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Interim report of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework

Interim report by the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention

Addendum

Summary

This addendum to the interim report of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention (IWG-FSF) focuses on the progress made by the IWG-FSF since it began its work on 14 October 2025. As mandated by decision 4/COP.16, it outlines the IWG-FSF's initial work and preliminary findings based on supporting documents produced for the group, namely a scoping paper and the preliminary findings from an assessment of the current United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification indicator framework. The early inputs contained in this document aim to (i) support the discussions of Parties at the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention as they prepare for subsequent meetings; and (ii) ultimately inform the identification of key elements of a post-2030 strategic framework for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its seventeenth session, as mandated by the same decision.



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I. Introduction

1. At its twenty-third session, the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) will begin consideration of the interim report of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention (IWG-FSF). This addendum to the main report provides supplementary information related to the progress made by the IWG-FSF since its activities were launched, in accordance with the decision 4/COP.16, by the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties (COP) during its extraordinary meeting held virtually on 8 October 2025.
2. Three online meetings were convened to initiate the work of the IWG-FSF, during which two parallel analytical workstreams were introduced and discussed: the development of the scoping paper for consideration of the IWG-FSF and the independent assessment of the current indicator framework used to track progress towards strategic objectives (SOs) 1–5 of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework). While the scoping paper is still in its initial stages of development, the indicator assessment has advanced and provides preliminary findings for further consideration by the IWG-FSF.
3. Work on the scoping paper, as presented by the drafting consultants, was initiated by developing and agreeing on a framework that defines the three main components that will structure the final document, including: (a) an overview of the UNCCD as a system, addressing its mandate, institutional arrangements, Science–Policy Interface (SPI), interfacing monitoring systems, and linkages with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs); (b) a comparative analysis of the three Rio conventions based on harmonized analytical headings covering scope, target-setting, institutional structures, financing, and reporting systems; and (c) an assessment of financing opportunities and challenges affecting the implementation of the current UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, including from the Global Environment Facility and other commitments or funds for drought risk reduction, climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as biodiversity protection. At this stage, progress consists mainly of the group endorsing the scoping paper framework, reviewing initial findings on the first sections of the structure, and consolidating interventions from IWG-FSF members to inform the next steps. The reflections raised by IWG-FSF members highlight the need for conceptual clarity, systematic treatment of COP decisions and results from the Intergovernmental Working Group to Oversee the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Midterm Evaluation Process of the UNCCD’s 2018–2030 Strategic Framework (IWG-MTE) and the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought, and careful distinction between treaty-based provisions, COP decisions and elements evolved through practice. Substantive analytical development will continue ahead of the IWG-FSF’s first in-person meeting in Panama.
4. While the scoping paper is still in its initial stages, the assessment of the indicator framework has advanced in parallel. An external consultant conducted the assessment and provided preliminary findings for the IWG-FSF as it develops recommendations for the future strategic framework of the Convention. Section III of this document contains the technical summary of the assessment, while the remainder of the consultant’s analysis is contained in document ICCD/CRIC(23)/INF.3. As the IWG-FSF has not yet had the opportunity to review or discuss the findings, both the technical summary presented here and document ICCD/CRIC(23)/INF.3 are being shared with Parties at CRIC 23 solely to provide an initial overview of the assessment process; they should therefore be considered as preliminary inputs intended solely to inform Parties and should not be interpreted as outputs, conclusions or agreed positions of the IWG-FSF.
5. The initial work on the scoping paper and the preliminary findings of the indicator assessment together provides a foundational basis for Parties as they begin consideration of a post-2030 strategic framework for the Convention.

II. Scoping paper framework

6. Notwithstanding the delays in initiating the programme of work of the IWG-FSF, the secretariat and senior consultants presented a consolidated scoping paper framework designed to support a more coherent understanding of the UNCCD system and position the scoping paper as a substantive analytical resource to guide the work of the IWG-FSF. This framework, along with reflections on the scoping paper, were taken up by the group during its second and third online meetings. The updated analytical framework, as presented by the consultants, consolidated inputs from members and now provides a clear foundation for the IWG-FSF's upcoming tasks.

