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#### Interfacing science and policy, and sharing knowledge

#### Review of the Science-Policy Interface and its achievements

## Review of the Science-Policy Interface and its achievements

### Note by the secretariat

#### *Summary*

By its decision 23/COP.11, the Conference of the Parties (COP) decided that the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) will function up to the end of COP 13, at which time it will be reviewed. Further, by decision 23/COP.12, the COP decided that the thirteenth session of the Committee on Science and Technology should focus, inter alia, on the review of the work conducted by the SPI during the biennium 2016–2017 and on its overall achievements since its establishment in order to decide on the future functioning of the SPI.

This document provides evidence-based information on the work conducted by the SPI during the biennium 2016–2017 and its overall achievements, as well as related conclusions and recommendations, building on an external assessment that was commissioned by the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in the period January to May 2017. The information, conclusions and recommendations presented in this document are intended to assist Parties in their deliberations on the future functioning of the SPI.

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## I. Background

1. By its decision 23/COP.11, the Conference of the Parties (COP) established a Science-Policy Interface (SPI) composed of 20 members and three observers. This decision follows the recognition that a better means of delivering scientific information on desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD) to all interested parties is required and that the COP needs to be kept up to date on scientific developments. The objectives of the SPI are to facilitate a two-way science–policy dialogue and ensure the delivery of policy-relevant information, knowledge and advice on DLDD to all interested parties.

2. In pursuing these objectives the SPI is assigned numerous tasks<sup>1</sup> that deal with identifying scientific knowledge needs, acquiring and analysing scientific findings and other science-related information concerning DLDD, and translating this information for policy use, particularly for decision-making under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). It is also tasked with identifying and bringing forth ways and means for meeting the scientific knowledge needs, and interacting with various scientific mechanisms.

3. By its decision 23/COP.11, the COP decided that the SPI will function up to the end of COP 13, at which time it will be reviewed. By its decision 23/COP.12, the COP decided that the thirteenth session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) should focus, inter alia, on the review of the work conducted by the SPI during the biennium 2016–2017 and on its overall achievements since its establishment, in order to decide on the future functioning of the SPI. By the same decision, the secretariat was requested to provide appropriate documentation for CST 13.

4. With the aim of ensuring that CST 13 would have available evidence-based, well-analysed information for the SPI review, the secretariat commissioned an external assessment of the SPI. The CST Bureau was consulted on the terms of reference. The CST Bureau also guided the selection of the team of consultants to carry out the assessment, building on a shortlisting of the most competent candidates that had applied for the assignment. A team led by Mr. Richard Escadafal and supported by Ms. Lindsay Stringer and Mr. Richard James Thomas was selected for the task.

5. The external assessment was prepared in the period January to May 2017. The assessment process involved the collection and study of both quantitative and qualitative data, involving SPI documents and meeting reports, statistics on the use of SPI products, two online surveys and interviews of various stakeholder groups. Overall, close to 200 people were consulted through the surveys and interviews during the assessment process. An advanced draft of the assessment report was presented to the SPI meeting in April 2017. The feedback provided by the SPI members was used to further develop the report. The assessment report was completed in mid-May 2017 and can be accessed on the UNCCD website.<sup>2</sup>

6. The external assessment was constructed in line with decision 23/COP.12: it focused on two interlinked aspects, namely the work conducted by the SPI in the biennium 2016–2017, and the overall achievements of the SPI since its establishment. The first aspect was prepared as a performance review of the SPI 2016–2017 work programme, which was adopted at COP 12.<sup>3</sup> It was primarily about comparing what was originally planned with

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<sup>1</sup> The terms of reference of the SPI are available at [http://knowledge.unccd.int/sites/default/files/inline-files/ToR\\_SPI\\_revised-Apr2016.pdf](http://knowledge.unccd.int/sites/default/files/inline-files/ToR_SPI_revised-Apr2016.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> [www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the\\_SPI\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the_SPI_Assessment.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Decision 21/COP.12.

what actually happened, and identifying key factors for successes or challenges. The second aspect, on the overall achievements of the SPI since its establishment, reflected the outcomes of the SPI against its overall objective and mandate. This aspect looked beyond output delivery towards the effectiveness/impact of the SPI. In order to establish a solid basis for assessing this effectiveness/impact, the external assessment started with a definition of an initial ‘theory of change’ for the SPI, which aimed to clarify how the SPI is expected to influence the UNCCD process and beyond, from a longer-term perspective.

