

Concept note for Phase II of the LDN Target Setting Programme (LDN TSP 2.0)

1. MANDATE

In September 2015, the global community agreed on “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Goal 15 urges countries to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”. SDG target 15.3 aims to “combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought, and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world”.

In October 2015, the twelfth session of the Conference of the Parties (**COP 12**) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) endorsed SDG target 15.3, which includes the concept of land degradation neutrality (LDN), as a strong vehicle for driving the implementation of the Convention. In order to enable the UNCCD to “make a significant contribution to achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN)”, the COP decided to invite Parties to “formulate voluntary targets to achieve LDN” and “explore options on how to integrate the voluntary LDN targets in their national action plans (NAP) as part of their overall discussion on the implementation of the SDG” (decision 3/COP.12). In the same decision, the COP also requested the secretariat and appropriate UNCCD bodies to develop guidance for formulating national LDN targets and initiatives.

In September 2017, **COP 13** highlighted the importance of the LDN target setting and implementation processes for the UNCCD by: Inviting Parties to formulate voluntary targets to achieve LDN in accordance with their specific national circumstances and development priorities (decision 2/COP.13); and Inviting Parties to ensure that LDN targets and the activities to achieve these targets are directly linked to their national SDG agendas and create leverage and synergies with their countries’ climate and biodiversity agendas (decision 3/COP.13);

In September 2019, **COP 14** provided more guidance on the importance of the LDN target setting and land use planning processes to the UNCCD by:

(a) Inviting Parties, who have not yet done so, to formulate voluntary LDN targets and to implement measures to accelerate their achievement (decision 3/COP.14, paras 1 & 2), and strengthen national-level coordination and cooperation through the promotion of integrated land use planning and the creation of an enabling environment for the achievement of LDN (decision 3/COP.14, paras 2b & 2c);

(b) Requesting the secretariat, the Global Mechanism and appropriate UNCCD bodies to further develop the LDN-TSP and support Parties in implementing it, periodically monitoring its progress, and to continue promoting synergies and knowledge-sharing among Parties (decision 3/COP.14, paras 5c & 5d);

(c) Explicitly acknowledging that the LDN target-setting process provides an opportunity for countries to promote synergies among the Rio conventions and other multilateral environmental agreements and policy coherence across multiple sectors, particularly as an accelerator for national-level achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (decision 12/COP.14);

(d) Welcoming with appreciation the achievements of the LDN-TSP in support of the strong political momentum created by country Parties to achieve LDN and emphasizing the importance of maintaining this momentum by fostering LDN implementation (decision 12/COP.14);

(e) Urging Parties to periodically review progress in the implementation of LDN targets (dec 12/COP.14, para 1)

(f) Encouraging Parties to further strengthen the integration of the LDN concept and voluntary targets into relevant national policies and planning frameworks (Decision 12/COP.14, para 6.b) and **encouraging the secretariat and the Global Mechanism to continue their efforts in supporting countries in the integration of voluntary LDN targets into national action programs, relevant policies and planning frameworks** (dec 12/COP.14, para 7);

(g) Also **requesting the Global Mechanism and the secretariat of the UNCCD**, in collaboration with the Global Environment Facility and relevant international partners **to continue supporting the process of voluntary LDN target-setting in those country Parties that may still wish to engage in this process, and also continue sharing relevant knowledge and lessons learned on the outcomes of this process** (decision 13/COP.14, paras 11a & 11b);

(h) Inviting Parties to raise the profile of and mainstream LDN in national policy agendas (decision 16/COP.14, para 6);

(i) Encouraging Parties to take into account land tenure and land-use planning conditions for creating an enabling policy and regulatory environment for LDN by, inter alia, enhancing national capacities for the effective implementation of integrated land-use planning, establishing the full integration of a neutrality framework for counterbalancing assessed losses with equal or greater gains, and applying the land degradation neutrality response hierarchy for measures to avoid, reduce and/or reverse land degradation (decision 16/COP.14, paras 9 & 9.e);

