United Nations ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6

Convention to Combat Desertification

Distr.: General
23 August 2024

Original: English

Conference of the Parties
Committee on Science and Technology
Sixteenth session
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 3–12 December 2024
Item 3 of the provisional agenda
Review of the work conducted by the Science-Policy Interface

Review of the Science-Policy Interface and its achievements

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The current mandate of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) runs until the end of the 16th session of the Conference of the Parties. Following decision 19/COP.13 and decision 21/COP.15, the 16th session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) will focus on, inter alia, the review of the work conducted by the SPI, in order to decide on the future functioning of the SPI.

To provide Parties with a thorough, systematic analysis as background for the review, the secretariat commissioned an external assessment that considered the activities and achievements of the SPI. In parallel to that assessment, a midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification was carried out, which also provided findings and recommendations relevant to the SPI review. The Bureau of the CST had an active role in both assessment processes, particularly in bringing their main findings and recommendations together and, on that basis, outlining a consolidated proposal of how the SPI could function in the future.

This document provides an overview of the SPI in its current form. It also presents the main findings and recommendations of the external assessment of the SPI and, for the parts relevant to the SPI, the midterm evaluation. These presentations are followed by a proposal for the future functioning of the SPI, as outlined by the CST Bureau.

Contents

I. Introduction

1. The Science-Policy Interface (SPI) was established at the eleventh session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 11) in 2013 to facilitate a two-way science-policy dialogue and ensure delivery of policy-relevant information, knowledge and advice on desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD).[1] In the following COPs, the SPI mandate, activities and members were further refined, and it is currently assigned to: (i) analyse, synthesize and translate relevant scientific findings and recommendations from DLDD-related scientific conferences, and relevant stakeholders and networks into proposals to be studied by the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) for the consideration of the COP; (ii) interact with existing multiple scientific mechanisms and other new and existing scientific networks and platforms; and (iii) assist the Bureau of the CST in organizing the scientific conferences hosted by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and assessing their results. Furthermore, the SPI, under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST, is mandated to: (i) provide the CST with clear and well-defined thematic guidance on scientific knowledge requirements for the implementation of the UNCCD; (ii) identify the most optimal way forward to address these knowledge requirements; (iii) draft terms of reference for the scientific work to be commissioned to external experts or institutes, and ensure the quality of content according to the contract administered by the secretariat; and (iv) select experts, including from scientific societies, science and knowledge organizations, civil society organizations, and networks known for their expertise in DLDD.

2. Following a review of the SPI in 2017, the COP decided to continue with the SPI and to extend its mandate up to the end of COP 16, at which time another review of the SPI was to be presented.[2] At its 15th session the COP also decided that CST 16 (in 2024) should focus on, inter alia, a review of the work conducted by the SPI, including its overall achievements since the last review completed at COP 13, in order to decide on the future functioning of the SPI.

3. No specific SPI review processes were outlined at COP 15, however the COP did request the secretariat to circulate appropriate documentation in due time for the CST.[3] To provide Parties with a thorough, systematic analysis of the SPI in 2017–2024, the secretariat commissioned an external assessment[4] which considered the activities and achievements of the SPI using the standard evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. This assessment included a survey and interviews, engaging close to one hundred people as contributors to its analysis. In March 2024, the draft assessment report was discussed by the SPI, providing further inputs in terms of its content.

4. In parallel to the external assessment of the SPI, a midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework was carried out under the supervision of an intergovernmental working group, as reported in document ICCD/COP(16)/2. The midterm evaluation process included an independent assessment involving close to 200 respondents, as well as participatory consultations on the sidelines of the 21st session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 21) in November 2023. Its findings identified the UNCCD science-policy guidance as one of the key areas for enhancing the implementation of the Strategic Framework in the coming years. Consequently, the midterm evaluation process also offered findings and recommendations relevant to the SPI review.

