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Global response to drought takes center stage at UN land conference in Riyadh

- *Negotiations on a future global drought regime get underway at UNCCD COP16*
- *US\$ 2.15 billion pledged for the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership*
- *World Drought Atlas highlights global drought impacts and resilience solutions*
- *International Drought Resilience Observatory will provide first global, AI-driven data platform to assess drought resilience globally*

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 3 December 2024 — Negotiations on a global drought regime are set to dominate the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP16) as 197 Parties gather to address one of the world’s deadliest and costliest disasters. The conference opened on Monday, 2 December with major political and financial commitments to strengthen drought resilience worldwide.

Drought, intensified by climate change and unsustainable land practices, has surged by nearly 30 per cent in frequency and intensity since 2000, threatening agriculture, water security, and the livelihoods of 1.8 billion people, with the poorest nations bearing the brunt.

In his opening remarks, Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary, said: “We are all gathered here to make COP16 a historic moment. The world expects Parties to adopt a bold decision that can help turn the tide on the most pervasive and the most disruptive environmental disaster: drought.”

In a video message to delegates at UNCCD COP16 in Riyadh, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed emphasized the growing challenges posed by land degradation and drought: “Never before have so many people been affected by land degradation and drought. 40 per cent of fertile land is now degraded. And the results are dire: rising inequalities, people hungry, people displaced. Livelihoods and businesses threatened, environments destroyed, and the foundation of peace, stability and security rocked. On the basis of current trends, by 2050, three in four people, will be affected by drought worldwide. But you are in Riyadh to turn the tide.”

Newly elected COP16 President Abdulrahman Alfadley, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Environment, Water, and Agriculture, echoed these concerns, noting that degraded land already affects three billion people globally and will “increase levels of migration, stability, and insecurity among many communities.”

COP16 will focus on establishing the first global regime for drought resilience, addressing the systemic risks of drought highlighted in multiple articles of the UNCCD and decisions from the past seven COPs.

Governments are expected to negotiate commitments to enhance resilience at all levels, building on recommendations from the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought established at COP15.

Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership Secures \$2.15 Billion in Commitments

The Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership, announced today by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as UNCCD COP16 host, will leverage public and private finance to support 80 of the most vulnerable and drought-hit countries around the world.

An initial US \$2.15 billion have been pledged towards the Riyadh Partnership by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (US\$150 million), the Islamic Development Bank (US\$1 billion) and the OPEC Fund for International Development (US\$1 billion). The Arab Coordination Group, which encompasses 10 institutions headquartered in five countries, is expected announce its pledge on day two of COP16.

“The Riyadh Drought Resilience Partnership will serve as a global facilitator for drought resilience, promoting the shift from reactive relief response to proactive preparedness. We also seek to amplify global resources to save lives and livelihoods around the world,” said Dr Osama Faqeeha, Deputy Minister for Environment, Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture of Saudi Arabia and Advisor to the UNCCD COP16 Presidency.

The Partnership will work to source additional funding through voluntary contributions by countries, financial institutions, and philanthropic organizations, among others. The financial and in-kind contributions help least developed countries (LDCs) and lower middle-income countries to unlock access to additional financing through blended financing such as concessional loans, commercial loans, equity participation, savings, insurance and other financial schemes.

State Secretary of Environment of Spain Hugo Morán, said: “For Spain and Senegal, the co-chairs the International Drought Resilience Alliance (IDRA), promoting international cooperation is a key priority. We are working very hard to mobilize political momentum and resources for drought resilience all over the world. However, much remains to be done. This is why we welcome the Riyadh Partnership and its potential to mobilize additional resources for drought resilience with a focus on the least developed countries and the lower middle-income countries. We look forward to collaborating with Saudi Arabia and the UNCCD Secretariat to leverage synergies between IDRA and this new partnership.”

Negotiations on drought underway

A major focus of COP16 will be negotiations on a future global regime on drought resilience, the first of its kind. Multiple articles of the Convention text refer to drought and the last seven UNCCD COPs also have decisions related to drought.

The Drought Resilience + 10 Conference, held in Geneva from 30 September to 2 October 2024, concluded that “the increasingly systemic nature of drought requires new approaches, policy instruments and the operationalization of national drought plans along the lines of proactive and integrated drought management.”

It is expected that the negotiations among governments, culminating at UNCCD COP16, will result in robust commitments to strengthen community, national and international resilience to anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of impending or ongoing droughts, building on the policy options presented by the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought established at COP 15.

“After 30 years of deliberations, including six consecutive years of intergovernmental working groups, all eyes are on us. This is a lot of pressure, but we must seize this pivotal moment in Riyadh. Together, we can reverse the trends of land degradation and build a more resilient world to drought,” said UNCCD’s Thiaw.

World Drought Atlas and International Drought Resilience Observatory

Amid escalating global drought crises, the UNCCD, in collaboration with the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) and partners, launched the [World Drought Atlas](#), highlighting the systemic risks of drought across critical sectors like energy, agriculture, river transport and trade, using maps, infographics and case studies to showcase its cascading impacts on inequality, conflict and public health.

In addition, the International Drought Resilience Alliance (IDRA) introduced the prototype International Drought Resilience Observatory (IDRO) — an AI-powered global platform designed to empower diverse stakeholders, from policymakers to communities, with actionable insights for building drought resilience. The full version of IDRO will debut at UNCCD COP17 in Mongolia in 2026, marking a shift towards proactive drought management worldwide.

Anna Dyson, Founding Director of Yale Center for Ecosystems + Architecture, explained: “Although a wealth of knowledge is emerging on drought resilience globally, it tends to be scattered and difficult to access. The Observatory will enable quick access to diverse expertise and tools needed to anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to drought challenges. Connecting insights with powerful analytics, it delivers timely, actionable information while addressing critical gaps in risk and adaptive strategies.

Media inquiries:

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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. It will coincide with the Convention's 30th anniversary. UNCCD COP16 is the first major UN conference hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It will also be the first time a UNCCD COP is held in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which knows firsthand the impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought.

About IDRA

The International Drought Resilience Alliance (IDRA) is the first global coalition creating political momentum and mobilizing financial and technical resources for a drought-resilient future. As a growing platform of more than 70 countries and institutions, IDRA draws on the collective strengths of its members to advance policies, actions, and capacity-building for drought preparedness, acknowledging we are only as resilient to drought and climate change as our land is. The work of IDRA is aligned with, and supportive of, the mandate of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which hosts the IDRA Secretariat. For more information: <https://idralliance.global>.