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2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification:

Follow-up on the midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Report by the Intergovernmental Working Group

Summary

At its fifteenth session (in 2022), the Conference of the Parties (COP) launched a midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The evaluation process was overseen by a dedicated Intergovernmental Working Group to Oversee the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework Midterm Evaluation Process (IWG-MTE) and built on three main documents: an evidence-based independent assessment of the progress made, a report of the IWG-MTE to the COP presenting the findings and recommendations of the IWG-MTE, and a COP decision on enhancing the implementation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework in 2025–2030.

This document presents the report of the IWG-MTE to the COP at its sixteenth session. The report builds on the findings of the independent assessment and the feedback provided by Parties and civil society organizations through the participatory consultations held in November 2023.

A separate Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought worked in parallel to the midterm evaluation process and will submit its own report to the COP at its sixteenth session. To avoid duplications and any confusion that might be caused by two working groups making recommendations on the same topic, in this document the IWG-MTE focuses its reporting on drought on the findings of the independent assessment.



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I. Introduction

1. At its fifteenth session (in 2022), the Conference of the Parties (COP) launched a midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The evaluation process was overseen by a dedicated Intergovernmental Working Group to Oversee the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework Midterm Evaluation Process (IWG-MTE) chaired by Mr. Daniel Van Assche from the European Union. The evaluation is built on three main documents: an evidence-based independent assessment of the progress made, a report of the IWG-MTE to the COP presenting the findings and recommendations of the IWG-MTE, and a COP decision on enhancing the implementation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework in 2025–2030.
2. The IWG-MTE consisted of 15 members (3 representatives nominated by each United Nations regional group), supported by 7 observers: 2 members of the Science-Policy Interface, 1 representative each from 3 major international organizations (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature) and 2 representatives from the civil society. The secretariat supported the work of the IWG-MTE and serviced its meetings.
3. The IWG-MTE held three in-person and three online meetings in the period February 2023–June 2024. Its first meeting was mainly to guide the preparation of an independent assessment, which was done by a team of external consultants in April–October 2023, including an extensive document review and feedback from close to 200 people through an online survey and interviews. Main findings and recommendations of the independent assessment were considered through participatory consultations during the twenty-first session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) in November 2023. Immediately after that CRIC, the IWG-MTE held its second in-person meeting to further consider the independent assessment and the feedback received by Parties as the substantive basis for the IWG-MTE report to the COP at its sixteenth session. At its third meeting in June 2024, the IWG-MTE completed its report for submission to the COP at its sixteenth session. At the same meeting, the secretariat also presented the draft decision that accompanies the report of the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16).
4. This document presents the report of the IWG-MTE to the COP at its sixteenth session. The report builds on the findings of the independent assessment and the feedback provided by Parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) through the participatory consultations held during the CRIC. Furthermore, this report benefited from inputs from two other evaluation processes, namely the evaluation of the UNCCD Gender Action Plan and the external review of the Science-Policy Interface. The Bureau of the Committee on Science and Technology had an active role in building the recommendation concerning science-policy guidance under the UNCCD.
5. A separate Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought, also established at COP 15, was working on drought in parallel to the midterm evaluation process and will submit its own report to the COP at its sixteenth session. To avoid duplications and any confusion that might be caused by two working groups making recommendations on the same topic, this IWG-MTE report focuses its presentation concerning drought on the findings of the independent assessment.
6. It should be noted that the members of the IWG-MTE carried out their duties in their personal capacity and not as representatives of their country, region or interest group. While this report is submitted to the COP by the IWG-MTE as a whole, the content of the report may not reflect the positions of the countries, regions or groups that the IWG-MTE members will represent at the COP.

II. Findings

7. The overall findings of this midterm evaluation process suggest that the UNCCD and the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework are relevant for addressing policies, plans and

projects around land as well as related synergies, and are well-aligned with the priorities of the international community and major partners. They indicate that progress is being made towards the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and its strategic objectives (SOs), and that the Convention is recognized as one of the key players in global advocacy, policymaking and cooperation concerning land degradation and drought. The relevance of the UNCCD is further growing as the awareness of the global community of the importance of protecting healthy land and building drought resilience is becoming more widespread.

8. While progress is being made, the midterm evaluation also 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 decisions and products generated in the UNCCD context are not yet translated into effective action on the ground. In fact, the latest UNCCD national reporting indicates that more land is becoming degraded at an alarming rate.¹ The UNCCD has less political and media attention and weaker science-policy influence than the other two Rio conventions. In most countries, it does not influence many national budgetary processes, and many UNCCD focal points and other stakeholders lack the needed capacity for accessing funding from external donors and implementing partners. The UNCCD secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) are small, and while their hard work is recognized, their limited resources are also acknowledged.

9. From these starting points, this report presents 11 key areas of findings. Possible actions to address the identified challenges are presented in 12 recommendations.