7. This document is based on the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the external assessment.

## II. Expected outcomes of the Science-Policy Interface

8. The overall objective of the SPI (to facilitate a two-way science–policy dialogue and ensure delivery of policy-relevant information, knowledge and advice on DLDD) is formulated in a manner that allows a broad range of interpretations of what can be considered as progress. Therefore the external assessment started with a specification of more exact parameters to measure the extent of SPI achievements, which was done in the form of the above-mentioned initial theory of change. It aimed to provide a pragmatic interpretation of the objectives and the expected outcomes of the SPI.

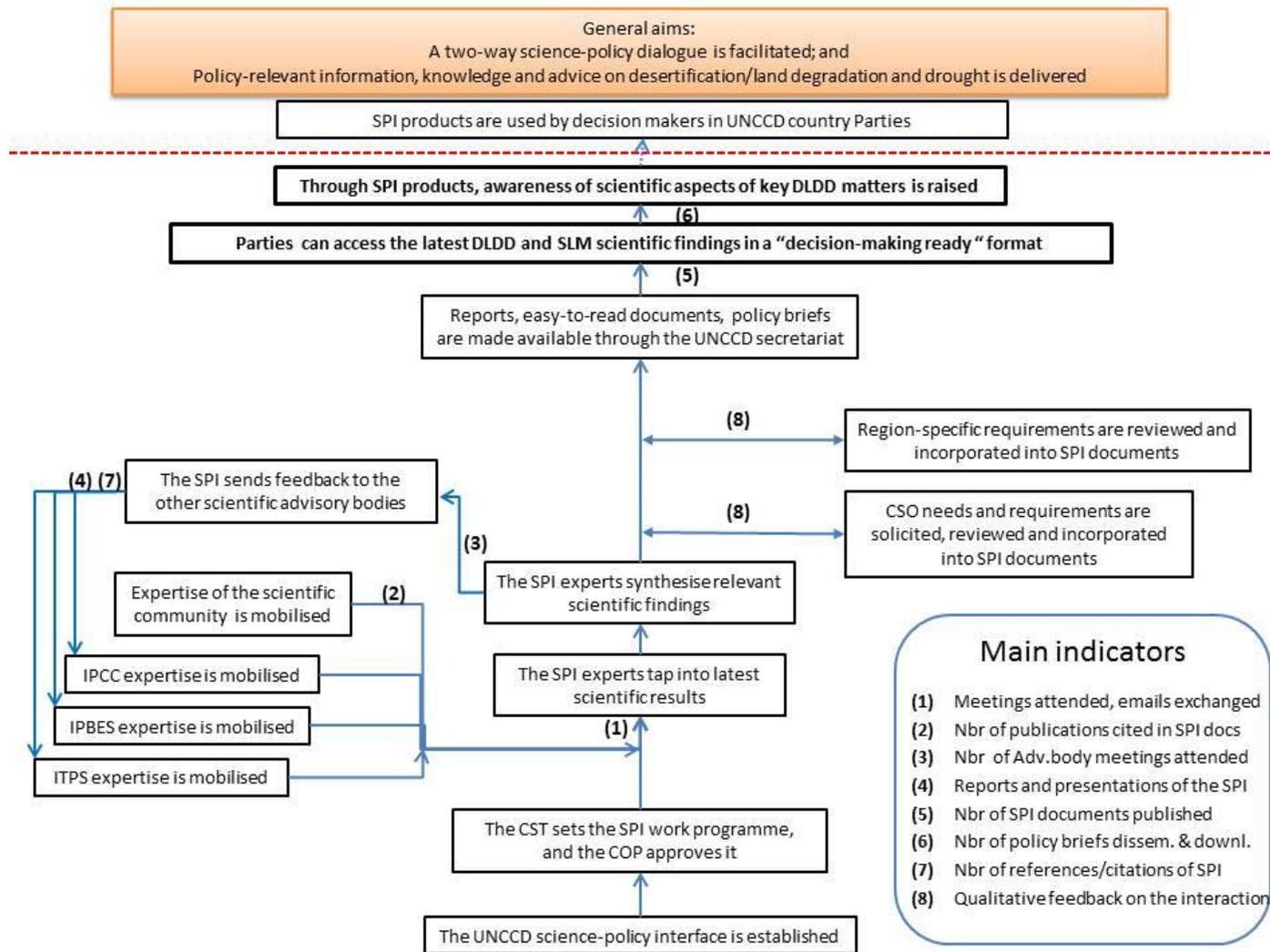
9. The initial theory of change for the SPI, as presented in the external assessment, is shown in the figure below. It translates the general aim of the SPI to be met when **SPI products are used by decision makers in UNCCD country Parties**. It further suggests that the key steps towards this are: (i) raised awareness of scientific aspects of key DLDD matters through SPI products and (ii) access of Parties to the latest DLDD and sustainable land management (SLM) scientific findings in a ‘decision-making ready’ format.

