



Report

Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership: Inaugural Conference

23- 24 June 2025 | Cologne, Germany | Hybrid Format

1. Executive summary

The Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership (RGDRP) Inaugural Conference, held on 23–24 June 2025 in Cologne, Germany, marked a major milestone in global efforts to address drought proactively and collaboratively. Co-hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UNCCD, the event brought together high-level representatives from governments, international organizations, development banks, civil society, and technical institutions to agree the RGDRP’s strategic vision, operational framework, and governance structure. A total of 80 participants attended in person and 130 joined online.

The conference opened with strong political statements emphasizing the urgent need to shift from reactive drought responses to long-term resilience. Speakers underlined the human, economic, and environmental toll of drought and expressed support for a structured, inclusive and well-financed global partnership.

The RGDRP’s strategic framework was presented by UNCCD advisors, outlining its three core components: a Readiness Facility to support policy and project preparation, an Investment Facility to scale drought resilience actions, and a Knowledge Platform to facilitate learning and coordination. Feedback from participants reaffirmed the importance of equity, science-based planning, support for countries with limited capacity with a focus on both income and vulnerability.

Participants agreed to complement income-based eligibility with indicators for drought vulnerability to better target support.

The governance structure—comprising a 12-member Steering Committee, Secretariat, Trustee, Independent Review Mechanism, and Assembly of Partners—was endorsed by consensus. Members agreed on a 3 year term with primary and alternate representatives in some constituencies to ensure inclusivity and continuity. Representation from UN agencies, funding institutions, beneficiary countries, technical organizations, the private sector, and civil society was confirmed, with remaining seats to be finalized through transparent selection processes.

Beneficiary countries decided that UNCCD will be the hosting entity for the RGDRP Secretariat, supported by a Technical Committee, and endorsed the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) Office as the Partnership Fund Trustee.

Panel discussions highlighted the importance of early warning systems, coordinated and aligned financing, and private sector engagement. Roundtable sessions emphasized the need for updated national drought plans, stronger data systems and regional collaboration. Clear consensus emerged on the need for simplified funding access and locally tailored solutions.

Participants endorsed the objectives and activities outlined in the Riyadh Partnership Agreement and committed to finalizing the governance documents within three months.

The first online Steering Committee meeting is scheduled for September 2025, followed by an in-person session during CRIC in December 2025 to operationalize the RGDRP.

2. High level opening

The high-level opening of the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership (RGDRP) Inaugural Conference set the tone for a focused and collaborative two-day dialogue on advancing global drought resilience. The session featured opening remarks by two key figures: E.S. Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and H.E. Dr. Osama Faqueha, Deputy Minister of Environment, Water and Agriculture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Their statements underscored the urgency of transitioning from reactive drought responses to proactive risk reduction strategies and established the strategic vision underpinning the RGDRP.

In his address, E.S. Ibrahim Thiaw emphasized that drought is no longer a regional or seasonal phenomenon, but a growing global challenge aggravated by climate change, land degradation, and unsustainable water management. He reminded the audience that over 1.4 billion people have been directly affected by drought in the past two decades, with consequences ranging from reduced food production and water scarcity to economic losses and displacement. He stressed that the cost of inaction is becoming increasingly intolerable, as drought can shave up to 10% off a country's GDP and reduce annual economic growth by 1% or more. Against this backdrop, he welcomed the RGDRP as a much-needed platform to drive systemic change in how drought is addressed. He commended the inclusive design of the Partnership, its ambition to align with national priorities, and its emphasis on proactive, science-based, and integrated solutions. Thiaw also recognized the unique convening power of the UNCCD in facilitating global cooperation on drought resilience, and highlighted the importance of coordination with existing mechanisms, including the International Drought Resilience Alliance (IDRA) and the Integrated Drought Management Programme (IDMP).

H.E. Dr. Osama Faqueha echoed these messages and reaffirmed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's commitment to addressing drought as a core development and environmental challenge. He described the RGDRP as a strategic extension of the Kingdom's broader climate leadership, in particular through the Middle East Green Initiative, which promotes sustainable land and water use across Central, South, and West Asia, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Vice Minister emphasized that drought resilience is not only a technical issue, but a matter of economic stability, food and water security, and social well-being. He underscored the importance of creating robust financing mechanisms, including pooled and parallel funding structures that can attract a diversity of contributions from donors, multilateral institutions, the private sector, and national governments. Dr. Faqueha also stressed the value of building on existing knowledge and innovation, including early warning systems, insurance schemes, and nature-based solutions that have shown measurable impact in other climate-related domains. He closed his remarks with a strong call for collective responsibility and sustained political commitment to ensure that the RGDRP delivers on its promise to build long-term resilience where it is needed most.

The opening session was followed by a short video presentation prepared by Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture, illustrating the human, ecological, and economic toll of drought across different

regions. The video further reinforced the urgency of coordinated action and helped frame the strategic vision session that followed. Together, the high-level statements and visual storytelling framed the conference in both political and practical terms, grounding it in global realities while pointing toward collaborative, implementable solutions.

This opening moment not only set the strategic and moral compass for the conference but also sent a clear message: the international community must come together through structured, inclusive, and well-resourced partnerships to tackle drought proactively.

3. Conference highlights

a. RGDPR Strategic vision and objectives

Dr. Youba Sokona (UNCCD advisor) opened his presentation by reaffirming the RGDPR's strategic vision, stressing that while much had already been said by earlier speakers, it was important to highlight the core principles guiding the initiative. He explained that the RGDPR framework was built on extensive consultations—nearly 100 pages of stakeholder input—which shaped its direction. Drawing on a health analogy introduced by Mr. Ibrahim Thiaw, he described drought as a “silent crisis”: a slow-onset disaster that erodes livelihoods, especially for the most vulnerable, often without warning.

He underscored that the RGDPR seeks to shift the global response from reactive to proactive, a transformation that demands real support for low- and middle-income countries. This shift, he argued, must be grounded in three key principles: **transparency and accountability** (efficient, non-duplicative use of resources), **inclusiveness and respect** (recognizing scientific and indigenous knowledge), and **fairness and equity** (equal opportunity and joint decision-making). Eligibility will be based on World Bank classifications, with 74 countries identified as potential beneficiaries (excluding those under UN sanctions).

Mr. Michael Koch (UNCCD advisor) then presented the proposed operational and financial architecture of the RGDPR, emphasizing a country-driven, inclusive approach. The structure includes three main components:

1. **Readiness Facility** – To support early-stage project development and national drought policies.
2. **Investment Facility** – Grant-based, co-financed support for diverse drought resilience measures, selected through merit-based and inclusive calls.
3. **Knowledge Platform** – To support technical exchange, learning, and evidence-based decision-making.

He also outlined two funding modalities: **pooled funding** (proposed to be hosted by the UN MPTF) and **parallel funding** (via direct donor support). Mr. Koch concluded with a draft Theory of Change focused on six goals, including reducing vulnerability and enhancing preparedness, with KPIs to be finalized by the Steering Committee.

After the presentation of the RGDPR's vision and governance structure, several countries and organizations shared their feedback and questions. One common concern was how countries without national drought plans would be able to participate. WMO and Liberia asked whether having a drought

policy or strong technical capacity would be required to access funding. In response, UNCCD representatives explained that drought plans and policies are important but not a barrier to access. Countries can receive support through the Readiness Facility to help develop these plans and prepare for funding.

Cote d'Ivoire asked about the role of private financing and whether funding would include loans. UNCCD representatives clarified that the Partnership (hosted by the UN MPTF) will provide only grants. If loans are offered by other partners outside of this main fund, they would be negotiated directly and transparently between the countries and those partners.

Kenya supported the overall principles of the RGDRP but stressed the need to use science when assessing vulnerability. They pointed out that even in middle-income countries, some regions face high drought risks. UNCCD representatives responded that a Technical Committee will support the secretariat. The Steering Committee will consider an eligibility approach that includes income and drought vulnerability.

