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## **Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention**

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Participatory consultations for the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework

## **Midterm evaluation: Main findings and recommendations of the independent assessment**

### **Background information for the participatory consultations**

#### *Summary*

By decision 7/COP.15, the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) launched a midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. The midterm evaluation is overseen by a dedicated Intergovernmental Working Group with support from the UNCCD secretariat, and the first main document in the evaluation process is an independent assessment that provides a detailed assessment of the key aspects and components of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and serves as evidence-based background information.

The findings and recommendations of the independent assessment will be considered through participatory consultations organized as part of the official Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention agenda. The main messages and recommendations of the independent assessment report have been summarized in this conference room paper to serve as a background for these consultations.

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## I. Introduction

1. By decision 7/COP.15, the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) launched a midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. The purpose of the midterm evaluation is to assess the progress made in implementing the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and achieving its five strategic objectives (SOs). It will determine whether the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework is working as intended, whether its implementation is meeting the stated aims, and whether/how it is contributing to broader global priorities of sustainable development. The evaluation will inform Parties and other key stakeholders about the successes and challenges in the implementation and, through a participatory process, result in recommendations to further improve performance for the remaining period of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.

2. The midterm evaluation is overseen by a dedicated Intergovernmental Working Group (IWG-MTE) with support from the UNCCD secretariat. Three main documents are prepared for the evaluation process:

(a) An independent assessment, prepared by external evaluators and managed by the UNCCD secretariat, which provides a detailed assessment of the key aspects and components of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and serves as evidence-based background information;

(b) The report of the IWG-MTE to the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16), in which the IWG-MTE presents its interpretation of the status of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and its recommendations for the way forward; and

(c) The eventual COP 16 decision on how to enhance the implementation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework during its second half (2025 to 2030).

3. The independent assessment report has been completed and can be accessed on the UNCCD website at <https://www.unccd.int/convention/governance/strategic-framework-2018-2030/midterm-evaluation>. The report provides a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of the measures taken in the UNCCD process under the five SOs of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework,<sup>1</sup> building on stakeholder feedback received through a survey and interviews. It considers the relevance of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework to its Parties and implementation partners, the coherence of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework with other related priorities and measures, the efficiency of its monitoring and reporting system, the sustainability of its achievement, and its gender responsiveness, among other matters. The independent assessment also makes a brief statement on the progress to impact concerning the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.

4. As requested by its terms of reference, the independent assessment report provides conclusions and recommendations based on its findings. In line with decision 7/COP.15, annex I, paragraph 15, a participatory consultation on these conclusions and recommendations will be conducted during the twenty-first meeting of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 21).

## II. Purpose of the participatory consultations

5. The participatory consultations on the findings and recommendations of the independent assessment will be organized as part of the official Committee for the Review

<sup>1</sup> SO 1: To improve the condition of affected ecosystems, combat desertification/land degradation, promote sustainable land management and contribute to land degradation neutrality

SO 2: To improve the living conditions of affected populations

SO 3: To mitigate, adapt to, and manage the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems

SO 4: To generate global environmental benefits through effective implementation of the UNCCD

SO 5: To mobilize substantial and additional financial and non-financial resources to support the implementation of the Convention by building effective partnerships at global and national level.

of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) agenda. The purpose of these consultations is to obtain first reactions from CRIC participants on the main findings and proposals made by the external consultants. That will provide the IWG-MTE members with an idea of which points of the independent assessment seem to be supported by countries and which are not, thus helping them to consider how to orient the report to the COP at its sixteenth session. For the CRIC participants, the consultations are an opportunity to know what kind of matters are considered in the midterm evaluation process and provide their feedback to the IWG-MTE.

6. The independent assessment report is a long document, covering nearly all topics that are dealt with under the UNCCD. To facilitate the participatory consultations, the main messages and recommendations of the report have been summarized into this conference room paper (CRP), which is part of the official documentation for CRIC 21.

