

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Monday, 9 December 2024

Science, Technology, and Innovation Day opened the second week of the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16). The day featured high-level dialogues and interactive sessions, including the launch of the International Science, Technology, and Innovation Forum.

The second open dialogue with civil society also focused on innovation, as panelists described their unique programmes to address land degradation and drought.

The Committee of the Whole (COW) opened discussions on the private sector and the business engagement strategy; the UNCCD communication plan; synergies with other relevant conventions and international organizations, institutions, and agencies; participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the UNCCD; and the work programme for COP 17.

The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) had a panel discussion on capacity building to further the implementation of the Convention.

The COW, budget, and joint CRIC-Committee on Science and Technology (CST) contact groups, as well as the informal group on drought, also met throughout the day.

Open Dialogue Session

The COP 16 Presidency opened the second open dialogue with civil society on the power and impact of land governance in communities across the globe.

Tarja Halonen, Former President of Finland and UNCCD Land Ambassador, remarked on the importance of including everyone in the development of solutions. She highlighted the significance of local, Indigenous, and traditional knowledges and the need for horizontal knowledge exchanges.

Keynote speaker: Celeste Drake, International Labour Organization (ILO), noted the importance of inclusive dialogues for elaborating solutions that matter and last. She highlighted the results of a recent report, which found that investing in nature-based solutions can create up to 32 million new jobs by 2030.

Panelists: Fatou Diouf, ENDA, spoke about multi-stakeholder dialogues and programmes that support local farmers' organizations to scale up agroecological farming in Senegal. She highlighted the importance of Indigenous knowledges, locally adapted solutions, and the role of youth.

Tiffany Marcelle, Caribbean Youth Environment Network, Dominica, emphasized the importance of youth empowerment and their role as innovative problem solvers. She called on parties to support the "profound lessons" Indigenous knowledges can offer for sustainable land management (SLM).

Mawe Moube Épse Nzoda, Youth in Action for Sustainable Development, Cameroon, discussed how land restoration projects can improve women's livelihoods. She detailed the work they are doing to support the sustainable use and harvest of eco-forest products to socially and economically empower women.

Jiajia Luo, China Green Foundation, described how the Million Forest project led to planting 2.6 million trees on the border of the Tengger and Badain Jaran Deserts by using a crowd-funding approach among young people donating funds for their music idol's birthday. These funds, she explained, were then used for buying and planting trees, with the entertainment "idols" raising awareness about reversing desertification and greening the desert.

Valentina Kastarakova, Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), and Representative of the Altai Region, Russia, shared the experience of western Siberian communities where traditional knowledge is used to combine peat humus and lignin in compost to replace expensive fertilizer and harmful herbicides. She called on the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) to integrate Indigenous knowledges with their free, prior, and informed consent into nature-based solutions to restore degraded lands.

Interventions from the floor expressed appreciation for CSOs within the UNCCD processes.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC called for establishing an international cooperation mechanism between parties, local communities, and CSOs. The EU said CSOs "reflect the lives of those on the front lines," and are instrumental in facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement. He said CSOs enable decisions that are scientifically robust and socially and economically sustainable.

YEMEN praised the dialogue for addressing the intersection between science and policy and called for more support for capacity building and knowledge transfer. CHINA called for expanding industries, such as desert tourism, and increased investment and economic incentives to restore nature.

CHINA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, ECUADOR, and the US expressed support for meaningful and effective participation of youth in the UNCCD, as they are "a driving force of innovation and action to promote environmental sustainability." ECUADOR emphasized public and private stakeholders in processes and in implementation. CAMBODIA welcomed the cooperation of civil society, development partners, and stakeholders, saying it will help achieve targets sooner. The US said CSOs enhance the work of the Convention and expressed disappointment about ongoing debates around CSO participation.

BRAZIL, BURUNDI, KENYA, MEXICO, and the US highlighted the need to involve Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and peoples with disabilities to address desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) and achieve land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets.