7. The scoping paper framework presented to the IWG-FSF begins by situating the UNCCD within its broader institutional and strategic context. It presents an expanded overview of the Convention as a system, integrating key elements of its mandate, institutional configuration, and implementation architecture. The first chapter of the scoping paper examines, in a more systematic manner, the core components of the UNCCD system, including:

- The nature and scope of the Convention;
- Approaches to implementing a strategic framework under the Convention;
- Theory of Change methodologies as science-informed analytical tools;
- The specificity and measurability of existing strategic objectives under the Convention;
- The role of voluntary national land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets;
- Institutional arrangements and the SPI;
- Linkages with the SDGs, particularly SDG Target 15.3; and
- The established monitoring and reporting system under the Convention.

8. In refining these elements above, some members of the IWG-FSF emphasized that the scoping paper must draw more systematically on COP agenda items and decisions that contain policy mandates not always reflected within the UNCCD strategic frameworks in general or its indicator system, but nonetheless continue to shape the Convention's evolution, such as those on social indicators, including land tenure, gender, Indigenous Peoples and local communities caucuses, economics of land degradation, and other ongoing thematic commitments. Also it is important that the scoping paper draw on the work of the IWG-MTE, noting that this group considered recommendations and suggestions that could be incorporated in a future strategic framework. Ensuring that these processes are duly reflected is essential to prevent important governance and policy areas from being overlooked.

III. Technical summary of the indicator assessment

A. Background and objectives

9. Since 2018, the UNCCD indicator framework has evolved significantly, from narrative reporting toward a more harmonized, results- and evidence-based monitoring system aligned with SDG Indicator 15.3.1 (Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area) and its three core subindicators for measuring the progress toward the SDG Target 15.3 (LDN). This evolution has been iterative and formative, seeking to balance global comparability with national ownership and feasibility. The framework links biophysical evidence with socioeconomic dimensions, aiming to inform both global tracking and national policy priorities.

10. An assessment was conducted to provide an evidence-based, independent review of the indicator framework currently used by Parties for national reporting under the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework. It was conducted by an external consultant under the mandate of the IWG-FSF to provide preliminary findings for further consideration of the

members of the IWG FSF. As the IWG-FSF has not yet had the opportunity to discuss or deliberate on the findings, this technical summary is being shared with Parties at the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 23) to offer an initial overview of the assessment process; it should therefore not be considered an output of the IWG-FSF.

11. In line with decision 4/COP.16, the objective of the assessment was to conduct a thorough analysis of the current indicators with a view to making the future indicator framework more responsive for a post-2030 strategic framework of the Convention, while ensuring that future methodologies are feasible, simple to understand and within the capacities of Parties. In the consultant's understanding, "more responsive" refers to updating the indicators to make them more practical, flexible and meaningful, ensuring they better capture progress and remain relevant to Parties' evolving priorities and capacities.

B. Methodology overview

12. The indicators, organized under the five strategic objectives (SO 1–SO 5), were assessed using the evaluation criteria established by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, adapted to the Convention's specific context. The criteria applied – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, measurability, systems integration, synergies and sustainability – were used to evaluate both technical integrity and policy utility over time.

13. The analysis draws on three complementary streams of evidence: (i) a desk review of COP decisions; documents and reports of the CRIC; the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework; the external evaluation of the SPI; and, where possible, peer-reviewed scientific literature; (ii) semi-structured interviews with global and regional experts; and (iii) a global electronic survey conducted among Parties and experts, with a total of 86 responses (80 from Parties' national focal points and science and technology correspondents and 6 from technical experts). Together, these sources offer an overview of how the current framework performs and where refinement is needed.