5. To promote the exchange of inputs and coherence between the external assessment of the SPI and the midterm evaluation, the secretariat ensured that information was shared between the two processes. Furthermore, the Bureau of the CST had an active role in both processes, particularly in bringing their main findings and recommendations together and, on that basis, outlining a consolidated proposal of how the SPI could function in the future.

[1] Decision 23/COP.11.
[2] Decision 19/COP.13.
[3] Decision 21/COP.15.
[4] https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/inline-files/SPI external assessment June 2024.pdf.

6. This document provides an overview of the SPI in its current form. It also presents the main findings and recommendations of the external assessment of the SPI and, for the parts relevant to the SPI, the midterm evaluation. These presentations are followed by a proposal for the future functioning of the SPI, as outlined by the CST Bureau.

II. Current functioning and working modalities of the Science–Policy Interface

7. The SPI has 20 members, comprising the five members of the CST Bureau, five regionally selected scientists (one nominated by each of the five regional implementation annexes), and ten independent scientists nominated by the CST Bureau through an open call. In addition, it has five observers representing the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as civil society organizations, also selected through an open call. The SPI is co-chaired by the Chair of the Bureau of the CST and one of the ten independent scientists, as elected by the members of the SPI. The membership is renewed in stages through a rotating system, with some of the members new and others pre-existing.

8. The SPI has been supported by the SPI Early Career Scientist Fellowship Programme, a pro bono UNCCD-secretariat administered fellowship programme focused on engaging experts with at least three, and no more than six, years of post-PhD research experience, to contribute to the work of the SPI over the period of its work programme. Currently four experts participate in this Programme.

9. The SPI operates in accordance with COP decisions pertaining to its activities. At each COP, it proposes a work programme for approval, with a focus on two objectives as the basis of its reports. Since 2017, during each intersessional period between COPs, the SPI has generated two or three thematic reports and related science-policy briefs according to the objectives in its work programme, covering different aspects of advancing land degradation neutrality, sustainable land management, restoration, soil organic carbon estimations, integrated land use planning, sustainable land use systems, the Land-Drought Nexus, drought resilience assessments and monitoring, and aridification. For each COP, the SPI thematic reports have been synthesized into conference documents containing policy-oriented recommendations for the consideration of the Parties.

10. In addition to the two objectives and related reports, the SPI work programme includes coordination activities with other science-policy bodies, particularly the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The SPI members conduct scientific reviews of the major reports resulting from the processes of other science-policy bodies and most relevant to the UNCCD objectives, with the aim of ensuring that consideration is given to land and drought matters. The SPI then reviews the intergovernmentally approved reports to develop policy-oriented recommendations on findings relevant to the mission of the UNCCD. The secretariat reports to each COP on the coordination activities carried out by the SPI.

11. The practices and modalities of the SPI's work have centred around working groups and meetings. Members and observers join one or more working groups for each SPI work programme objective and coordination activity, guided by co-leaders and at least one advisor from an observer organization. The working groups meet online on a regular basis while fully fledged, in-person SPI meetings are usually organized twice a year.

12. The secretariat organizes the SPI meetings and facilitates communication within the SPI and between the UNCCD and other stakeholders. In the UNCCD core budget, approximately EUR 65,000 per year is provided to the SPI, usually covering the costs of its in-person meetings. Two staff positions (the chief scientist and an assistant) are funded from the core budget to support all science-policy related functions under the UNCCD, including support to the SPI. While no staff are directly assigned to the SPI under the core budget, the secretariat has received seconded staff and/or funding for additional staff as voluntary contributions, to support the work of the SPI. Two such staff positions from voluntary contributions have been secured for the biennium 2025–2026.