BRAZIL, supported by GUATEMALA, said establishing an Indigenous People's Caucus under the UNCCD is "an important step for achieving maturity in the Convention," in line with progress of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's Local Peoples and Indigenous Peoples (LIPP) Caucus and the new permanent subsidiary body on Article 8(j) and other provisions related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (UNHCHR) urged for a rights-based approach to the UNCCD,

calling for the equal, free, and active participation of people in civil society, and called for COP 16 to integrate the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into its outcomes.

Panelists responded by highlighting the need for finding synergies and leveraging the combined efforts of NGOs and universities working on projects within the same regions.

Concluding the session, Moderator Ellen Otaru Okoedion summarized key messages, calling on UNCCD parties to: support locally-led actions between local communities, Indigenous Peoples, CSOs, scientists, academia, and policy makers; encourage and support effective participation of Indigenous Peoples; provide training workshops and capacity-building platforms; and ensure mobilization of financial resources from the public sector through fiscal incentives.

Committee of the Whole

Participation and involvement of the private sector in meetings and processes of the UNCCD and the business engagement strategy: The representative of the Global Mechanism (GM) introduced the documents [ICCD/COP\(16\)/13](#) and the draft decision in [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#).

The EU said the recommendations provided by the GM are useful and expressed appreciation for the Business for Land Initiative, noting the emergence of a vibrant land restoration industry. He said advancing engagement with the private sector should include strengthening the business case for UNCCD initiatives and its attractiveness to the private sector, and encouraging business and industry to become involved in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD.

The COW forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Review of progress in the implementation of the UNCCD communication plan: The UNCCD introduced the documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/3](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)) and provided an overview of the communications campaign.

ECUADOR and the EU emphasized that communications should be science-based. The EU welcomed the extension to a broader, non-English audience. The COW forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Promotion and strengthening relationships with other relevant conventions and international organizations, institutions and agencies: The Secretariat introduced the documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/4](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)). Overall, there was broad support for synergies.

CHINA reinforced “independent voices” and autonomy of the Conventions, while REPUBLIC OF KOREA emphasized synergies require effective communication. COLOMBIA, GUATEMALA, and INDIA emphasized international cooperation. COLOMBIA called for a financing strategy that mobilizes resources for synergies. MEXICO and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) highlighted the outcome of the Bern III Conference on Cooperation among the Biodiversity-related Conventions. DOMINICAN REPUBLIC said synergies make the Rio Conventions more adaptable, and the EU said synergies would improve implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The EU and UNEP emphasized the role of nature-based solutions, while URUGUAY cautioned these can be positive for mitigation but negative for LDN. PANAMA called attention to the UN Development Programme’s Nature Pledge uniting the three Rio Conventions.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) highlighted the centrality of agrifood systems. CSOs emphasized synergies among UN entities on SLM. UN WOMEN stressed the importance of gender-responsive implementation across the Rio Conventions. COLOMBIA, ECUADOR, FAO, and UN WOMEN highlighted monitoring, reporting and indicators.

The COW forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the UNCCD: The Secretariat

introduced the documents ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/12](#), [ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)).

UNCCD CSO Panel Chair Oyéoussi Charles Balogoun highlighted the urgent need for inclusive and transformative action to combat DLDD, which is crucial for achieving sustainable development and community resilience. He called on parties to strengthen gender-responsive policies and to support and facilitate the establishment of an Indigenous Peoples Caucus to enhance their full and effective participation.

BRAZIL argued that it is time for the UNCCD to enable those most vulnerable to influence decision-making, highlighting the CBD’s Indigenous Peoples and local communities caucus, and its recent decision establishing a permanent subsidiary body on Article 8(j) and other provisions related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities under the CBD. GUATEMALA agreed, arguing that the current UNCCD process neglects the insights of those who have sustainably managed lands for generations. She said this was not a matter of equity, but about the very achievement of the Convention’s goals.