10. Building on the mandate given to the SPI, the initial theory of change identifies four main outcomes for the SPI, which will be critical for meeting the above-mentioned key steps, as follows:

- (a) Latest scientific results are tapped into by the SPI;
- (b) Relevant scientific findings are synthesized by the SPI experts (including attention to region-specific requirements and needs and requirements arising from civil society);
- (c) Other scientific advisory bodies are aware of UNCCD perspectives through the SPI inputs;
- (d) Expertise of the scientific community is mobilized.

11. The two key steps and four outcomes are the results framework against which the overall achievements of the SPI were measured in the external assessment. As the SPI has functioned for a limited time and many of its products have been published only recently, progress towards the general aim (SPI products are used by the decision-makers) were not considered in depth.

Figure  
Initial theory of change for the Science-Policy Interface<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Source: Final report of the SPI assessment. Available online: <[www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the\\_SPI\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the_SPI_Assessment.pdf)>.

### **III. Work conducted by the Science-Policy Interface during the biennium 2016–2017**

12. The 2016–2017 SPI work programme has three objectives: (i) addressing the operationalization of the voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) target; (ii) highlighting the science-based synergistic potential of SLM practices to address DLDD, climate change mitigation and adaptation; and (iii) encouraging the development and implementation of specific rehabilitation, restoration and reclamation measures and practices in degraded lands.<sup>5</sup> The work programme also contains four coordination activities involving: (i) the Land Degradation and Restoration Assessment conducted by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES); (ii) contributing to the development of the Global Land Outlook; (iii) the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS); and (iv) the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).<sup>6</sup>

13. Work on the three objectives has been addressed through self-organization of SPI members into teams, usually with a designated leader. The four coordination activities were also led by self-organized SPI teams. However, owing to the strategic implications of the coordination activities, their implementation was carried out in close collaboration with the UNCCD secretariat.

14. The implementation of the work programme was organized and discussed during two fully fledged SPI meetings (October 2015 and September 2016). Much of the work was done remotely through email and teleconferences.

15. The findings of the external assessment concerning the work conducted by the SPI during the biennium 2016–2017 are summarized in tables 1 and 2.

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<sup>5</sup> See table 1.

<sup>6</sup> See table 2.