CILSS, representing countries in the Sahel already facing severe drought impacts, asked how the efforts of regional organizations like theirs would be acknowledged and supported by the Partnership. UNCCD representatives responded that the RGDRP aims to add value and indeed complement existing processes to ensure stakeholders in drought resilience building can access funding more effectively.

b. Statements and Strategic Proposals from Countries and Partners

The formal statements session of the RGDRP Inaugural Conference highlighted strong political support and valuable feedback from countries and institutional partners. Across interventions, participants reaffirmed the relevance of the Partnership and its potential to transform drought response. A clear call emerged for an inclusive, transparent, and country-driven approach that delivers timely and equitable support based on both income and drought vulnerability.

UNDP, represented by Dr. Nahid Hussein, confirmed its readiness to support the RGDRP, particularly through the Readiness Facility. CAF highlighted its substantial investment in water resilience and recommended clear eligibility criteria, integration of investment planning into national drought strategies, and a potential role for IDRA in managing the knowledge platform. Spain and Senegal emphasized alignment with international mechanisms such as IDRA, GEF, and the Adaptation Fund, while Spain reiterated its interest in contributing to the Steering Committee and knowledge platform.

Several countries—including Pakistan, Liberia, Sudan, and Uganda—stressed the urgency of addressing drought in national development agendas. They highlighted the need for technical assistance, early warning systems, capacity building, and access to financing. Pakistan proposed regular progress updates and trilateral coordination with development partners. Liberia emphasized the importance of inclusive and transparent partnerships and called for support in finalizing national drought policies and plans.

Other feedback focused on improving governance and resource allocation. Zimbabwe requested refinement of the vulnerability index, while Sierra Leone and Uganda highlighted the value of regional coordination. Ethiopia proposed the use of AI in early warning systems, and Djibouti called for

alignment with ongoing development programs. Lebanon stressed the importance of synergy with broader environmental initiatives.

Overall, the statements reflected strong engagement, alignment with the RGDRP's objectives, and a shared commitment to ensuring the Partnership becomes an effective coordinating platform for building global drought resilience.

In response to the statements made by country representatives and partners, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw welcomed the ideas and acknowledged the value they bring in shaping the direction of the partnership. He emphasized that while many countries have expressed ambition, it is essential to develop national drought policies to clearly identify needs. He pointed out that even in developed countries, such policies and strategies are often lacking and stressed the importance of coordination across ministries. National planning, he said, is the foundation for attracting international support, and domestic resources should also be mobilized to complement external assistance.

Mr. Thiaw also addressed the importance of scaling up action. He encouraged countries not to wait for external funds to move forward but to build on existing efforts. To do this, partnerships with technical institutions and the private sector are critical, along with support from multilateral donors. He proposed closer collaboration with IDRA and emphasized that the partnership should promote practical solutions.

Advisors Youba Sokona and Michael Koch echoed these messages, highlighting that the RGDRP process has been co-designed with stakeholders. They called for ongoing collaboration and a pragmatic approach to finalizing the framework.

c. Coordinating for Impact: Governance, Finance, and Regional Priorities in Drought Resilience

Panels 1 and 2: From Early Warning to Coordinated Investment in Drought Resilience

This high-level panel brought together experts and institutional leaders to explore how to move from early warning to early action and scale investment in drought resilience. Moderated by Satu Ravola (Evaluation office - UNCCD), the session underscored the urgent need to shift from crisis response to long-term preparedness and resilience-building.

- Early Action and Coordination

Robert Stefanski (WMO) opened the discussion by reflecting on WMO's 12 years of experience in drought coordination, noting the importance of long-term collaboration with over 47 countries. He stressed that drought should be addressed within a broader environmental risk framework. Transparency, sustained partnerships, and strong country-level institutions are essential for making early warning systems truly actionable.

Giriraj Amarnath (IWMI-CGIAR) emphasized the importance of grounding early warning systems in local realities. He called for integrating technologies like automated monitoring stations and citizen-reported data with vulnerability assessments. He argued that isolated projects are insufficient and called for multi-sectoral collaboration across nine sectors, aligning efforts under a shared framework for long-term resilience.

