

UNCCD COP17 Mayors Forum

“Local Leadership for Land Resilience: Cities Advancing Sustainable Futures”

Date: 20–22 August 2026

Venue: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia – UNCCD COP17 Blue Zone

Organizer: Governor’s Office of the Capital City of Ulaanbaatar

Co-organizers:

- United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Secretariat •

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

- ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI)

Cities both shape and are shaped by the pressures of land degradation, water scarcity, and climate change. Addressing this relationship effectively requires cities to be active participants in global solutions — not only as affected parties, but as agents of change.

I. Background and Rationale

More than half of the world's population currently resides in urban areas, a proportion projected to reach 68 percent by 2050. This concentration of people, economic activity, and infrastructure makes cities a central nexus in the relationship between human development and environmental sustainability.

The challenges of land degradation, desertification, drought, water scarcity, and climate change interact with urban systems in ways that are mutually reinforcing. On one hand, the consequences of these processes — weakened rural livelihoods, displacement, reduced agricultural productivity, and ecosystem decline — place compounding pressures on urban infrastructure, housing, water supply, public services, and labor markets. Cities absorb these pressures, often unevenly and with limited preparedness.

On the other hand, cities themselves contribute to these dynamics. Unplanned urban expansion consumes and degrades surrounding land. High rates of resource consumption intensify water stress. The proliferation of impervious surfaces, declining green space, and inadequate waste and water management exacerbate land and ecosystem degradation in both urban and peri-urban areas. The relationship is therefore not unidirectional: cities are at once affected by, and implicated in, the broader deterioration of land and water systems.

Recognizing this, the “Call for Engagement” adopted during the 16th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the UNCCD, alongside the “Pact for the Future” initiative, affirmed the essential role of local and regional governments in addressing land degradation, desertification, and drought. These frameworks acknowledge that effective solutions require engaging cities not only as stakeholders, but as policy actors with the authority, proximity, and capacity to implement sustainable land and resource management at scale.

The process of international municipal cooperation on desertification and sustainable urban development traces back to the “World Forum of Mayors on Cities and Desertification” held in Bonn in 1999, and has since evolved through successive forums in Rome, Ordos, and Riyadh. These platforms have progressively strengthened the integration of local governments into the UNCCD process. In particular, the 2024 Riyadh Mayors Forum highlighted the critical role of cities as drivers of ecological transition, sustainable land management, and climate resilience, elevating the importance of local-level engagement to a new stage.

The “UNCCD COP17 Mayors Forum,” to be hosted in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, will build on this foundation — providing a dedicated international platform to advance cooperation among cities on sustainable land management, urban-rural linkages, water security, and climate adaptation.

II. Objectives of the Forum

The Mayors Forum will serve as a high-level international platform bringing together mayors and city leaders, local and regional governments, international organizations, development partners, global city networks, academic and research institutions, green finance actors, and private sector representatives.

The Forum aims to facilitate dialogue on how interconnected challenges—including land degradation, water scarcity, drought, and climate change—are affecting sustainable urban development, economies, infrastructure systems, and the well-being of citizens. It will further seek to identify practical, city-led solutions, innovative governance approaches, and new mechanisms for cooperation and implementation.

The Forum will also promote policy cooperation, investment partnerships, technological exchange, and innovation in the fields of urban-rural connectivity, sustainable land management, water security, and climate resilience. In parallel, it seeks to strengthen the role and institutional engagement of local governments within the UNCCD process and provide an international platform for sharing successful practices and scalable urban solutions.

The Forum will pursue five core objectives:

Policy & Strategic Dialogue

Facilitate substantive dialogue among city leaders on the two-way relationship between urban systems and land degradation, water scarcity, drought, and climate change — including both the pressures cities face and those they generate. The aim is to develop joint policy recommendations and identify practical directions for inter-city cooperation.

Knowledge & Technical Exchange

Promote the exchange of good practices and technical expertise in sustainable land management, water-efficient urban systems, green infrastructure, and nature-based solutions, and establish peer learning mechanisms among cities navigating comparable challenges.

Governance & Institutional Voice

Initiate discussions on establishing the Mayors Forum as a long-term institutional cooperation

mechanism within the UNCCD framework, enabling consistent urban leadership and experience sharing on land degradation, desertification, and drought across successive COP cycles.

Finance & Implementation

Explore financing sources, investment instruments, and implementable financial models for addressing the urban dimensions of land degradation, water scarcity, and climate change — including green finance, international development funds, multilateral development banks, and public-private partnerships.

Political Outcome & Legacy

Develop and adopt a joint Mayors' Declaration, to be presented at the UNCCD COP17 High-Level Segment, articulating collective urban commitments on land degradation, desertification, and drought, and establishing a basis for continued cooperation.

III. Expected Outcomes

The Forum is designed to generate concrete outcomes, partnerships, and follow-up mechanisms that extend beyond the event itself. Key deliverables include:

- Adoption of the joint “Ulaanbaatar Declaration” by participating mayors and presentation of the Declaration at the UNCCD COP17 High-Level Segment;
- Development of a consolidated policy document containing joint recommendations and future directions for cooperation on land degradation, desertification, drought, water scarcity, and sustainable urban development;
- Launch of new city-to-city partnerships, technical cooperation initiatives, and knowledge sharing mechanisms focused on sustainable urban development, sustainable land management, water security, and climate adaptation, while establishing the foundation for an international knowledge and cooperation platform showcasing urban best practices and scalable solutions;
- Initiation of technical cooperation, pilot projects, and collaborative urban initiatives related to sustainable land management, green urban infrastructure, water management, nature based solutions, and climate adaptation;
- Establishment of a financing dialogue and cooperation platform connecting cities with green finance institutions, international development funds, development banks, investment organizations, and public-private partnership opportunities to support practical urban projects and initiatives;
- Commencement of discussions on developing the Mayors Forum into a long-term institutional cooperation mechanism under the UNCCD framework.

IV. Participants

The Forum will bring together mayors and representatives of cities from around the world, local

and regional governments, international organizations, city networks, development banks, financial institutions, academic and research organizations, civil society, and private sector stakeholders.

The Forum is expected to convene approximately 250–300 participants from more than 50 countries.

V. Structure of the Forum

The Mayors Forum will be organized as a multi-dimensional platform combining high-level policy dialogue, scientific and technical exchange, and peer-to-peer sharing of urban experiences. The Forum will feature open and interactive discussions involving city leaders, international organizations, research institutions, development partners, financial actors, and private sector representatives.

The Forum will consist of the following main components:

- Opening Session;
- Keynote speeches addressing global and regional policy trends, scientific perspectives, urban leadership, and financing mechanisms;
- Thematic sessions on land degradation, water scarcity, urban and peri-urban ecosystem degradation, climate risks, urban-rural linkages, green infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and financing mechanisms;
- Mayors' roundtables and closed high-level policy discussions;
- Interactive dialogues, exhibitions, and knowledge-sharing events showcasing city-to-city partnerships, technical cooperation opportunities, investment and financing mechanisms, urban best practices, technological innovation, and nature-based solutions;
- Closing Session dedicated to the adoption of the joint Mayors' Declaration and discussion of future directions for cooperation.

Invitation to Participate

City governments play a central role in the two-way relationship between urban development and the health of land and water systems. How cities grow, manage resources, and govern land use has direct consequences for the broader sustainability challenges addressed under the UNCCD. The Mayors Forum provides a dedicated space for city leaders to engage with these issues collectively — sharing experience, building partnerships, and contributing to the international policy process.