Table 1  
**Progress towards the Science-Policy Interface objectives in its 2016–2017 work programme<sup>7</sup>**

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Expected outputs</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1: Provide scientific guidance to the operationalization of the voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) target	User guide for implementing LDN at the country level, based on a review of proposed conceptual and methodological frameworks that would scientifically underpin LDN implementation	Undertaken by the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) team, led by two members and supported by an initial workshop with external experts, and contributions by SPI members and external reviewers	Document produced: <i>Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality</i> . Released for external peer review in June 2016, final version published Feb 2017. From this 98-page document in English only, a 6-page science-policy brief has been derived and made available in 3 languages in both printed and electronic form
2: Highlight the science-based synergistic potential of sustainable land management practices to address desertification/land degradation and drought, and climate change mitigation and adaptation	Technical report, commissioned to an institution/consortium. Activities in this objective were decided at the twelfth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) and extremely detailed, contrary to those of the other objectives where the components were defined by the SPI	Addressed by a small team of SPI members, coordinated by four of these members. Definitions of the terms of reference, the call (posted online from 15/7/2016 to 16/9/2016) and selection of the consortium took longer than expected. The report is being reviewed by SPI members and by external reviewers	The technical report delivered to the SPI for review by its members and external reviewers (1–17 April) should be finalized in the coming weeks. The corresponding science-policy brief will be prepared by the SPI shortly thereafter. Their delivery on time for consideration by COP 13 cannot be verified within the time frame of this assessment
3: Encourage the development and implementation of specific rehabilitation, restoration and reclamation measures and practices in degraded lands	Review of existing suitable practices and to propose scientific guidance to use those practices	To avoid duplication, the SPI considered tapping into an initiative of the International Resource Panel (IRP) of the United Nations Environment Programme to collaborate in preparing a report on land restoration. This requires interaction with the internal process of IRP to approve and launch	Although (positive) online exchanges with IRP had already begun in the second half of 2015, targeted consultation involving SPI representation started only at the IRP land restoration working group meeting in March 2017. Thus, collaboration with IRP was launched very recently. Work on this objective will continue in the next SPI work programme, subject to a COP 13 decision

<sup>7</sup> Source: Final report of the SPI assessment; with minor editorial adjustments. Available online: <[www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the\\_SPI\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the_SPI_Assessment.pdf)>.

Table 2  
**Progress on coordination activities<sup>8</sup>**

<i>Coordination activity</i>	<i>Progress</i>
1: Follow up and contribute to the Land Degradation and Restoration Assessment (LDRA) conducted by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)	During June and July 2016 the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) contributed to the review of the first order draft of the LDRA. Volunteering SPI members will continue the collaboration with IPBES by providing further inputs at the occasion of the second order draft of the full technical report, and its associated summary for policymakers, available for review during May and June 2017
2: Contribute to the development of the Global Land Outlook (GLO)	SPI team leaders for coordination activity 2 have been involved in the 3rd meeting of the GLO Steering Committee (held on 30 June and 1 July 2016 in Bonn, Germany). Two potential contributions from the SPI have been identified: (i) outputs prepared as part of the SPI work programme could be incorporated in the GLO structure (first or future editions) as possible working papers; (ii) SPI members would review GLO working papers and draft chapters during the external review process planned for December 2016 to January 2017. However, GLO remains essentially a public awareness document rather than a scientific output
3: Follow up on current collaboration with and explore further means of collaboration with the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS)	Soil organic carbon is a key indicator for land degradation neutrality (LDN) implementation and a major topic of the collaboration between the SPI and ITPS. At the 5th working session of ITPS in March 2016, three joint activities for 2017 were identified: (i) ITPS was invited to contribute a chapter on soils to GLO; (ii) ITPS would collaborate with the SPI on assessing soil organic carbon (SOC) (including a new global SOC map by 2017) in the framework of indicator 15.3.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals and the endorsed metrics for assessing LDN; and (iii) a joint global assessment of soil erosion will be performed under the leadership of Working Group 1 “Sustainable Soil Management” of ITPS. First concrete result of the SPI-ITPS collaboration was the soil organic matter symposium organised in Rome in March 2017, co-sponsored by the UNCCD/SPI, Global Soil Partnership (GSP)/ITPS and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
4: Initiate and coordinate interactions between the UNCCD and the IPCC	The context of this coordination activity is the preparation of a special report by the IPCC on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. One SPI member attended the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/IPCC meeting in Rome in January 2017 together with UNCCD staff. The SPI co-chair was nominated by the UNCCD, through the Committee on Science and Technology Bureau, for the scoping meeting for the special report in Dublin (February 2017) and also attended the 45 <sup>th</sup> IPCC session (Guadalajara, Mexico, March 2017), where, based on the scoping report, the IPCC plenary decided to start the development of the special report. The SPI-IPCC collaboration will complement the activities on SOC