A. Large-scale multisector implementation is a priority

10. The UNCCD has succeeded in building global commitment and awareness concerning desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD). The land degradation neutrality (LDN) framework, with the conceptual and methodological definitions as well as target-setting and project preparation support, is engaging close to two-thirds of all countries in the world. Together, their LDN targets represent a significant share of global commitments to land restoration. The LDN concept is also used by financial institutions that deal with land management and support environmental sustainability, including the GEF, and it is influencing various processes, policy frameworks, and major programmes and projects.

11. At country level, the LDN target-setting process has generated a better understanding of land degradation, improved capacity in land/ecosystem management, increased cooperation among key stakeholders, and stronger national planning and monitoring systems. However, large-scale, multisector implementation has yet to take place. In general, LDN is not well-known nor understood at national and local levels, even if action to avoid and reduce land degradation and restore degraded lands has already been taken.

12. In many countries, the concept and targets of LDN need to be integrated into national policies and practices to become operationalized and included in national planning and budgeting systems, as well as cooperation and partnership arrangements. The LDN targets need to be translated into projects and programmes for rehabilitating, restoring and conserving degraded landscapes, with the aim of making significant progress by 2030. In several countries, this refining and integration of LDN targets has started through the Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme 2.0 of the GM.

13. The COP has adopted a definition for LDN, but there is neither a structured implementation process at the national level, nor learnable and replicable best practices and cases available for practical reference. Parties need to adapt LDN implementation to their specific context while responding to its overall aim. This process needs practically oriented LDN guidelines aiming to generate progress at local level, and communication that delivers understandable and politically attractive messages on LDN. Policies, programmes and investments involving land resource utilization should be based on integrated land use planning and guided by approaches such as sustainable land and soil management, integrated water resource management, and climate-smart agriculture; their aims should be supported by cost-benefit analyses. The demonstration and promotion of science-based best practice

¹ UNCCD Data Dashboard.

examples with national and regional emphasis/characteristics reflecting an integrated management approach would be useful. Often land degradation is perceived as a purely environmental issue, and the extent of its negative impacts is not adequately understood. Achieving LDN will require farmers to change their practices, businesses to improve their sourcing of land-based materials, and urban planners to rethink infrastructure, to outline just a few examples of the magnitude of the needed measures.

14. The UNCCD can play an important role in advancing political decision-making and momentum on LDN, generating global recognition and motivation for LDN action and supporting the sharing of best practices. The Convention process also provides and promotes measures that are necessary for addressing DLDD, from thematic guidance and capacity-building to resource mobilization. However, to achieve impact on the ground at scale, the support and efforts of the UNCCD would need to catalyse a wider global movement for protecting and restoring land and building resilience to drought.

15. Such a movement would include grassroots initiatives and projects/programmes of all scales. It would engage governments to set regulations and incentives and promote expert education and training, which would guide land use and management. These measures should support the local private sector in identifying and promoting sustainable value chains and their value addition, and building capacity for self-organization. The measures should also influence major global corporations, setting standards and introducing practices that protect healthy land and ecosystems.

16. There are many measures that the UNCCD process could take to advance this transformation. It could, for example, support the articulation of the necessary norms and standards concerning land use, and promote integrated land use planning to ensure that the placement of land-based interventions takes into consideration both the land potential and the inevitable trade-offs inherent in balancing the competing demands for land resources. The Convention could also serve as a platform to further develop, define and promote the use of approaches and practices with high potential for combined environmental and socioeconomic gains, such as nature-based solutions, schemes for payment for ecosystem services, agroecology, and regenerative agriculture practices.

17. **Recommendation 1: The UNCCD becomes an effective catalyst of large-scale implementation.** COP 16 may launch a process, taking into consideration the scope, modalities and timelines needed, for identifying and developing measures that the UNCCD Parties could utilize to effectively promote large-scale implementation, raising the potential of reaching the voluntary LDN targets. These measures may include incentives, promotion of training, capacity-building, recognition of achievements, and demonstration and promotion of best practices, among other things. The COP may also request the secretariat and the GM to further develop, define and promote the use of approaches and practices with high potential for combined environmental and socioeconomic gains, such as nature-based solutions, schemes for payment for ecosystem services, agroecology, regenerative agriculture practices, and collaborate on sustainable land management (SLM) projects that contribute to the achievement of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

18. **Recommendation 2: The UNCCD approach and tools for engaging the private sector in protecting, restoring land and building resilience to drought are further developed.** The COP may request the secretariat and the GM to collaborate with Parties and partners on the development and improvement of best practices and guidelines that are relevant to addressing DLDD, such as corporate disclosure standards and frameworks on nature, among other things. The COP may request the GM to further develop the private sector engagement strategy for protecting and restoring land and building resilience to drought, in particular to encourage private sector support, finance flows and technology transfer.²

19. **Recommendation 3: Decisions and guidance made under the UNCCD are better integrated with national implementation.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may (i) invite Parties and relevant stakeholders to enhance country-level information-sharing and coordination on the preparation for and follow-up to UNCCD meetings and on the topics

² On voluntary and mutually agreed upon terms.

discussed in the UNCCD process; and (ii) request the secretariat and the GM to develop measures to support the capacity of the national focal points and science-technology correspondents to do so. The COP may also encourage Parties in a position to do so to integrate LDN targets into national planning and budgeting systems, as well as cooperation and partnership arrangements. Furthermore, the COP may request the secretariat and the GM to translate the LDN concept and methodology into a concrete tool that is simple, concise and easily understandable by policymakers and the public and further supports the development of transformative projects to address DLDD. The COP may also request the secretariat to enhance its communication strategy to further support awareness and understanding of LDN.

