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Interfacing science and policy, and sharing knowledge

Work programme of the Science-Policy Interface beyond 2024

**Work programme for the Science-Policy Interface beyond
2024**

Note by the secretariat

Summary

In line with its mandate, as defined in decisions 23/COP.11 and 19/COP.13, the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) provides the Committee on Science and Technology with clear and well-defined thematic guidance on scientific knowledge requirements for implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

The approach for defining the work programme of the SPI beyond 2024 will evolve in line with the recommendations for the future functioning of the SPI resulting from the integrated outcomes of the midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification reported in document ICCD/COP(16)/2 and the review of the SPI reported in document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6. Those recommendations focus on the work of the SPI in contributing to flagship reports such as the Global Land Outlook, the provision of rapid response information, and coordination activities with other intergovernmental technical and scientific bodies.

The evolving focus of the SPI will require a transition period during the biennium 2025–2026 for the development of procedures for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI for its work programme as well as the procedures for the preparation of flagship reports and rapid response information products. During this biennium, the SPI and the secretariat will collaborate on communication planning for SPI products and ensuring all UNCCD communications products are based on sound science while continuing the SPI's work. The secretariat will need to conduct a workflow analysis to ascertain the costs of SPI activities in order to develop a resource mobilization strategy to enable the delivery of future work programmes.



Contents

| | <i>Paragraphs</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------------|-------------|
| I. Background | 1–10 | 3 |
| II. Preparatory measures | 11–25 | 4 |
| A. Development of procedures | 12–15 | 4 |
| B. Communications planning | 16–20 | 5 |
| C. Costing analysis | 21–23 | 5 |
| D. Resource mobilization | 24–25 | 6 |
| III. Science-Policy Interface transition work programme 2025–2026 | 26–47 | 6 |
| A. Contribution to the Global Land Outlook | 27–30 | 6 |
| B. Rapid response information products..... | 31–35 | 6 |
| C. Coordination activities | 36–47 | 7 |
| IV. Science-Policy Interface work programme beyond 2026..... | 48–50 | 9 |
| A. Contribution to the Global Land Outlook | 48 | 9 |
| B. Rapid response information products..... | 49 | 9 |
| C. Coordination activities | 50 | 9 |
| V. Conclusions and recommendations | 51–54 | 9 |

I. Background

1. In line with its mandate, as defined in decisions 23/COP.11 and 19/COP.13, the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) provides the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) with clear and well-defined thematic guidance on scientific knowledge requirements (e.g. thematic assessments, scientific studies and/or user guides) for implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

2. In the past, following decision 19/COP.13, the work programme for the SPI had been based on a proposal submitted by the SPI for consideration at each regular CST session, with a focus on one or two broad, globally relevant priority topics related to desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD).¹ The proposed topics for future SPI work programme scientific assessments were drawn from priorities communicated by Parties via surveys and/or the intersessional consultations of the CST Bureau. The SPI would also seek inputs from the secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) on emerging issues. The SPI would then discuss the candidate topics so they could be screened against the following criteria developed by the CST Bureau, with support from the secretariat to facilitate the final selection of the proposed topics to be submitted for the consideration of the CST:

(a) Relevance to the mission of the UNCCD: The topic is central to addressing DLDD;

(b) Added value: The scientific assessment would provide significant added value to the implementation of the UNCCD;

(c) Actionability, which is the level at which Parties could use the results of the scientific assessment to make policies or improve implementation;

(d) Knowledge gap: The topic addresses a gap in the assessed and synthesized body of scientific knowledge that limits progress in implementing the UNCCD;

(e) Uniqueness: The topic has not been dealt with in earlier SPI reports or reports prepared by other intergovernmental scientific bodies; and

(f) Feasibility, which is the capacity to build upon the outcomes of past SPI work and leverage the assembled expertise of the SPI.