16. The external assessment found that the SPI has taken action to address all of its work programme objectives and coordination activities, while some activities have received greater attention than others. Some activities were reported to having been dependent on the development of new collaborative partnerships, which had been time-consuming even with enthusiastic and committed partners. Collaboration with other agencies has been successful

<sup>8</sup> Source: Final report of the SPI assessment; with minor editorial adjustments. Available online: [www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the\\_SPI\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the_SPI_Assessment.pdf).

in some cases, but it was noted that often such efforts had been delayed owing to reasons beyond the control of the SPI members.

17. With regard to the organization of work, the external assessment found that the burden of carrying out the SPI tasks is not equally distributed among the SPI members. It also noted, however, that task allocation was based on voluntary commitments and, most importantly, the necessary activities were actively pursued.

18. According to the external assessment, the current size of the SPI seems appropriate for meeting its expectations, given the level of available financial support. While the current size may be seen as limiting the scope and range of topics that the SPI can cover, it also provides operational ‘agility’ – the SPI has considerable flexibility in organizing and scheduling its tasks, it is very resource efficient and its meetings and other service needs can be managed by the secretariat. A bigger science-policy interface would certainly need very different arrangements.

19. The external assessment suggested that the financial support progressively mobilized for the SPI activities had been sufficient, although some respondents had indicated the need for more visibility and transparency about available resources. The number of face to face meetings was considered insufficient by a majority of SPI members. All SPI members had expressed appreciation of the strong and efficient support provided by the secretariat throughout the process.

#### **IV. Overall achievements of the Science-Policy Interface since its establishment**

20. The external assessment found that statistics on the SPI products – brochure dissemination and online downloads – indicate that these products are being used, and that the most visible and used SPI documents are the science-policy briefs *Pivotal Soil Carbon*<sup>9</sup> and *Land in Balance: The Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality*.<sup>10</sup> It noted that the latter is becoming the most largely distributed brochure of all UNCCD publications, with the current reprinting bringing the amount of brochures to 5,000.

21. The most significant SPI work, according to interviewees for the external assessment, is the *Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality* and its derivatives by the Global Mechanism (GM). This framework had been used to inform the GM publication *Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality at the Country Level: Building Blocks for LDN Target Setting*<sup>11</sup> (October 2016), which is one of the key papers on the national-level LDN target-setting process involving more than 100 Parties. However, following the outcomes of the same interviews, the assessment noted that policymakers and practitioners involved in the target-setting activities did not always seem to be fully aware of the SPI documents.

22. SPI publications were perceived as of high quality and established on solid scientific grounds; they are based on duly cited publications. This allows the tracing of the information provided and used. For example, *Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality*<sup>12</sup> (98 pages) contains 201 footnotes referring to 134 websites, documents or publications, as well as 8 tables and 15 figures; it draws strongly on peer-reviewed scientific literature. Some interviewees considered the SPI documentation as a

<sup>9</sup> <[www2.unccd.int/publications/pivotal-soil-carbon](http://www2.unccd.int/publications/pivotal-soil-carbon)>.

