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Improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties

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Note by the secretariat

Summary

Decision 11/COP.14 requested the Convention institutions to improve the reporting tools for the 2022 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) reporting process, including, inter alia, the establishment of a geo-spatial platform and activities aimed at building the capacities of Parties to respond to the newly adopted reporting obligations.

In response to this decision, the secretariat and the Global Mechanism undertook a series of activities, and this document highlights all elements of reporting that have been updated, amended, and/or aligned with other decisions taken by the Conference of the Parties.

The conclusion and recommendation section of this document should be read together with the relevant draft decision contained in document ICCD/CRIC(20)/10.



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I. Introduction

1. The 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which was adopted by Parties at the thirteenth session of the Conference of Parties (COP 13), requires Parties to report on five strategic objectives (SOs) and an implementation framework. The 2018 reporting process was the first time Parties reported using the indicator and monitoring framework adopted for this strategic framework. Based on the experience of Parties during this first reporting round, the COP, in decision 11/COP.14, requested the secretariat, within available resources, to improve the reporting tools to address bottlenecks highlighted by Parties, including the establishment of a geo-spatial platform and the support of country capacity development to monitor the implementation of the Convention.
2. By the same decision, the COP requested the secretariat to strengthen coordination efforts with the United Nations agencies involved, especially when considering synchronization between a potential follow-up Global Support Programme and other projects relevant to enabling activities funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), to ensure adequate and timely technical and financial support for the 2022 reporting process.
3. Decision 11/COP.14 also requested the secretariat to collaborate with Conservation International to ensure that Trends.Earth can support the preparation and analysis of data for reporting in a form that can automatically be transferred to the Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS), and that the functions of Trends.Earth are expanded to help generate reports to serve at the national level.
4. This document provides information on how the secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) responded to all the requests made by the COP in decision 11/COP.14, and improved the reporting process, including its tools and capacity building activities in preparation for the 2022 reporting process. It also provides details on the Enabling Activity project developed by the GM and funded by the GEF to support the reporting process.
5. In line with decision 32/COP.14, the conclusion and recommendation section of this document should be read together with the relevant section in document ICCD/CRIC(20)/10, entitled ‘CRIC 20 draft decisions’.

II. Reporting platform and data analytics tools

A. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification reporting platform

6. The PRAIS has been significantly upgraded and brought into line with modern systems architecture. After the development of a systems architecture for PRAIS, based on open-source technology, and the implementation of that architecture by IT experts, the older version of the platform, PRAIS 3, has been superseded. In summary, the new PRAIS 4 has the following major improvements on PRAIS 3:
 - (a) The static offline reporting template has been transformed into a series of online reporting forms for data entry while continuing to produce a stand-alone national report (in PDF-format) which can be saved and viewed offline by Parties;
 - (b) The reporting data will be saved to a secure, centralised database for easier data synthesis and interpretation by the secretariat, e.g. for the preparation of a preliminary analysis report for consideration by the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC);
 - (c) Geospatial data will be central to the reporting process and can be managed, created and viewed through the platform;
 - (d) Multilingual content will be available to accommodate reporting in all six United Nations languages;

(e) User account management will allow Parties to self-administer their country reporting zone in terms of adding new users and granting roles to added users. This makes PRAIS a collaborative and inclusive working space;

(f) An in-built revision and review system will enable a dialogue between the secretariat and country Parties on the national report, ultimately improving the efficiency, transparency and robustness of the technical review process;

(g) Integrated and online support, guidance, help and a PRAIS news update will be available.

7. PRAIS 4 has been tested in three phases: (i) an internal testing phase conducted by the secretariat staff and a contracted partner; (ii) user acceptance testing by a selection of Parties which responded to an invitation to test the system issued in August 2021; and (iii) post-release testing by a contracted partner which included the quality assurance of default data. For the user acceptance testing, 18 of 29 (or 62%) users who responded to the invitation provided feedback through a form, the others did not test the system before the deadline or tested it but did not provide their feedback. Those who provided feedback commented positively on the system in the beta stage and any major issues and areas identified for improvement (e.g. mapping and interface design aspects) were promptly addressed before post-release testing. The transparency of the testing approaches adopted gave the project team early insight into any technical issues with the platform from the outset, and ensured the desired functionality in time for the launch of PRAIS 4.

