

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Friday, 6 December 2024

Friday was Governance Day at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16). Side events highlighted the importance of responsible and inclusive land governance and land tenure, and a high-level interactive dialogue examined the role of subnational governments in accelerating sustainable land management (SLM).

Land governance was also on the negotiating agenda, as the Committee of the Whole's (COW) contact group completed a first reading of the draft decision on land tenure. It also worked on the draft text on land degradation as a driver of migration.

The COW discussed sand and dust storms (SDS), gender, and grassland and rangeland. The Committee on Science and Technology (CST) addressed interfacing science and policy, knowledge sharing and technology transfer, as well as the work programme of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI). The CST and budget contact groups, and the informal group on drought met.

Committee of the Whole

Sand and Dust Storms: The Secretariat introduced the document ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/16](#)) and the draft decision in [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#). The AFRICAN GROUP, TUNISIA, SYRIA, and MEXICO called for capacity building and, with VENEZUELA, mobilizing financial resources to address sand and dust storms (SDS). GRENADA called for resources to understand the extent of social, health, environmental, and economic impacts of SDS.

The AFRICAN GROUP, CHINA, VENEZUELA, KENYA, TAJIKISTAN, and CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOs) called for enhancing monitoring and early warning systems. SAUDI ARABIA praised the Early Warnings for ALL initiative of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Middle East office for consolidating their region's systems.

Many, including the AFRICAN GROUP, SYRIA, INDIA, BAHRAIN, and GRENADA, supported regional and global cooperation for SDS management. The US asked for clarity on the progress to develop a global SDS information programme since there is no "one-stop-shop" solution. The UNCCD Secretariat responded that the global SDS implementation initiative developed by the Global Mechanism (GM) will be tailored to regional, national, and subnational circumstances.

IRAQ and VENEZUELA supported national and regional action plans. MEXICO said SDS should be part of national land degradation neutrality (LDN) strategies, and development plans across sectors regionally and nationally. The EU underscored the importance of bilateral and multilateral efforts.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA described cooperative efforts in Northeast Asia and called for support from the GM and the Global Environment Facility. Turkmenistan, on behalf of CENTRAL ASIA, described their regional SDS strategy.

KENYA, the FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO), and CSOs called for addressing drivers of SDS, with KENYA identifying anthropogenic deforestation, overgrazing, and unsustainable agricultural practices. The

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE) encouraged sustainable agriculture and increasing vegetation. CHINA called for promoting sustainable land and water management practices. TAJIKISTAN promoted biodiversity, eco-friendly mindsets, and increasing forest coverage. The EU supported nature-based solutions and soil-loss mitigation measures.

FAO described the UNCCD-FAO Guideline on the Integration of Sand and Dust Storm Management into Key Policy Areas and drew attention to the UN Decade on Combating Sand and Dust Storms, 2025-2035. TURKİYE said the Guideline needs to be adapted to specific contexts by taking into account national circumstances.

COW Chair Anna Luise forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Gender: The Secretariat presented the document on gender ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/17](#)) and the draft decision ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)).

CHILE, EU, AUSTRALIA, and others called for the promotion of gender equality throughout the Convention and gender parity in delegations. CHINA supported the continuation of the Gender Caucus at future UNCCD meetings and encouraged coordination between the UNCCD, UN Women, and other organizations to promote women's empowerment.

BAHRAIN said policies need to be based in social justice and the economic empowerment of women and youth. They also reiterated the need to include gender in environment and development strategies, and the rights of women in environmental decision-making. MALAYSIA described their national efforts to empower women in decision making. MONGOLIA noted they had integrated gender equality into their environmental and land management plans.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC and MONGOLIA highlighted the challenges that women and girls face, especially in rural areas, with PANAMA saying that they are also the first to lead and innovate. BENIN highlighted the challenges women face when they don't have secure land tenure and raised questions about how to monitor this across different contexts.

BRAZIL said women's rights must be defended in public policies and supported by appropriate funding. CHILE expressed their commitment to a human rights-based approach for the empowerment of women and girls, and, with the EU and INDIA, highlighted the need for robust gender disaggregated data. INDIA further supported the development of gender-responsive indicators to better track impact and ensure more inclusive implementation.

MONGOLIA said a newly established Environmental Female Leaders Group will help ensure that gender equality is a priority during COP 17. CSOs emphasized that gender equality is central to addressing desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) and called for greater gender responsiveness within the UNCCD. They called for the integration of the Gender Action Plan recommendations into UNCCD activities, including the establishment of a gender focal point to foster synergies across the Rio Conventions. They also called for the mobilization of resources to support gender specific programmes and to allow CSOs to participate as observers in COP contact groups.

COW Chair Anna Luise forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Grassland and rangeland: The Secretariat introduced the document ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/21-ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/9](#)).

TANZANIA and BOTSWANA called on the GM to identify innovative and effective financial and risk management tools. CHINA and MONGOLIA welcomed the Global Land Outlook Thematic Report on Rangelands and Pastoralists published earlier this year. CHINA recommended the Secretariat carry out additional scientific analysis and mobilize additional resources.

PERU indicated the need for a coordinated participatory approach to rangelands. The EU underscored the importance of aligning implementation with other relevant global goals. CHINA called for linkages with other international processes. Many countries highlighted synergies across biodiversity loss, climate change, water scarcity, and livelihoods.