<sup>10</sup> <[www2.unccd.int/publications/land-balance](http://www2.unccd.int/publications/land-balance)>.

<sup>11</sup> <[www2.unccd.int/publications/achieving-land-degradation-neutrality-country-level-building-blocks-ldn-target-setting](http://www2.unccd.int/publications/achieving-land-degradation-neutrality-country-level-building-blocks-ldn-target-setting)>.

<sup>12</sup> <[www2.unccd.int/publications/scientific-conceptual-framework-land-degradation-neutrality](http://www2.unccd.int/publications/scientific-conceptual-framework-land-degradation-neutrality)>.

major improvement in the provision of verified, credible (numerical) information published under the UNCCD.

23. More than 80 per cent of the respondents participating in the online survey for the external assessment were of the opinion that the documents produced by the SPI are informative and their content is easy to understand. Nearly as many considered that the SPI work had improved their awareness of the topics that it has covered and/or related scientific aspects. Interviewees also indicated that the SPI is well known and its products are appreciated.

24. However, many interviewees considered that the overall impact of the SPI products beyond those familiar with the UNCCD process and the activities of the secretariat is still low, as a wider audience of end users has not yet been reached.

25. The external assessment, noting that the SPI work programme was approved by the COP, expressed surprise on finding that close to one third of the open survey respondents (primarily national focal points) did not consider that the most important UNCCD-related questions of a scientific nature are taken into account in the SPI work.

26. A large majority of the respondents to the online survey targeted at civil society organizations (CSOs) confirmed their awareness of the SPI and of its work to synthesize scientific results. However, only slightly more than half of them consider that questions raised by CSOs are taken into account in the SPI work, whereas 60 per cent felt that the SPI policy briefs and reports meet the CSO needs in terms of scientific background for action on DLDD and LDN.

27. In terms of inputs to other scientific processes and mobilization of the scientific community, the external assessment found that the SPI has succeeded in establishing links with other science-policy bodies with different degrees of success to date. It rated this success for IPBES as low, for ITPS as fair and for the IPCC as good. Collaboration with the International Resource Panel of the United Nations Environment Programme was reported to have only recently started.

28. The external assessment suggested that the SPI is designed not to compete with larger and more resource-intensive science-policy interfaces, but rather to work collaboratively with them on topics related to DLDD. It concluded that in its current configuration, the role of the SPI vis-à-vis the other bodies is essentially to deliver to the UNCCD the products that others do not produce, building on the specific priorities/guidance from the COP.

29. According to the interviewees participating in the external assessment, the larger scientific community had been modestly involved through the process of external reviewing of SPI technical reports, and via the external expert group organized for starting the operationalization of the SPI objective 1. The connections with the larger scientific community are gained by establishing responsive partnerships on an ad hoc basis, depending on the topic, such as through the current development of special sessions at conferences or special issues of journals.

30. With regard to feedback from scientists outside the UNCCD 'circles', the majority of the respondents to the external assessment considered the SPI as a valuable tool for the UNCCD that is useful for addressing DLDD and LDN issues. The assessment assumed, nevertheless, that the awareness of the scientific community of the SPI is still low and the impact of the SPI products could be greater.

## V. Recommendations of the external assessment

31. The external assessment concludes the following:

“The SPI has made good progress in implementing its 2016–2017 work programme. It is working on all objectives and coordination activities that were assigned to it and many planned outputs have already been delivered. The SPI has effectively organized its work by allocating tasks among members, and the secretariat has provided the necessary services for its functioning.

From the stakeholder feedback it is clear that the SPI produces useful knowledge that is on a solid scientific basis. It is also succeeding in influencing other scientific processes and better involving the scientific community in the UNCCD work, although there is yet plenty to be done in these areas.

In general, the findings of the assessment indicate that the SPI has made a promising start and the evaluators recommend it should be continued after this ‘trial’ period.”