(j) Inviting Parties and cooperating partners working on science-policy aspects relating to the enabling environment for LDN to further engage in raising awareness and understanding of LDN by supporting research, capacity-building and development of land governance systems for LDN and develop science-based methods to support land-use planning, including scenario analysis and assessment of trade-offs (decision 16/COP.14, paras 10.b & 10.c);

(k) Requesting the secretariat and the Global Mechanism to support national efforts to build capacity for the improved assessment and monitoring of LDN, multiple benefits, and trade-offs to support integrated land-use planning (decision 16/COP.14, para 11);

More recently, in May 2022, **COP 15** provided additional and more concrete guidance on LDN target setting by:

(l) **Encouraging Parties that have not yet done so to formulate voluntary LDN targets, as appropriate, and Parties which have already set targets to consider reviewing and refining them, ensuring that LDN targets are specific, time-bound, policy-coherent, quantitative, spatially explicit, gender-responsive and adequately integrated into planning frameworks** (decision 3/COP.15, para 1, decision 12/COP.15 para 1, & decision 13/COP.15 para 1);

(m) Inviting Parties, as appropriate and on a voluntary basis, to enhance the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 15.3, into their national strategies, plans and programmes and map them with those of the other two Rio conventions and other processes, including national development strategies, to increase transparency, policy coherence and synergies in their implementation (decision 3/COP.15, para 3);

(n) Requesting the secretariat and the Global Mechanism to continue to promote synergies and knowledge-sharing among Parties on land degradation neutrality target-setting efforts (decision 3/COP.15, para 5e);

(o) Also **inviting Parties to explore complementarities between land degradation neutrality targets, Nationally Determined Contributions, and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans**, as well as national targets under the Sendai Framework, and related planning, programming, reporting and monitoring in order to achieve the Convention's objectives (decision 8/COP.15, para 2);

(p) Also **requesting the secretariat and the Global Mechanism to support Parties in reviewing and refining their voluntary land degradation neutrality targets** and in delineating their location and extent in order to ensure that they are quantifiable, spatially explicit and time-bound, in line with levels of national ambition (decision 11/COP.15, para 5a, and decision 12/COP.15 para 1); **and also support the process of setting and/or refining voluntary LDN targets, streamlining it with other Convention and associated processes, and integrating these targets into (sub)national integrated land-use planning frameworks** in those country Parties that may wish to engage in this process (decision 13/COP.15 para 6c);

Additional guidance on integrated land use planning processes can be found in decision 16/COP.15.

2. BACKGROUND AND CURRENT STATUS

In response to COP12 decisions and based on the lessons learned from a pilot project involving 14 countries and supported by a total of 18 institutional, technical and financial partners¹, the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) of the UNCCD developed the LDN Target Setting Programme (LDN TSP)² in October 2015 to define national LDN baselines, establish national voluntary targets and associated measures as well as identify transformative projects and programmes to reach LDN by 2030. The LDN TSP was officially launched in a series of regional inception workshops during 2016.

In April 2019, the work done under the LDN TSP received the inaugural Impact Award³ of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, as an international recognition to the Programme's innovative, science-based and participatory approach to support countries in setting voluntary targets to halt land degradation by 2030.

According to an independent terminal evaluation of the LDN TSP⁴ completed in 2019, the support provided to countries was assessed to be: i) highly relevant to the needs of participating countries and the priorities of the partners of the project; ii) be a cost and time efficient process, with a rapid delivery achieved through a combination of a well-structured, easily replicated process, and a centralized operating model; and iii) highly effective as most project outputs and outcomes have been achieved, with the number of participating countries greatly exceeding original projections. The evaluation also made some recommendations for areas of improvement (particularly around knowledge sharing and gender mainstreaming activities) that the GM has been addressing since then taking into account the management response to this terminal evaluation and also ongoing guidance provided to improve GM operations in support of countries' work.