C. Key preliminary findings of the indicator assessment by strategic objective

Strategic objective 1: To improve the condition of affected ecosystems, combat desertification/land degradation, promote sustainable land management and contribute to land degradation neutrality

14. Indicators under SO 1 (Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area) and its three subindicators: Trends in land cover, Trends in land productivity or functioning of the land, and Trends in carbon stocks above and below ground) were consistently assessed as highly relevant and effective in mapping and monitoring land degradation; moderately efficient and measurable, given available data and established methodological approaches; well-integrated into national policy and planning systems; as well as complementary and synergistic with the reporting processes of the other Rio conventions, namely the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

15. The methodological challenges point to the limited relevance of the indicators to regional geographies – particularly in arid and hyperarid environments, small island developing States, and mountainous and highland ecosystems, as well as to arable land/or cropping land – meaning they are not always fit-for-purpose in national contexts, which further complicates implementation and long-term viability. Ground truthing at national level should be encouraged. Creating long-term sample sites at national level could be considered to strengthen default data validation. The assessment also identified the need to integrate additional metrics in the land degradation assessment, such as soil erosion, soil health, soil moisture as well as short-term seasonal dynamics in vegetation cover due to dry and wet season shifts. Respondents further noted that soil organic carbon, as a slow ecological variable, offers limited value for short-term land-use decisions. Additionally, the assessment

suggested to revise the one-out, all-out rule to better capture the extent and severity of the trajectory of land degradation, restoration progress and positive change to avoid overestimating degradation. The current methodology only measures the extent of land degradation but lacks an indication of its degree of severity. These methodological challenges contribute to the view that these indicators are not sustainable, or that they are difficult to maintain with current resources (i.e. staff, skills, systems and budget) over the long term. Firstly, the human and financial resources available in each country do not always meet the high effort and cost involved in collecting, analysing and validating data for SO 1 indicators, especially given that currently available global datasets are suboptimal for national-level reporting. This can be exacerbated by the often weak or absent institutional coordination at the national level that limits the managing and sharing of existing observations and data or the pooling of resources for acquiring new data and information. Furthermore, many countries lack sufficient national capacity to ensure that technical staff and reporting officers are adequately trained, resulting in a reliance on external support and international expertise, which is not sustainable in the long term, particularly when donor funding expires.

Strategic objective 2: To improve the living conditions of affected populations

16. Indicators under SO 2 were assessed as uneven in their performance across the evaluation criteria. Indicators SO 2-1 (Trends in population living below the relative poverty line or income inequality in affected areas) and SO 2-2 (Trends in access to safe drinking water in affected areas) were broadly considered relevant, effective, measurable, efficient, integrated, sustainable, complementary and synergistic with other reporting frameworks. However, both indicators carry a caution: their values do not always vary as a direct function of the intrinsically interlinked desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD), which risks misinterpretation when used to assess DLDD impacts. For instance, the link between land degradation and access to safe drinking water is not apparent in scientific literature.

17. In contrast, indicator SO 2-3 (Trends in the proportion of the population exposed to land degradation, disaggregated by sex) performed significantly weaker across all criteria. It requires enhancement through other equally relevant social metrics – such as land tenure, migration, and youth disaggregation – to better reflect how DLDD affects people’s lives. Moreover, institutional and methodological challenges were noted in combining fundamentally different datasets, such as those related to land degradation and human population, which further complicates its implementation. Narrative reports of local cases of transformative change to supplement quantitative analysis could be considered as qualitative evidence of improvements in the living conditions of local populations. Qualitative indicators of human well-being – for example, surveys on community perceptions, social values, satisfaction, experiences, and perceived impacts of land-related measures – could complement quantitative metrics by providing a clearer social context for observed trends.