III. Findings and recommendations of the midterm evaluation and the external assessment

13. The external assessment of the SPI presents an analysis of the work and achievements of the SPI in 2018–2022, with the main aim of providing Parties with a basis on which to decide the future functioning of the SPI. The midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, on the other hand, looks at the overall status of progress and related successes and challenges in terms of meeting the objectives of the UNCCD and its Strategic Framework. The science-policy guidance offered through the UNCCD is only one, although important, element in this analysis. Both processes were built on an extensive study of documentation and direct feedback from key stakeholders, and both reports present evidence-based findings, conclusions and recommendations. As the two assessments vary in terms of scope and focus, their recommendations are also somewhat different: the midterm evaluation seeks to enhance the role and potential impact of the UNCCD science-policy guidance in a broad sense, while the external assessment of the SPI proposes detailed measures to refine the functioning of the SPI. Nevertheless, the findings of the two processes are almost identical while their recommendations are more complementary than conflicting.

A. Main findings and recommendations of the midterm evaluation concerning the UNCCD science-policy guidance

14. The midterm evaluation found that the science-policy work under the UNCCD, notably the technical reports and science-policy briefs of the SPI, as well as the Global Land Outlook (GLO), has helped ensure a scientific basis for information provided at sessions of the COP, and increased knowledge and visibility of the UNCCD agenda among and beyond Convention stakeholders. The SPI scientific conceptual framework for land degradation neutrality is a particularly well-recognized knowledge resource.

15. With regard to challenges, the midterm evaluation notes that the UNCCD science-policy products are not widely used at the country level. Some UNCCD concepts are highly academic by nature and difficult to apply to implementation on the ground. The relevance of the UNCCD science-policy products to national information needs could be enhanced through the development of a continuous exchange process that informs the SPI of the needs faced by national focal points (NFPs) and the science and technology correspondents (STCs). The CRIC could be used as one such platform for information-sharing. It could also be useful to extend the selection of disciplines among SPI members, notably to include more expertise on economics and political/social science, to ensure that the science-policy guidance better responds to national-level information needs.

16. The midterm evaluation further notes a need to simplify the UNCCD science-policy messages and tools if they are to be effectively used for advocacy and communications targeting audiences beyond the usual participants in the intergovernmental UNCCD process, including a variety of land user groups, policymakers and civil society. Various communication platforms and media channels could be used for enhanced communication between and within the countries. It is especially important to develop science-policy communication tools to be used by the STCs and NFPs at the country level, and to inform different ministries, departments and institutions, thereby promoting actions across sectors and offices at national and local levels.

17. According to the findings of the midterm evaluation, the SPI does not yet influence research agendas and debates to the extent possible, which is likely due to the limited work resources at its disposal. These challenges appear to stem from the overall setup of the SPI. Its temporary nature, currently approved for seven years (from COP 13 to COP 16), seems to present the SPI as less important than other permanent science-policy bodies, thus reducing the weight, credibility and appeal of the SPI among the scientific community. Another important factor is the duration of the SPI work programme, i.e. the intersessional period between COPs (usually around two years). This short timeline deprives the SPI of many important opportunities. Activities such as connecting with scientific organizations and networks to seek their co-authorship and inputs to report topics, organizing consultations and

feedback rounds among a broader group of scientists and practitioners, and accessing funding sources for science-policy cooperation all require more time than the current SPI timeline allows.

18. The midterm evaluation considers that these challenges could be at least partially solved by approving the SPI, through a COP decision, as a standing body[5] – replacing the time-bound mandate – and revising the work programme cycle of the SPI. Extending the SPI work programme over a longer period of time with scheduled milestones, including periodic reviews, would increase ambitions for its end products and facilitate the involvement of various global, regional and national scientific institutions and networks as contributors to SPI tasks. In addition, it would be easier to plan and implement the organization of feedback processes online and relevant back-to-back meetings and processes. A longer timeline would also enable access to a wider variety of funding sources than currently possible, and to more sizeable funding through the enhanced quality and reach of the SPI products.

19. Building on its findings, the midterm evaluation recommends that **the UNCCD science-policy guidance approach is reformed to ensure better visibility and responsiveness to country-level needs.** To implement the recommendation, it considers that, at its 16th session, the COP may decide to: (i) update the mandate of the SPI to enhance the visibility of science-policy work under the UNCCD and 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. At its 16th session, the COP 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, the midterm evaluation notes that increased and more predictable resources should be considered to deliver policy-relevant information from scientific findings.

