



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

United Nations conference in Riyadh charts a path for global action on land, drought

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 14 December — After two weeks of intense negotiations on how to tackle land degradation, desertification and drought, the largest and most inclusive United Nations land conference wrapped up in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The nearly 200 countries convening at the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) committed to prioritize land restoration and drought resilience in national policies and international cooperation as an essential strategy for food security and climate adaptation. Nations also made significant progress in laying the groundwork for a future global drought regime, which they intend to complete at COP17 in Mongolia in 2026. In the meanwhile, more than USD 12 billion were pledged to tackle desertification, land degradation and drought around the world, especially in the most vulnerable countries.

Among the main agreements reached at COP16 were the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities to ensure that their unique perspectives and challenges are adequately represented; a continuation of the Convention's Science-Policy Interface to strengthen science-based decision-making, and the mobilization of private sector engagement under the [Business4Land](#) initiative.

COP16 was the largest and most inclusive UNCCD COP to date: it attracted more than 20,000 participants, around 3,500 of them from civil society, and featured more than 600 events as part of the first Action Agenda to involve non-state actors in the work of the Convention.

In a prepared statement, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed emphasized "Our work does not end with the closing of COP16. We must continue to tackle the climate crisis—it is a call to action for all of us to embrace inclusivity, innovation, and resilience. Youth and Indigenous peoples must be at the heart of these conversations. Their wisdom, their voices, and their creativity are indispensable as we craft a sustainable future with renewed hope for generations to come."

In his closing remarks, COP16 President, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Environment, Water and Agriculture Abdulrahman Alfadley, said the meeting marked a turning point in raising international awareness of the pressing need to accelerate land restoration and drought resilience.

"The Kingdom's hosting of this important conference reflects its ongoing commitment to environmental issues and sustainable development. It reaffirms its dedication to working with all parties to preserve ecosystems, enhance international cooperation to combat desertification and land degradation, and address drought. We hope the outcomes of this session will lead to a significant shift that strengthens efforts to preserve land, reduce its

degradation, build capacities to address drought, and contribute to the wellbeing of communities around the world.”

Addressing COP16 closing plenary, Under-Secretary-General and UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw stated: “As we have discussed and witnessed, the solutions are within our grasp. The actions we took today will shape not only the future of our planet but also the lives, livelihoods, and opportunities of those who depend on it.”

He further emphasized a significant shift in the global approach to land and drought issues, highlighting the interconnected challenges with broader global issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, food security, forced migration, and global stability.

Financial needs and pledges

During the Conference, participants heard that UNCCD estimates that at least [USD 2.6 trillion in total investments](#) are needed by 2030 to restore more than one billion hectares of degraded land and build resilience to drought. This equals USD 1 billion in daily investments between now and 2030 to meet global land restoration targets and combat desertification and drought.

New pledges for large-scale land restoration and drought preparedness were announced, such as the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership which attracted USD 12.15 billion to support 80 of the world’s most vulnerable countries in building their resilience to drought, including a USD 10 billion pledge from the Arab Coordination Group.

The Great Green Wall (GGW), an African-led initiative to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land, also mobilized EUR 11 million from the Italian Government for landscape restoration in the Sahel and EUR 3.6 million from the Austrian Government to strengthen the coordination and implementation of the initiative across 22 African countries. The drive is part of the [GGW Accelerator](#), a UNCCD-supported effort to achieve the ambitions for a greener, more prosperous Sahel.

Additionally, the United States and several partner countries and organizations announced total investments of nearly USD 70 million to advance the Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils (VACS). The initiative looks to build resilient food systems grounded in diverse, nutritious, and climate-adapted crops grown in healthy soils.

The first-ever UNCCD COP in the Middle East and North Africa provided an opportunity to shine a light on the specific challenges facing the region and bring to the fore innovative solutions to land degradation and drought.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced five new projects valued at USD 60 million to ramp up climate and environmental efforts as part of the Saudi Green Initiative. The UNCCD COP16 Presidency also announced the launch of an international sand and dust storm monitoring initiative. This effort, part of a regional early warning system, aims to complement existing efforts overseen by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

The International Drought Resilience Observatory ([IDRO](#)), the first global AI-driven platform to help countries assess, and enhance, their capacity to cope with harsher droughts. This innovative tool is an initiative of the [International Drought Resilience Alliance](#) (IDRA), which Saudi Arabia [joined](#) earlier this year.

Greater voice for Indigenous Peoples and other non-state actors

In a landmark decision, Parties requested the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities. The objective is to ensure that their unique perspectives and priorities are adequately represented in the work of the Convention. The declaration '[Sacred Lands](#)', presented during the inaugural Indigenous Peoples' Forum at a UNCCD COP, underscored the role of Indigenous Peoples in sustainable resource management and called for greater involvement in global land and drought governance, including through participation in land restoration efforts.