Strategic objective 3 – To mitigate, adapt to, and manage the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems

18. Indicators under SO 3 were widely recognized as highly relevant to map and monitor drought risk, but considered to be only moderately sustainable. They are often well integrated into national systems and show alignment with other global reporting frameworks, particularly those related to climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. However, performance varied across the indicator suite. Indicator SO 3-1 (Trends in the proportion of land under drought over the total land area) was considered more measurable, efficient and effective than SO 3-2 (Trends in the proportion of the total population exposed to drought) and SO 3-3 (Trends in the degree of drought vulnerability), in that order.

19. While climatological aspects of drought are relatively easy to quantify, they are not sufficient and often only provide information on one of the inputs needed for resilience-building. In contrast, the most critical dimensions of drought vulnerability – such as socioeconomic and institutional factors, including availability of water resources and water conservation facilities to increase the potential resilience to drought – are the hardest to sustainably measure, even with recent advances in assessing the total economic value of ecosystem services. Drought exposure was found to share similar limitations with land degradation exposure, as its current disaggregation (limited to gender and location) does not adequately capture the underlying drivers of vulnerability. One suggestion was to consider

additional disaggregation (such as the proportion of irrigated arable land relative to other land use types) and measures related to the efficiency of governance. Despite these challenges, the strategic relevance of the SO 3 indicators to climate resilience and risk reduction was consistently highlighted as a major strength, and there was overall consensus among survey respondents that all three indicators should be retained.

Strategic objective 4: To generate global environmental benefits through effective implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

20. Indicators under SO 4 were assessed as highly relevant and well aligned with other global frameworks, particularly the CBD. However, they were not considered efficient due to the substantial resources required for measurement and reporting, even when relying on centrally coordinated global databases. Performance across the SO 4 indicators varied in terms of measurability, systems integration, and sustainability. Indicator SO 4-1 (Trends in carbon stocks above and below ground) reflected the same sustainability concerns as noted under SO 1. Indicator SO 4-3 (Trends in protected area coverage of important biodiversity areas) would benefit from evolving from designation-based to condition-based metrics that reflect actual ecological outcomes. Indicator SO 4-2 (Trends in abundance and distribution of selected species) was considered the most sustainable of the three indicators. Notably, indicators SO 4-2 and SO 4-3 were viewed as better integrated in existing national and international reporting streams than SO 4-1. While there was general consensus among survey respondents that all three indicators should be retained in their current form, the absence of an indicator on land restoration was identified as a gap.

Strategic objective 5 – To mobilize substantial and additional financial and non-financial resources to support the implementation of the Convention by building effective partnerships at global and national level

21. In relation to SO 5, the assessment determined that a relevant and sound framework of progress indicators exists to monitor financial flows, particularly those from public funding sources (i.e. bilateral and multilateral sources as well as domestic public resources). Nonetheless, the current indicator cluster also encounters some challenges due to partial data coverage in specific indicators and institutional issues at country level. The challenges stem from: fragmented or siloed approaches linked to the cross-ministerial data requirements; insufficient disaggregation of available finance data, making it difficult to identify DLDD-related flows accurately; and partial access to data from the private sector, despite its significant relevance for comprehensive financial tracking.

D. Key preliminary findings of the indicator assessment by assessment criteria

22. Relevance is scored highest for land-based and environmental indicators under SO 1, SO 3 and SO 4, which survey respondents broadly view as aligned with national priorities and complementary reporting under other conventions. Indicators on living conditions (SO 2) and resource mobilization (SO 5) are also considered relevant, though fragmented institutional responsibilities often constrain their consistent application.

23. In terms of effectiveness, indicators exert the greatest policy influence where they inform planning, restoration investments, and early-warning systems, most notably for drought and land condition. By contrast, financial indicators are less often linked to measurable land outcomes, pointing to the need for stronger causal chains between investments and on-the-ground impact. Nonetheless, while these improvements may enhance reporting, they also increase the reporting burden for country Parties in addition to the technical challenges of monitoring investments and environmental outcomes.

