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## **Conference of the Parties**

### **Sixteenth session**

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2–13 December 2024

Item 7 (a) of the provisional agenda

### **Procedural matters**

**Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

## **Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

### **Note by the secretariat**

#### *Summary*

By its decision 5/COP.15, the Conference of the Parties (COP) requested the secretariat to address a number of issues relevant to the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), including a specific request to the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the Civil Society Organization Panel (CSO Panel) and to develop a youth engagement strategy to ensure stronger, effective and meaningful participation of youth in the meetings and processes of the Convention.

By the same decision, the COP requested the secretariat to report at its sixteenth session (COP 16) on the implementation of the decision, including the report of the CSO Panel on the implementation of its tasks.

This document contains the reports of the Executive Secretary and the CSO Panel on the measures undertaken by both to implement the above-mentioned decision. It also provides recommendations for consideration by the Parties at COP 16 on ways to strengthen the participation of CSOs in general and youth in particular in the UNCCD process.



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## **I. Background**

1. Since 2009, the Conference of the Parties (COP) has guided and promoted the organization and engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Decisions 5/COP.9, 5/COP.10, 5/COP.11, 5/COP.12, 5/COP.13, 5/COP.14 and 5/COP.15 form the basis for civil society participation in general and the Civil Society Organization Panel (CSO Panel) in particular. The UNCCD CSO Panel ensures the coordination of all the CSOs accredited to the COP and provides regular guidance and feedback on the work of the secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM).
2. In the period since the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15), the secretariat continued supporting the work of the CSO Panel. Decision 5/COP.15 requested the secretariat to continue working with key stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, local community organizations, youth, farmers organizations, pastoral organizations, women's organizations, persons with disabilities, local governments and parliamentarians.
3. The decision also requested the secretariat to develop a youth engagement strategy and the modalities for its implementation to ensure stronger, effective and meaningful participation of youth in the meetings and processes of the Convention.
4. This document provides information on the activities of the CSO Panel and the secretariat in the follow-up to decision 5/COP.15.

## **II. Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

### **A. Renewal of membership for the Civil Society Organization Panel**

5. By decision 5/COP.15, paragraph 5, the COP requested the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the CSO Panel starting immediately after COP 15. Following this provision, and as a result of the consultations reached with the accredited CSOs, the following members were appointed:
  - (a) Mr. Oyéoussi Charles Balogoun from Afrique Esperance (Benin), representing Africa and serving as Chair;
  - (b) Mr. Surya Narayana Reddy from Grameena Vikas Samithi (India), representing Asia;
  - (c) Ms. Ana Di Pangracio from Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Argentina), representing Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC);
  - (d) Mr. Jimsher Koshadze from Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (Georgia), representing Eastern Europe;
  - (e) Mr. Mauro Centritto from DesertNet International (Italy), representing Western Europe.
6. On June 2024, the secretariat received a communication from CENN indicating that Mr. Koshadze could not continue representing the organization as a panel member and suggested that Ms. Sopiko Babalashvili will replace him until the end the mandate. The CSO Panel accepted the change and welcomed the new member.
7. Since 20 September 2022, the CSO Panel has met 21 times to deliver its mandate. It is expected that the Panel will have met at least five times between July and November 2024 in preparation for COP 16.

## **B. Support for the Civil Society Organization Panel in discharging its mandate**

8. In line with the mandate given by the Convention and in COP decisions, the secretariat has continued its engagement with CSOs, keeping them informed about the Convention's meetings and processes. Additionally, throughout the current biennium, the secretariat has supported the CSO Panel to ensure their active participation in implementing the Convention at all levels, coordinating the engagement of their constituencies, sharing relevant information for civil society and leading the engagement of the non-state actors. This support has included organizing meetings, drafting agendas and preparing reports to aid in following up on the decisions made by the CSO Panel.

9. The secretariat ensured the availability of funding for the functioning of the CSO Panel and the participation of CSOs in meetings of the subsidiary bodies and has secured additional resources that will enable CSO representatives and youth delegates to attend the forthcoming session of the COP. The representatives of the CSO Panel were able to secure additional financial resources to deliver the tasks entrusted to it by the COP.

10. By the time of the preparation of this report, 271 new organizations had correctly submitted their documents for accreditation as observers to the COP. It is expected that additional organizations will have fulfilled this requirement before the start of COP 16 in Riyadh.

11. The secretariat facilitated the participation of the accredited CSOs in the twenty-first session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 21), held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from 13 to 17 November 2023. CSOs were able to present their position for each one of the agenda items, and their recommendations were included in the final report of the session.

12. Representatives of the CSO Panel have also been included as members of the UNCCD Science–Policy Interface (SPI), including as equally active alternate representatives, and the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought and the Intergovernmental Working Group to Oversee the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework Midterm Evaluation Process; two representatives were included in both working groups to support the work of the Parties.

## **C. Additional support provided by the secretariat in engaging with key stakeholders**

13. The secretariat has been working with the Global Environment Facility (GEF), International Union for Conservation of Nature, Drynet and the CSO Panel on the finalization of the medium-sized GEF project proposal titled “Strengthening Civil Society Role in Achieving Land Degradation”. The project was prepared to increase the capacities and recognition of the CSOs in contributing to adherence to land degradation neutrality (LDN) principles in policies, programmes and investments.

14. The project will consist of two components: (1) influencing LDN; and (2) leveraging LDN. Component 1 focuses on increasing the recognition of CSOs at the political level, as well as increasing opportunities to be involved in designing, implementing and evaluating transformative LDN projects. This is further extended to increasing the visibility of CSO efforts towards achieving LDN. This will be done through a variety of mechanisms, namely knowledge development and exchange, mentoring, advocacy towards policymakers, awareness-raising events and the mobilization of the CSO community. Component 2 seeks to answer this demand by building CSO capacities, providing technical support to CSOs to leverage funds and convening fundraising meetings with donors and private investors. It is centred around a single outcome: CSOs' capacities to leverage funds for LDN are increased. This will be achieved through knowledge development and exchange and increased engagement with donors. It is expected that this project will be launched before the end of 2024.

15. Decision 5/COP.15 requested the secretariat to continue working with key stakeholders and identifies several on which to focus. During the reporting period, the

secretariat ensured active participation of key stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples and local communities, women, local governments and parliamentarians, persons with disabilities, and youth, in the meetings and processes of UNCCD, and particularly the annual global observance of Desertification and Drought Day. Using the available resources and with the support of the accredited CSOs, the secretariat has been engaging actively with the following stakeholder groups.

#### **1. Indigenous Peoples, local communities and pastoralists**

16. The secretariat has actively encouraged the participation of Indigenous peoples and local community organizations in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD. Indigenous peoples have contributed to various initiatives, from their involvement in land tenure decisions to their active participation in the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) session and the global observance of the Desertification and Drought Day.

17. The secretariat is part of the steering committee of the International Land Coalition and has been supporting the engagement of Indigenous peoples and local communities, particularly in the agenda item related to land tenure and the work undertaken by Parties and observers in this area.

18. Together with the chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the secretariat and other partners are working to establish a comprehensive framework for engaging Indigenous peoples and local communities in the UNCCD. Within the framework of the forthcoming observance of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, the secretariat is also teaming up with the organizing committee with a view of ensuring the protection and restoration of global rangelands, taking into consideration the role to be played by Indigenous peoples and local communities.

#### **2. Women's organizations**

19. The secretariat, together with the CSO Panel, has been engaging with women's organizations to ensure their input and contributions in the areas of awareness-raising, decision-making processes and capacity-building. The engagement of women's organizations was very important during 2023 within the framework of the "Her Land. Her Rights." campaign launched in the lead up to Desertification and Drought Day.<sup>1</sup>

20. Document ICCD/COP(16)/17 titled "Follow-up on policy frameworks and thematic issues: Gender" contains additional information on the engagement with women's organizations.

#### **3. Persons with disabilities**

21. The secretariat used the opportunity of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences held in 2022 and 2023 to engage in conversations with the representatives of the disability caucus to explore the possibility for their engagement with the UNCCD and for organizations to seek accreditation to the forthcoming session of the COP.

22. During the 2024 Olympic year, the secretariat also engaged with the International Paralympic Committee through the Athletes' Council as part of the new Sports4Land campaign to raise awareness on the importance of the land and the challenges that desertification/land degradation and drought pose to those in situations of vulnerability and particularly persons with disabilities. The secretariat will report to the COP on the ongoing activities.

#### **4. Local governments and parliamentarians**

23. The secretariat has been working with ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability to ensure the engagement of the mayors and local governments in the implementation of the Convention. At the 2024 Daring Cities Conference, the secretariat organized a special session titled "Connecting Climate-Land-Nature". The event served to present the elements relevant

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/gender/herland>.

to the role that subnational governments can play in the protection of the land and urban-rural linkages. At the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP 28) in 2023, the secretariat participated in the launch of the Trees in Dry Cities Coalition led by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and engaged with its members in the lead up to COP 16. The secretariat has also engaged with the Global Covenant of Mayors to explore areas for collaboration in the framework of the Convention.

24. In the present biennium, the Group of 20 Global Initiative on Reducing Land Degradation and Enhancing Conservation of Terrestrial Habitats, together with the United Nations System Staff College, established the Changemaker Academy for Parliamentarians, a platform designed to empower legislators globally in protecting and managing land resources, thereby fostering champions for sustainable land management, restoration and conservation at the national level.<sup>2</sup> More than 60 parliamentarians from around the world participated in the academy over the two years, creating a community of practice around the topic.

## 5. Youth

25. During COP 15, the secretariat, together with the Government of Côte d'Ivoire, facilitated the organization of a youth conference with the participation of over 300 young representatives from all around the world. The outcomes were presented at the ministerial dialogue organized during the high-level segment interactive dialogue entitled "Land reGeneration: The role of youth in shaping the sustainable land agenda". An outcome of this was that Parties requested the secretariat to prepare a Youth Engagement Strategy (see section 2.D).

26. Youth engagement is increasingly becoming a key element in the development and functioning of many organizations and institutions. This involves young people taking an active role in planning and decision-making, which empowers them to drive change. It also includes fostering genuine intergenerational partnerships and dialogues that ensure meaningful youth involvement in implementing the Convention and in decision-making processes. These intergenerational partnerships should be founded on transparent information exchange, respect for diverse experiences and viewpoints, and clear expectations regarding roles and decision-making. This approach contributes to positive youth development and civic participation, while also advancing and strengthening local institutions, policies and programmes.

27. In the area of advocacy, the secretariat promoted the engagement of young ambassadors through the designation of UNCCD Land Heroes. Document ICCD/COP(16)/3 on the implementation of the UNCCD communication plan contains relevant information on this campaign and others related to the youth engagement.

28. The secretariat continued its engagement with the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development by becoming involved in several initiatives, particularly Decent Jobs for Youth, which is managed by the International Labour Organization. Within this context, the UNCCD became an active member in the initiative and officially submitted its commitment to the initiative to foster participation and partnerships, capacity-building and networking to empower young people to pursue meaningful and sustainable careers in sustainable land and water management. The commitment was presented at Young, Green and Digital: Global Conference of Decent Jobs for Youth, organized in May 2024 in Kigali, Rwanda. The secretariat was also part of the Youth Employment Funders Group, bringing importance to creating decent green, land-based jobs for youth. Furthermore, the secretariat has been working in close contact and cooperation with the United Nations Youth Office in areas related to outreach and awareness-raising and reported to the United Nations on the engagement and activities undertaken with youth.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://g20land.org/g-cap/>.

29. In 2023 and 2024, the secretariat participated actively at the World Youth Development Forum in China by providing support to Land Heroes and attending the conference, thereby bridging the work of the UNCCD and sustainable development.

30. Additional support has been provided to the UNCCD and the Global Youth Caucus on Land and Desertification (UNCCD Youth Caucus), particularly in the coordination of their inputs to CRIC, thereby strengthening the communications of the caucus and facilitating their participation in GEF Council Meetings, global observances of the Desertification and Drought Day, and other international events. The Caucus currently has more than 2,000 members, meets once a month to coordinate their work and follow up on the implementation of the Convention, and is promoting a call to action for the Parties to the Convention.<sup>3</sup>

31. In 2024, the global observance of the Desertification and Drought Day was hosted in Bonn by the Government of Germany under the theme “United for Land: Our Legacy. Our Future”, with a strong focus on youth engagement and intergenerational land stewardship. The day before the global observance, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and the secretariat organized the meeting Youth Voices towards COP 16 in Bonn with more than 60 young people from around the world. The young people requested the global leaders to:

- (a) Ensure meaningful engagement, empowerment, inclusion and mobilization of future land stewards;
- (b) Create an enabling environment for immediate policy implementation and strong collective action;
- (c) Reform the financing landscape;
- (d) Steer land transformation through data, research, technology and artificial intelligence.

32. The secretariat is currently working with the Youth Caucus and other partners in the organization of the youth conference on the sidelines of COP 16.

#### **D. Youth Engagement Strategy**

33. Following a request by Parties, the secretariat, with the generous support of Switzerland, started the preparations for the Youth Engagement Strategy (YES) that will ensure stronger, effective and meaningful participation of youth in the meetings and processes of the Convention.