A key finding from the global assessment⁵ conducted by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving or PBL) and published in November 2020 indicates that through the effective implementation of the LDN TSP and the voluntary LDN targets defined in this context by UNCCD country Parties, countries committed to restoring an estimated total of over 450 million hectares of degraded lands, in addition to the restoration of about 250 million hectares planned in the context of the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the UNFCCC, and some 90 million hectares included in the National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans under the CBD. This achievement represents a substantive contribution to the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the global land restoration agenda. However, despite the very substantial progress achieved to date, the findings of the Second Edition of the Global Land Outlook⁶ presented in 2022 clearly tell us that we need to do more, faster and better in order to address the global crisis of land degradation.

As of February 2023, the LDN Target Setting Programme has supported a total of 130 participating countries, with 107 countries having successfully completed this voluntary process, 101 countries having already published their national reports detailing the outcomes of this process in the UNCCD Knowledge Hub⁷, and 72 countries having officially adopted their LDN targets through high-level government commitments. To date, the LDN TSP continues supporting the remaining countries in finalizing their LDN target setting process and securing high-level political commitments for LDN.

¹ France, Germany, Luxembourg, Republic of Korea, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Venezuela, the European Space Agency, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Global Environment Facility, International Soil Reference and Information Centre – World Soil Information, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Soil Leadership Academy, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme and World Resources Institute.

² <https://www.unccd.int/actions/ldn-target-setting-programme>

³ <https://www.unccd.int/news-events/ldn-target-setting-project-wins-iucn-impact-award>

⁴ <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2019-04/LDNTSP-EvalReport%20final.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.pbl.nl/en/publications/goals-and-commitments-for-the-restoration-decade>

⁶ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/global-land-outlook/glo2>

⁷ <https://knowledge.unccd.int/home/country-information/countries-with-voluntary-ldn-targets>

3. CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The LDN target-setting process constitutes an initial solid step in a longer iterative process towards establishing baselines, setting voluntary LDN targets and achieving the desired long-term impact of LDN by 2030. Despite the very positive results achieved to date, there is still considerable room for improvement at different levels.

The independent evaluation of the LDN TSP included some recommendations for maintaining the current momentum, and providing the best support to the national and global effort towards achieving LDN, including among others:

- Develop a more systematic approach to knowledge management, learning and outreach (including building a sufficient enabling environment for LDN investment, identifying gaps to achieve LDN, and how to develop and secure finance for transformative projects and programmes).
- Improve capacity building and development support to address countries' capacity needs.
- Develop further guidance on integrating gender and co-benefits into national LDN strategies and targets and related implementation efforts.
- Promote closer harmonisation across the Rio Conventions.

Linked to the need to improve knowledge management, there has also been an increasing demand from partners to analyse the national LDN targets from different thematic perspectives, i.e., in order to determine the total sum of hectares of land that have been targeted for restoration through the LDN target setting process globally in addition to commitments made under other initiatives such as the Bonn Challenge, Biodiversity targets and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC's). As indicated earlier, PBL made an initial global assessment with a limited sample of countries with very positive outcomes. This assessment should be updated and further developed (i.e., systematic analysis with all UNCCD country Parties, including information on LDN sub-target and measures, and enabling thematic analysis beyond area committed for restoration), taking also into account the information on LDN targets that countries will report via PRAIS during the 2022 national reporting exercise, and in order to generate more precise and valuable data that the UNCCD Parties and partners can capitalize on to achieve LDN by 2030. Decision 20/COP.15 (para 9) provides a specific mandate in this regard. The UNCCD secretariat has already initiated contacts with potential partners in order to explore options to further develop the global assessment on commitments.

With regards to promoting closer harmonization across Rio Conventions, the cross cutting and cross sectoral nature of land and LDN targets offers a great potential, but it is important to consider how we can strengthen coherence with other ongoing relevant processes and ensure operational synergies both at the level of policy development and related implementation efforts (e.g. national SDG agendas, updates of NDCs and national adaptation plans (NAPs), revised National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) under the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, Bonn Challenge commitments, etc.). This coherence would be also relevant for the purpose of national reporting exercises to the Rio Conventions and the SDG's. In the context of the LDN TSP, through the development of LDN leverage plans, national working groups and related national stakeholders consultation processes, we have seen many countries making significant advances in this regards. However, we still see many countries facing remaining internal silo approaches among Rio Conventions and challenges to mainstream LDN into higher level national sustainable development strategies. The issue of complementarity versus duplication of national targets/commitments made under different processes also remains unclear in some countries.