B. Main findings and recommendations of the external review of the Science-Policy Interface

20. The findings of the external assessment of the SPI are organized according to six evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Two of these criteria – effectiveness and progress to impact – are presented together as they used much of the same data, resulting in an overlap in their findings. The main findings as per the assessment criteria are as follows:

21. Relevance: The work of the SPI is generally relevant to the mandate and priorities of the CST, the objectives of the UNCCD, and the needs of Parties. However, the SPI must evolve to become more responsive to changing needs and, specifically, to address the practical bottlenecks experienced by Parties as they advance in implementing the Convention.

22. Coherence: The work of the SPI is coherent with and complementary to the work of other science-policy bodies, and its participation in the processes of other science-policy bodies has added value to the UNCCD science-policy work.

23. Effectiveness and progress to impact: While the SPI is praised for enhancing the UNCCD's credibility as a global science-policy authority, the effectiveness of its products and its recognition within the scientific community must increase.

24. Efficiency: The SPI has been efficient in completing its assigned tasks in its work programme within the given time, and within the limits of the resources allocated to it. However, bearing in mind the challenges concerning its effectiveness and impact, the short and long-term results of the SPI could be significantly improved by giving further attention to its work processes, communications, financial resources and status, and by enhancing the technical support given to its work.

25. Sustainability: The key factors for the future sustainability of the SPI include "activating" STCs as country-level messengers for disseminating the information deriving

[5] Here, "standing body" means that the COP would give the Science-Policy Interface (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.

from the SPI and revising the CST role to better service this function. Responsiveness of future SPI work to country level needs could usefully be ensured by giving it more flexibility to react to emerging topics through systematic dialogue with regional and sub-regional experts from science and practice.

26. The external assessment notes that while its findings show that the SPI has improved the credibility of the UNCCD as a global science-policy authority on DLDD, they also indicate that the full potential of the SPI has not been achieved. This is attributed to structural issues that require a reshaping of the SPI in the following areas:

(a) Improving engagement with UNCCD NFPs and STCs to better address Parties' priorities for scientific advice, and thereby enhance the relevance of its work;

(b) Revising the modalities of work to improve the effectiveness of products;

(c) Developing coordinated engagement with relevant science partners at the international level;

(d) Engaging with regional and sub-regional science experts and practitioners to catalyse information exchange and uptake of the SPI work;

(e) Further developing its communication and outreach abilities (including media engagement skills);

(f) Ensuring the SPI's continuity within the UNCCD system to increase its potential for impact by bringing in science and science-based partnerships to benefit the implementation of the UNCCD;

(g) Improving its resourcing and consolidating its technical basis to ensure the sustainability of its services to the UNCCD and its Parties.

27. Building on its findings, the external assessment makes seven recommendations, many of which will require more time than one intersessional period following COP 16. The recommendations should therefore be considered as building blocks for the coming years as the UNCCD process continues developing its next strategic framework. The recommendations and related key messages for the future functioning of the SPI are as follows:

28. **Recommendation 1: The SPI becomes more responsive to immediate knowledge needs and the bottlenecks of Parties.** The SPI must be more responsive to immediate knowledge needs or the bottlenecks expressed by Parties, allowing more timely provision of scientific advice on DLDD measures at the necessary scales, and assisting the CRIC in identifying solutions that improve the living standards of people in affected areas, and land health in sustaining or enhancing human wellbeing and livelihoods. Responsiveness could be enhanced by establishing an informal intersessional consultation process, coordinated by the CST Bureau and technically supported by the UNCCD secretariat, between the NFPs, STCs, other relevant science-policy institutions and the SPI in the preparation for the next SPI work programme.

29. **Recommendation 2: The SPI processes and products are further developed to improve the uptake of its work**. The SPI must optimize scientific understanding and uptake of its work through more targeted solicitation of expertise and improved communications with NFPs, STCs, and UNCCD strategic scientific partners, including the media. This may involve making the call for the nomination of experts to the SPI more visible, further developing its working methods and products, and improving its cooperation with other scientific bodies.

30. **Recommendation 3: The SPI organizes and participates in dialogues and exchanges with relevant science-policy bodies and processes, scientific and practitioner communities and other key stakeholders at global and regional level to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of its products**. To ensure that the science-based options of the SPI remain relevant and effective in specific contexts for planning and implementation purposes, informal regional intersessional dialogues should be developed, strengthening regional and sub-regional dialogue with research and academic communities, other knowledge holders and relevant stakeholders, including, but not limited to, youth

representatives, civil society organizations, the private sector, financing institutions and development agencies.

31. **Recommendation 4: Communication concerning the SPI work and products is improved**. Communication and media outreach for SPI products are critical to ensure the SPI's impact and reach. The SPI communication and outreach strategy must be developed and put into action through cooperative agreements with specific relevant science partners and media, informing all stakeholders about UNCCD science and ensuring its timely outreach and visibility. Such efforts further reinforce the UNCCD as the scientific authority on DLDD.

32. **Recommendation 5: The SPI is established as a standing body**. The SPI should be established as a standing UNCCD body to help it efficiently and effectively implement its work programmes, facilitate networking among science-policy bodies and scientific institutions, and enhance the scientific authority of the UNCCD in tackling DLDD. It is therefore recommended to strengthen the mandate of the SPI by granting it permanent status within the UNCCD architecture to directly and more efficiently address bottlenecks and new knowledge needs among Parties. The decision on making the SPI a standing body could be made at COP 16.

33. **Recommendation 6: The SPI is given adequate resources.** It is essential to secure adequate funding and resources for the effective implementation of the SPI work programmes, to ensure its activities are aligned with the overall strategic work during the sessions, and to allow the UNCCD to serve as the leading global scientific authority on DLDD.

34. **Recommendation 7: Possible ways of ensuring adequate technical support for the SPI are explored.** The capacity of the technical and scientific staff in the UNCCD secretariat and external technical services available to the SPI should be increased and consolidated to ensure the effectiveness, sustainability and future operation of the SPI. Under the IPCC and IPBES, an external technical support unit (TSU) provides technical, operational and communication support, and similar arrangements should be considered for the SPI. An initial feasibility assessment should be undertaken to establish an external TSU to execute the SPI's complex multi-component science and information projects, with specific consideration given to regional engagement and communication of science, and subsequent steps taken to ensure an adequate interface.

IV. Possible elements for the future functioning of the Science-Policy Interface

35. The findings and recommendations of the external review of the SPI and the midterm evaluation identify several challenges that could be addressed by the COP when deciding on the future functioning of the SPI. These challenges can be summarized as follows:

(a) Improving the visibility of the science-policy work under the UNCCD, which would include making the SPI's products more easily accessible, attractive and pertinent to the needs of the UNCCD Parties and other key stakeholders, as well as communicating more effectively on those products;

(b) Also improving the way by which the SPI benefits from, and interacts with, other science-policy bodies as well as scientific networks, regional scientific institutions and other potential partners; and

(c) Improving the set-up of the SPI, with the aim of enhancing its status as a science-policy body, enabling access to a wider variety of funding sources, technical support and partnerships, and providing adequate time for engaging with Parties and other key stakeholders to enhance the responsiveness of the SPI products to the needs of countries.

36. The measures outlined in the following chapters A-C could be taken to address these challenges.

A. Enhancing the products of the Science-Policy Interface

37. While the reports and briefs of the SPI are found to be of high quality and responsive to UNCCD priorities, they do not appear to be used as widely as expected. The two assessments identified many potential improvements in this regard: (i) preparing more policy-oriented and reader-friendly content; (ii) enhancing the structure and layout; and (iii) improving the communication of SPI publications. It was particularly noted that focusing the SPI work on high-profile, science-based flagship reports, such as the GLO, with various sub-products (shorter regional or thematic reports, for example), could garner more attention and use than reports of the current type.