8. Default data has been pre-populated for several indicators based on the best available data sources.¹ Geospatial datasets have been pre-processed in Trends.Earth by Conservation International prior to integration into PRAIS 4. All other fields are to be filled in manually by Parties via a series of input boxes, narrative text, and dropdown menus within the online forms.

9. By its decision 11/COP.14, the COP requested the secretariat to further facilitate reporting on SOs 1–4 by including additional data fields specific to affected areas in the reporting system. Therefore, PRAIS 4 facilitates countries wishing to report on affected areas as an additional and optional national reporting item, using a specific set of forms.

10. The PRAIS 4 platform's geospatial capability (consisting of a map interface and a management console) allows for the visualisation of geospatial data and the capturing of polygons (or points) (i) of false positive and false negative outcomes in cases where the degradation analysis of the sub indicators of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 15.3.1 may produce a counterintuitive outcome; (ii) of 'hot spots' of land degradation and 'bright spots' of land improvement; and (iii) in order to locate areas of national voluntary targets and implemented actions to meet those targets. It also supports the creation of templated, thematic maps. The PRAIS 4 platform is fully compatible with Trends.Earth, such that outputs from that software can be uploaded to the platform. Such location-based information can strengthen spatial approaches to sustainable land management, help integrate responses to land degradation at the landscape scale and support the creation of improved information products to demonstrate the impact of the Convention.

11. As a participating organization in the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), the secretariat to the UNCCD recognizes that the societal benefits arising from Earth observations can only be fully achieved through the sharing of data, information, knowledge, products and services.² The PRAIS 4 platform allows for the upload or creation of spatial datasets. The secretariat intends to use the data provided by Parties through reporting to shape data-driven information products and, in time, to share this data with as few constraints and restrictions on its use as possible. After consulting with technical partners, including the secretariat to the GEO, the Geospatial Unit of the Food and

¹ For more information on the sources of default data for each indicator see document ICCD/COP(15)/CST/7-ICCD/CRIC(20)/8.

² For more information on the GEO data sharing principles, see: https://www.earthobservations.org/open_eo_data.php#.

Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Land and Water Division, and legal experts of the United Nations Geospatial Network, the secretariat is trialling the use of the Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC 2.0) licence,³ a global, simple and standardized way to give copyright permissions to digital work, all within the framework of existing copyright law, to govern the use of data provided by Parties through the reporting process. The CC BY-NC 2.0 licence means users of the data are free to: (i) share, i.e. copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format; and (ii) adapt, i.e. remix, transform, and build upon the material. In return, users of that data must (i) attribute the data – give appropriate credit, provide a link to the licence and indicate whether changes were made; and (ii) not use the data for commercial purposes. Should Parties not accept the CC BY-NC 2.0 licence, they may have to define an existing data licence which may impose additional restrictions on the use of reporting data, and describe the terms of use of their data using the form provided in PRAIS. The user-specific licence is applicable to national data provided in PRAIS and not the default data provided by the secretariat – this is already in the public domain and should not be licensed separately.

12. In the longer term, it is expected that PRAIS 4 will continue to be developed and improved as new requirements and issues emerge. Therefore, a Sustainability Plan for the platform has been developed to ensure that the system meets the needs of Parties now and into the future, is adequately supported and is able to adapt to changes in personnel and technology. The PRAIS 4 platform acts as a foundation for future reporting processes by extending the same source code and ensuring that the design is future-proofed as far as possible.

13. A follow-on phase of PRAIS development will address the need for a more extensive data visualisation and data discovery interface for the display and analysis of reported data. There is a broader ambition beyond this phase to build on the reporting system to create a UNCCD Data Centre which will provide access to data and information on desertification/land degradation and drought for more informed decision-making, and be used both internally by the secretariat and externally by Parties. The ambition to create a UNCCD Data Centre contributes to the vision of the Secretary General’s ‘Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere’.⁴ The secretariat has recognized that the user base for reporting data has expanded beyond Parties and includes, inter alia, media enquiries and requests from the academic community. Therefore, the design and system specifications for PRAIS 4 have sought to provide a flexible, standards-based and extensible foundation on which to deliver the wider vision for a UNCCD Data Centre to service such data requests over the longer term.