B. Clear global targets would strengthen commitment and focus actions

20. The political importance of the UNCCD is growing. It is associated with active advocacy and communication highlighting the links between land, climate change and biodiversity. The integration of LDN into the SDGs framework has helped the Convention gain political momentum and recognition among decision-makers, and various land and/or drought initiatives and partnerships that have been established offer opportunities for leveraging funding from various sources and promoting activities addressing DLDD globally.

21. However, although the UNCCD and the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework are generally seen as relevant, the Convention objectives and priorities do not yet feature in high-level debates, major plans and programmes, and/or national policies and budget exchanges to the extent that would be needed to ensure that effective action to address DLDD is taken at all levels (from local to global). Countries' actions tend to be guided (i) by other frameworks that they consider more suitable for their situation, politically more important, or as having clearer guidelines and outcomes; and/or (ii) based on the availability of funding and other resources.

22. The five SOs of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework³ establish a broad setup for the UNCCD, from improving ecosystems to mobilizing resources. While they succeed in reflecting the wide variety of measures needed to address DLDD, their broad formulation is less useful for capturing the attention of political authorities and the general public, both of which are critically important for effective large-scale implementation. With regard to the LDN concept, it has generated many results, but it is not sufficient to be used for effective advocacy and communications of the global importance of addressing DLDD.

23. The UNCCD should establish a global target or multiple targets that reflect the commitment to addressing land degradation and drought as well as a framework for effective implementation, follow-up and monitoring of measures to motivate and urge Parties to meet the set targets. Such target(s) should complement the existing targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (in particular the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets) and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and be applicable for all UNCCD Parties. They should set a clear ambition for the UNCCD, while generating added value and complementing existing global targets. Ideally, the UNCCD target(s) should be concrete, measurable, explicit, and aligned with existing targets, while allowing for a variety of implementation measures (particularly on DLDD), including activities towards LDN, at country level.

24. A global UNCCD target or targets would enable clear, positive and strategic messaging in different forms of communication, from global campaigns of the UNCCD secretariat to regional processes and national-level exchanges with high-level authorities and

³ SO1: To improve the condition of affected ecosystems, combat desertification/land degradation, promote sustainable land management and contribute to land degradation neutrality
SO2: To improve the living conditions of affected populations
SO3: To mitigate, adapt to, and manage the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems
SO4: To generate global environmental benefits through effective implementation of the UNCCD
SO5: 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.

ministries/offices dealing with land and with partners working on matters relevant to UNCCD implementation. Such target(s) could also assist in the development of monitoring and reporting under the Convention to further focus on concrete achievements and challenges faced by Parties.

25. The current UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework will end in 2030, and the next strategic approach is likely to be adopted by Parties by that time at the latest. Should Parties decide to start the consideration of global UNCCD target(s), those considerations could serve as first steps towards designing the next UNCCD strategy.

26. **Recommendation 4: A UNCCD global target or a set of targets are established.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may decide to launch a process towards developing a global target or multiple targets to guide and focus the UNCCD process and the actions of the Parties and their implementation partners. Such a target or set of targets should articulate in clear terms the ambition of the UNCCD for the coming years and provide a politically attractive and communication-friendly basis for advancing effective implementation. The target(s) should be concrete, measurable and explicit, based on a vision for the UNCCD, and be aligned with relevant existing targets. They should allow for a variety of implementation measures, particularly on DLDD, including activities towards LDN, and address drought issues at regional and country levels. Furthermore, they should be considered as the main building blocks for the next UNCCD strategy.

C. Everyone is affected

27. The globality of the UNCCD topics is well reflected in SDG target 15.3, which calls on all United Nations Member States to “by 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world”. The perception of the global nature of the causes and consequences of DLDD is also demonstrated in the growing understanding of the interlinkages between climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation, as well as the recognition of the worldwide impacts of DLDD in terms of food and water security, production and trade, and peace and stability.

28. Many countries that have considered themselves as “non-affected” under the UNCCD are intensifying their action to protect healthy land and mitigate the effects of drought. In addition to many partnerships, cooperation initiatives and processes, such as the G20 Global Land Initiative and the International Drought Resilience Alliance, land restoration and/or drought mitigation are increasingly featured in policy frameworks and platforms, for example those of the European Union and the World Economic Forum, that involve many countries that have usually defined themselves as “non-affected” under the UNCCD.

29. So far, the Convention process has paid only limited attention to integrating substantive considerations of countries categorized as non-affected into its agenda, national reporting and operations. The UNCCD and the tools and services it offers are largely targeted at developing countries, and most of the currently non-affected countries will not need these services in the future either. However, all UNCCD Parties would greatly benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the status of land and drought matters worldwide. The Convention process could also serve as an effective platform for global exchanges, networks and information-sharing. For the UNCCD, closing the divide between the affected and non-affected Parties would enrich the substantive basis of considerations and decisions under the Convention and deepen political commitment and cooperation worldwide.