3. The second major component of SPI work programmes of past bienniums were coordination activities with other intergovernmental scientific panels and bodies dealing with DLDD issues. The SPI, with support from the secretariat, would engage these other bodies to prioritize the focus of future collaborations, which typically include the scientific review of first and second order drafts of reports and, for reports approved under those bodies, the development of policy-oriented recommendations for consideration by the CST.²

4. The nature of the proposed work programme of the Science-Policy Interface beyond 2024 will be shaped by the results of two parallel assessment processes initiated by Parties at the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15):

(a) In decision 7/COP.15, Parties decided to start a midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework) immediately after COP 15, with a view to considering the resulting findings at COP 16, as reported in document ICCD/COP(16)/2;

(b) In decision 21/COP.15, Parties decided that the sixteenth session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST 16) should focus on, inter alia, the 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.

¹ Documents ICCD/COP(16)/CST/2 and ICCD/COP(16)/CST/3 provide the outcomes of two such scientific assessments conducted by the SPI during the triennium 2022–2024.

² Document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/4 provides the outcomes of the SPI coordination activities for the triennium 2022–2024.

5. To ensure consistency between these two assessment processes, the secretariat encouraged regular sharing of information. In addition, the CST Bureau actively contributed to both, combining key findings and recommendations to create a unified proposal for the future functioning of the SPI, including the development of its work programme, as reported in document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6.

6. The findings reported in ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 and the related recommendations presented as draft text for negotiations in document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/10 form the basis for the proposed work programme of the SPI beyond 2024, which is detailed in the present document.

7. Chapter II of this document introduces the preparatory measures (new procedures, communications planning, costing analysis and resource mobilization) that should be undertaken during the next biennium (2025–2026) to materialize the full potential of the SPI envisioned in documents ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 and ICCD/COP(16)/CST/10.

8. Chapter III of this document introduces the substantive elements for a transition work programme of the SPI for the biennium 2025–2026.

9. Chapter IV of this document outlines the core elements envisioned for SPI work programmes beyond 2026.

10. Chapter V of this document provides conclusions and recommendations for the Conference of the Parties (COP).

II. Preparatory measures

11. The 2025–2026 biennium marks the transition period necessary to implement the findings regarding the future functioning of the SPI based on the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework and the review of the SPI, as reported in ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 and the draft text recommendations resulting from those findings presented in ICCD/COP(16)/CST/10. Specifically, this transition period will require the development of some new procedures and the continuous improvement of communications. While the changes have been designed to be cost-neutral, the transition period will also provide the opportunity to better understand the cost implications and, if necessary, develop new strategies for resource mobilization.

A. Development of procedures

12. The evolution in the functioning of the SPI will require a transition period during the 2025–2026 biennium in which its modalities of work can be revised in order to improve the effectiveness of SPI products and their recognition within the scientific community. This need will be addressed in part by formulating procedures for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI as well as procedures for the preparation of flagship reports. In addition, rapid response information products are to be developed by the SPI under the guidance of the CST Bureau with support from the secretariat for consideration by the CST at its next regular session.

13. New procedures need to be developed for receiving requests on scientific and technical matters that require the SPI's attention and action. This will include procedures for prioritizing the requests, suggestions and inputs with respect to determining the focus of flagship reports such as the Global Land Outlook (GLO) as well as rapid response information products. It is envisioned that this prioritization will be conducted by the CST Bureau with scientific input from the SPI and the support of the secretariat.

14. New procedures will also be required for the preparation of SPI deliverables, including:

(a) Flagship reports such as the GLO, which may include some or all of the following elements: scoping, scientific assessment process, report drafting, independent scientific review(s), review editing and response, scientific clearance, and report approval;

(b) Rapid response assessments and information products, which are expected to involve a more streamlined, fast-track approach.

15. The SPI procedures for receiving and prioritizing requests put to the SPI for its work programme and the preparation of flagship reports and rapid response information products need to be developed during the biennium 2025–2026 by the SPI under the guidance of the CST Bureau with support from the secretariat for consideration by the CST at its seventeenth session.

B. Communications planning

16. The SPI plays a critical role in providing scientific guidance to Parties to the Convention on issues related to DLDD. Despite its importance, one of the key findings of the review of the SPI was that its work remains relatively unknown to the public and the media. The limited awareness was also noted within the scientific and policymaking communities. This lack of awareness is partially due to the broader challenge of the UNCCD itself being less recognized compared to its sister Rio conventions, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), which are more widely associated with climate change and biodiversity issues.