### **III. Organization of work for the participatory consultations**

7. The participatory consultations will be organized as a CRIC plenary discussion, scheduled for the afternoon of Thursday, 16 November 2023. There are no other meetings taking place in parallel. The room setup will be that of the CRIC plenary, and simultaneous interpretation will be available.

8. At the beginning of the participatory consultations, regional/interest groups, Parties and observers may, if they wish, make brief general statements relevant to the midterm evaluation. After that, the meeting will continue as an exchange around the topics presented in the next section of this CRP. The lead consultant for the independent assessment will give a brief presentation of the findings and proposals under each topic, one by one, after which the floor will be open for interventions by the Parties.

### **IV. Consideration of the main findings and recommendations of the independent assessment**

9. The independent assessment presents numerous findings and proposals for improvement targeting nearly all areas of work under the UNCCD. In general, the findings suggest that progress is being made toward the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and its SOs. The UNCCD work on land degradation neutrality (LDN) has been useful and beneficial for the involved countries and holds significant potential and an important role in advancing land restoration globally. The Convention is also recognized as one of the key players in global advocacy, policymaking and cooperation concerning drought, and this role is further growing as droughts are becoming more widespread and severe. Furthermore, gender matters are increasingly integrated into all UNCCD activities as a cross-cutting topic.

10. With regard to the Convention secretariat and the Global Mechanism, the findings concerning their performance and effectiveness indicate that these two entities are generally effective; they focus on the “right” topics, and their work is considered valuable. The secretariat is particularly commended for bringing critically important topics such as land governance to the mainstream of the UNCCD debates, while the Global Mechanism support to translating LDN targets into bankable projects through broad-based partnerships is widely appreciated.

11. While progress is being made, the independent assessment found many areas in need of more effort, some of which are critically important for the sustainability of the results made so far and for further achievements. The focus of the midterm evaluation recommendations, and the participatory consultations during the CRIC, will be on enhancing measures in these areas.

12. The following chapters present possible improvements in five areas, as described in the independent assessment report, for consideration through the participatory consultations. For each area, some indicative questions are also presented, with the aim of facilitating the consideration of Parties on where to provide feedback at the consultations. It may be noted that matters concerning drought are not a major consideration here, as they are covered in

detail in the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought, which will submit its report to COP 16. However, they are described extensively in the independent assessment report.

## A. Political and financial commitments

13. The independent assessment report states that although the UNCCD and the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework are generally seen as relevant, the actions taken by countries tend to be guided by other frameworks that are either more specific/suitable to their situation or considered politically more important. The status and recognition of the UNCCD is considered lower than those of the other two Rio conventions. In most countries, the UNCCD does not influence many national budgetary processes, and in general it has less political and media attention and weaker science-policy influence. Accessing funding from major external donors and implementing partners is complex, and many UNCCD focal points and other stakeholders lack the needed capacity for that.

14. The UNCCD secretariat and the Global Mechanism are relatively small, and while their hard work is recognized, their limited resources are also acknowledged. The regular budget for the activities under the UNCCD has been limited by zero nominal growth; that means it has remained at the same level for more than a decade, thus losing significant purchasing power, while the scope of the Convention topics has significantly evolved. Assessing the potential budgetary impacts of all UNCCD requests to the COP for additional funding needs for activities would enhance transparency. Moreover, regular, proactive communication from UNCCD about costs associated with UNCCD activities, and responses to inquiries from Parties before and during the COPs on potential costs, could develop more buy-in to Secretariat activities from Parties. Lack of growth in the regular budget has resulted in an ever larger share of the UNCCD activities being funded from extrabudgetary resources, which are outside COP governance, resulting in limitations to the transparency of the budget of the Convention. While such extrabudgetary resources are welcome, too heavy reliance on them poses a major risk for the continuity of the activities and staff posts that they fund.

15. The assessment considers that the political commitment/visibility and the availability of resources are intertwined in many ways; if one is missing, the other one is not likely to be there either. It makes the following recommendations to strengthen the political and financial commitments to advance the UNCCD and its UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.