34. Given the nature of the task and the importance to abide by the spirit and principles of the Convention by promoting a real bottom-up approach, the secretariat started a consultative process that lasted nearly one year. Representatives of youth-led and youth-based organizations, members of the UNCCD Youth Caucus, and constituencies in other multilateral environmental agreements (YOUNGO, Global Youth Biodiversity Network, Children and Youth Major Group to the United Nations Environment Programme), Land Heroes and other relevant youth leaders were consulted through interviews, surveys and/or webinars. During this consultative process, the secretariat facilitated the organization of regional consultations supported by the UNCCD Youth Caucus, held a global webinar open to any individual, youth-based or youth-led organizations working on the implementation of the Convention with simultaneous interpretation in English, French and Spanish, and organized a special event during the UNFCCC COP 28 in Dubai. The event entitled #Youth4Land Intergenerational Dialogue on Future Land Leadership” addressed the engagement of youth and future generations in the land agenda.

35. Once the first draft was finalized, the document was presented again to all young people involved in the Convention to provide comments via webinar, and written comments could be received for a period of one month. The secretariat then prepared an edited and formatted version in the six official United Nations languages that was introduced to the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unccd.int/resources/other/unccd-youth-call-action>.

Parties through consultations organized in the first quarter of 2024, and the text was open for contributions and comments by Parties for a six-week period. After taking into consideration all comments and inputs, the secretariat used the opportunity of the global observance of Desertification and Drought Day and the strong focus on youth to launch the YES.<sup>4</sup>

36. The YES presents a compelling vision, guiding principles, and strategic objectives which frame the modalities for its implementation (i.e. its action plan). Youth priorities are presented for all levels of action, recognizing their need to be tailored to national and local circumstances. The YES outlines the roles and responsibilities of UNCCD stakeholders, as well as strategies to raise awareness and mobilize resources with the aim to promote meaningful youth engagement, support youth-led initiatives, and build youth–adult partnerships.

37. The YES identifies four strategic objectives establishing specific outcomes and strategies for its implementation. The strategic objectives are:

(a) Advance youth-focused policies: Ensure policies that govern land management are drafted in consultation with diverse youth and address their vulnerabilities, particularly around access to land, markets and finance, as well as representation in decision-making;

(b) Support meaningful participation and partnerships: Mainstream spaces and avenues for youth, with an emphasis on youth from diverse backgrounds, remote locations, and marginalized communities, to participate in and influence decision-making, and partner with young people on the ground to create an enabling environment for effective collaboration;

(c) Provide dedicated financial and technical support: Set aside dedicated resources to support initiatives designed and led by young people, and offer the necessary technical assistance to enhance the design, implementation, and monitoring of these initiatives;

(d) Build capacity and support networking: Build young people’s knowledge and skills in sustainable land management (SLM) in ways that are accessible to disadvantaged and marginalized youth and which enable youth to connect with each other, adults, and other relevant stakeholders.

38. The YES also identifies the challenges we are facing in ensuring meaningful youth engagement (access to land and land tenure; participation in governance and policymaking; access to finance and financial inclusion; access to markets and value chains, knowledge, information and capacity) and proposes actions that could be taken by the different stakeholders in charge of implementation (i.e. Parties, the secretariat, donors, UNCCD Youth Caucus, CSOs, the private sector, universities/academia). It presents a global effort that requires a collective commitment and active engagement of all the sectors of the society.

39. Implementation of some activities described in the YES has already started. For instance, the Land Youth Negotiators Program was launched in Germany on 17 June 2024 in order to support youth to be part of decision-making within the Convention and in official policy development processes at the international, regional, national, and local levels. The programme aims to redress the systemic inequality of youth representation and leadership in negotiations and decision-making at UNCCD. More than 60 young people are being trained in the lead-up to COP 16 to enable and empower the next generation of land negotiators with the skills, knowledge, community, networks and resources to deliver transformative change.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-06/UNCCD%20Youth%20Strategy\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-06/UNCCD%20Youth%20Strategy_FINAL.pdf).



### III. Report by the Civil Society Organization Panel

#### Activities undertaken by the Panel

##### 1. Background

40. The CSO Panel of the UNCCD was established in 2009 by the COP through decision 5/COP.9.

41. The CSO Panel has five members, which represent the five United Nations regional groups. The current Panel was elected in August 2022 by the CSOs accredited to the UNCCD. The composition of the Panel has since been as indicated in paragraph 5 above.

42. At the first CSO Panel meeting held virtually on 20 September 2022, Mr Oyéoussi Charles Balogoun from the organization Afrique Esperance in Benin was elected as its chair.

##### 2. Work of the Civil Society Organization Panel and participation in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification process

43. In pursuing UNCCD processes, CSO Panel members agreed to organize periodic online meetings with the support of the secretariat. Since September 2022, the CSO Panel held 20 virtual meetings and 1 in-person meeting. Holding these virtual monthly meetings was crucial to keep the CSO Panel actively involved in the actions and events happening under the Convention. Preparation, leadership and reporting of the meetings was entrusted to the Panel members on a rotational basis.