38. The secretariat has so far produced two GLO reports through an extensive multi-year cooperation and coordination process involving numerous partners and contributors. Should the SPI become the main author and/or editor of future GLOs or similar flagship reports, its work programme cycle should be revised to enable a broader, longer-term process. In concrete terms, considering that the third edition of the GLO is scheduled for completion in 2026, the SPI's 2025–2026 work programme would focus on helping to prepare the third edition of the GLO. From thereon, it would have four-year work programmes, starting with 2027–2030, which would result in a GLO or a similar science-based flagship report.

39. The biennium 2025–2026 would serve as a "practice round" for the SPI on the multi-year process of producing a high-profile flagship report, and would help define the exact modalities for work in the following years. Provisionally, the following tasks are foreseen for the four-year work programmes:

(a) The scope and content of the GLO will be outlined through consultations among Parties (NFPs and STCs) and other stakeholders. The secretariat will organize and prepare for these consultations, potentially through the intersessional CRIC, and compile the resulting inputs. This task may be carried out before the SPI four-year work programme begins, resulting in a draft decision on the scope and content of the report for the consideration of the CST;

(b) The SPI will establish a scheduled plan for the preparation of the GLO and possible thematic or regional sub-reports and, with support from the secretariat, connect with partners that may contribute to the content;

(c) The SPI will collaborate with selected partners to generate the content for the GLO and possible sub-reports. While preparing content, the secretariat may organize online meetings, side events or other similar occasions that could be useful for informing Parties, the scientific community and other stakeholders of the ongoing work of the SPI, and for seeking their inputs and feedback;

(d) The secretariat will develop the format of the report and actively communicate and promote the report through multiple media sources and events;

(e) Prior to the COP, the SPI will draft a summary for policymakers, which will present the main findings and suggestions of the flagship report. This draft will be negotiated by the CST during its meeting, and the agreed text will become an important outcome of the COP.

40. In addition to preparing the flagship report, the SPI would assume an active role in ensuring that the work of the Bureaux of the COP, CST and CRIC as well as the secretariat and the Global Mechanism, is based on sound science. This would entail the SPI members, when accepting their nomination, agreeing to provide their expertise in response to occasional requests sent to them by the secretariat: the SPI members would be expected to prepare, or participate in the preparation of, brief rapid response products in their fields of expertise. Such needs-based rapid responses would enhance the visibility and recognition of the SPI in the context of the UNCCD.

41. In preparation for this approach, the Bureau of the CST, with support from the secretariat, would need to develop procedures for: (i) receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI for its work programme; (ii) the preparation of flagship reports, including report outline scoping, thematic assessment of scientific, local and Indigenous knowledge,

independent scientific review, and the preparation and approval by the CST of summaries for policy makers, and: (iii) the development of rapid response information products.

42. Another means of increasing visibility of scientific findings and the SPI in the UNCCD process would be to include a "state of the science" presentation at the COP plenary, ideally during the opening plenary or the high-level segment. This presentation would be delivered by the SPI co-chairs, or another acclaimed scientist selected by the SPI.

B. Working with other science-policy bodies and the scientific community

43. The external assessment of the SPI noted that the work of the SPI is coherent with and complementary to the work of other science-policy bodies, and its participation in the processes of other science-policy bodies has added value to the UNCCD science-policy work. The coordination activities of the SPI have been an important tool for bringing in relevant science-policy information from other processes to the UNCCD, as well as delivering inputs and information on the UNCCD priorities to them. Furthermore, many SPI members have linked the UNCCD matters to their own work and participation in different science forums and communities.

44. Continuing these coordination and information-sharing activities in the coming years has the potential to enrich the content and increase the recognition and visibility of the science-based flagship reports produced by the SPI. It will also facilitate the establishment of scientific partnerships likely to be necessary to generate the reports.