17. A refocus of the SPI on flagship reports, such as the GLO, which already have visibility, and rapid response products which respond to a specific need, will help address this challenge. Additionally, the SPI will need to work collaboratively with the Communications, External Relations and Partnerships unit within the secretariat, including through the development of a simple communications plan, to increase the visibility and understanding of its work and its relevance to global efforts to combat land degradation.

18. The simple communications plan should outline several key objectives, prioritized to align with the SPI's overarching goals of promoting clear science on DLDD. The primary focus of communication should continue to be on informing and influencing policies and initiatives of Parties through the findings of SPI assessments.

19. The target audiences for the SPI communications effort include policymakers, particularly practitioners working to implement the Convention at regional, national and local levels, and broader civil society groups working on land use and conservation. Secondary audiences include other scientists and intergovernmental scientific panels. The SPI should aim to build stronger relationships with these audiences through targeted outreach and engagement activities, including leveraging media channels to communicate its findings and processes effectively.

20. The communications plan should provide for media training of SPI members and opportunities for the SPI to contribute to educational events focused on journalists. Additionally, the SPI communications plan should emphasize the importance of building an appreciation for the value of science in informing the UNCCD, similar to the way that science is recognized as informing the UNFCCC and CBD.

C. Costing analysis

21. Achieving the vision for the future functioning of the SPI communicated in document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 will benefit from a cost analysis that considers resources, including core budget and voluntary contributions, that are currently dedicated to both the SPI activities and to the development and promotion of the GLO. This will involve assessing workflows, mapping processes and measuring the time, resources, and cost associated with (i) an envisioned flagship publication such as the GLO; (ii) the proposed rapid response information products; (iii) the coordination activities of the SPI with other intergovernmental science bodies; and (iv) the communication of SPI findings.

22. The costing analysis should include an evaluation of workflows followed by a thorough breakdown of costs for the phases of each activity. For example, in this case of reports, the stages would include topic identification and prioritization, knowledge assessment (e.g. scientific literature, grey literature, local and Indigenous knowledge),

analysis, report drafting, peer review, publication and promotion to provide a clearer view of resource allocation. The analysis should take into consideration external technical support and communication costs. Adjustments should be made based on the specific scale, complexity, and goals of each scientific assessment leading to an SPI deliverable.

23. The secretariat will need to undertake such a costing analysis early in the 2025–2026 biennium, accounting for SPI deliverables planned for COP 17 while also providing estimates for future four-year cycles of SPI activities.

D. Resource mobilization

24. The results of the costing analysis will be needed to help the SPI, with support from the secretariat, to determine if additional resources are required and if so, to develop a comprehensive resource mobilization strategy.

25. The flexibility to diversify secretariat funding sources and maintain transparency and accountability will be critical to securing the voluntary contributions necessary to fulfil the future work programmes of the SPI.

III. Science-Policy Interface transition work programme 2025–2026

26. While some of the work of the SPI during the transition biennium 2025–2026 will involve contributions to the preparatory measures outlined in chapter II, the majority will be dedicated to substantive scientific assessment work. This transition period will include the contribution of the SPI to the GLO and other UNCCD flagship reports, the piloting of the rapid response assessment and information product development process, and the continuation of the cooperation between the SPI and other intergovernmental scientific bodies.

A. Contribution to the Global Land Outlook

27. Following decision 18/COP.15, the SPI assumed a primary role in the quality assurance of a possible third edition of the Global Land Outlook (GLO 3).

28. During the 2025–2026 biennium, it is envisioned that the SPI will be invited to serve on the GLO 3 steering committee and will support the development of the report and its summary for policymakers.

29. While interested SPI members may join future GLO author teams, the primary contribution of the SPI to GLO 3 envisioned for the biennium 2025–2026 will be taking responsibility for ensuring that the GLO is based on sound science.

30. In this capacity, the SPI will, with the support of the secretariat, develop and implement the scientific review process for the main report and summary for policymakers of the GLO 3 by interacting with authors, helping address the comments provided by expert reviewers on drafts, assisting the authors in tackling contentious or controversial issues where there might be disagreement among reviewers, as well as providing general quality control.

B. Rapid response information products

31. The review of the SPI documented in ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 suggests that one way the SPI can play an active role in ensuring the work of the UNCCD is based on sound science would be to generate short rapid response products in response to requests emerging from the work of the COP, CST and Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) Bureaux as well as the secretariat and the GM.

