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Options and implications of the scheduling of the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties
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I. Possible options

1. Article 22 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) states that “Unless otherwise decided by the Conference of the Parties, the second, third and fourth ordinary sessions [of the Conference of the Parties] shall be held yearly, and thereafter, ordinary sessions shall be held every two years”.

2. So far, there have been two exceptions to this Article: In 2000, the Conference of the Parties (COP) decided to organize its fifth session (COP 5) in the following year as there were matters that required its rapid attention; and in 2021, COP 15 could not be organized and had to be postponed to 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. For the scheduling of COP 16, Article 22 may be read in different ways.

   (a) COP 16 in late 2023: The postponement of COP 15 because of the pandemic may be seen as an exceptional case influencing only that COP; in consequence, COP 16 would be organized in the last quarter of 2023 and thus the usual cycle of organizing the COPs in odd-numbered years would be maintained;

   (b) COP 16 in 2024: Alternatively, Article 22 may be taken literally: Regardless of the timing of COP 15, next COP should be held two years after it, and COP 16 would thus be organized in 2024.

4. COP 15 is mandated to decide the timing of COP 16. From its perspective, the secretariat considers both of the above options manageable and will be at the service of the Parties for delivering an effective COP 16, whichever scheduling is decided upon by the Parties. However, Parties may note that also some other COP, CRIC and CST agenda items will be influenced by the decision on COP 16 scheduling, as that defines the amount of time available to carry out the actions requested in COP 15 decisions.

5. With the aim to assist Parties in their consideration and eventual decision of the scheduling of COP 16, this document provides background information on the legal, procedural and financial aspects concerning the scheduling, as well as on its potential impact on agenda items.

II. Legal, procedural and financial aspects

6. As noted above, Article 22 defines the frequency of the COP sessions and provides the COP with the authority to also decide otherwise. It allows for the organization of COP 16 in 2023 or in 2024, as decided by the COP.

7. The sessions of both subsidiary bodies (the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the Committee on Science and Technology (CST)) are tied to the COP sessions, but their frequency/schedule in years is not specified. By Article 24, the CST is required to meet “in conjunction with the ordinary sessions of the COP”. By its terms of reference,2 the CRIC sessions are “to be held during the COP and once between each of the ordinary sessions of the COP”.

8. Next intersessional CRIC will be held between COP 15 and COP 16 to review national reports. The national reporting process has already started and the disbursement of the enabling funding from the Global Environment Facility is scheduled for the coming months, while the deadline for the submission of the reports is yet to be set. The dates of the intersessional session of the CRIC will be decided at COP 15, and after that, the Executive Secretary and the Bureau of the CRIC will assess progress made in the reporting process and decide on the report submission deadline. Organizing the next intersessional CRIC during the first half of 2023 would allow Parties ample time to compile their reports with credible and comparable data, and also offer adequate time for the secretariat and the GM to prepare the necessary documentation. With that schedule, COP 16 could be

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1 <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-01/UNCCD_Convention_ENG_0.pdf>.
9. For each COP, the secretariat enters into a detailed agreement with the host country, and arrangements are also made also with the United Nations services for document processing, conference interpretation and security. The scheduling of COP 16 in 2023 or 2024 is not likely to influence the scope, availability or quality of these arrangements and services. The United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) has confirmed its preparedness to deliver the usual arrangements for conferences to be organized in-person, and recognized the re-scheduling efforts of many conferences that were postponed or cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. By its latest resolution on financial provisions to the UNCCD official meetings, adopted on 17 December 2021 (A/RES/76/206), the United National General Assembly “...decides to include, in the United Nations calendar of conferences and meetings for the year 2022 and subsequent years, the sessions of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention and each of its subsidiary bodies, and requests the Secretary-General to continue to make provisions for those sessions in the proposed programme budgets”. That resolution covers the conference requirements of the UNCCD irrespective of its cycle of meetings. Nevertheless, as the United Nations calendar of meetings is approved by the General Assembly on an annual basis, the decision on the scheduling of COP 16 should be conveyed to the United Nations Secretariat immediately after COP 15 for proper budget planning. This is particularly critical if it is decided that both the next intersessional CRIC and COP 16 are to be organized in 2023, thus requiring UNOG services for two UNCCD meetings within one calendar year.

11. The secretariat has been made aware of ongoing discussions pointing to uncertainties about the availability of sufficient regular budget funds to cover conferences in the United Nations calendar of meetings that may be conducted in a virtual or hybrid format.

III. Potential influence on agenda items

12. The COP sessions are critically important for intergovernmental decision-making to advance progress under the UNCCD. The COP decisions guide and prompt Parties to take action in the priority areas of the Convention. They also define the aims and scope of the work of the secretariat and the GM and call on partners for collaboration.