### 1. Recommendation 1: Establishment of one or more global targets

16. The LDN concept serves well as the basis for national-level programming and for global reporting, such as for Sustainable Development Goal monitoring. Nevertheless, as stated by many respondents, it is not ideal for convincing political decision-makers or the general public. An explicit quantitative restoration target, such as the “30 by 30” in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework or “50 by 40” in the G20 Global Initiative on Reducing Land Degradation and Enhancing Conservation of Terrestrial Habitats (G20 Global Land Initiative),<sup>2</sup> would be useful for the UNCCD, even if it would be (at least for the time being) an umbrella concept for LDN. Quantitative targets or explicit obligations would also be useful as tools to ensure that countries take the implementation of the Convention more seriously. They could prompt the governments to take the needed actions and facilitate the needs assessment and provision of resources for implementation.

### 2. Recommendation 2: Closing the divide between who is affected and who is not

17. Many Parties that are labelled as “non-affected” under the UNCCD are taking measures to protect and restore their land and soil. So far, the Convention process has paid only limited attention to integrating into its agenda and operations substantive considerations

<sup>2</sup> Target 2 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework is about ensuring that “by 2030 at least 30 per cent of areas of degraded terrestrial ... ecosystems are under effective restoration” and target 3 is about ensuring that “by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial...areas, ... are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures”. The G20 Global Land Initiative aims to “prevent, halt and reverse land degradation and reduce degraded land by 50 per cent by 2040”.

outside the countries belonging to the five Regional Implementation Annexes, although that could significantly enrich the substantive basis and deepen political commitment and cooperation worldwide.

**3. Recommendation 3: Enhancing the effectiveness of resource mobilization**

18. The UNCCD national focal points and other country-level key stakeholders for Convention implementation need continued support to strengthen collaboration with other sectors and capacity to translate plans and targets into bankable projects and programmes suitable for domestic or international financing at scale, including from the private sector. To meet those needs, access to information about a variety of funding sources and their working modalities could be further developed. Developing business cases to demonstrate the economic and social benefits of addressing desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD) would also be useful for promoting the engagement of the private sector. Partnerships and initiatives like the International Drought Resilience Alliance and the G20 Global Land Initiative hold great potential for bringing together different countries and organizations around a shared concern and influencing the mobilization of related resources. Furthermore, the regular budget of the Convention should become commensurate to the tasks requested of the secretariat and the Global Mechanism.

**Questions that could be considered at the participatory consultations:**

- What would be the most important measures for enhancing political commitment and visibility for the UNCCD at a national level and globally?
- How could the UNCCD best support countries in accessing large-scale funding and investments for implementation?

**B. Action at larger scale on the ground**

19. The independent assessment received many comments about the need to find effective ways and means for the UNCCD to foster action on the ground. Some said that land degradation is still perceived as an environmental issue, and its critical role in farming, infrastructure and urbanization, among other things, is not adequately understood. This was considered to limit the institutionalization of LDN and related aims into different governmental policies and regulations. It was also considered that the concepts that the UNCCD uses are not easy to link with sustainable land management activities on the ground, which calls for information that is better tailored for that purpose. To strengthen action at a scale on the ground, the independent assessment made the following recommendations.

**1. Recommendation 4: Improving the availability and targeting of information**

20. The economic aspects of land and drought, including land value and a cost-benefit analysis of restoration measures, should be better integrated into the UNCCD process, as they can effectively influence political decision-making. On the other hand, there is a need for guidance on concrete approaches that can be applied locally as long-term solutions toward the objectives of the UNCCD and its UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. These information needs could be at least partially covered by leveraging existing expert networks involved in scientific research and broader land aspects.

**2. Recommendation 5: Building a “restoration industry”**

21. To achieve impact on the ground at scale, the support and efforts of the UNCCD and others aiming to achieve the same targets would need to lead to a global “restoration industry”, which is a compilation of normative frameworks, scientific expertise, targeted financing, skilful practitioners and committed land users, that can deliver LDN. For the UNCCD process to be an effective catalyst for such a movement, it may need to reconsider its substantive focus. Such reconsideration could include, for example, new UNCCD measures aiming to promote norms or legislation that encourage public sector and private companies to protect and restore land, or advancing expert training on specific topics through partnerships.