14. To improve the use of data for decision-making, the secretariat has conducted an audit of its internal data assets, designed a roadmap on how to move towards a data-driven transformation and explored options for how to put the best available data on land at the forefront of the secretariat’s work. Options presented include taking an in-house data enterprise approach with a commensurate increase in resource investment and expansion of staff skill sets, or to pursue partnerships with technical data partners in the land domain to realize the vision of a UNCCD Data Centre.

B. Trends.Earth

15. In line with decision 11/COP.14, Conservation International has further enhanced and expanded Trends.Earth to support the preparation and analysis of data for UNCCD national reporting in a format that can be automatically transferred to PRAIS.

16. Trends.Earth is a free and open-source tool for monitoring indicators of land change and drought vulnerability.⁵ The enhanced version of Trends.Earth supports not only the calculation of SDG Indicator 15.3.1, based on the latest analytical methods documented in

³ <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>>.

⁴ <<https://www.un.org/en/content/datastrategy/index.shtml>>.

⁵ <<https://trends.earth/docs/en/>>.

Version 2 of the Good Practice Guidance for SDG Indicator 15.3.1,⁶ but also the analysis of geospatial data for the calculation of indicators used to track progress towards SOs 2 and 3, based on the Good Practice Guidance for national reporting on SO 3.⁷ In addition, Trends.Earth supports the integration of globally available data with nationally or locally available data, and allows Parties to customize the methods used to account for local conditions.

17. Further, the Tools for Land Degradation Neutrality (Tools4LDN)⁸ backed by the GEF has supported the integration of Trends.Earth with the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) and Land Potential Knowledge System (LandPKS).⁹ The Tools4LDN project allows countries to integrate satellite data from Trends.Earth with field data from LandPKS and data on sustainable land management approaches and technologies from WOCAT, to improve the quality of data submitted in national reports.

III. Technical backstopping and capacity development

18. Capacity development for reporting has always been part of the core services provided by the Convention institutions and was generously funded by the GEF as part of the Global Support Programme mentioned in section V below. During past reporting processes, the secretariat and the GM followed a two-pronged approach and facilitated regional meetings during which Parties had the opportunity to test the new reporting tools through hands-on exercises, while experts were on-site to provide advice and assistance, where needed. These regional meetings were always coupled with technical assistance provided by the Convention institutions and dedicated experts through a centralized help desk portal once national focal points had started engaging with national stakeholders in the reporting process. In contrast to the regional meetings organized at the beginning of the reporting period, the help desk services were provided for the entire duration of the reporting process.

19. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face regional meetings were not considered a viable option for capacity development. Thus, the Convention institutions, in consultation with the Bureau of the CRIC, decided to design and implement online capacity development activities. The services provided can be broken down into four categories:

- (a) E-learning video tutorials and online question and answer events;
- (b) Technical backstopping;
- (c) Help desk services;
- (d) Technical review of national reports.

A. E-learning video tutorials and online question and answer events

20. The secretariat and the GM have commissioned a specialized company to assist in the production of e-learning video tutorials to allow Parties to undertake effective self-learning. A series of e-learning video tutorials on the SOs of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework will be made available to Parties in all United Nations languages and in a structured way, allowing newly introduced methodological issues to be explained in a simplified manner. More specifically, the tutorials will guide Parties on how to calculate the indicators and how to fill in the reporting forms in PRAIS 4. Additional tutorials on the use of Trends.Earth will be made available in collaboration with Conservation International.

⁶ <<https://www.unccd.int/publications/good-practice-guidance-sdg-indicator-1531-proportion-land-degraded-over-total-land>>.

⁷ <<https://www.unccd.int/publications/good-practice-guidance-national-reporting-unccd-strategic-objective-3-mitigate-adapt>>.

⁸ <<https://www.tools4ldn.org/>>.