30. **Recommendation 5: Full engagement in the UNCCD of Parties categorized as non-affected is facilitated.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request the secretariat to consult with Parties categorized as non-affected on how best to integrate their national circumstances, aims, actions and needs concerning DLDD within the UNCCD process, and encourage them to define voluntary LDN targets and submit national reports. This may include, for example, consideration of the modalities and participation of these Parties in UNCCD national reporting and monitoring, and ways and means for sharing information on their work in the UNCCD information platforms. The COP may also request the secretariat to initiate an overall comprehensive discussion among Parties on how to best reaffirm the

global role and importance of the UNCCD in deepening political commitment and cooperation to address DLDD, taking into account new trends and recognizing that everyone is affected.

D. More work is needed for drought resilience-building

31. The UNCCD has become one of the key players in global advocacy, policymaking and cooperation concerning drought, and that role is further growing as droughts are becoming more widespread and severe. The Convention process offers a platform for multiple stakeholders to agree on policy and normative frameworks and approaches to enhance action on drought. The UNCCD agenda on drought is relevant to the needs and approaches of countries all over the world. Many countries consider that the UNCCD should focus on drought as the priority, not only because of the pressing need for drought resilience-building, but also because it gains the attention of policymakers globally.

32. Those countries that have been involved in the UNCCD drought-focused activities generally rate them positively, noting improvements in their planning for drought/mitigating its effects, and increased political commitment to drought preparedness. In terms of challenges, lack of resources and capacity for effective drought monitoring and early warning and limited internal coordination and information-sharing among relevant sectors and stakeholders are identified as main problems.

33. As the next steps in addressing drought under the UNCCD are considered in detail by a dedicated intergovernmental working group, this report does not offer recommendations on the topic. However, the findings of this midterm evaluation process indicate that possible improvements towards effective drought resilience-building include (a) further policy advocacy, partnership-building and resource mobilization; (b) enhanced national planning, communication and coordination; and (c) better understanding of drought preparedness and resilience-building through improved data collection and analysis for national use and for global consideration.

E. Women's economic empowerment and equal land use rights are shortcuts towards land degradation neutrality

34. A significant share of land use activities and agricultural labour are carried out by women. Their ability to maintain and improve land health is critical for its future productivity. Without women's active involvement, LDN cannot be achieved.

35. The progress made in advancing gender responsiveness under the UNCCD is recognized: gender equality concerns are included in the national LDN target frameworks and drought plans, the Gender Caucus is active, and the secretariat has succeeded in garnering attention to the importance of women's land rights. Those countries that have participated in the UNCCD-supported work on gender report an increased national commitment to gender equality, along with improved understanding and awareness of and capacity to integrate gender equality into national/local policies, projects and programmes.

36. Nevertheless, in many countries women still face significant challenges in becoming effective custodians of healthy land. Gender inequality affects women's tenure security and has significant implications for women's ability to access credit, services and financial support for SLM. Tenure insecurity limits their ability to control resources or acquire technical skills and knowledge, and reduces their influence in community, cultural and formal networks and collective decision-making processes.

37. The roles and rights of women tend to be defined in customs and laws that are entrenched and difficult to change. However, women who have access to resources of their own have more opportunities to manage and improve their livelihoods, including by making investments in land and other productive assets that they use. Women are often responsible for processing and post-harvest management (improving the quality of crops at local level, packaging technologies, marketing and sales), and investing in these processes and women's self-organization can effectively improve their income generation. In general, resources may

be made available through, for example, supporting women's associations and cooperatives, training women as entrepreneurs, incentivizing women's participation in plans, projects and programmes, and promoting norms, regulations and practices that expand women's rights. Economic empowerment of women can be an effective shortcut for advancing LDN, and promoting further support to women farmers and community-level actions to improve women's status should be considered priorities for advancing gender equality under the UNCCD.

38. In the UNCCD process, gender responsiveness could also be further developed by continuing the development of sex-disaggregated indicators and through cooperation and linkages with similar actions under the other Rio conventions and their implementation.

39. **Recommendation 6: Economic empowerment of women and equal land use rights are set as priorities for advancing gender equality under the UNCCD.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request Parties, the secretariat, the GM, and their implementation partners, within their respective mandates, to prioritize in the implementation of the UNCCD Gender Action Plan: (i) measures that facilitate women's economic and social empowerment, including their access to capacity-building, financing and technology in addressing DLDD and their role in transformative DLDD programmes, projects and initiatives; as well as (ii) institutional empowerment to enhance and secure women's equal land rights. The COP may also request the secretariat, in cooperation with partners, to continue developing gender-responsive indicators to support Parties in collecting and reporting sex-disaggregated data for monitoring and reporting under the UNCCD.