**Questions that could be considered at the participatory consultations:**

- What would be the most important measures for UNCCD Parties to implement to support and strengthen implementation on the ground?
- How could the UNCCD catalyse large-scale action to support implementation? What are the most important factors for increasing the attention of the private sector to land restoration?

**C. Linkages between the three Rio conventions**

22. The independent assessment found that the interlinkages of addressing land restoration, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and biodiversity protection are becoming increasingly recognized, but more effort is needed for gaining the attention of major decision-makers like ministers of finance, agriculture and energy. It states that improved awareness and understanding of the benefits of synergies in implementing the Rio conventions is needed globally, in both poor and wealthy countries, and for domestic planning/implementation as well as international cooperation. To strengthen linkages between the three Rio conventions, the independent assessment made the following recommendations.

**1. Recommendation 6: Committing to joint implementation of the three Rio conventions**

23. Countries will need to develop a variety of national coordination and cooperation improvements to promote synergies between the three Conventions at national level, and the Convention secretariats, together and separately, should support their efforts with technical assistance and guidance, among other means. An explicit commitment to joint implementation through COP decisions under all three conventions could significantly speed up such national processes.

**2. Recommendation 7: Enhancing information-sharing**

24. To further promote synergies at national level, countries could benefit from access to case studies and lessons learned from projects and programmes that link the objectives of the three Rio conventions. This could be a shared repository serving all conventions.

**Questions that could be considered at the participatory consultations:**

- What would be the most important measures for the UNCCD to enhance linkages between the three Rio conventions at national level and globally?

**D. Science-policy update**

25. Many respondents participating in the independent assessment mentioned the need for more effective use of science to influence political decision-making and guide implementation on the ground. This could also mean enhancing the relevance of the UNCCD products and services for activities on the ground. To update and upgrade the UNCCD science-policy contributions, the following recommendations are made.

**1. Recommendation 8: Enhancing the clarity of science-policy messages**

26. The UNCCD science-policy messages and tools need to be simplified if they are to be effectively used for advocacy and communications targeting policymakers. For enhancing communication between and within the countries, various communication platforms and media channels could be used. Of particular importance is to develop science-policy communication tools for use at the country level for informing different ministries, departments and institutions and thereby promoting actions across sectors and offices at national and local levels.

## **2. Recommendation 9: Broadening the substantive scope**

27. The inclusion of new disciplines such as economics into the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) could be considered, and/or the SPI membership could include expert practitioners, like the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services has done. Establishing the SPI as a body of independent scientists that are not nominated by Parties but selected according to their merits could give it more room to openly address issues that hinder implementation and submit them for the consideration of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST). Furthermore, the SPI work could be better aligned with the agendas and priorities of the CRIC and the COP.

## **3. Recommendation 10: Refining the UNCCD science reach**

28. Broadening the participation of the scientific community in the UNCCD process could be an effective means for influencing the commitment of governments and practitioners. This could include engaging with regional scientific networks and other expert partners at regional and national levels, from producing and compiling information on specific science-policy topics to supporting data collection for the national reporting.

### **Questions that could be considered at the participatory consultations:**

- What would be the most important measures for further enhancing the effectiveness of the UNCCD science-policy work?

## **E. Monitoring and reporting**

29. As the implementation of the Strategic Framework and the five SOs advances, tools for measuring achievements beyond output delivery will be needed, not only for accountability toward donors but also for demonstrating the benefits for political decision-makers, thereby enhancing the political momentum. This is particularly critical for the LDN results in the UNCCD context, but considering the numerous land restoration commitments made outside the UNCCD, at least some monitoring of impact at the global level will be needed in the coming years as well. It will be important to ensure that even if the UNCCD would not take the central role in such monitoring, it will have access to the information that others produce.