45. While the SPI involvement in relevant reports and processes of IPCC and IPBES, among other science-policy bodies, will also be a key coordination activity in the future, the SPI may also consider developing additional information-sharing and liaison functions specifically targeted at science bodies working on the topics of the next SPI flagship report. Furthermore, individual members of the SPI could be encouraged to proactively organize and participate in dialogues and exchanges with relevant global, regional and national science-policy bodies and processes, and scientific and practitioner communities and networks. This will support the SPI members in planning and preparing products that are relevant to their expected users, and that benefit from work done outside the SPI.

46. As noted in paragraph 39 above, the secretariat has an important role in facilitating SPI cooperation and liaison with other science-policy bodies, as well as Parties. In addition to organizing opportunities for exchange and information-sharing among the SPI and different stakeholders, the secretariat may further develop its communication channels and material to engage the scientific community, and effectively advocate for and promote the SPI products.

C. Improving the working modalities of the Science-Policy Interface

47. One challenge for the SPI which was widely recognized in both assessments relates to the status of the SPI as a temporary body. In fact, the SPI seems to be occasionally perceived more as a working group than an authoritative science-policy body advising a convention process. It was generally agreed that this challenge could be addressed by adopting a COP 16 decision that establishes the SPI as a science-policy standing body of the UNCCD.

48. If the SPI work programme is to be set for four years from COP 17 onwards, it would be useful to update the SPI membership accordingly. The following measures could be taken:

(a) Those SPI membership and observer positions that become vacant after COP 16 due to the rotating system would be filled only for the biennium 2025–2026;

(b) Following COP 17, the SPI members with the exception of the CST Bureau whose election is governed by the COP Rules of Procedure (decision 1/COP.1, as amended by decision 25/COP.10 paragraph 2), would be nominated to serve four years to ensure continuity during the entire process of preparing the flagship report;

(c) The only exception of the four-year membership would be the scientific co-chair of the SPI; they would be elected by the SPI members at least one year prior to the end of the term of that SPI. The aim of this early election would be to allow the new co-chair to "shadow" the preceding co-chair and thereby be prepared to take over the SPI.

49. Currently, 10 of the 20 SPI members are independent scientists. Increasing their number to 15 could significantly enhance the ability of the SPI to deliver its reports and outreach, as described in the earlier sections. It would also assist in ensuring that the SPI members represent a wide range of disciplines, including political sciences and economics, as was suggested by many respondents to the external assessment of the SPI.

50. Furthermore, some SPI memberships could be reserved for scientific institutions, instead of individuals. While these institutions would be represented by individuals at the SPI, they would be expected to devote more time and institutional resources to support the SPI work than could be expected from any individual member. Such institutional members could be nominated from COP 17 onwards, and their selection criteria could directly derive from the scope and content of the SPI flagship report underway.

51. Creating dedicated slots on the SPI for early-career scientists has had a tremendous impact and should be continued by ensuring that five independent early-career scientists are part of the SPI's future.

52. Following decision 19/COP.14, the regional nomination process for SPI membership was integrated into the open call for independent scientists, facilitating the recruitment process for new members from each regional group, positively influencing their service to the SPI.

53. As mentioned in paragraph 12 above, current resources for the functioning of the SPI are mostly covered by voluntary contributions, primarily in the form of seconded or sponsored staff. The core budget of the UNCCD covers the salaries of the UNCCD lead scientist and an assistant, both of whom can devote only part of their time to the SPI. This also provides funding for in-person SPI meetings. Any additional resource needs, such as consultants to support the preparation of the reports, expert workshops, or publications, are dependent on the goodwill of donors to provide voluntary contributions.