There is a growing understanding on the central role of land use planning to implement LDN as it helps identifying those land uses that best meet the demands of people while safeguarding soil, water, and biodiversity for future generations (Global Land Outlook, UNCCD, 2017). To be effective, the neutrality mechanism should be integrated into existing land use planning processes, to facilitate consideration of the likely cumulative impacts of land use and land management decisions on land-based natural capital and the implications for achieving neutrality. This framework applies a counterbalancing mechanism for maintaining (or exceeding) neutrality that is voluntary and focused pro-actively on planning. However, an internal assessment conducted by the Global Mechanism indicates that only around 30% of LDN TSP participating countries that have set targets have linked their LDN targets and/or related measures with relevant (sub)national land use planning policies and frameworks.

In order to address this gap, the Global Mechanism has developed in collaboration with IUCN a GEF Enabling Activity project titled “Integrating Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) into land use planning frameworks to strengthen national UNCCD enabling environments” that will be executed by the Global Mechanism in direct coordination with the activities of the LDN TSP 2.0. Building upon new technical and scientific guidance from the Science-Policy Interface of the UNCCD (see document ICCD/COP(15)/CST/2⁸), relevant tools and platforms (i.e., Trends.Earth 2.0, LUP4LDN, PRAIS4, WOCAT SLM database and planning tools, FAO’s guidelines for land-use planning, etc.) and new initiatives such as the GIZ-led project on data for integrated land use planning (“From Data to Action” initiative, S4LUP project) and the GEO LDN Initiative Support Project among others. This Enabling Activity project will identify land use planning best practices, produce practical guidelines and support further development and application of relevant tools and platforms for the effective integration of LDN in land use planning at country level. It will also include identifying global good practices related to gender mainstreaming in land use planning and land management, as well as related training and capacity building. Recently approved by the GEF, the project is expected to be operational during the first half of 2023 with activities to be completed within two years.

In terms of capacity building, the LDN target setting exercise also identified areas requiring enhanced support at country level, including the effective monitoring of LDN targets. There is a need to provide expertise, tools and training to enhance national capacities to undertake quantitative assessments and the corresponding mapping of their degraded lands as new data becomes available. Considering that the monitoring of LDN and SDG indicator 15.3.1 relies, to a large extent, on Earth observations and geospatial information, training is required on the use of available tools for accessing, processing, analyzing and interpreting Earth observations data as well as on data validation techniques. Such training would ideally target not only the main entity responsible for LDN implementation and reporting to the UNCCD, but also national statistical offices responsible for SDG monitoring/implementation. In this context, LDN TSP 2.0 capacity building efforts should directly involve relevant specialized agencies (i.e., FAO, Conservation International, WOCAT, etc.), build upon and align with ongoing/planned UNCCD capacity building efforts (i.e., GSP III, PRAIS4), and be coordinated with relevant initiatives and platforms (i.e., Trends.Earth 2.0, GEO LDN Initiative, Tools4LDN, etc.).

The nature of LDN target setting as a voluntary and nationally driven process that needs to adjust to varied national circumstances led to having different countries setting very varied sets of LDN targets with differing levels of definition and ambition. However, with the support of LDN TSP 2.0 and as part of an iterative process to advance towards achieving LDN by 2030, country Parties that have already set voluntary LDN targets can review and further strengthen their LDN targets by ensuring that they are specific, time-bound, policy coherent, quantitative, spatially explicit, gender-responsive and adequately integrated into land use planning frameworks in order to improve land-use decision-making and further advance in LDN implementation and related monitoring activities.

4. PHASE II OF THE LDN TARGET SETTING PROGRAMME (LDN TSP 2.0)

The second phase of the LDN TSP is designed to assist country parties to review, evaluate and refine their national LDN targets and, more importantly, to move from commitments to the ambition to action through strengthening land governance and land use planning, and spatial mapping of the targeted land and monitoring interventions aimed at avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation in those specific locations to meet their targets and to implement LDN at scale.