The EU and MOROCCO highlighted the crucial role that CSOs play in decision making on land management, with MOROCCO additionally emphasizing relationships and knowledge exchange with CSOs.

Some parties expressed reservations regarding CSO participation. CHINA and ESWATINI urged caution with regard to contact groups, underlining that the UNCCD is an intergovernmental process. MALAYSIA argued that CSOs should engage as observers and not participate in contact groups. The UAE suggested that CSO participation should be limited to knowledge-exchange and awareness-raising, noting that their participation should come with clear conditions.

The COW forwarded the draft decision to the contact group.

Programme of work for the Seventeenth Session of the Conference of the Parties: COW Chair Anna Luise introduced the draft decision ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/22](#)) and forwarded it to the contact group for further discussion.

CSOs called for: prioritizing inclusive governance; promoting synergies across conventions; expanding capacity-building efforts at the local level; embracing gender-responsive strategies; expanding the scope of the SPI; and funding and resources for community-driven projects.

Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

Development and promotion of activities for targeted capacity-building to further the implementation of the Convention: The Secretariat introduced the documents ([ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/6](#), [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/7-ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/8](#) and [ICCD/CRIC\(22\)/8](#)).

CRIC Chair Mirko Knežević invited the panelists to present their organizations’ capacity building strategies. Tatenda Lemann, World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, emphasized key strategies for effective capacity building in SLM and LDN, including to: align efforts across programmes and initiatives to maximize impact and avoid duplication; and strengthen capacity through practical, real-life challenges at local and national levels.

Patrice Burger, Centre d’Actions et de Réalisations Internationales (CARI), highlighted the need for capacity building at all levels, and said it was crucial to address complexities and misunderstandings regarding DLDD terminology through workshops and training sessions. He expressed doubt that the UNCCD goals would be achieved without serious capacity-building efforts.

Khalid Cherki, Ministry of Agriculture, Maritime Fisheries, Rural Development, and Water and Forests, Morocco, described the African Capacity Building Plan of Action, which provides a simple guide for focal points on what is expected of them, how they should mobilize community members, and how to convey

their messages, specifically as related to public sector or local community members.

Helene Gichenje, SPI Early Career Scientist Fellow, discussed coordinated, responsive, and innovative approaches to catalyze UNCCD capacity-building efforts. She focused on the need to support incubation platforms to nurture young scientists and practitioners within the SPI and noted that challenges surrounding digital literacy and infrastructure limit their usefulness to some stakeholders.

Ludwig Liagre, Rio Impact, joined the panel virtually to discuss joint capacity-building programmes between the Rio Conventions. He called for strengthening individual, institutional, and systemic approaches to enhancing synergies between climate, biodiversity, and land, and emphasized the importance of knowledge dissemination, training programmes, and enhanced collaboration between specific planning processes, such as LDN targets and national adaptation plans.

Ecuador, on behalf of the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP, with BOLIVIA and VENEZUELA, praised the Secretariat's capacity-building efforts. He noted that gaps in reporting tools remain, specifically around how to report unique national and regional circumstances. He called for increased investment for training and capacity building for small island developing states (SIDS), least developed, and middle-income countries. ARGENTINA urged parties to "get back to the origins of the Convention" by focusing on the three pillars of DLDD to make the most of "the scarce funding we have at our disposal."

The EU acknowledged positive steps taken to integrate Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 into the Convention's framework through LDN target setting and called for continued collaboration at all levels.

LIBERIA expressed their commitment to an adaptive, inclusive approach to sustainable development and LDN, and aligning all efforts in the region to build collaborative networks. KAZAKHSTAN said for targeted capacity building to ensure successful implementation of the Convention, key areas to prioritize include developing a plan at national level, and using geo-information systems and maps to support drought prediction and other weather-related events.

BOLIVIA and VENEZUELA described their capacity-building efforts to improve vegetation cover, saying it required intensive awareness raising through weekly bulletins about forest fires. BAHRAIN said reporting is the cornerstone of transparency, and called for capacity building through expansion of online tools that accommodate training courses, and solicit and translate best practices.