F. Effective synergies need concrete national coordination tools and global cooperation

40. The interlinkages of the three Rio conventions addressing land degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss are becoming increasingly recognized, particularly in relation to terrestrial ecosystem restoration and SLM, which represent the main intersections between the conventions. Many climate change adaptation projects include interventions to limit or reverse land degradation, and several nationally determined contributions refer to soil organic carbon as part of the climate change mitigation targets. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework contains three area-based environmental targets involving integrated spatial planning, land and ecosystem restoration, and protected areas and conservation measures, which offer great potential for synergies.

41. Many countries and their implementation partners perceive the UNCCD as a tool for implementing the other two conventions at country level, even to the extent that the pace of the UNCCD implementation becomes driven by developments in the climate change and biodiversity measures. While this confirms that UNCCD implementation contributes to synergies with other conventions, it also indicates that the objectives of the UNCCD do not have a similar status as those of the CBD and the UNFCCC. The success of the UNCCD should not be defined by how much it contributes to the other Rio conventions. Rather it should be noted that without addressing DLDD, the objectives concerning climate change and biodiversity will not be achieved. The provisions and potential of the UNCCD as the only legally binding intergovernmental treaty on land and drought should be harnessed fully, as land and water are indispensable for all life on Earth.

42. Although the interconnectedness of the three Rio conventions is increasingly recognized, they still operate largely independently from each other. They represent different interests, reporting tools, instruments, funding mechanisms, and budgets, and Parties tend to keep the work of the different conventions separate. Frequent change of national focal points for all three conventions is a further challenge to coordination.

43. Synergies are implemented at the national and global levels. The UNCCD secretariat should cooperate with the secretariats of the other two Rio conventions to support countries in establishing regular contacts and coordination among their national focal points for the Rio conventions and other key stakeholders, such as the focal points for the GEF and the Green Climate Fund (GCF). This joint support could also guide the development of a practical framework applicable for national coordination, for example a matrix of national-

level objectives and main actions for the Rio conventions. Such a practical framework would assist in building a coherent approach, and also maintaining that approach when national focal points change. It could be accompanied by an integrated financial strategy that covers the actions for all three conventions.

44. At the level of the Rio conventions, cooperation on science, for example promotion of the development of a global database among the Rio conventions, development of a more unified national reporting indicator system, support in sharing national data collected under each convention, and/or a report authored jointly by the science-policy platforms of the three conventions would facilitate the identification and implementation of actions that benefit all Rio conventions.

45. Furthermore, an explicit commitment to linking the implementation of the Rio conventions, to be carried out through decisions taken by the Conferences of the Parties under each convention, could significantly speed up national coordination processes. These decisions could clarify the different responsibilities and the synergies of the three conventions concerning ecological and environmental issues and put forward specific activities and methods of collaborative cooperation.

46. The Rio convention secretariats, together and separately, should further promote synergies between the three conventions by improving countries' access to case studies and lessons learned from projects and programmes that link the objectives of the Rio conventions. They could also consider building interoperability of information management and reporting systems and aligning tools for national reporting, where feasible, and actively promote workshops and awareness-raising efforts for synergies.

47. **Recommendation 7: National and global-level approaches for synergies in the implementation of the three Rio conventions are strengthened.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may encourage Parties, with support from the secretariats of the three Rio conventions, to establish a practical framework, accompanied by an integrated financial strategy, for national coordination in the implementation of the three Rio conventions. The COP may also request the secretariat to (i) support countries in developing national coordination among the offices of the national focal points and other key stakeholders; and (ii) actively collaborate with the secretariats of the other two conventions to, for example, provide joint guidance for enhancing national coordination and share key information on the priorities and key initiatives to improve synergies across the Rio conventions. The COP may ask the secretariat to promote the sharing of data collected under each convention, initiate joint science-policy publications, improve countries' access to case studies and lessons learned from projects, pilot projects and programmes that link the objectives of the three Rio conventions, consider building interoperability of information management systems, and promote workshops and awareness-raising efforts for synergies.

G. Large-scale implementation requires practical science-policy guidance

48. The science-policy work under the UNCCD, notably the reports and policy briefs of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI), as well as the Global Land Outlook, has improved the consideration of science-based information at the COP meetings and increased knowledge and visibility of the UNCCD topics within and beyond the Convention stakeholders. The SPI scientific conceptual framework for LDN is a particularly well-recognized knowledge resource.

49. However, the UNCCD science-policy products are not widely used at the country level. Some UNCCD concepts are very academic by nature and difficult to apply to implementation on the ground. Plenty of attention is paid to providing information on scientific research, while efforts to translate scientific findings into policy-oriented knowledge or the practical application of them towards the general public and decision-makers are not sufficient.

50. The relevance of the UNCCD science-policy products to national information needs could be enhanced through the development of a continuous exchange process that brings information on the needs faced by national focal points and the science-technology

correspondents to the attention of the SPI. The CRIC could be used as one platform for such information-sharing. Extending the selection of disciplines among the SPI members, notably to include more expertise on economics and political/social science, could be also useful for ensuring the science-policy guidance better responds to national-level information needs.