30. In many countries, the monitoring systems for DLDD are weak and baselines are often not clearly established, and/or there are varied estimates for the total size of degraded lands and the severity of their degradation and the effects of drought. The current reporting system, the performance review and assessment of implementation system (PRAIS 4), has been substantially upgraded from PRAIS 3, especially regarding its use of default data from geospatial data providers and its online processing and storage functions. It seems that the system has become more user-friendly, and the national focal points have welcomed its introduction. While this facilitates the preparation of the national reports, further conversion of the data into relevant information for national/regional/local decision-makers could be envisaged.

31. The current national reporting provides information on the trends under each SO, but there is very limited effort to establish causal linkages or attribute any observed progress to the UNCCD. While it will always be very difficult to identify the concrete impact of UNCCD's activities on the ground, a more consistent alignment of indicators with intended impacts would certainly help in that effort. To enhance the UNCCD monitoring and reporting framework, the independent assessment makes the following recommendations.

### **1. Recommendation 11: Enhancing the current reporting system**

32. The indicators for the first SO on improving ecosystems focus on biophysical data. The national reporting process would benefit from other relevant data that also shows the economic and social implications of land degradation, in particular the impact on food production and food security. Co-benefits from land restoration such as poverty reduction, youth employment and diversification of rural incomes should also be systematically



monitored and reported, as such data would help to mobilize further support of donors. The same applies to good land governance, including land tenure decisions and active gender actions, which are recognized by the COP as necessary for achieving the LDN targets, although their implementation progress is uneven among countries.

33. Such data collection and reporting could fit well under the second SO on improving living conditions, which currently has very broad indicators on trends in poverty, access to safe drinking water and exposure to land degradation, but shows no demonstrated causal linkages with the work of the UNCCD. Further consideration should also be given to the indicators under the fourth SO dealing with synergies, in consultation with the other two Rio conventions.

34. An in-depth evaluation into the PRAIS 4 reporting model and its results should be made before a decision is taken on its further development. The SPI should be involved in that exercise, which should be concluded long enough before the expiry of the current UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and be taken into account for designing the monitoring and reporting mechanisms of the subsequent one, using the established mechanisms such as the joint contact group between CST and CRIC at the COP.

## 2. Recommendation 12: Measures to revise or complement current national reporting

35. Improving the accuracy and practical use of the monitoring of progress and assessment of impact under the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework can involve a variety of measures. The current indicators and metrics could be revised or complemented to include information on results that are more directly relevant for the work carried out under the UNCCD. New approaches for collecting and availing information could be taken into use to complement the national reporting, such as conducting periodic cross-cutting assessments or studies focusing in-depth on a specific aspect of selected SOs. This does not necessarily need to increase the workload of the UNCCD if expert partners that are working on the topics in question can be engaged for support. The emerging UNCCD collaboration with the Framework for Ecosystem Restoration Monitoring led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations serves as an example of such potential partnership.

### Questions that could be considered at the participatory consultations:

- How should the monitoring and reporting under the UNCCD be developed?

## V. Conclusions

36. Parties may note that the recommendations of the independent assessment report are diverse in nature: some of them may be taken into use, if Parties so wish, immediately, while others will require more effort and time. One option of looking at those longer-term proposals in this report is to consider them as possible milestones for the post-2030 UNCCD agenda. From that perspective, the midterm evaluation would help in launching a process to reconsider and possibly revise several key elements under the Convention, which would be completed in the form of the next UNCCD Strategic Framework, starting in 2030 or as Parties decide.

37. That reconsideration process could, in line with the independent assessment report, entail:

(a) Consideration of an overall target or targets that set clear and simple objectives for the UNCCD;

(b) Revision or complementing monitoring and reporting for the UNCCD purposes (and beyond, if needed), with more attention to data that reflect the UNCCD work and can be collected and verified more easily;

(c) Consideration of ways and means to ensure UNCCD implementation at a larger scale on the ground, which would include linking science with policy and practice and catalysing large-scale action to support country-level capacities and actions; and

(d) Consideration of further measures to enhance the joint implementation of the three Rio conventions.

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