44. CSO Panel members also held online meetings with accredited CSOs at the regional level. LAC CSOs met on 27 April 2023, and they also held a thematic webinar on agroecology on 30 October 2023 to exchange experiences. One more meeting is expected before COP 16. The Panel also held bilateral meetings with relevant civil society actors such as the UNCCD Youth Caucus, Drynet and the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for relations with the United Nations Committee on World Food Security.

45. African CSOs organized a conference on 16 May 2023 under the theme: "The CSO Panel and interaction with accredited CSOs in Africa: Lessons, opportunities and perspectives for achieving the objectives of the Convention". The Executive Secretary was represented at this session with the participation of the UNCCD Regional Coordinator for Africa and representatives from CSOs around the world.

46. On 14 June 2024, the region also organized an information session, which aimed to review the themes that will be discussed at COP 16 in Saudi Arabia and ensure that Africa's concerns are harmonized and taken into account in the decisions of COP 16. Secretariat officials and representatives of the Youth and Gender Caucuses made presentations on the relevant issues that will be addressed at COP 16.

47. Accordingly, the reports of the CSO Panel meetings, including important topics for discussion, decisions and actions, were regularly updated on the CSO Panel website.<sup>5</sup>

48. At the beginning of its mandate, the CSO Panel agreed on its modus operandi and prepared its work plan for the 2023–2024 biennium to enable it to fulfil its mandate. The work plan included five work packages with detailed activities. The five work packages were as follows:

- (a) The CSO Panel and UNCCD processes;
- (b) Communication and information-sharing with accredited CSOs;
- (c) The promotion of CSO preparation and involvement in CRIC 21, the Committee on Science and Technology and COP 16;
- (d) CSO involvement in implementing COP 15 decisions;

<sup>5</sup> <https://csopanel.org/>.

(e) Synergies between the UNCCD and other United Nations conventions.

49. Based on these work packages, the following is the collective summary of activities and results achieved by the CSO Panel members at various levels.

**3. Activities undertaken by the Civil Society Organizations Panel for communication and information-sharing with accredited civil society organizations**

50. The CSO Panel maintained the CSO website by providing various important news items and relevant information on events and causes, including commission statements, publications, presentations, and reports related to the Panel's work, thereby increasing the availability of high-quality and timely information for CSOs.

51. Awareness-raising and other relevant materials and information were shared with the CSO mailing list as appropriate, mostly in English, French and Spanish.

52. The CSO Panel members have contributed to celebrating Desertification and Drought Day on 17 June of each year. They encouraged the accredited CSOs to contribute to and report on the celebration at national, regional and international levels. The CSO Panel members themselves organized celebrations, as described in the following paragraphs.

53. For Desertification and Drought Day 2023, the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) representative co-organized an international event under the theme "Her Land. Her Rights.", which brought together academic researchers and civil society representatives dedicated to safeguarding water resources and combating desertification and land degradation. The first part of the event took place at the Department of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Sassari, Italy, and targeted students, researchers, agronomists and the general public. The second part of the event was a virtual meeting conducted as an international webinar titled "Her Land. Her Rights: A Science-Civil Society Dialogue on Women's Efforts for Drought and Desertification Challenges", coordinated by the WEOG representative of the CSO Panel. This was followed by a round table discussion coordinated by the Italian UNCCD science and technology correspondent. Participants in the event included Ph.D students, researchers, and civil society representatives from around the world, including China, Pakistan and various countries in Africa, Europe and Latin America.

54. For Desertification and Drought Day 2024, the WEOG representative co-organized an event in Italy, held simultaneously in Messina and Rome. Over 350 participants attended, both in person and remotely. The event also served as an official professional training activity for the professional associations of geologists, agronomists, foresters and engineers. Additionally, on the morning of 18 June, the organizers were formally received by the Environment Commission of the Municipality of Messina to discuss desertification. The event garnered significant media attention. To commemorate Desertification and Drought Day 2024, the organizers created special mementos, including 1,000 limited-edition postcards (two designs). Each postcard was stamped with a formal philatelic postmark from the Italian postal service specifically created for the occasion and included a description of the event. These postcards are intended for collectors. The postcards were sent to the President of Italy, with others sent to the Italian focal point of the UNCCD and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Environment and Energy Security.

55. Asia CSOs observed Desertification and Drought Day across the region on 17 June 2024. The Asia representative in the CSO Panel organized a workshop focusing on synchronizing spiritual organizations' role in combating desertification on a global scale at Shri Aurobindo Society.