51. There is a need to simplify the UNCCD science-policy messages and tools if they are to be effectively used for advocacy and communications targeting audiences that are not among the usual participants in the intergovernmental UNCCD process, including a variety of land user groups, policymakers and the civil society. Various communication platforms and media channels could be used for enhanced communication between and within the countries. Of particular importance is to develop science-policy communication tools to be used by the science and technology correspondents and national focal points at the country level and for informing different ministries, departments and institutions, thereby promoting actions across sectors and offices at national and local levels.

52. The SPI does not yet influence research agendas and debates to the extent that it could, which is likely due to the limited resources it has for its work. These challenges seem to derive from the overall setup of the SPI. Its nature as a temporary body, currently approved to function for seven years (from COP 13 to COP 16), seems to present the SPI as less important than other science-policy bodies that are established on a continuous basis, thus reducing the weight, credibility and attraction of the SPI among the scientific community.

53. Another important factor is the duration of the SPI work programme, which is the intersessional period between the COPs (usually around two years). In reality, the active time for the SPI to carry out the tasks of each work programme is around one year, as it needs several months after each COP to organize its work with new members. In addition, because of United Nations document deadlines, it needs to complete its reports several months before the upcoming COP. This short timeline deprives the SPI of many important opportunities: connecting with scientific organizations and networks to seek their co-authoring and inputs to its report topics, organizing consultations and feedback rounds among a broader group of scientists and practitioners, and accessing funding sources for science-policy cooperation, as all those activities need more time than the current SPI timeline offers.

54. These challenges could be at least partially solved by approving the SPI through a COP decision to become a continuous body⁴ instead of having a time-bound mandate, and revising the work programme cycle of the SPI. Extending the SPI work programme to a longer period of time with some scheduled milestones would enable a higher ambition level for its end products and facilitate the involvement of various global, regional and national scientific institutions and networks as contributors to the SPI tasks. Organization of feedback processes online and back-to-back relevant meetings and processes could be more easily planned and implemented as well. A longer timeline would also enable access to a wider variety of funding sources than is currently possible and to more sizeable funding through the enhanced quality and reach of the SPI products.

55. **Recommendation 8: The UNCCD science-policy guidance approach is reformed to ensure better visibility and responsiveness to country-level needs.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may decide to (i) update the mandate of the SPI to enhance the visibility of science-policy work under the UNCCD to ensure that the UNCCD science-policy guidance meets the needs of countries; and (ii) increase the recognition of UNCCD science-policy information, findings and resources. COP 16 may also request the secretariat to further promote information on scientific findings and their practical applications for decision-makers. In terms of budget allocation for the UNCCD science-policy actions, increased and more predictable resources should be considered for delivering policy-relevant information from scientific findings.

⁴ Here, “continuous body” means that the COP would give the SPI its mandate without defining an end date. This would be a major change from earlier decisions concerning the SPI, which have limited the duration of the SPI to a specific number of years.

H. Monitoring and reporting

56. The majority of the UNCCD Parties submit a national report using the performance review and assessment of implementation system (PRAIS) online portal. The UNCCD secretariat provides default data from existing sources as a basis for reporting in order to also engage those countries that face challenges in data collection. In many countries, preparation of the UNCCD national report has resulted in new capacities to monitor DLDD, and improved cooperation among different national ministries and offices that deal with data collection. The new functions of PRAIS and particularly the dashboard showing key data in a communication-friendly format are useful and generally appreciated.

57. The submitted UNCCD national reports cover only around half of the global land area, which hinders the credibility of the global assessments. The national reporting system is considered quite complex, and many countries still do not have the capacity and monitoring systems needed for providing verified data for all indicators, even if they detect errors in the default data. Some indicators are relatively general, not directly linked to the priorities of the UNCCD, and the data does not effectively guide Parties in related decisions at the national level. The national reporting process has also suffered from delays in the disbursement of the financial support to eligible countries.

58. Countries will need further capacity-building and support to improve the quality and accuracy of data in their national report, noting that the national reporting is considered quite complex and that data collection is challenging. If the default data continues to be used, the providers of that data should be invited to participate in the training on how to use that data, and how to check and validate it at national level. Further efforts could be explored with these data providers to improve the accuracy and representativeness of their data products, in particular at regional and subregional levels.

59. Regional/subregional organizations could be better engaged to provide operational and technical support for the national reporting, as they know the specific challenges and strengths in the region. Furthermore, global data tools such as Trends.Earth and exchange processes on data relevant to the UNCCD, such as those organized under the Group on Earth Observations Land Degradation Neutrality Flagship initiative, could be used as platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration and capacity-building, and for collecting views and ideas to develop the UNCCD reporting process.

60. While the current national reporting provides information on trends under each SO, it does not establish causal linkages or attribute any observed changes to the action taken to implement the UNCCD. There is limited consideration of the drivers of land degradation and the efforts made by countries to implement the Convention, including the enabling conditions for land restoration. Lack of concrete learning from past performance in the implementation of the Convention limits the use of the reporting results to guide COP decision-making and national priority-setting. There is a need for a dialogue on how national reporting systems can be made more relevant to inform national and local decision-making to address DLDD.