⁹ <<https://landpotential.org/>>.

21. Once sufficient time has passed for self-learning, one or two online events will be organized by the Convention institutions to address any reporting questions Parties may have.

22. In parallel to these online events, the secretariat has also ensured that reference documents outlining methodological updates and a revised reporting manual and glossary are available on the UNCCD website.¹⁰

B. Technical backstopping

23. Experience from the last reporting process has shown that, while face-to-face regional meetings were considered helpful, reporting issues encountered by Parties required the sustained involvement of technical experts, provided through online interactions even in the 2018 reporting process. In many instances, the complexity of UNCCD reporting requires tailored approaches to Parties' reporting questions, which are best handled through bilateral exchanges between the Party and technical experts.

24. Therefore, the Convention institutions have hired and trained a team of 12 international technical experts that will provide a tight network of assistance to Parties throughout the reporting process via the help desk system, bilateral or multilateral virtual meetings, and the PRAIS 4 in-built revision and review system for the technical review of national reports.

C. Help desk

25. Following past practice, the secretariat has implemented an online help desk where Parties can submit any reporting questions and queries they may have. The help desk can be found at the following link: <<https://support.unccd.int/>>. It provides a platform where technical assistance and scientific backstopping will be provided to all Parties throughout the entire period of the reporting process. The help desk is run by staff members of the secretariat to the UNCCD and the GM, as well as the technical backstopping experts ready to assist Parties in their work to compile and calculate data for their national reports. The help desk will assist the secretariat in centralizing all reporting queries sent by Parties, thereby providing an exhaustive overview of the kind of problems Parties encountered during the reporting process.

D. Technical review of national reports

26. In decision 11/COP.14, country Parties requested the secretariat to improve, inter alia, the quality assurance process for submitted reports within available resources. In the same decision, Parties also requested the secretariat and the GM, within their respective mandates, to use the reporting quality assurance exercise as a part of national capacity building processes, making in-depth technical reviews of the reports of selected countries per region with broad stakeholder engagement.

27. Building on the quality assurance methods used during the 2018 reporting process, the secretariat has developed guidelines for the technical review of national reports, which will be applied as of the 2022 reporting process. The guidelines are contained in document ICCD/CRIC(20)/INF.1. The objective of the guidelines is to promote consistency, completeness, comparability and transparency in the review of information reported under the SOs of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.

28. While document ICCD/CRIC(20)/INF.1 provides detailed information on the purpose, modalities and scope of the technical review process, this document contains a summary of the objectives and general procedure of the technical review process.

¹⁰ <<https://www.unccd.int/conventionreporting-process-and-praisprais-4-reporting-platform/2022-reporting-process-tools>>.

29. The main objectives of the technical review of national reports are:
- (a) To develop capacity in country Parties by helping them to:
 - (i) Submit consistent, transparent, comparable, accurate and complete information;
 - (ii) Fulfil reporting obligations by improving their reporting of information contained in national reports and the implementation of their commitments under the Convention;
 - (b) To ensure that the CRIC has accurate, consistent and relevant information in order to review the implementation of the Convention.
30. The technical review process will take on an extra layer of importance in the 2022 reporting process as the reported data will be displayed, at least in aggregate form, on a publicly available data visualisation and data discovery interface once the reporting process has concluded. Any inaccuracies in the reported data could therefore lead to greater scrutiny of the reporting process by Parties and the general public. Thorough quality assurance of the reported data should minimize the risk of error and increase credibility in publicly available information derived from the reported data.
31. It is envisaged that the technical review of each national report will be conducted as a desk review throughout the reporting process and prior to the reporting deadline by the experts recruited by the secretariat to provide technical backstopping to country Parties. The expert review will assess the completeness, transparency, consistency, comparability and accuracy in reported data and methods, as well as how well country Parties have adhered to the Good Practice Guidance for SDG Indicator 15.3.1, the Good Practice Guidance for national reporting on SO 3, and the reporting manual.
32. The technical review of national reports will be conducted in PRAIS 4, leveraging its in-built revision and review system. PRAIS 4 supports an audit trail of the progression of the national report, from working draft to the revisions required prior to the reporting deadline. Users can submit revisions at any moment for review by the experts. An in-built comments system allows the experts to add comments and suggestions for improvements to the forms for consideration by the users. Conversely, the comments system also allows users to add comments for consideration by the experts, thereby enabling collaboration for the review of national reports. Country Parties will be expected to revise their national report as needed, and submit the final and official version by the stipulated deadline through PRAIS 4.
33. Subject to the availability of resources and assuming that COVID-19-related travel restrictions will be lifted, a limited number of in-country reviews could be held soon after CRIC 21, where major issues in the country Party reports warrant deep investigation, or to draw lessons from high quality reports to improve the next round of national reporting. Country hosts of in-country reviews shall be selected by the Bureau of the CRIC based on expert recommendations formulated during the expert review period, giving due consideration to regional balance.