13. The way that the workplan for the secretariat and the GM is currently formulated and considered by the COP allows flexibility for the COP scheduling. The workplan consists of broad four-year outcomes and outcome indicators that set the priorities and the ambition level for the secretariat and the GM without going into detail. These outcomes remain both formally and substantively valid as the overall guidance to the secretariat and the GM until the following COP, whether it takes place in 2023 or 2024.

14. For most specific topics and substantive agenda items, the action to be taken in the coming years is part of a process that has been outlined by the COP. For example, the concept of national voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) target-setting is well established and already applied by the majority of Parties, and many of them have also started to develop transformative LDN projects with the support of the GM. As another example, the Gender Action Plan that was adopted by the COP at its thirteenth session provides the framework for effective gender action at all levels for the years to come, with clear priorities and focus areas. For agenda items relating to such examples, the scheduling of COP 16 in 2023 or 2024 will not represent major challenges, as their processes are already outlined and advancing.

15. Although the consideration of most substantive agenda items will not depend on the scheduling of COP 16, there are a few matters described below that may require further measures should COP 16 be held in 2024.
A. Science-Policy Interface work programme

16. Science-Policy Interface (SPI) membership changes in part after each COP, with the leaving members still at work two to three months after the COP to compile their lessons learned for debriefing the Bureau of the COP. Typically, the new membership of the SPI starts functioning three to four months after the COP. The SPI has a work programme decided by the COP, which consists of up to two objectives/science-policy reports and several scientific coordination tasks. The scheduling of COP 16 will greatly influence the nature, depth and scope of activities and deliverables in the next SPI work programme. If COP 16 is held in late 2023, the new membership of the SPI will have one year to organize itself and carry out its work programme (taking into account the renewal process at the beginning of its term and the COP document submission deadlines at the end); if COP 16 is held in 2024, the SPI will have up to two years.

B. The budget

17. The financial rules of the COP3 state that “The financial period shall be a biennium, of which the first calendar year shall be an even-numbered year”.

18. At its fifteenth session, the COP will decide on a budget that should last until the next COP. If COP 16 is held in 2024, the budget decision would need to cover a three-year period of 2022–2024 in order to avoid the organization of another extraordinary COP session in 2023. Approving a three-year budget would require a COP decision to amend the financial rules.

19. More than 80 per cent of the UNCCD core budget is for relatively stable cost items (staff and regular operating costs). This fact would probably facilitate Parties’ consideration of extending the proposed 2022–2023 budget to also cover 2024, as the additional year would not entail major substantive revisions. However, some standard provisions in the budget decision would need to be updated to take into account the change in years.

C. Midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework

20. At its fourteenth session, the COP decided4 that COP 16 will finalize the modalities, criteria and terms of reference for the midterm evaluation and establish an intergovernmental working group to oversee the evaluation process. The evaluation findings would be considered at COP 17.

21. If COP 16 is held in 2023, the midterm evaluation findings would be considered, and the process would be concluded at COP 17 in 2025. With this schedule, there will be another 5 years left of the 12-year UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework to carry out any measures to strengthen the implementation of the Framework that may derive from the evaluation.

22. If COP 16 is held in 2024 and COP 17 in 2026, only four years will be available for revising the course of implementation, if such need arises through the evaluation.

23. Currently, the roadmap for the midterm evaluation assumes that COP 16 will be held in 2023. If that schedule remains, the preparations for the evaluation will proceed as planned with no need for changes.

24. Should COP 16 be held in 2024 and COP 17 in 2026, Parties might want to launch the evaluation process already at COP 15 to conclude it at COP 16 in 2024 so as to make more timely use of the evaluation findings. If it is decided that such re-scheduling is to be done, it can be accommodated within the existing COP 15 agenda item on the midterm evaluation.

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3 <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/sessions/documents/2019-08/2COP1_0.pdf>.

4 Decision 7/COP.14.
D. Ad hoc and time-bound working groups and assignments

25. Most COPs decide to establish working groups for a specific topic and/or assign the secretariat or the GM tasks that are to be completed by the following COP. Similar to the work of the SPI, the depth and scope of such working groups or tasks are significantly influenced by the scheduling of COP 16, which needs to be taken into account in the respective COP 15 decisions.

IV. Conclusions

26. In the light of the above, Parties may note that both 2023 and 2024 are feasible for the scheduling of COP 16, and both also have advantages and disadvantages. Organizing the COP in 2023 would not require any procedural or planning changes, but proximity to COP 15 would limit the substantive scope and scale of some agenda items and activities. Setting the COP 16 date in 2024 would provide ample time for a thorough delivery of all intersessional assignments, while requiring adjustments to the financial rules of the COP and the schedule of the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.