

#Sport4Land Champions Unveiled at United Nations Land Conference

High-profile athletes Naomi Akakpo, Asmaa Niang, Jitske Visser, and Franck Kessié unite in support of healthy land and drought resilience at UNCCD COP16

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 7 December 2024 – The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) today unveiled its first-ever #Sport4Land Champions at COP16, the largest United Nations land conference in the Middle East region to date.

Launched at the Paris Olympics earlier this year, the #Sport4Land campaign aims to leverage the universal appeal of sports to avert the global land crisis, marked by the loss of a staggering four football fields of productive land every second.

The four #Sport4Land Champions will join UNCCD, one of the three Rio Conventions alongside climate and biodiversity, in the urgent mission to restore degraded land and build resilience to drought, and to inspire communities worldwide to take collective action.

Naomi Akakpo, Olympic hurdler from Togo emphasized the fundamental connection between land health, food security and human well-being. "Land is more than a resource—it is our foundation," she said. "When we restore degraded land, we restore life and opportunity for countless communities." Inspired by her motto, "Beyond Limits," Naomi's advocacy embodies bold, innovative actions for land restoration.

Asmaa Niang, six-time African judo champion from Morocco, drew parallels between the discipline required in her sport and the strategies needed to combat desertification. "Judo has taught me resilience and strategy," she explained. "These are the same tools we need to fight desertification. It's not just a fight for land; it's a fight for every family and community that depends on it." Leveraging her multicultural background and nomadic spirit, Asmaa works with the Yzza Slaoui Foundation to empower rural girls and women in Morocco's regions most affected by desertification.

Paralympic wheelchair basketball gold medalist Jitske Visser from the Netherlands underscored the disproportionate impact of land degradation and drought on marginalized populations. "People with disabilities are often excluded from environmental solutions, even though we're among the most vulnerable to its effects," she said. "This campaign is about breaking down barriers, ensuring that no one is left behind, and demonstrating that inclusion is essential for success."

Footballer Franck Kessié from Côte d'Ivoire, who is currently playing for Saudi Pro League club Al-Ahli, highlighted youth engagement in support of healthy land, noting that "Sport teaches us resilience, teamwork, and the power of unity. These are exactly the values we need to tackle the land crisis."

UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw said: "Congratulations to our new champions leading the fight against desertification, land degradation, drought and food insecurity. Your determination

to raise awareness of these critical issues brings hope to countless communities, including youth and those most vulnerable, including people with disabilities."

At the announcement event held at COP16, the newly appointed champions shared their personal journeys and reflected on how their sporting careers connect to the global fight against land degradation.

According to UNCCD data, 100 million hectares—an area equivalent to the size of Egypt—become degraded every year. The impact jeopardizes the livelihoods of more than one billion young people in developing countries who depend on the land for their survival. Among those affected, people with disabilities—16% of the world's population—face unique challenges, from limited access to resources to exclusion from decision-making and recovery efforts.

About Sport4Land

Sport4Land is a global campaign by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to unite the sports community in the fight against land degradation, desertification and drought. With climate change accelerating droughts, heatwaves, and land degradation, the impact is being felt not only on playing fields but also on the food we eat, the livelihoods we depend on, and the environment we share.

Launched at the Paris Olympics 2024, the campaign engages sportsmen and women and fans worldwide to take action for land restoration. High-profile athletes like Asmaa Niang, Naomi Akakpo, Jitske Visser, and Franck Kessié will champion this initiative to highlight the critical connection between healthy land and thriving communities.

Website: <https://www.unccd.int/our-work/campaigns/sport4land>