Taking into consideration the COP mandate, the current level of achievements of the LDN TSP, its lessons learned, and the identified areas for improvement, as well as the complementarity with other relevant lines of work under the UNCCD and relevant partners’ initiatives, the following includes the key elements for the LDN TSP 2.0:

VISION: Achieving healthy productive land in balance by 2030.

OVERALL OBJECTIVE: To support an enabling environment for countries to close the implementation gap, deliver and meet land-based targets.

⁸ <https://www.unccd.int/official-documents>

Component 1: Country level decision support

This component will focus on country level decision support by providing technical assistance and relevant resources for country Parties to improve LDN targets (to ensure that targets are quantitative, specific, time-bound, policy-coherent, spatially-explicit, linked to land use planning, and gender responsive) and develop tools to support scenario planning and trade-off analysis to inform and improve decision making in Land Use Planning (directly linked to the activities that will be delivered through the GEF IUCN LDN-LUP Enabling Activity project).

These activities will be supported through the provision of supplementary technical guidelines and capacity building for improved country support, dedicated technical expertise to support national processes, assess implementation status and gaps and improve delivery plans for land-based implementation actions;

Component 2: Monitoring, knowledge management and communication

This component will focus on further developing user friendly databases on LDN targets, ensuring alignment with PRAIS, supporting generation of information for thematic analyses, and ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation and the development of relevant knowledge materials both for internal UNCCD and external stakeholders (i.e., internal and external LDN targets database, LDN information in country-specific UNCCD webpages, LDN content in UNCCD website, relevant news pieces and social media posts, specific LDN briefs on demand, thematic LDN publications).

In this context, the LDN Target Setting 2.0 will contribute directly to relevant UNCCD work on communications, awareness raising and data/knowledge management (i.e., LDN Targets Tracking Tool, PRAIS4, Trends.Earth 2.0, UNCCD's knowledge management, and collaboration with partners on assessments on land restoration commitments, UNCCD's policy advocacy and political leverage work, direct collaborations with secretariat of the UNCBD and the UNFCCC on land-based targets, etc.) for increased impact.

A complete logframe for participating countries has been developed for the LDN TSP 2.0 with further details on the expected outcomes, outputs, activities, and indicators, including required timeframes and budgetary considerations.

5. OPERATIONAL DELIVERY AND TIMELINES

The LDN TSP 2.0 will ensure coordination with the various relevant ongoing projects/initiatives mentioned earlier. Based on the experienced gained during the delivery of the LDN TSP since 2016 and internal exchanges with relevant UNCCD secretariat units, it is foreseen to have an initial phase with only 15 participating countries. For this purpose, the LDN TSP 2.0 would follow a similar operational delivery approach as the one used under the LDN-TSP since 2016, with the GM and the Administration Services unit of the UNCCD secretariat providing direct support to participating countries for executing country level activities.

A subsequent phase that would increase substantially the number of participating countries with larger volume of operations would require an alternative delivery model through potential partners that may be interested in directly supporting TSP 2.0 activities at country level.

The LDN TSP 2.0 was announced during COP15, both in the context of the GM report (ICCD/CRIC(20)/5⁹) and as part of GM presentations to pre-COP capacity building workshops, regional preparatory meetings, and planned events (GEF half day at Rio Pavilion, GM event with partners, etc). Programme activities are expected to be initiated after the 2022 UNCCD national reporting exercise is completed, and the GEF-IUCN EA LDN-LUP project is operational (both currently expected for first half of 2023).

The LDN TSP 2.0 will target an initial group of 15 countries. Selection of countries will be done jointly with the GEF-IUCN EA LDN-LUP project via an open call for expressions of interest with clearly defined selection criteria and to be launched during the first half of 2023. A capacity building workshop for participating countries is planned for 4-6 October 2023 (back-to-back with CRIC21) in Samarkand (Uzbekistan). 12-months country processes would then roll out till October 2024, aiming at presenting their key outcomes at COP16.

⁹ https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-03/ICCD_CRIC%2820%29_5-2202342E.pdf