COP 16 will adopt a decision on this crucial element, perhaps with a focus on providing policy guidance to chart a post-2030 agenda for the Convention.

As highlighted in the broad agreement for a new indicator for drought resilience, the UNCCD needs to do more to establish global targets to facilitate implementation and enhance the effectiveness of resource mobilization. This will become even more important in a crowded global space, with the upcoming COPs of its sister Rio Conventions taking place before COP 16 likely to eat up a lot of the financial and political “bandwidth.” This is why continuing collective efforts to change the global narrative on the critical role of land to all three Conventions are critically needed, to ensure that addressing land restoration becomes a “whole-of-government” approach.

Upcoming Meetings

UNFCCC COP 28: During the UN Climate Conference, the first Global Stocktake to assess progress made on implementation of the Paris Agreement will conclude. The Global Stocktake, initiated every five years, aims to assess the world's collective progress towards achieving its climate goals. Meeting during the event will be: COP 28; the fifth meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 5); the 18th meeting of the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 18); the 59th meeting of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI 59); and the 59th meeting of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA 59). **dates:** 30 November – 12 December 2023 **location:** Dubai, United Arab Emirates **www:** unfccc.int/cop28

66th GEF Council: The GEF Council will continue its work developing, adopting, and evaluating the operational policies for GEF-financed activities. It will also: review and approve its work programme; focus on relations with environmental conventions; and approve criteria, standards, and priorities for programmatic approaches. **dates:** 5-9 February 2024 **location:** Washington D.C., US **www:** thegef.org

Sixth meeting of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-6): UNEA-6 convenes under the theme “Effective, inclusive and sustainable multilateral actions to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.” It will be preceded by the sixth meeting of the Open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives, which will take place from 19-23 February 2024. **dates:** 26 February – 1 March 2024 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** unep.org/environmentalassembly/unea-6

Drought Resilience +10 – High-Level Meeting on National Drought Policy: This conference will bring countries together to review progress and lessons learned since the 2013 High-level Meeting to Explore and Define a Joint Way Forward towards a Drought-resilient World. **dates:** April/May 2024 **location:** TBD **www:** droughtmanagement.info/hmndp10/

CBD SBSTTA 26: The twenty-sixth meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) will be held back-to-back with the fourth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI). **dates:** 13-18 May 2024 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** cbd.int/meetings

Fourth meeting of the CBD SBI: This meeting will review implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in advance of the next CBD COP. **dates:** 21-29 May 2024 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** cbd.int/meetings

60th Session of the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies: The 60th sessions of the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) will prepare for the next meeting of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties. **dates:** 3-13 June 2024 **location:** Bonn, Germany **www:** unfccc.int/calendar/events-list

2024 UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF): The 2024 session of the HLPF will convene on the theme “Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises: The effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions.” It will include in-depth review of SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the Goals). **dates:** 8-17 July 2024 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org

UNCCD COP 16: COP 16 will, among other things, adopt a range of decisions based on consideration of the conclusions and recommendations of CRIC 21. **dates:** 2-13 December 2024 **location:** Riyadh, Saudi Arabia **www:** unccd.int/events/governing-bodies-meetings/unccd-conference-parties-16th-session-cop16
For additional meetings, see sdg.iisd.org

Glossary

AOAD	Arab Organization for Agricultural Development
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CST	Committee on Science and Technology
COP	Conference of the Parties
CRIC	Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention
CSOs	Civil society organizations
DaRT	Data Report Tool
DLDD	Desertification, land degradation, and drought
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GRULAC	Latin American and Caribbean Group
IWG	Intergovernmental Working Group
LDN	Land degradation neutrality
MEAs	Multilateral environmental agreements
PRAIS	Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDS	Sand and dust storms
SIDS	Small island developing states
SLM	Sustainable land management
SPI	Science-Policy Interface
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WOCAT	World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies