

UNCCD COP 16 Highlights: Wednesday, 11 December 2024

On Wednesday, all eyes were on the contact groups at the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16). No formal meetings of the Committee of the Whole (COW), the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), or the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) were on the agenda. Instead, delegates found themselves meeting in contact groups, which were scheduled from 10:00 am until 11:00 pm. While there were short breaks throughout the day, the pressure to make progress on the many outstanding draft decisions was palpable both in the small conference rooms and in the corridors where delegates rushed between rooms, often grabbing a quick snack or coffee to fuel themselves through the long day.

Contact Groups

COW: In the morning, the facilitator of the informal group on **drought** reported back that they had almost reached agreement on the draft decision. There was emerging agreement to establish an *ad hoc* intergovernmental working group, and set the number of meetings and the modalities of those meetings. The informal group had also discussed the mandate, objectives, and content of the protocol or framework. They planned to complete their work on Wednesday and submit the draft text to the contact group, following a review by the UNCCD legal officer. Some delegations asked to have time to consider the text and discuss it Thursday morning. Others wanted to discuss the paragraph on the protocol or framework in the evening.

The COW contact group then returned to the decision on **sand and dust storms** (SDS), which they started Tuesday night. Delegates completed discussing the paragraph, which invites the UN Coalition on Combating SDS and other relevant entities to continue their collaboration to assist affected country parties in developing and implementing national and regional SDS policies and action plans.

Delegates then discussed technical and financial support, eventually agreeing that regional and multilateral financial institutions and relevant stakeholders could help affected countries cope with SDS linked to DLDD to achieve their voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets. On a sub-paragraph on requests to the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM), delegates agreed that the scope of these requests would be matters pertaining to the Convention and subject to the availability of resources.

On participating in the UN Coalition on Combating SDS, they agreed to enhance cooperation and collaboration with UN

agencies, organizations, and treaties, and to develop global implementation initiatives to address particularly anthropogenic SDS sources and gaps. On a sub-paragraph on the SDS Toolbox, delegates agreed it should be promoted and refined.

On an inventory of SDS-related tools and technologies, parties asked the Secretariat about the status and timeline of the inventory's development since COP 15. They also agreed to include best practice guidelines and to ensure broad dissemination of the inventory. On SDS strategies and action plans, parties agreed that these should include in-depth technical studies, knowledge and science-based data, and clear terms and procedures.

Delegates then agreed to a paragraph requesting the Secretariat and the GM to report to future CRIC sessions and COPs. Some underscored that, while time bounds were not proposed, timely follow-up and "continuity" in upcoming sessions was essential.

For future COW discussions, a proposal was made, with broad support, to streamline the negotiating procedure so they would only discuss new text that was available well in advance and to convene in small groups to accelerate the process to agree on text.

Delegates then returned to the draft decision on **land tenure**. They finalized the operative paragraphs on nominating focal points for land tenure, and on terminology on differentiating between "developed country Parties and other Parties" in relation to collaborating with other actors on, *inter alia*, designing and implementing land tenure administrative systems to improve responsible governance of tenure.

On focal points, discussions focused on: clarifying the role of the land tenure focal point in terms of coordinating the integration of land tenure into national plans and activities; ensuring that a focal point on land tenure would not prejudice the existing focal point frameworks; and a qualifier that takes into account the Secretariat's availability of resources. On the latter, parties reported back from informal discussions that they had agreed to remove reference to technical and financial support. Discussions focused on whether to distinguish between developed country parties and other parties, in relation to the actions that they are invited to undertake, and the extent to which these should be done "on a voluntary basis," by those "in a position to do so," or "taking into account their capabilities."

Next, delegates completed the first reading of the draft decision on the promotion and strengthening of relationships with other relevant conventions and international organizations, institutions, and agencies (**synergies**). They swiftly moved through the preambular paragraphs, with only a few proposed edits, and countries filing reservations on paragraphs related to: acknowledging that implementation benefits from strong

and effective collaborations to leverage synergies; welcoming the progress made in enhancing existing and establishing new partnerships; and the significance of addressing DLDD to achieve objectives on climate change and biodiversity.

Moving onto the operative paragraphs, delegates discussed the additional text moved from the draft decision on the midterm evaluation of the 2018-2030 UNCCD Strategic Framework. Here, delegates discussed phrases linked to respecting the mandates of the Conventions and the qualifiers necessary to consider the Secretariat's resources.

In discussion of the operative text, parties considered new references to spatial data alongside Earth observation data for economic and sustainable land management (SLM). They also considered inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and women in stakeholder engagement plans. There was some initial disagreement as to whether to keep a proposal to consider the outcomes of the Bern III Conference on cooperation among the biodiversity-related Conventions for the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. There was also disagreement about new text requesting the Secretariat to continue and strengthen interlinkages to scientific bodies, namely the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and the Science-Policy Interface (SPI). Parties agreed to align language related to who will provide financial contributions with the finalized text on land tenure that identified "developed country Parties and other Parties."

In the evening, delegates opened discussion on **gender** and completed a first reading of the text. Among other things, new text was introduced on women's access to land and natural resources and also on those in vulnerable situations, and in relation to halting biodiversity loss and achieving land restoration targets.

As of 9:00 pm, delegates were discussing the way forward on SDS and which draft decision to prioritize next.

CST: The contact group reconvened in the morning and reopened the draft decision on the **future functioning of the SPI**. The SPI provided an explanation, noting that the paragraphs are closely linked and should be approached in a holistic manner. He also mentioned that much of the content is repeated in the draft decision on the SPI's work programme, which acts as a guide to the SPI, whereas this draft decision determines the functioning of the SPI.

Following interventions requesting bracketing or moving multiple paragraphs, the group decided to focus initially on general comments to have an overview of the contents before providing textual suggestions. Initial interventions focused on the composition and budgetary implications of a future SPI, and definitions underpinning terms such as "sound science" and "rapid response information products." Delegates queried how review procedures would take place and how two paragraphs moved from the draft decision on the midterm evaluation of the Strategic Framework 2018-2030 would apply in this decision.

They also discussed the introduction of two operative paragraphs. The first calls for exploring the idea of establishing a Global Science-Policy Alliance on Land for more integrative Earth observation and scientific assessment in collaboration with the SPI and appropriate secretariats. The second invites parties to support and strengthen newly-established national and international scientific institutions, and to organize and host regionally-specific scientific events and networks under the auspices of the UNCCD

SPI/CST to ensure DLDD issues are integrated into existing SPI networks. These two paragraphs were agreed.

In the afternoon, the group continued with a second reading of the draft decision, focused on providing textual suggestions. Little progress was made, and after much debate, the group agreed to a break to allow informal-informal discussions on merging two paragraphs in the decision. After much discussion, delegations agreed to combine the two paragraphs into a single paragraph with sub-paragraphs on how the SPI will coordinate with intergovernmental science-policy bodies, as well as that future work programmes will be fixed for a duration of two intersessional periods. Subsequent consideration of the amendments elicited further deliberations. In the evening, delegates reached agreement on all outstanding paragraphs.

Discussions continued on the **work programme for the SPI for the biennium 2025-2026**, as well as the programme of work for the CST's 17th session.

CRIC: The CRIC contact group spent most of the day on the draft decision on assessment of financial flows to close the existing financing gap and enhance the effectiveness of DLDD mitigation efforts. Late in the afternoon, they began negotiations on the draft decision on promotion of capacity building to further the implementation of the Convention.

Budget: The COW's budget contact group met all day. Participants continued discussing the ramifications of a zero nominal growth budget versus a budget increase, acknowledging zero nominal growth would effectively be a decrease in the budget due to inflation and existing budget shortfalls.

In the Corridors

Quicksand forms when sand is suddenly agitated. When water in the sand cannot escape, it creates a liquefied soil that loses strength and cannot support weight, causing objects on the surface, including people, to sink. Over the past week, some of the negotiations on draft decisions seemed to resemble quicksand, as parties got sucked into debates over language and phrases taking hours to resolve before they could once again come to the surface.

This is the norm at multilateral environmental negotiations. Funding terminology is a great example of this: who should be paying for certain programmes and how much will they cost? Should only "donor countries" pay, or should it also be "countries in a position to do so"? Should it be "voluntary," or "upon request," or "as appropriate"? This debate, which is similar to some of the discussions on differentiated responsibilities in other multilateral environmental agreements, slowed some negotiations during the day, including on land tenure and sand and dust storms. According to one delegate, "This has not always been the case at UNCCD COPs." Another one worried that maybe "We are taking synergies too far and importing climate change politics into the UNCCD."

Yet, outside the contact groups, there has been a true spirit of cooperation, which many say has been the standard practice at the UNCCD. One journalist, who usually attends climate COPs, asked, "Where are the protests and actions? Where are the NGOs?" In response, another participant quipped, "The UNCCD family works together to ensure sustainable land management and restoration. There are no 'good guys' and 'bad guys.'" As sounds of applause emanated from one of the contact groups as they agreed to the draft decision on land tenure, perhaps the quicksand will prove to be less scary than it currently appears.