32. It is envisioned that the rapid response will be based on a fast-track approach where the scientific assessment, information product development and scientific review would

occur over days, weeks or months, depending on the issue and need, combining, as appropriate to each issue, the latest scientific information, local and Indigenous knowledge, and the views of specialists knowledgeable in the topic of the assessment beyond the SPI membership.

33. During the 2025–2026 biennium, the SPI will pilot the concept of rapid response assessments leading to the development of rapid response information products, building on the experiences of other organizations whose focus is to transform environmental data into innovative, science-based information products.

34. The SPI could also explore cooperation opportunities with other intergovernmental scientific bodies and other scientific and technical partners to invite affiliated experts with relevant expertise to join the SPI in conducting rapid assessments.

35. During the 2025–2026 biennium, undertaking pilot rapid assessments should be pursued by the SPI in a formative and participatory manner, meaning that different approaches would be tested and refined based on what is learned in this pilot phase. This approach would also help the SPI to test and refine the procedures for future rapid response assessments and information product development discussed in chapter II.A.

C. Coordination activities

36. During the 2025–2026 biennium, the SPI is also proposing to undertake the following coordination activities:

1. **Coordination activity 1: Cooperate with the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services within the framework of its rolling work programme up to 2030 and in accordance with the procedures established in the memorandum of cooperation with the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

37. In decision 19/COP.13, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to continue to contribute to and cooperate with the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES). Subsequently, a memorandum of cooperation between the secretariats of IPBES and the UNCCD was signed in January 2019.

38. The rolling work programme of IPBES up to 2030 (outlined in decision IPBES-7/1) includes two thematic assessments relevant to the UNCCD: the thematic assessment of the interlinkages among biodiversity, water, food, and health (nexus assessment) and the thematic assessment of the underlying causes of biodiversity loss and the determinants of transformative change and options for achieving the 2050 vision for biodiversity (transformative change assessment).

39. During the 2022–2024 triennium, the SPI contributed to the nexus and transformative change assessment reports through scientific review; both reports will be considered for approval at the eleventh session of the IPBES Plenary in December 2024. The SPI will summarize the key messages relevant to the UNCCD during the 2025–2026 biennium and present the results at CST 17.

40. Decision IPBES-10/1 on the implementation of the IPBES rolling work programme approved the undertaking of a fast-track methodological assessment of integrated biodiversity-inclusive spatial planning and ecological connectivity for consideration by IPBES at the fourteenth session of the IPBES Plenary. The SPI will also contribute to the scientific review of the spatial planning assessment if a draft of this report becomes available in time for the SPI to complete the review during the biennium.

2. Coordination activity 2: Cooperate with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change within the framework of its agenda, particularly regarding its Sixth Assessment Report

41. In decision 19/COP.13, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to continue to contribute to and cooperate with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At the sixtieth session of the IPCC, the chair of the IPCC communicated his vision for the Seventh Assessment Report (AR7) cycle in document IPCC-LX/Doc.6. This included establishing links with external bodies, including other United Nations environmental assessments/programmes, in which one of the IPCC vice-chairs has been assigned as the focal point for the UNCCD SPI. The SPI, in its first meeting of the 2025–2026 biennium, will name a focal point for its cooperation with the IPCC.

42. In 2016, the IPCC agreed on the set of scientific reports for AR7. As per decision IPCC-LXI-9, the IPCC will agree at its sixty-second session (likely to be held in February 2025) on the scope, outline and work plan for the assessments to be conducted in AR7 by Working Group I (the physical science basis), Working Group II (impacts, adaptation and vulnerability) and Working Group III (mitigation).

43. The SPI will follow up on developments regarding the AR7 working group assessment reports and special reports. If drafts of AR7 reports relevant to the UNCCD become available in time during the biennium 2025–2026, the SPI will consider contributing to their scientific review.

3. Coordination activity 3: Cooperate with the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils within the framework of its work programme

44. In decision 19/COP.13, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to continue to contribute to and cooperate with the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS). Cooperation with the ITPS during the 2025–2026 biennium will continue on topics jointly agreed by the SPI and the ITPS, within the framework of the ITPS work programme, including potential participation in future symposia relevant to the UNCCD, namely the Global Symposium on Soil Sealing and Urban Soils and the Global Symposium on Soil Compaction and Physical Degradation.