The CBD recalled Decision 16.3 on capacity building, adopted during the CBD COP 16 in Cali, saying regional centers are intended to play a crucial role in implementing the decision.

CSOs emphasized capacity building as a fundamental component to addressing land degradation, provided it: supports local leadership; empowers local communities and "walks hand-in-hand" with them; integrates Indigenous and traditional knowledges; and ensures multi-stakeholder participation.

The CRIC forwarded the decision to the contact group.

Contact Groups

COW: Facilitated by Asher Nkegbe (Ghana), the contact group met from 10:00 am - 2:45 pm. The informal group on **drought** reported back that they are making progress on the draft decision and would meet again at 1:00 pm for further discussions with the aim of sending a clean text back to the contact group.

On the draft decision on **enhancing the implementation of the Convention and its 2018-2030 Strategic Framework**, the Secretariat proposed moving specific paragraphs, including on the private sector, CSOs, synergies, gender, the SPI, communication of information, and resource mobilization into the relevant decision under each of those agenda items to ensure consistency.

Delegates agreed to study the proposal and inform the contact group.

The contact group then returned to the draft decision on **migration**. On Saturday, they completed the preamble and paragraphs 1 and 2(a). They completed the first reading of the decision, and reached agreement on a few paragraphs, but will continue discussions at a subsequent session.

Parties then returned to negotiations on the decision on **land tenure**. Regarding the paragraph on land tenure being an enabling factor for synergistic implementation of the Rio Conventions, consensus proved elusive. Discussions focused on the appropriate way to highlight and reference the Conventions' synergies, whether to include reference to "other conventions," and whether to mention national implementation in particular. After lengthy discussions, parties agreed to "encourage" the integration of secure land tenure in line with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. On this paragraph, lengthy discussions also arose on how best to reference the relevant technical guidance for the Guidelines, and whether to include qualifiers to the text.

The contact group resumed in the evening with plans to finish the second reading of the land tenure decision and then return to the decision on migration.

Joint CRIC-CST: Facilitated by Alwin Dornelly (Saint Lucia), the contact group considered the decision on improving the procedures for the communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP. Bracketed text was addressed fairly rapidly, focused on: "assessing financial resources necessary in order to initiate a digital transformation initiative to be launched at the COP"; and "developing internationally agreed standards for the UNCCD's geospatial reporting indicators." The group agreed to change the text to simply "follow international standards" in a more general approach as a cost-free development was no longer available. From paragraph 8 onwards, the pace slowed, and discussions continued into the night.

In the Corridors

As the second week of COP 16 began, CSO participants once again had the opportunity to share their experiences and their passions during the second civil society dialogue. Inspiring stories from around the world brought home the true value of investment in inclusive land restoration activities. It is through these examples that the intertwined practices responding to all of the Rio Conventions' objectives are demonstrated.

The examples of innovative approaches did not disappoint. One such example was generating USD 2.5 million for planting trees by posing a very simple question: "Do you want to get your pop culture idol a cool birthday gift?" Youth used the music entertainment industry in Asia to create this unique and successful funding model for environmental action. One inspired delegate called this "a total win-win" and noted that not only did it raise significant funds, it also increased the visibility of communities living alongside a desert that is "always edging closer." This and other presentations highlighted why the CSO dialogues are really key to reminding delegations why youth, women, Indigenous Peoples, and local civil society solutions can be transformative. Some participants, however, expressed disappointment that more parties were not in the room to share the experience.

In the afternoon, the COW's discussion on civil society engagement took a different tone. Some delegates supported enhancing CSO and youth participation, as well as establishing an Indigenous Peoples Caucus. But many said that as "observers," CSOs "should not participate in the 'work' of contact groups." Outside the conference room, some participants asked, "If the other two Rio Conventions welcome civil society observers into their contact groups, why can't the UNCCD?"