Thomas Pitaud (UNDP) stressed that effective drought governance requires a system-wide approach combining policy integration, financing, and capacity building. He endorsed the proposed RGDRP

governance structure, including pooled and parallel funding tracks, and recommended creating an “integrated results network” to align efforts, monitor progress, and build national project pipelines.

The panel concluded that moving from early warning to early action demands investment in institutional architecture, coordinated financing, and knowledge systems supported by strong governance.

- Financing and Implementation Feedback

The second part of the panel focused on financing and scaling up partnerships. Speakers highlighted the urgent need for a technical arm to incubate projects and ensure implementation readiness.

Ulrich Apel (GEF) presented GEF’s approach to flexible, country-led investment through five funding streams. He announced plans already under discussions for GEF-9’s upcoming drought-focused program and advocated bundling existing initiatives into cohesive investment packages.

Syed Husain Quadri (IsDB) confirmed a \$1 billion commitment from the Islamic Development Bank for drought resilience, noting it could leverage five to six times its value through structured risk-sharing. He highlighted the role of catalytic finance and capacity building in unlocking additional investments.

Mohammad Abbadi (UNCDF) proposed a financial strategy built around three pillars: leveraging the \$150 million seed fund, setting up a de-risking facility for private investors, and establishing a technical governance structure to evaluate projects. He emphasized Saudi Arabia’s role in supporting this technical infrastructure.

Khalid Cherki (UNCCD Morocco) discussed Morocco’s 2021 national drought plan, which involved 48 institutions. He highlighted operational challenges and called for international support to scale successful models such as desalination and water reuse.

Daniel Tsegai (UNCCD) reiterated the need for science-based, evidence-informed collaboration. He urged partners to focus on operational pipelines and ensure that early warning translates into early and sustained action.

The session demonstrated strong alignment among stakeholders on the need for inclusive partnerships, transparent governance, and targeted financing mechanisms to scale drought resilience effectively.

Panel 3: Synergies and Integration of Current Efforts

Moderated by Dr. Birguy Lamizana (UNCCD-GPARC), this panel addressed key barriers to implementing drought resilience, the integration of existing initiatives, and the role of innovation and the private sector.

H.E. Nabil Ben Khatra (OSS) identified major obstacles such as fragmented coordination, limited financial and technical capacities, and misaligned policies across sectors and countries. He emphasized that many drought-prone regions struggle with outdated data systems, language barriers, and insecurity, making it difficult to design and fund sustainable resilience projects. He highlighted the lack of harmonized, accessible information as a key barrier to integration and called for more inclusive strategies that consider local realities and capacities.

Dr. Caroline King Okumu (UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology) echoed the need for better coordination and stakeholder alignment. She stressed that global drought often lack equitable

representation, particularly from the most affected countries. Ensuring broader participation and aligning diverse interests are essential to building effective and inclusive resilience strategies.

Johannes Kruse (GIZ/ELD) tackled the challenge of mobilizing private investment. He argued that nature-based solutions (NBS) are undervalued in traditional economic systems, even though they generate broad societal benefits. To unlock private finance, he proposed three entry points: adopting a whole-of-society perspective that reflects social and environmental benefits, reforming financial systems to value natural capital, and creating enabling conditions—like resolving land tenure issues—

to attract investment. He stressed the need to build pipelines of investable projects with robust, standardized data.

Speaking online, Phemo Kgomo (UNDP) emphasized that strong government collaboration is critical to reduce implementation barriers. She highlighted innovative technologies such as insurance instruments and the importance of integrating multi-scale approaches—from grassroots projects to national programs. She also stressed simplifying access to funding, especially for local actors, to strengthen on-the-ground impact.

The moderator concluded that overcoming drought-related challenges requires coordinated efforts across all levels. Stakeholders must align existing initiatives, improve knowledge sharing, and use tailored financial and technological tools to build effective, scalable solutions. The panel called for a shift in mindset—recognizing communities not just as vulnerable groups but as active implementers—and for more inclusive, data-driven strategies to unlock both public and private financing for drought resilience.