61. Prior to the adoption of the new Strategic Framework, the current indicators and the data that is needed should be assessed in terms of their responsiveness to UNCCD objectives and expected performance, with particular attention paid to the drought indicators and the use of the national reporting results at the country level. Alternative or additional approaches for providing high quality default data should be explored, including enhanced coordination among United Nations agencies and the Rio conventions to share official data, with the aim of identifying possibilities to ease the current data collection and verification tasks of Parties. This could encourage more countries to submit their national reports, thus increasing the accuracy of the global assessments.

62. **Recommendation 9: The relevance, accuracy and coverage of the UNCCD national reporting is enhanced.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request the secretariat to conduct a thorough participatory analysis and assessment of the current indicators and data required for national implementation and reporting on SOs under the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. This analysis should include the necessity of additional indicators, taking into account data availability and ongoing initiatives and processes at global, regional and national levels, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. It also

should consider the responsiveness of the current indicators and required data to the UNCCD objectives and expected performance, with particular attention paid to assessing drought and the use of the national reporting results at the country level. This analysis and assessment could be used to inform the development of the next Strategic Framework and any global targets developed under the Convention. The COP may also request the secretariat to continue identifying possibilities to ease the current data collection and verification tasks of Parties, and further develop capacity-building for national reporting.

I. Large-scale implementation requires long-term financing from multiple sources

63. Many positive developments concerning the availability of resources for UNCCD implementation can be noted: the GEF allocation for the Land Degradation Focal Area has steadily increased over the years and leveraged financing from other GEF funding windows. The funding committed by many donors, such as the African Development Bank, GCF and the World Bank, to the African-led Great Green Wall Initiative and various other projects and initiatives launched by countries indicate that major funders are recognizing the importance of addressing DLDD, and the GM support to the development of bankable LDN projects is starting to generate results.

64. Nevertheless, lack of resources remains the main hindrance for implementation. LDN targets and national plans and policy instruments on drought are not well reflected in domestic budgets, and only some countries have successfully used them for the mobilization of external resources. Although countries know what resources they would need for effective implementation and where those resources are, many lack the capacity to access the resources.

65. Successful large-scale implementation is likely to consist of a wide variety of actions by different stakeholders. Similarly, the financial needs will vary from funding sizeable field projects to resources for capacity-building and processes to develop new norms, regulations and incentives, among other things. This will entail a move from the traditional project-based resource mobilization towards more comprehensive and strategic financial planning, which takes into account different types of needs and seeks to identify suitable sources among the domestic budget, external assistance, private investments and various innovative financing tools.

66. For national resource mobilization, the planned aims and activities on LDN and drought mitigation should be translated into concrete and measurable targets and detailed, scheduled actions. This practical formulation would be helpful in the integration of DLDD and related actions into different sectors and policies and specific, relevant national processes and funds such as national science funds. It could also be used as an input for the country plans and strategies with the United Nations and other major partners, and provide the basis for a coordinated Rio conventions implementation matrix (see para. 40).

67. The national focal points and other country-level key stakeholders need further capacity-building to access a variety of funding sources, such as those under GCF and regional development banks, and different GEF focal areas. Many financial institutions and innovative funding mechanisms have existing allocations and programmes that could be accessed or leveraged for the implementation of activities that contribute to LDN and drought impact mitigation.

68. The important role of the GEF and its implementing agencies needs to be continued and further expanded, and coordination among the UNCCD focal points and the operational focal points of the GEF and other financial institutions and implementation partners present in the country/region should be enhanced.

69. The GM should be strengthened to incubate and promote new large-scale, high-impact initiatives and flagships, and to assist countries in accessing funding for these initiatives and flagships from regional development banks and other major funders. Identifying issues that are of high importance for a region, such as sand and dust storms for some regions, will be instrumental for accessing funds within regions, and also for involving regional organizations in resource mobilization efforts. The COP may request the secretariat and the GM to

strengthen the transparency of its monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track the progress of resource mobilization efforts and the implementation of large-scale projects.

70. **Recommendation 10: The UNCCD support to Parties on resource mobilization emphasizes the development of large-scale projects and access to multiple sources of funding.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request the GM to further focus on large-scale, high-impact, multi-country flagship initiatives, projects and programmes, and to scale up its capacity-building to countries and relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, civil society and private sector, where applicable, to help in accessing funding from a variety of sources, such as those under GCF, regional development banks, different GEF focal areas, philanthropies, private sector and innovative funding sources. COP may encourage more collaboration between the regional organizations and the GM in resource mobilization for the development of multi-country, large-scale projects addressing DLDD. The COP may request the secretariat and the GM to strengthen the transparency of its monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track the progress of resource mobilization efforts and the implementation of large-scale projects.

J. Civil society as a key partner for implementation

71. CSOs play a significant role in the UNCCD as voices in decision-making and implementation partners. Over 600 CSOs are accredited as observers to the COP. They have had an important role in promoting inclusive and sustainable governance of natural resources, rural development and environmental protection; their contribution has been particularly strong in advancing land tenure and governance issues under the UNCCD.

72. CSOs acknowledge the UNCCD for accepting their active involvement and providing opportunities and financial support for networking, collaboration and influencing of the agenda of meetings.