32. The external assessment makes eight recommendations that address the SPI composition, functioning and resourcing, with the aim of improving its operations and capacity to deliver. An overview of these recommendations is presented below, and the full description of the proposed activities can be found in the assessment report<sup>13</sup> on the UNCCD website:

(a) **The SPI members should contribute through their own work to a better recognition of the SPI.** The external assessment suggests that individual SPI members will, for example, co-author publications in high-quality citation-indexed journals or contribute to a series of papers on DLDD topics in an annual special issue of a dedicated journal willing to do so, and while co-authoring/contributing in their own name, they would also acknowledge the SPI. An alternative could be a series of UNCCD technical reports that would be directly attributed to the SPI;

(b) **Interaction between the SPI and IPBES, and the SPI and the IPCC, should be formalized;**

(c) **The CST Bureau, supported by the secretariat, should refine the terms of reference for the SPI membership, including more detailed membership criteria, specification of what is expected from the members and a revision of the process to renew the members.** On the last point, the external assessment proposes a ‘rolling mechanism’ whereby only half of the SPI members serving a four-year term are renewed at a given time, starting from COP 13;

(d) **The SPI should use observers more effectively.** The external assessment recommends an increase in the observer seats;

(e) **Each SPI work programme should be limited to 1–2 priority topics, to be implemented in a realistic schedule;**

(f) **The SPI should continue engaging partners to support its substantive work;**

(g) **The SPI should meet at least twice per year;**

(h) **The secretariat should continue to ensure that the SPI has adequate resources for its work.**

<sup>13</sup> <[www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the\\_SPI\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www2.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-05/FinalReportof%20the_SPI_Assessment.pdf)>.

## VI. Conclusions

33. Taking into account the findings and recommendations of the external assessment of the SPI and the practices and working modalities of the CST and the SPI, the CST may wish to recommend that the COP:

(a) Note with appreciation the good performance of the SPI in implementing its 2016–2017 work programme and the significant progress made by the SPI towards achieving the objectives that were set for it;

(b) Decide to continue the SPI and to extend its current mandate, as defined in decisions 23/COP.11 and 19/COP.12, and taking into account any new guidance that may derive from COP 13, up to the end of COP 16 (2023), at which time another review of the SPI should take place;

(c) Also decide that the SPI membership renewals will be conducted as a rotating system aiming to ensure the continuity of the work of the SPI, and request the CST Bureau, with the assistance of the secretariat, to define the process for the staged renewal of the SPI membership and to revise the SPI terms of reference accordingly;

(d) Further decide that for the biennium 2018–2019, the membership of no more than eight current SPI members be exceptionally extended by two years, so as to benefit from the advantages of a rotating membership renewal system;

(e) Decide to add two more observer seats to the composition of the SPI;

(f) Request the SPI to submit through the secretariat for the consideration of each regular CST session a proposal for its work programme, with a focus on one or two broad, globally relevant priority topics;

(g) Also request the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to continue to contribute to and cooperate with other international scientific panels and bodies dealing with DLDD issues, in particular IPBES, the IPCC and ITPS; and request the secretariat to clarify the potential benefits, costs, conditions and procedures for establishing more formal relationships between the SPI and IPBES, the IPCC and ITPS;

(h) Encourage the SPI to continue fostering partnerships with scientific bodies and institutions, international organizations, CSOs and other relevant stakeholders, and to invite the representatives of these entities to its meetings as external observers when feasible, with a view to strengthening substantive exchanges and collaboration, harnessing synergies and avoiding duplication of effort;

(i) Invite the current and future SPI members to increase the awareness of the SPI and to support its better recognition through opportunities arising in their own work;

(j) Request the secretariat to continue the mobilization of resources for the effective functioning of the SPI;

(k) Invite developed country Parties, other Parties in a position to do so and financial institutions to support the activities of the SPI.