

UNCCD CRIC 23 - Panama
Asia Pacific Group Opening Statement

AGENDA 1.
Organizational Matters – CRIC 23 Opening Session

Madam Chair,

Executive Secretary,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Asia-Pacific Group, it is an honour for **Bhutan** to deliver this opening statement at the **23rd Session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention**.

At the outset, we extend our sincere appreciation to the **Government and people of Panama** for graciously hosting CRIC23 in this vibrant and culturally rich country. We also thank the UNCCD **Secretariat and the Global Mechanism** for their dedicated efforts in preparing this meeting and in supporting Parties across our diverse region.

We further express our sincere thanks to Mr Ibrahim Thiaw, for his leadership during the six years of service as the Executive Secretary and warmly welcome Dr. Yasmine Fouad to her new role. The Asia Pacific Group affirms that we stand ready to support the implementation of the Convention under her leadership.

Madam Chair,

Our region—stretching across mountain, desert, rangeland, forest and coastal land ecosystems, from hyper-arid areas to small islands, includes some of the most diversely populated areas and largest farming communities in the world—continues to face multiple and interconnected environmental challenges that threaten our sustainable development. Drought, land degradation, desertification, sand and dust storms, climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, sea level rise, salinity intrusion, soil erosion, compaction and fertility decline, and the growing

pressures on land and water resources are realities that impact the livelihoods, health, food security, and overall resilience of millions of people in Asia-Pacific.

In this context, CRIC23 is an important opportunity to review progress, share lessons learned and best practices, and identify and chart practical pathways to strengthen implementation of the Convention. We approach this session with the spirit of cooperation, ambition, and determination to advance solutions that reflect the diversity and needs of our region.

Madam Chair,

The Asia-Pacific Group attaches great importance to strengthening the **UNCCD reporting framework**. We acknowledge the Secretariat's efforts to support national reporting and encourage continued work to simplify methodologies, improve data availability and resolution, and strengthen tools and user support. A streamlined, efficient, and well-resourced reporting system is essential for meaningful monitoring of global and regional trends. However, the delays in the reporting process and regional trainings have limited the ability of many Parties to fully engage, in discussions and experience sharing, on the revised PRAIS system. In this regard, the region welcomes the UNCCD initiative to collaborate with regional centres to build Parties capacity for reporting process, which will help ensure timely and high-quality outcomes.

We also welcome the commencement of the work by the **Intergovernmental Working Group on the future strategic framework**. By envisioning the future world we aspire to see, and the UNCCDs role within it, we can identify actions, objectives and targets for the work of the Convention, its Parties and Partners. The Asia-Pacific region believes that our collective efforts must reinforce integrated land management, strengthen drought resilience, and promote synergies with climate and biodiversity agendas, in line with global development priorities, and ensure full alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. We would like also to encourage regional centres with the interests and expertise, to provide inputs based on their research findings and experiences to the assessment report on indicators, and the scoping paper as well as to provide guidance to the IWG. We look forward to engaging in discussions that will guide the Convention with clarity, ambition, and practicality beyond 2030.

Madam Chair,

Sand and dust storms continue to pose a serious hazard across many of our countries, affecting human health, economic productivity, agriculture, and ecosystems. Their transboundary nature requires enhanced regional cooperation, improved early warning systems, and sustained international support and investment to mitigate its social, environmental and economic impacts. The region encourages member countries to commemorate and implement activities for the **United Nations Decade on Combating Sand and Dust Storms** that shall continue from 2025 to 2034.

We recognize the strong commitment shown by many countries in our region that have established voluntary **Land Degradation Neutrality** targets and are advancing implementation. Nonetheless, gaps in capacity, finance and data remain significant. We therefore underscore the need for predictable, timely and accessible, financial resources, including support for technology transfer, capacity-building, relevant data collection, processing and sharing, to ensure that all Parties can meet their LDN ambitions and that **additional Parties** wishing to set or revise voluntary targets receive adequate support, in particular for Small Island Developing States. We acknowledge that rangeland ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management is of greater importance for achieving LDN. Ensuring that these LDN targets are aligned with environmental and development priorities is vital to maintaining momentum, enhancing effectiveness, and ensuring no one is left behind in the face of evolving environmental and socio-economic challenges.

We further welcome the discussions at CRIC23 on science-policy guidance, capacity-building, land tenure, and the gender caucus. Considering the opportunities and conditions of the members, these cross-cutting elements are vital for the full and effective implementation of the Convention. We reiterate the importance of empowering women, youth, persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups, Indigenous peoples as well as local communities, who play a central role in sustainable land stewardship.

Madam Chair,

The Asia-Pacific Group acknowledges the contributions of regional and global initiatives including the **Changwon Initiative**, the **Peace Forest Initiative**, the **G20 Global Land Initiative**, **Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership** as well as voluntary contributions from countries within our region that continue to support Parties in advancing UNCCD implementation.

We further acknowledge the strong willingness of our region to serve as host for multiple UNCCD meetings and take this opportunity to once again thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its successful hosting of COP16, and advancing important decisions and initiatives that strengthen the UNCCD process. We reaffirm the Asia Pacific Groups' full support to Mongolia as the host COP17 and look forward to working together to ensure a successful and impactful Conference of Parties. We would also like to echo the call from the 10th Kubuqi International Desert Forum, for an international day of rangelands to be considered by the COP17, especially on the occasion of launching the international year of rangeland and pastoralists, to strengthen advocacy and raise awareness, along with Desertification and Drought Day , Forest, and Sand and Dust Storm day.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates.

The Asia-Pacific Group approaches CRIC23 with optimism and determination. We remain committed to working with all Parties to deliver ambitious, balanced, and action-oriented outcomes that promote healthy , resilient, and productive land and soils, for present and future generations.

Thank you, Madam Chair.