IV. Reporting timeline

34. The reporting process was put in motion in early November 2021 with the official launch of the PRAIS 4 reporting portal. Prior to the launch, Parties had informed the secretariat of their nominated reporting officers who received credentials to access the “country space” of their respective country within PRAIS 4, where prefilled reporting forms are available for each Party.
35. The production of e-learning tutorials is ongoing at the time of writing this document and videos will be posted as they become available. An introductory online reporting seminar is scheduled for mid-February where Parties will receive an overview of the reporting requirements for all strategic objectives, of how the PRAIS 4 platform can be navigated and how technical assistance is provided during the pandemic. Following this online seminar and the release of the e-learning video tutorials, one or two online Q&A

events will be organized where Parties can raise any challenges they may have encountered during the reporting process.

36. Technical assistance is provided throughout the reporting process through the help desk while a technical review of information and data will further assist Parties to submit robust and credible data.

37. Considering that Parties at COP 15 will decide on the date and venue of the intersessional session of the CRIC to review information submitted by Parties, and considering that the national report submission deadline is linked to the date of the intersessional session, it is expected that the Executive Secretary, in consultation with the Bureau of the CRIC, will decide on a national report submission deadline shortly after COP 15.

V. Enabling funding from the Global Environment Facility for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification reporting

38. The GM led the formulation of a GEF Enabling Activity project to support UNCCD reporting in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and in close collaboration with the secretariat to the UNCCD. This project, the Global Support Programme (GSP-III), aims to support country Parties in developing their national reports while enhancing technical and institutional capacity for land degradation monitoring and reporting through technical assistance and the availability of an online help desk system. This project is a continuation of the support that the GM and the secretariat have provided in previous reporting processes.

39. As a result of activities undertaken under the GSP, the UNCCD 2022 reporting process introduces several new features in the reporting system, including an advanced online reporting platform (PRAIS 4) with newly introduced data mining and data visualization tools. In addition, some changes have been introduced in terms of newly proposed indicators and reporting forms and updated methodological guidelines for pre-existing indicators. Technical assistance and capacity building provided by the GSP is also tailored to the new circumstances created by COVID-19. The support provided to the Parties would need to be mostly virtual, comprising e-tutorials and pre-recorded videos produced to help Parties interpret data and fill in the requisite information in the reporting forms. A selected number of online events will also allow for Q&A sessions where Parties can clarify problems encountered during the reporting period.

40. The secretariat to the UNCCD has also liaised with Parties on GEF support for the 2022 reporting process, provided through a number of UNEP umbrella projects. The Regional Liaison Offices of the secretariat to the UNCCD have liaised with Parties on their submission of an Expression of Interest (EoI) to ensure participation in this UNEP-led programme. Consequently, the UNEP develops the GEF Enabling Activity projects based on the number of EoIs received and the funds are disbursed by the UNEP to the Parties in support of national activities aimed at enabling Parties to comply with the obligations of UNCCD reporting.