BOTSWANA said grasslands and rangelands hold profound cultural importance to desert societies and Indigenous Peoples. TANZANIA emphasized social and cultural values. INDIA called for frameworks that protect pastoralist traditions. FAO advocated for building capacities of pastoralists and communities, and supporting participatory and gender-sensitive approaches. CGIAR supported sustainable and participatory tools for grasslands and rangelands. CSOs advocated for land tenure and ensuring grassland and rangeland are included in planning and decision-making processes.

UAE emphasized rangeland management for food security and water scarcity, and highlighted vertical farming methods to maximize resource utilization and enrich biodiversity. FAO, INDIA, and PALESTINE underscored food security and nutrition. VENEZUELA discussed regenerative farming, pesticide- and herbicide-free practices for swift soil recovery, habitat restoration, and ecological balance. CSOs supported agroecological approaches.

BOTSWANA and the US discussed their national guidelines on rangelands. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC said two of their eight LDN goals are on rangelands. PERU proposed integrating SLM into national policies to achieve LDN. TANZANIA and FAO drew attention to the 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists. Chair Luise referred it to the COW contact group.

Committee on Science and Technology

Interfacing Science and Policy, and Sharing Knowledge: Interfacing science and policy, knowledge sharing and technology transfer: The Secretariat introduced the documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/5](#) and [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/10](#)).

The EU and CHINA welcomed the updated recommendations from the Secretariat, with the EU suggesting closer collaboration with the Economics of Land Degradation Initiative to further incorporate economic and business aspects into the SPI and CST. CHINA described their efforts to scale up public investment and mobilize the private sector to support ecological reconstruction and rural revitalization.

VENEZUELA expressed appreciation for the SPI's work, noting that it has enabled them to set LDN and drought management targets. They queried how the recommendations provided can be implemented on the ground.

CSOs highlighted the critical importance of bridging the science-policy divide to address DLDD and called for the continued removal of barriers to technology transfer, particularly for developing countries.

UN HABITAT, on behalf of UN SPECIALIZED AGENCIES, noted that, during the COW, a number of parties underscored the importance of land tenure data, while the Gender Caucus called for gender disaggregated data to better understand the gender gap in land tenure rights. They noted the significant strides made to support monitoring data but cautioned that findings reveal mixed progress on land tenure. The Committee forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Work Programme of the Science-Policy Interface beyond 2024: The Secretariat introduced the document ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/7](#)) and the draft decision contained in [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/10](#). CSOs called for expanding the mandate of the SPI; equipping the SPI to address its work programme effectively;

including perspectives from women, youth, local communities, and Indigenous Peoples; and developing user-friendly tools and guidelines that present actionable solutions to policy makers and relevant stakeholders.

US requested adequate time during the COP to consider the priorities and impacts of the SPI work programme to avoid one that is challenging to implement.

The EU suggested a transition period of no more than two years beyond 2024, during which the SPI should operate in an advisory capacity and called for a proper stocktake across the three Rio Conventions. They recommended disseminating syntheses of technical reports, and amplifying country examples.

JAPAN requested that the third edition of the Global Land Outlook (GLO) be subject to proper peer review and suggested SPI strengthen its coordination with the GLO.

ARGENTINA suggested the SPI work programme should include fewer concepts and themes and instead address broader scientific developments that are concise and adapted to the country context, while bearing in mind that developing countries have fewer people able to implement the work.

WMO sought clarity about a phrase in the document termed "rapid response information products," noting that "periodic response information documents" is more appropriate.

The Committee forwarded the decision to the contact group.

Contact Groups

COW: Facilitated by Asher Nkegbe (Ghana), the COW contact group on other matters resumed consideration of the draft decision on land tenure. Delegates finished the first reading of the text and suggested adding new elements, including the nomination of land tenure focal points, capacity building for those focal points, national consultations on land tenure, innovative digital approaches to map legitimate land tenure rights, and creating a land tenure toolbox on the UNCCD website.

Delegates then addressed the draft decision on land degradation as a driver of migration. On promoting sustainable territorial development, delegates debated whether to refer to reducing "forced migration and displacement," "migration and forced displacement," or "migration and displacement"; and whether SDS should be included, given that it is a separate agenda item.

CST: Facilitated by Joseph Noel (Grenada), the CST contact group continued deliberations on the draft decision on sustainable land use systems (SLUS), focusing on the sub-paragraphs on creating an enabling environment for SLUS. The group completed its consideration of the draft decision and forwarded it to the CST.

In the Corridors

"Synergies" have emerged as a priority during the first week of COP 16. Many expressed the need to think across systems, forums, and domains of practice. "We speak with an aligned voice," said one Rio Convention Executive Secretary, in relation to the others. The mantra throughout plenary, committees, and contact groups has generally been that biodiversity, climate change, and DLDD decisions are inseparable. While some delegates discussed aligning land management with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's carbon sequestration goals and a just energy transition, others opined about the need for environmental safeguards that relate to both chemicals and biodiversity frameworks. Another said decisions across multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) should not undermine each other.

"The UNCCD is an umbrella," said one participant. "All impacts across all terrestrial ecosystems can be shielded by a holistic approach to proper land management." Another highlighted that land restoration is also about restoring biodiversity. Despite this growing chorus, it remains to be seen if synergistic thinking can be brought into the negotiations. An exasperated delegate said, "We all talk about the importance of addressing drivers of the triple planetary crises – but we have to actually put them into the text when the time comes!" Another quipped, "We really need to start talking about a whole-of-MEA-approach."