4. Coordination activity 4: Cooperate with the International Resources Panel of the United Nations Environment Programme within the framework of its work programme

45. In decisions 18/COP.13 and 21/COP.13, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to contribute to and cooperate with the International Resources Panel of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP-IRP). Cooperation during the 2025–2026 biennium will continue on topics jointly agreed by the SPI and the UNEP-IRP within the framework of the UNEP-IRP's mission to provide independent, coherent and authoritative scientific assessments of policy relevance on the sustainable use of natural resources and, in particular, their environmental impacts over the full life cycle and to contribute to a better understanding of how to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

5. Coordination activity 5: Cooperate with the Global Land Indicators Initiative of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, which aims to achieve globally comparable monitoring of land governance by 2030

46. In decision 21/COP.13, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to cooperate with the Global Land Indicators Initiative (GLII) of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme to ensure the harmonization of land indicators developed by the GLII to measure tenure security, with land indicators used to measure progress towards land degradation neutrality. The SPI will continue cooperation in the 2025–2026 biennium to ensure harmonization of land governance indicators and land degradation indicators, as relevant to both GLII and the UNCCD.

6. Coordination activity 6: Cooperate with the Integrated Drought Management Programme, a joint initiative of the World Meteorological Organization and the Global Water Partnership on scientific issues related to drought

47. In decision 18/COP.14, the COP requested the SPI, in close collaboration with the secretariat, to cooperate with the Integrated Drought Management Programme (IDMP) on scientific issues related to drought. During the biennium 2025–2026, the SPI will collaborate on topics to be jointly agreed by the SPI and the IDMP in its efforts to support governments and other stakeholders at all levels in implementing integrated drought management and by providing technical and management guidance and by sharing scientific knowledge and best practices.

IV. Science-Policy Interface work programme beyond 2026

A. Contribution to the Global Land Outlook

48. Document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/6 provides for the future functioning of the SPI beyond the 2025–2026 biennium, where the SPI would, starting in 2027, have an approximately four-year work programme. It is anticipated to include taking responsibility for the development of the GLO or alternative science-based flagship report of the Convention together with relevant units of the secretariat (e.g. Science, Technology and Innovation; Global Policy Advocacy and Regional Cooperation; Communications, Partnerships and Resource Mobilization) as follows:

(a) The scope and content will be defined by the secretariat in consultation with the Parties, including both national focal points and science and technology correspondents, and other stakeholders, taking advantage of the intersessional CRIC;

(b) The content of the main report will be generated by the SPI in collaboration with other scientific partners;

(c) The summary for policymakers will be drafted by the SPI;

(d) The format for both the main report and the summary for policymakers will be determined by the secretariat.

B. Rapid response information products

49. The results of the pilot for rapid assessments and information product development conducted during the 2025–2026 biennium will provide the foundation for establishing this as an ongoing dimension of SPI work programmes after 2026.

C. Coordination activities

50. Towards the end of the biennium 2025–2026, the SPI should review its cooperation with other intergovernmental science bodies and, with guidance from the CST Bureau and with the support of the secretariat, put forward recommendations for future work programmes. These recommendations should focus on both current and potential future partnerships.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

51. The future work of the SPI will require preparatory measures, including the development of procedures, communications planning, a costing analysis, and the development of a resource mobilization strategy.

52. The SPI work programme for the biennium 2025–2026 should encompass the SPI's contribution, primarily as review editor, to GLO 3, the piloting of rapid response assessments and information products, and a set of coordination activities with other intergovernmental science bodies.

53. SPI work programmes beyond 2026 should run on a four-year cycle focused on a flagship publication like the GLO, rapid response assessment and information products, and cooperation with other intergovernmental science bodies.

54. Parties may wish to consider these conclusions when engaging in consultations on a draft decision to be considered by the COP based on the draft text for negotiations that can be found in document ICCD/COP(16)/CST/10, which, following decision 33/COP.15, contains all draft decisions prepared for Parties for consideration at CST 16.