Multi-Stakeholder Roundtables: Thematic and Regional Priorities

Participants identified shared priorities and key challenges in enhancing drought preparedness across regions. They emphasized the urgent need to develop or update national drought policies and plans and align them with existing climate, biodiversity, land degradation neutrality, and socio-economic development frameworks. These plans should be supported by clear monitoring systems and inclusive governance mechanisms.

A common concern was the limited capacity—technical, institutional, and financial—at national and local levels to design and implement drought policies. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of strengthening early warning systems, improving access to climate data, and investing in nature-based solutions such as reforestation and sustainable water management. Inclusive approaches that engage Indigenous communities, women, youth, and the private sector were deemed essential to ensure community ownership and long-term impact.

To align national efforts with the RGDRP, participants recommended embedding drought plans into broader national policy and budgetary frameworks (e.g., NAPs, NDCs, SDGs) and ensuring stakeholder participation from design to implementation. A multisectoral coordination mechanism was also proposed at the national level.

On financing, both groups called for simplified access to funds, stronger co-financing arrangements, and innovative mechanisms such as drought bonds and regional financing pools. The RGDRP was seen as a potential broker that could help countries secure technical support for project preparation and act as a lever for mobilizing international resources.

Finally, collaboration with regional organizations and among neighboring countries was underlined as vital for tackling transboundary drought risks. There was strong agreement that sharing knowledge and building on existing platforms would be key to accelerating results.

d. Presentation of the Governance Structure and the Steering Committee

The RGDRP governance structure was presented by the UNCCD Advisors, following extensive consultations with stakeholders and potential partners. It comprises five key elements: (1) a Steering Committee as the principal decision-making and oversight body; (2) a Drought Partnership Secretariat to manage day-to-day operations, supported by a Technical Committee; (3) a Fund Trustee to ensure financial oversight; (4) an Independent Review mechanism to monitor effectiveness and compliance; and (5) an Assembly of Partners to serve as an open forum for engagement and collaboration. The proposal was designed to ensure institutional credibility, transparency, and broad-based participation from relevant actors.

At the core of this structure is the Steering Committee, conceived as the main governance body of the partnership. The UNCCD Advisor clarified that this committee would be composed of institutional rather than individual representatives to ensure continuity and accountability. A total of twelve (12) seats were proposed, in line with the governance arrangements of similar global initiatives. The composition also considered the requirements of the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF), which calls for the inclusion of two UN agencies. The seat distribution aimed to strike a balance between donors, beneficiaries, technical experts, and non-state actors.

Specifically, the proposal included:

- 3 seats for donor countries and financial institutions
- 3 seats for beneficiary countries
- 2 seats for UN agencies
- 2 seats for international organizations with technical expertise in drought resilience
- 1 seat for the private sector
- 1 seat for an NGO, CSO, or community-based organization

It should be noted that as more eligible beneficiary countries are considered Lower Middle-Income Countries, it was agreed by participants that one Steering Committee Member should be selected from the list of low-income countries and two Steering Committee Members would be selected from the list of lower-middle-income countries.

Regarding membership duration, the proposal included:

- Two permanent members: at least one UN agency and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as founding member
- Ten rotating members serving three-year staggered terms

To foster inclusive and participatory governance, the Steering Committee would be co-chaired by the Permanent Members and one representative of eligible beneficiary countries. Decision making would be based on achieving consensus. Meetings were proposed to take place twice a year alongside major international events such as UNCCD COPs or subsidiary body meetings.

The participants agreed on the five key elements of the governance structure — namely, the Steering Committee, Secretariat, Trustee, Independent Review Mechanism and Assembly. This broad consensus demonstrated strong support for a governance framework that balances operational effectiveness with inclusive oversight.

It was decided that the UNCCD will host the Drought Partnership Secretariat, supported by a Technical Committee, and that the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) Office will serve as the Trustee of the Partnership.