41. While the PRAIS 4 reporting platform is ready to receive information submitted by Parties, the secretariat is currently in the process of ensuring that Party-reported data will be in discoverable database format and, more importantly, that the database will become an integral part of the UNCCD knowledge base used for advocacy work by the Convention institutions and decision-making by Parties. In fact, efforts are underway to use the PRAIS database as the foundation for a long-term objective set by the UNCCD management team to establish a UNCCD virtual data centre that will assist Parties, inter alia, in using data-driven tools to track the progress made in the implementation of the Convention. Following the example set by the United Nations Secretary General's 'Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere', the secretariat is considering upgrading its operations, using extra budgetary resources, to provide UNCCD staff members and Parties with submitted data that

has been carefully vetted and scientifically scrutinized, and which will lend further credibility to the Convention.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

42. Based on the mandates granted to the secretariat and the GM, as contained in the various decisions referenced in the preceding sections, and the progress made on improving methodologies for tracking progress on the implementation of the Convention, general conclusions can be made as outlined in paragraphs 43 to 49.

43. By combining cutting-edge geospatial information, technology and services that can maximize the value of reporting data for better decision making, PRAIS 4 sets the foundations for future innovation in reporting and, more broadly, for a UNCCD data-driven transformation in line with the Secretary General's 'Data Strategy for Action by Everyone, Everywhere'.

44. The upgrade of PRAIS will help countries move from ambition to action. The spatial tools provided in the platform will assist countries in reporting targets, actions, and other relevant reporting items on a map. This will, for instance, assist Parties participating in the Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme (LDN TSP) which will be evolving into a second generation vehicle (LDN TSP 2.0) for decision support, and encourage the refinement of LDN targets to ensure that targets are quantitative, specific, time-bound, policy-coherent, spatially explicit, linked to land use planning, and gender responsive.¹¹ Spatially explicit targets with distinct locations and maps can provide increased focus on critical hotspot areas, aid prioritization and help create realistic and purposeful sub-national commitments and plans.

45. Through PRAIS 4, Parties can take national ownership of globally derived estimates as it is fully compatible with Trends.Earth by Conservation International. Trends.Earth not only operationalizes standardized methodologies documented in the Good Practice Guidance documents for SDG indicator 15.3.1 and for national reporting on SO 3, but gives countries control in producing their own estimates based on country data and nationally determined assumptions. This will help improve ownership while ensuring harmonization and comparability across countries, strengthen country capacity for data production and use, and reduce reliance on externally produced estimates.

46. Recognizing, in line with the GEO data sharing principles, that the societal benefits arising from Earth observations can only be fully achieved through the sharing of data, information, knowledge, products and services, PRAIS 4 allows Parties to specify the data licence governing the use of nationally reported data, with particular recognition of spatial data and associated attribute data, while encouraging as few restrictions as possible on its use to maximise the potential of reported data and inform decision-making on land.

47. The secretariat wishes to ensure the long-term sustainability of PRAIS 4. Factors affecting the long-term viability of the platform include governance, funding, data sharing and licensing. The secretariat will review and carry out the actions identified in the Sustainability Plan for the platform to ensure that PRAIS remains current and relevant to Parties, as well as sustainable over the longer term.

48. Based on the findings of the audit of its internal data assets, the secretariat has concluded that a data-driven transformation would be enabled by an in-house data enterprise approach coupled with formal partnerships, while acknowledging that investment is required in both the data systems and processes used by the secretariat, and in exploring and resourcing data-centred partnerships.

¹¹ For more information on the evolution of the voluntary Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme, see document ICCD/CRIC(20)/5.

49. To support the capacity development of Parties throughout the 2022 reporting process, the secretariat and the GM have diversified the provision of online support by making available:

(a) A series of e-learning video tutorials aimed at enabling Parties and stakeholders involved in reporting at the national level;

(b) A team of 12 technical experts who will provide a tight network of assistance to Parties throughout the reporting process;

(c) A help desk through which technical assistance and scientific backstopping will be provided to all Parties throughout the reporting process;

(d) Guidelines for the technical review of national reports, a revision and review system and a comments system in PRAIS 4 which will facilitate interactions between Parties and technical experts for the improvement of national reports.

50. Parties may wish to consider these conclusions with a view to preparing a draft decision for the COP based on the draft text for negotiations that can be found in ICCD/CRIC (20)/10, prepared on the basis of decision 32/COP.14.