56. The Africa representative celebrated the 2023 International Earth Day with the Association for the Defense of the Environment and Development of Cabo Verde under the theme: "Earth Day: Invest in our Planet". The African region has been collaborating closely with FIAN International and TMG Research for the organization of workshops with civil society to implement decision 26/COP.14 on land tenure in Benin and other African countries. Two meetings were organized for the co-development of a political advocacy strategy on land rights and to build capacity and establish learning mechanisms. Both events were held in May and December 2023.

57. The representative of Africa also attended a West African regional workshop in Liberia on the West Africa Frontline Grassroots Defenders Directory. The goal of this session was to monitor, document and report attacks suffered by environmental defenders as well as create visibility for the work of grassroots defenders and activists in West Africa. Several organizations from eight West African countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) were present.

58. The Foundation of the former President of Niger Mahamadou Issoufou, in collaboration with the coordination of the implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative, organized the Inaugural Forum in June 2023 to celebrate the engagement of the private sector in the implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative in Niamey. The meeting focused mainly on the role of stakeholders in achieving the objectives of the Great Green Wall in terms of land restoration, security and food security. It also addressed the challenges caused by the rural exodus and illegal immigration of young people forced by unemployment and recruited by jihadist movements.

59. On the 2024 Desertification and Drought Day and the 30th anniversary of the Convention, several organizations of the African Civil Society Network received institutional support from the secretariat for the organization of the global observance. Tree seedlings, video reports, training and capacity-building for women and girls around land management issues were organized by Youth Initiative for Land in Africa (YILAA) Benin, Ntende Foundation Malawi, Young Volunteers Algeria, House of Africa (Chad), United Hands of Africa Côte d'Ivoire, and Association des jeunes pour l'Environnement et l'Education Civique (Niger).

#### **4. Civil Society Organization participation in relevant UNCCD processes**

60. Upon request from the secretariat, and in accordance with its mandate, the CSO Panel facilitated the election process of an alternate CSO observer to the SPI of the Convention. The election resulted in the selection of Ms. Manon Albagnac from Centre d'Actions et de Réalisations Internationales (CARI) as an alternate to Ms. Jiajia Luo from the China Green Foundation. CSO Panel members communicated regularly with the CSO observers to the SPI, inviting them to report back to CSOs during online meetings with accredited organizations.

61. Representatives of the CSO Panel have also been included as members of the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought (IWG-D) (Ana Di Pangracio) and the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 UNCCD Strategic Framework (IWG-MTE) (Oyéoussi Charles Balogoun).

62. As part of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the CSO Panel was invited to participate in the Working Party on International Environmental Issues (WPIEI) – Desertification, which was held on 15 September 2023. The purpose of this participation was to gather CSOs' expectations and priorities for CRIC 21 and to explore ways to enhance CSO involvement in both EU and UNCCD forums. The CSO Panel selected the representative of Western Europe to represent the CSO Panel at this meeting. During the meeting, the key messages that the CSO Panel had prepared for presentation at CRIC 21 were shared with European Union Member States and discussed during the WPIEI session. Prior to the WPIEI meeting, the key CSO messages intended for CRIC 21 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, were circulated among all UNCCD-affiliated CSOs, and an online meeting was held on 13 September 2023 to discuss this document and other outstanding issues.

63. Following CRIC 21, the European Union Member States, under the Belgian Presidency, organized another WPIEI – Desertification meeting on 19 January 2024 to lay the groundwork for the successful preparation of the upcoming COP 16. The UNCCD CSOs were once again represented by the Western Europe CSO Panel member at this meeting. In principle, the European Union took note of the points made by the CSOs and encouraged that similar meetings could be organized with other regional groups. The CSO Panel requested the secretariat to assist and liaise with the groups to ensure that this is also done with other regions. In case there are regional physical meetings in preparation for COP 16, the secretariat was requested to facilitate the participation of CSO representatives in those meetings.

64. The CSO Panel, in consultation with the representatives of the CSOs accredited to the COP, came up with key points that are being highlighted in preparation for COP 16:

(a) The CSOs expressed satisfaction with the reactivation of the UNCCD Gender Caucus, to which they were eager to contribute. They also emphasized their continued attention to progress and achievements in promoting gender justice within the Convention;

(b) The CSOs congratulated the UNCCD Youth Caucus, highlighting the importance of further support for youth delegates, including capacity development, to enable deeper involvement in UNCCD processes from global to local levels;

(c) The CSOs stressed the importance of ensuring that COP 16 remains open, participatory, and inclusive, in the same spirit that prevailed at CRIC 21;

(d) In preparation for COP 16, the CSOs requested inclusion in regional and national consultations by the Parties and the secretariat to establish strong partnerships;

(e) Additionally, the CSOs underscored the need for significant capacity development for CSOs, youth, women, Indigenous peoples and local communities to enable meaningful participation in COP 16 and other Convention processes;