24. Efficiency has improved with the use of global datasets and bespoke tools for indicator calculation, particularly in countries that have institutionalized interministerial coordination and aligned LDN monitoring with national SDG processes. However, global datasets are known to pose accuracy challenges at national and subnational scales. Persistent challenges also include staffing and skills shortages, coordination costs and resource-intensive ground-truthing requirements.

25. Biophysical indicators tend to be considered more readily measurable, supported by the growing availability and accessibility of satellite Earth observation data in the last few decades, which have significantly improved the assessment of land degradation. In contrast, socioeconomic and finance-related indicators are more challenging due to data opacity and definitional uncertainty.

26. Integration is most advanced for SDG Indicator 15.3.1, with emerging alignment with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Evidence from the assessment characterizes the UNCCD as a bridge across people, land and climate, though cross-sectoral data-sharing mandates vary, and synergies are stronger at the methodological and technical levels than the operational level. For instance, while SDG Indicator 15.3.1 has been adopted by the CBD COP as a component indicator under Target 2 of the GBF¹ and its use as a proxy for terrestrial ecosystem degradation to set a baseline for tracking progress has been recommended in the Resource Guide to Target 2 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework,² its actual application by CBD country Parties is still to be assessed.

27. The sustainability of national monitoring systems varies. While global data streams provide continuity, national reporting structures frequently depend on external time-bound projects. Parties pointed to the need for recurrent budget lines, continued regional data services, and shared digital infrastructure and related institutionalized capacity at national level to ensure long-term data maintenance.

E. Mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive assessment

28. The UNCCD indicator framework is scientifically robust, but some indicators do not fully meet the “mutually exclusive” criterion. Overlaps occur where indicators share data sources (such as land degradation and drought population exposure metrics derived from SDG Indicator 15.3.1 and drought hazard data), but these overlaps reflect the interdependence of biophysical, socioeconomic and financial systems rather than duplication. Some multipurpose indicators, like soil organic carbon, serve multiple SOs and are reported under a single SO, using provisional metrics until global datasets become available.

29. In terms of collective exhaustiveness, the 17 indicators broadly cover the DLDD continuum. Key gaps remain, however, in restoration outcomes, gender-responsiveness, land tenure security, livelihood resilience, adaptive capacity, non-official development assistance finance flows, governance (i.e. enabling environment), national policy frameworks, and the economic value of ecosystem services.

F. Overall assessment insights

30. The current SO 1 indicators are deemed important and essential for countries to assess the condition of affected ecosystems. This implies that they could be retained with some methodological refinement, but they are not currently sustainable to measure and report within current resources; additional indicators may be needed to increase sensitivity and relevance across different regional geographies. The challenges highlighted in the assessment indicate that it is difficult to consistently implement land degradation monitoring with current staff, skills, systems and budgets. In order to improve the sustainability of SO 1 indicators, open data sharing, targeted capacity-building, and institutional infrastructure and budget allocation are essential.

31. Regarding the SO 2 indicators, while SO 2-1 and SO 2-2 are generally fit-for-purpose, their limited sensitivity to reflect the social dimensions of DLDD dynamics calls for careful and context-specific interpretation and further consideration of other social indicators. SO 2-

¹ CBD decision 16/31 (<https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-16/cop-16-dec-31-en.pdf>).

² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and Society for Ecological Restoration. 2024. Delivering restoration outcomes for biodiversity and human well-being. – Resource guide to Target 2 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Rome, Montreal, Canada and Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd2925en>.

3, being a relatively new indicator, is still evolving and may benefit from further methodological strengthening (e.g. through the integration of complementary metrics and disaggregation to ensure it meaningfully captures the human dimension of land degradation). A more flexible and context-sensitive method would make these indicators more useful and relevant to track progress toward improving the living conditions of affected populations.

32. The current SO 3 indicators are a vital part of realizing the UNCCD's mission and mandate on drought. However, to improve the measurability and sustainability of drought vulnerability indicators, alignment and integration with national climate resilience planning is required to leverage shared expertise and resources. More importantly, the challenge of using current indicators as building blocks to develop an easily interpretable measure of drought resilience will require the application of appropriate but simplified analytical and methodological approaches, which may include other indicators.