54. Resource mobilization for the SPI to effectively implement its work programmes would benefit from identifying and presenting the budgetary implications of planned activities in the SPI work programme at an early stage. Some of these resource needs could be met through partnership arrangements and in-kind contributions while the four-year duration of the future SPI work programmes would also enable access to funding sources requiring more time than allowed by the current two-year SPI work programme. Nevertheless, Parties could also consider securing at least several more resources for the SPI from the core budget, starting with a position that is primarily assigned to support the SPI.

55. Both the IPCC and the IPBES use TSUs to assist and facilitate work on specific topics and fields. These TSUs are part of existing institutions outside the IPCC and IPBES, such as a ministry in an active country, or an independent research centre, while providing the information and support needed for the scientific assessment and report development processes specific to the science-policy topic in question. Similar arrangements may also be useful for the SPI to complement the limited technical and scientific staff and services currently available under the UNCCD. For this purpose, the COP, at its 16th session, may decide to launch a feasibility study to identify ways of ensuring adequate technical support for the SPI, including the possible use of external TSUs provided by partners, similarly to the IPCC and the IPBES.

V. Conclusions

56. The findings of the external assessment and the midterm evaluation indicate that the SPI has improved the credibility of the UNCCD as a global science-policy authority on DLDD. Its reports are generally relevant to the mandate and priorities of the CST, the objectives of the UNCCD and the needs of Parties, and its participation in the processes of other science-policy bodies has added value to the UNCCD science-policy

work. In spite of very limited resources, the SPI has succeeded in transforming the UNCCD into a science-based process that has advanced a number of conceptual elements (e.g. the Scientific Conceptual Framework for land degradation neutrality), which are now widely embraced in the global scientific community and leveraged in other intergovernmental processes relevant to land and drought resilience.

57. The main challenge in the coming years will be to realize the full potential of the SPI by ensuring its continuity and independence while improving the effectiveness of its products, further building its recognition within the scientific community, and expanding broader awareness of DLDD issues. This document suggests that the reform process begin by modifying the set-up of the SPI to enable it to expand its visibility and impact with more partners, more time and more resources, all with the aim of furthering progress in implementing the UNCCD at all levels.

58. More specifically, this report proposes that:

(a) The COP establish the SPI as a standing body of the UNCCD;

(b) Future SPI work programmes focus on the delivery of the GLO or a similar, high-profile, science-based flagship report, which will require the duration of each work programme to be extended to four years over two, starting in 2027;

(c) The SPI extend its role in the UNCCD to the provision of practical, rapid, scientific advice to the work of the Bureaux of the COP, CST and CRIC, the secretariat and the Global Mechanism;

(d) The CST Bureau, with the support of the secretariat, develop procedures for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI for its work programme, as well as procedures for the preparation of flagship reports and rapid response information products;

(e) The SPI intensify its interactions with the scientific community. That, in addition to its usual liaison with other science-policy bodies, it start proactively engaging scientific institutions and networks to contribute to its work;

(f) Parties be provided with more information and opportunities to contribute to the work of the SPI, including through a specific agenda item at each intersessional CRIC;

(g) The five CST Bureau members serve on the SPI;

(h) The recruitment and selection of independent scientists at the global and regional levels, through a single open call, continue to consider disciplinary, gender and regional balance;

(i) The early-career scientist programme continues, through the same open call;

(j) The SPI include five additional independent scientist members, which may be serving as individuals or representing their scientific institution;

(k) Five observers provide representatives to serve on the SPI, four representing the United Nations system organizations and other international organizations selected from an open call, and one representing civil society organizations nominated by the UNCCD civil society organizations panel;

(l) The CST Bureau review and update, as necessary, the terms of reference for SPI members and observers;

(m) The secretariat intensify its efforts to secure more financial resources and technical support for the SPI, including the possible use of external TSUs provided by partners, similarly to the IPCC and the IPBES.

59. Parties may wish to consider this document, especially the focus on the next biennium, with a view to preparing a draft decision for the COP based on the draft text for negotiations that can be found in ICCD/COP(16)/10, which contains all draft decisions prepared for Parties for consideration at COP 16.