(f) The CSOs called on Parties and donors to financially support a strong and diverse presence of CSOs at COP 16 and CSO advocacy work. They also requested that Parties and the secretariat support the production of daily editions of ECO, including its editing and printing, as it is a valuable source of information and communication for the CSO community, Parties and other stakeholders;

(g) The CSOs reaffirmed their commitment and readiness to work with Parties and other stakeholders to achieve the objectives and vision of the UNCCD by standing united for land;

(h) The CSOs would like to be allowed to observe the contact groups at COP 16. Additionally, in preparation for COP 16, the CSOs requested inclusion in regional and national consultations by the Parties and the secretariat to establish strong partnerships.

## **5. Civil society organization participation during the twenty-first session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention**

65. The CSO Panel members engaged in coordinating the CSOs' preparations for CRIC 21, which was held from 13 to 17 November 2023.

66. The CSO Panel members were invited to attend the meetings of regional implementation annexes in Samarkand.

67. To allow CSOs to prepare for CRIC 21, CSO Panel members produced and disseminated synthesis documents based on the official preparatory documents, making use of diverse online tools. A consultation on CRIC 21 was held online with accredited CSOs on 17 October 2023. An in-person strategy meeting was held in Samarkand with accredited CSOs on 12 November 2023, and a specific online space was created for CRIC 21 to ease access to relevant information. A WhatsApp group was also created to facilitate communication among CSOs.

68. As a result of a participatory process, CSOs prepared a document titled CSOs' Key Messages for CRIC 21 and were able to present their position for each of the agenda items.<sup>6</sup> Their recommendations were included in the final report of the session.

69. CSOs delivered a statement on each of the 19 agenda items for CRIC 21, and their recommendations were included in the final report of the session. The CSO Panel members organized the collective preparation of these statements.

## **6. Preparations for civil society organization participation towards the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties**

70. The CSO Panel members developed a comprehensive plan of action for CSO involvement during COP 16, including preparatory meetings for CSOs and the organization

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<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://csopanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CSOs-KEY-MESSAGES-CRIC21-Final-Version-ENG.pdf>.

of voluntary working groups, with chairs and rapporteurs, to advance a variety of advocacy tasks towards COP 16. Working groups were expected to ask for input and report back to accredited CSOs via email and online consultations.

71. The CSO Panel hosted two online preparatory meetings with accredited CSOs in the run up to COP 16, providing simultaneous interpretation in Arabic, English, French and Spanish. Two additional virtual meetings and one in-person meeting at the venue in Riyadh are still expected to take place, and CSO representation in regional consultations held before COP 16 is expected to happen.

**7. Civil society organization involvement in building synergies between the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, other United Nations conventions and other international events**

*Désertif'actions*

72. In 2022, the UNCCD secretariat and the Observatory of the Sahara and the Sahel supported the CARI-coordinated initiative Désertif'actions, which mobilized civil society around COP 15. This year, the central theme of Désertif'actions was the benefits of agroecology to inspire the transition and paradigm shift needed in agricultural development. As part of this initiative, actions were held throughout 2022.

73. Following COP 15, a multi-stakeholder summit brought the Désertif'actions 2022 initiative to a close, from 5 to 8 October in Montpellier, France. The summit brought together 270 participants from 39 countries, including representatives from civil society, scientists, ministries, local authorities and international institutions. The summit provided an opportunity to review the work carried out at COP 15 and pursue discussions on agroecology as a solution to environmental, economic and social challenges.

74. As part of Désertif'actions, an inventory of actions and initiatives carried out by development stakeholders (non-governmental organizations, researchers, institutions) in over 30 countries has, among other things, highlighted agroecological approaches and technical solutions for achieving LDN and improving the resilience of populations in the face of drought.

75. This enabled the contributors to Désertif'actions to conclude that, as a mode of agricultural production based on the sustainable use of ecosystem services, agroecology can both achieve high productivity and amplify the natural functionalities of agroecosystems over a given area. By analysing the technical effects of agroecological practices implemented by CSOs in their territories, Désertif'actions has demonstrated the relevance of agroecology in limiting degradation factors and contributing to the achievement of LDN objectives, considering the need to avoid and reduce land degradation and restore degraded land.

76. In this respect, CSOs recommended that governments include agroecology among the relevant models to be considered for achieving their neutrality targets and draw inspiration from it for the transformative projects currently being developed. They also recommended that the UNCCD recognize and enshrine agro-ecological transitions as solutions for deploying drought-resilient agricultural and food systems.