33. The SO 4 indicators effectively represent the biodiversity co-benefits of implementing the UNCCD, particularly through their alignment with global frameworks such as the CBD GBF. However, other environmental benefits – such as increasing land health by restoration and improving climate change adaptation and extreme weather resilience – are not captured within the current suite. The assessment of the soil organic carbon indicator under SO 4 mirrors the concerns raised under SO 1, especially regarding sustainability and data availability.

34. The current SO 5 indicator framework comprises relevant key pillars for tracking financial flows, and continued efforts to strengthen national capacities remain important. Priority areas include improving country-level capacities across relevant ministries to access relevant financial data related to combating DLDD; enhancing methodologies related to the identification of activities and associated expenditures to address DLDD for measuring domestic public flows and private sector sources; further standardizing reporting templates and integrated financial management information systems; and improving monitoring systems that link DLDD-related investments to measurable impacts on the ground.

35. The following cross-cutting conclusions apply across multiple SOs:

(a) The integration of monitoring and data use within national management cycles remains limited. While countries are increasingly producing relevant datasets, their use is often limited to periodic reporting for the generation of global assessment results. Embedding monitoring and reporting systems within national planning, budgeting and review processes – and linking them to broader frameworks such as land-use planning and climate change adaptation – would unlock the full policy value of the data and make data collection more continuous and actionable. Reporting should inform decision-making at the national and subnational level by linking indicators to deliverables, resource allocation, corrective actions, measurement of progress, and target-setting. This approach would transform monitoring from a static reporting exercise into a dynamic tool for policy coherence, investment prioritization, and adaptive land governance. However, the current “reporting” process functions more as a global level assessment compiled from or validated by country reported data, and not grounded at the national and local levels;

(b) Institutionalization, country capacity and sustained financing are critical determinants of system continuity. Most national reporting systems remain dependent on externally funded project-based support for data collection, leading to discontinuity when support ends. Institutionalization could include clear custodianship within government (e.g. assigning drought data to meteorological agencies, land-cover data to environment ministries, and finance data to planning ministries), along with open data-sharing policies, dedicated budget lines for data maintenance, and capacity development plans. Shared digital infrastructure – such as regional data hubs, national spatial data infrastructure or cloud repositories – was identified as a cost-effective way to maintain access and reduce duplication;

(c) Across objectives, respondents highlighted the need for indicators to better capture how land degradation and drought affect people, particularly vulnerable groups, women, and those with insecure tenure. Embedding tenure security, income diversification, and gender empowerment into monitoring and reporting would ground UNCCD's results framework in the lived realities of affected communities;

(d) The lack of explicit targets across most SOs constrains the assessment of progress on policy implementation. Although the LDN target under SDG Target 15.3 is broad and voluntary, it has served as an important focal point for national policy engagement and accountability, highlighting the value of having even non-binding targets to guide action and track progress;

(e) The overarching lesson of this evaluation is that the current indicator framework has matured, with refinement, coherence, and national integration as the next essential steps. The framework now stands at a crossroads: with targeted reforms and sustained investment, it can evolve from a measurement tool into a decision-support system and a catalyst for transformation, enabling countries not only to track change but to act on it.

IV. Conclusions

36. Since CRIC 23 is an intersessional session and therefore does not produce draft decision text, this section of the report highlights key points and proposals for Parties' consideration. Following the adoption of the final report of CRIC 23, draft decision text on this agenda item will be prepared in time for CRIC 24.

37. This document summarizes the initial work on the scoping paper and the preliminary findings of the indicator assessment for consideration by Parties at CRIC 23. It is presented to invite any comments, suggestions, or proposals Parties may wish to put forward to support the IWG-FSF in preparing its recommendations for consideration by the COP at its seventeenth session.