73. The number of CSOs involved in UNCCD-related awareness-raising and project implementation at the national and local levels is still limited in many countries, and the financial capacities of the participating CSOs are often weak. In general, the UNCCD has limited, although growing, outreach beyond its key stakeholders towards wider-scale involvement of parliamentarians, youth, the scientific community, media, and the general public. UNCCD communication could be targeted further to specific recipients (farmers, civil society, private sector); currently, such targeted communication is mainly towards youth. Further outreach should also be planned for progressive involvement of other groups of stakeholders that are active and influential on the ground, notably local authorities/local governments.

74. Regional CSO networks should be activated and CSO participation should be increased in different UNCCD functions, including outside the official meetings (for example, regional consultations). In general, regular dialogue between the national focal points and accredited CSOs – especially before COP sessions – should be further encouraged.

75. **Recommendation 11: Stakeholder and civil society engagement to the UNCCD processes should be further supported.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request the secretariat, including its regional officers, to enhance effective communication and outreach globally to different stakeholder groups that are active and influential in matters concerning land and drought, with a view to progressively involving these groups in UNCCD implementation. The secretariat may also be requested to facilitate (i) the involvement of accredited CSOs in meetings and processes under the Convention, including regional consultations; and (ii) the provision of capacity-building that also targets CSOs. The COP may request Parties to include provisions for the engagement of civil society when preparing for the next Strategic Framework. The COP may request the Parties and accredited CSOs to work more closely in preparation of UNCCD meetings and processes. The COP may request Parties to consider fostering partnerships and collaboration among relevant national stakeholders to leverage their collective expertise, resources, and networks; and further encourage multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships to address DLDD.

K. Secretariat and Global Mechanism

76. The findings of the midterm evaluation concerning the performance and effectiveness of the Convention secretariat and the GM indicate that these two entities are generally effective; they focus on the “right” topics, and their work is considered valuable. Parties are actively participating in the activities that they conduct and promote to support the implementation of the Convention. In general, the secretariat and the GM are considered to handle their multiple tasks with great dedication, despite their limited staff and budget resources.

77. Continuous information-sharing by the secretariat and the GM on the results that they deliver and the associated expenses would increase the transparency of their work. Regular, proactive communication about costs associated with UNCCD activities, and responses to inquiries from Parties before and during the COPs on potential costs, could generate more buy-in from Parties into secretariat activities.

78. The core budget for the activities under the UNCCD has been limited by zero nominal growth for more than a decade, while the scope of the Convention topics has significantly evolved. The lack of growth in the core budget has resulted in an ever-larger share of the UNCCD activities being funded from extrabudgetary resources, which are outside the COP governance. This limits the transparency of the resources and their use under the Convention. Heavy reliance on extrabudgetary resources poses a major risk for the continuity of the activities and staff posts that they fund. This is also not a long-term solution for the budget and is unlikely to be sustainable into the future.

79. To ensure the continued extent and quality of services under the Convention, the UNCCD regular budget should become more responsive to the evolving priorities and the tasks set to the secretariat and the GM. In its budget proposals, the secretariat should clearly demonstrate the need for and benefit of additional budgetary resources when requesting them. Assessing the potential budgetary impacts of all UNCCD requests to the COP for additional funding needs for activities would enhance transparency.

80. The UNCCD functions to support each region should be strengthened to deliver UNCCD messages, promote networking, and communicate clearly and strategically issues of regional importance to the highest levels of governments. Regional cooperation in organizing high-level workshops and intersectoral meetings around land and drought matters could be helpful; for example, land weeks similar to the climate weeks could be organized at regional level.

81. The applicability of the UNCCD COP decisions at national level should be improved. More explicit/targeted language in COP decisions and action-oriented political declarations could be helpful in advancing the UNCCD agenda nationally.

82. **Recommendation 12: The UNCCD budget is responsive to activities decided by the COP, and the secretariat proactively communicates on matters concerning its resources.** At its sixteenth session, the COP may request the secretariat, when planning the budget, to carefully analyse any gaps and potential savings, and inform Parties accordingly and in a timely and transparent manner. The COP may further request the secretariat to present the budgetary implications of the draft decisions that it submits for the consideration of the COP, with a view to providing Parties with an adequate basis to determine the priorities and activities that best meet their needs in implementing the Convention in the coming years. Furthermore, the COP may request the secretariat to regularly communicate to the Parties about matters concerning the use of its resources, as well as any significant developments thereon. The COP may also request the secretariat to explore further options for optimizing the availability of resources for the activities mandated by the COP, in particular at the regional level, and using the available resources in a cost-efficient and effective manner.

III. Enhancing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification implementation: Conclusions

83. The midterm evaluation findings indicate that plenty of progress has been made towards the five SOs of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, and that Parties continue to be committed to the implementation of the Convention. The main challenge for the coming years is to ensure that the UNCCD priorities, approaches and resources are optimal for effective support to large-scale implementation for protecting healthy land and soil, restoring degraded land, and mitigating the effects of drought worldwide.

84. Parties may wish to consider the findings and recommendations contained in this report, with a view to translating them through a COP decision into concrete actions to enhance the implementation of the Convention and the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework in the coming years.