*Workshop on Women's Land Rights and the Rio Conventions*

77. A CSO Panel member, together with the Secretariat, took part in the Strategy Workshop on Women's Land Rights and the Rio Conventions held in Berlin on 3–5 July 2023, organized by the UNCCD, TMG Research and Robert Bosch Stiftung and bringing together key actors working to promote women's equal rights to land and natural resources in the context of the Rio conventions.

*Official side event at COP 3 of the Escazú Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*

78. The UNCCD-accredited organization Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, together with EcoMaxe from Mexico and the International Union for Conservation of Nature National Committee of the Netherlands organized an official side event on the occasion of the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the Escazú Agreement, entitled

“Experiences and good practices in gender action plans to generate a safe and enabling environment for women environmental defenders”. Representatives of the Rio conventions secretariats, women’s groups and women environmental defenders shared experiences and good practices in gender action plans to generate a safe and enabling environment for women environmental defenders (WED) and identify entry points for collaboration between the Rio conventions and the Escazú Agreement on gender and WED.

*Leveraging momentum for women’s land rights: enhancing an initiative for synergies across conventions*

79. Co-hosted by TMG Research, Robert Bosch Stiftung, the UNCCD, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UNFCCC, the strategic initiative held in Berlin on 20–21 June 2024 sought to leverage the momentum generated by the alignment of all three COPs of Rio conventions held within a year. Participants included key advocacy actors amongst civil society, and especially grassroots actors, representatives of the Convention secretariats, gender and CSO caucuses, foundations supporting CSOs, and national focal points. A CSO Panel member and the UNCCD secretariat were present at this gathering.

## **8. Lessons learned**

80. The CSO Panel members collaborated online but they also benefited from the positive effects of face-to-face meetings at the beginning of their mandate and a handover from the previous Panel members. The CSO Panel recommends that arrangements be made for a handover meeting with the next Panel.

81. By the time of the preparation of this document, the number of accredited CSOs totalled 697, including around 280 additional CSOs that have requested accreditation for COP 16. These organizations have contributed in varying degrees to implementing the UNCCD. It is crucial that Parties regularly maintain dialogue with their national CSOs and consider CSO actions in national implementation reports.

82. It is a challenge for the CSO Panel and the secretariat to engage with all applicant organizations. The CSO Panel recognizes that the mailing list developed for each region, as well as the CSO Panel website, were crucial communication tools and should be maintained and improved. Online translation tools have helped the Panel to share information with CSOs in English, French and Spanish. Considering the language barrier for many CSOs, the CSO Panel requests the secretariat to provide more resources and tools to facilitate information dissemination, consultations and capacity-building activities directed at CSOs in multiple languages.

83. The CSO Panel expresses satisfaction regarding CSO participation in the IWG-D and IWG-MTE, the level of openness from members, and careful consideration of their contributions.

## **IV. Conclusions and recommendations**

**84. The role played by CSOs, including women, Indigenous peoples and local communities and youth groups, in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD has been greatly appreciated by the various stakeholders within the Convention.**

**85. In the current biennium, the UNCCD CSO Panel has grown and expanded its role of supporting the active engagement of CSOs, ensuring that those that are in situation of vulnerability are aware of the priorities and the work of the secretariat and the Parties. The Panel representatives have reminded Parties and the secretariat to deliver the tasks entrusted to them by the COP. Through their regular meetings and continued communication with their respective constituencies, the CSO Panel has been actively involved in all the processes set up by COP 15. The selection of CSO representatives for the intergovernmental working groups and the SPI, the CSO contributions, and the regular follow-up on the work of these groups to ensure input from civil society are strong evidence of the importance of enlarging the participation**

space and involvement of non-state actors within the meetings and processes of the UNCCD.

86. The YES, prepared by the secretariat following an extensive consultation process with youth and Parties, has been very well received by the different UNCCD stakeholders that were requesting to start the implementation of the different components and develop a framework for its monitoring and evaluation. Going forward, Parties, observers and the secretariat would need to ensure the meaningful engagement of youth and future generations in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD. The process could benefit from this active engagement at the local, national and international level, thereby facilitating a true intergenerational dialogue that moves UNCCD implementation forward. The secretariat and other stakeholders would need to report regularly on the implementation of the YES and other measures that ensure the meaningful engagement of youth in the UNCCD. The Parties may wish to use this momentum to include youth as one of the emerging issues to be addressed at COP 17.

87. In addition to youth, the Convention institutions will need to strengthen their forthcoming work with other relevant stakeholders, including the Indigenous peoples and local community organizations, women's organizations, people with disabilities, local governments and parliamentarians.

88. Elements from these conclusions are presented in the form of a draft decision for the consideration of the Parties (see document ICCD/COP(16)/22).

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