Following in-depth discussions, the proposed Steering Committee structure was endorsed with minor clarifications that strengthened its inclusivity and functionality. Participants confirmed the 12-seat configuration and agreed on a three-year term for all non-permanent members to ensure stability and regular renewal. To improve constituency building, representation and to ensure continuity, it was also agreed to introduce a system of primary and alternate members, in case of absence or conflict of interest. The confirmed membership breakdown reflects the outcome of consultations held with beneficiary countries physically present at the conference, while the floor was also opened to online participants. No objections were raised virtually, enabling the structure to be adopted by consensus and setting the stage for finalizing a balanced and responsive governance body for the Partnership.

The Confirmed Membership Breakdown:

Category	# of Seats	Member	Details
UN Agencies	2		
		UNCCD	Permanent Member
		UNDP	Primary Member
		WMO	Alternate to UNDP
Funding Entities	3		
		Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Permanent Member
		Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)	Primary Member

		OPEC Fund for International Development	Alternate to IsDB
		Global Environment Facility (GEF)	Primary Member
Beneficiary Countries	3		
		Low-Income Country Seat	
		Ethiopia	Primary Member
		Chad	Alternate
		First LMIC Seat	
		Cameroon	Primary Member
		Kenya	Alternate
		Second LMIC Seat	
		Pakistan	Primary Member
		Uzbekistan	Alternate
		LAC Representative (to be confirmed)	Alternate
International Organizations	2		
		Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS)	Primary Member
		International Drought Resilience Alliance (IDRA)	Primary Member
Private Sector	1	To be identified	Selection through a transparent process by UNCCD
NGO/CSO/Community-Based Organization	1	To be identified	Selection through a transparent process by UNCCD

The LAC countries, participating online, committed to identifying and communicating their selected representative following further internal consultations. Seats representing the private sector and the NGO/CSO/community-based constituency will be selected via a fair, inclusive and transparent process conducted by the UNCCD.

4. Next steps

- Finalize Partnership Charter and governance document based on feedback received at the Inaugural Conference.
- Coordinate selection of remaining Steering Committee members.
- Convene online/virtual meetings to prepare first in-person Steering Committee meeting (Panama, December 2025) to guide process further.

The Steering Committee was urged to consider:

- Multi Partner Trust Fund establishment process.
- Partnership Secretariat structure and budget including for the establishment of the Technical Committee, Independent Review and Assembly.
- Eligibility criteria using drought vulnerability indicators alongside income classification
- Operational and programme guidelines; simplified reporting tools
- Guidance on parallel finance considerations.

5. Closing Remarks

H.E. Dr. Osama Faqeeha, Deputy Minister of Environment, Water and Agriculture, KSA

Dr. Osama expressed his gratitude to Mr. Thiaw and the UNCCD for hosting the conference and providing a platform for open and productive dialogue. He thanked Mr. Michael Koch and Mr. Youba Sokona for their efforts in consolidating inputs and acknowledged all delegates who participated both in person and online.

He commended the spirit of cooperation that led to consensus in the final days, emphasizing that drought is a global issue requiring a collective response. The RGDRP, he noted, offers a framework to advance together, grounded in shared principles.

Key achievements included progress in governance and regional representation — a promising foundation built through joint effort. Dr. Osama called for continued momentum: to move forward quickly, yet mindfully.

He underscored the importance of engaging NGOs and the private sector and proposed establishing mechanisms to ensure their participation in the steering committee. He announced a first in-person Steering Committee meeting in December 2025 alongside UNCCD CRIC meeting in Panama and encouraged UNCCD to organize virtual sessions beforehand to finalize contributions.

He concluded by urging strong partnerships across all levels and extended sincere thanks to everyone involved.

H.E. Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary, UNCCD

Mr. Ibrahim Thiaw warmly congratulated all participants, expressing admiration for how compromise and collaboration led to concrete outcomes in such a short period. These achievements are the product of nearly two years of diligent consultation and engagement.

He highlighted the successful establishment of a governance framework as a historic milestone, affirming that with determination and vision, even the most ambitious goals can be realized. Expressing his delight to see the full process concluded before the end of his mandate, he

extended congratulations to the newly appointed members of the Steering Committee and closed by celebrating the spirit of cooperation that has brought the partnership to this promising new chapter.