"Today, history has been made", said Indigenous People representative Oliver Tester from Australia. "We look forward to championing our commitment to protect Mother Earth through a dedicated Caucus, and leave this space trusting that our voices be heard."

COP16 also saw the biggest youth participation to date, building on the UNCCD [Youth Engagement Strategy and Action Plan](#), that seeks to give youth a more prominent role in land and drought negotiations and action, and provide technical and financial support for youth-led initiatives.

On the gender front, countries underscored the need to pay special attention to all forms of discrimination faced by women and girls when designing and implementing policy and programmes related to land degradation and drought.

In recognition of the important role of the private sector, which currently contributes only 6% of financing towards land restoration and drought resilience, Parties have mandated the UNCCD Secretariat and the Global Mechanism to mobilize private sector engagement under the Business4Land initiative. The decision emphasizes the critical role of private sector advocacy, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategies, and sustainable finance in addressing DLDD challenges. The decision comes after the [Business4Land Forum](#), which brought together the largest-ever number of private sector participants at a UNCCD COP — more than 400— from industries like finance, fashion, agri-food, and pharmaceuticals.

Stronger science on land and drought

Acknowledging the role of science as the foundation for sound policies, the Parties agreed on the continuation of UNCCD's Science-Policy Interface (SPI), which was created at COP11 in 2013 to translate scientific findings into recommendations for decision-makers. At COP16, for instance, the SPI presented definitive evidence that three quarters of the Earth's ice-free surface have become permanently drier in the past 30 years, with a predicted five billion people living in drylands by 2100, showing the urgency to take action.

A new UNCCD report, [The Global Threat of Drying Lands: Regional and global aridity trends and future projections](#), revealed that some 77.6% of Earth's land has experienced drier conditions since the 1990s compared to the previous 30-year period. Over the same period, drylands — an arid area with low rainfall— expanded by about 4.3 million km² equal to an area nearly a third larger than India, the world's 7th largest country. Drylands now cover 40.6% of all land on Earth excluding Antarctica.

Seven of nine planetary boundaries are negatively impacted by unsustainable land use, highlighted the UNCCD report [Stepping back from the precipice: Transforming land management to stay within planetary boundaries](#), produced in collaboration with the [Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research](#), which explains how land degradation is undermining Earth's capacity to sustain a growing human population. The report reiterates that agriculture accounts for 23% of greenhouse gas emissions, 80% of deforestation, and 70% of freshwater use, and calls for an urgent land use transition to step away from the precipice.

According to UNCCD's newly released [World Drought Atlas](#) and [Economics of Drought Resilience](#) reports, droughts affect the livelihoods of 1.8 billion people worldwide, pushing already vulnerable communities to the brink. They also cost an estimated USD 300 billion per year, threatening key economic sectors such as agriculture, energy and water.

From Riyadh to Mongolia

For the first time, UNCCD Parties made a decision encouraging the sustainable management, restoration and conservation of rangelands — vast ecosystems used for grazing — ahead of COP17, to be hosted by Mongolia in 2026 during the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists. These ecosystems cover half of the Earth's terrestrial surface and are the dominant land use in the world's drylands, but have long been overlooked and are disappearing faster than rainforests.

The degradation of rangelands threatens [one-sixth of global food supplies](#), potentially depleting one-third of the Earth's carbon reserves. Some two billion people who live in pastoral areas are among the world's most vulnerable in the face of desertification, land degradation and drought.

END

NOTES

Media inquiries:

For media enquiries, please contact the UNCCD Press Office at press@unccd.int or unccd@portland-communications.com

COP16 decisions are available [here: https://www.unccd.int/cop16/official-documents](https://www.unccd.int/cop16/official-documents)

About UNCCD



The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is an international agreement on good land stewardship. It helps people, communities and countries create wealth, grow economies and secure enough food, clean water and energy by ensuring land users an enabling environment for sustainable land management. Through partnerships, the Convention's 197 Parties set up robust systems to manage drought promptly and effectively. Good land stewardship based on sound policy and science helps integrate and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, builds resilience to climate change and prevents biodiversity loss.

About COP16

The Conference of the Parties (COP) was established by the Convention as its main decision-making body. It is made up of UNCCD's 197 Parties (196 countries and the European Union) and is responsible for guiding the Convention so that it can respond to global challenges and national needs. UNCCD COP16 will be a landmark event to raise global ambition and accelerate action on land and drought resilience through a people-centred approach. Coinciding with the Convention's 30th anniversary, UNCCD COP16 was the first major UN conference hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was also the first time a UNCCD COP was held in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which knows firsthand the impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought.