



**Convention to Combat  
Desertification**

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Item 8 (a) of the provisional agenda

**Procedural matters**

**Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

**Participation and involvement of civil society in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

**Note by the secretariat**

*Summary*

By its decision 5/COP.16, the Conference of the Parties (COP) requested the secretariat to address a number of issues relevant to the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), including a specific request to the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the Civil Society Organization Panel (the Panel), to assess the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy, to support the establishment of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities and to compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organizations in multilateral environmental agreements and United Nations bodies.

By the same decision, the COP requested the Executive Secretary to report at its seventeenth session (COP 17) on the implementation of the decision, including the report of the Panel on the implementation of its tasks.

This document contains the reports of the Executive Secretary and the Panel on the measures undertaken by both to implement the above-mentioned decision. It also provides recommendations for consideration by the Parties at COP 17.

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## **I. Background**

1. Since 2009, the Conference of the Parties (COP) has guided and promoted the organization and engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Decisions taken since COP 9 set the basis for the civil society in general and the CSO panel established at that time in particular. The CSO Panel of the UNCCD has been ensuring the coordination of all the CSOs accredited to the COP and providing regular guidance and feedback on the work of the secretariat and the Global Mechanism.
2. In the period since the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16), the secretariat continued supporting the work of the CSO Panel in delivering the tasks entrusted by the Parties. Decision 5/COP.16 also requested the secretariat to continue engaging with civil society organizations working with people in vulnerable situations, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, people living in rural areas, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.
3. The decision also requested the secretariat to support the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy, to facilitate consultations for the development of terms of reference for the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities and to compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of CSOs in multilateral environmental agreements and United Nations bodies for the consideration of the Conference of the Parties at its seventeenth session.
4. This document provides information on the activities of the CSO Panel and the secretariat in follow-up to decision 6/COP.15.

## **II. Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

### **A. Renewal of the membership of the Civil Society Organization Selection Panel**

5. By decision 5/COP16 paragraph 10, the COP requested the secretariat to facilitate the renewal of membership to the CSO Panel until the next Conference of the Parties starting immediately after sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties. Following this provision, and as a result of the consultations reached with the accredited CSOs, the following members were appointed:
  - (a) Ms. Marioldy Sanchez Santivanez from AIDER (Peru) representing Latin America and the Caribbean and serving as Chair.
  - (b) Mr. Amiya Prapan Chakra Borty from Dhrobotara Youth Development Foundation (Bangladesh) representing Asia;
  - (c) Ms. Ellen Otaru-Okoedion from Journalists' Environmental Association of Tanzania representing Africa;
  - (d) Mr. Andrew Morris from British Society of Soil Science (United Kingdom) representing Western Europe.
6. For this renewal, the secretariat did not receive applications from accredited CSOs from Central and Eastern Europe, the panel suggested that the representative of the previous CSO Panel, Ms. Sopiko Babalashvili from Georgia, could continue representing this regional group until the end of the CSO Panel mandate.
7. Since 08 April 2025, the CSO Panel has met 9 times with the Secretariat and 8 times in the capacity of the Panel to advance its mandate. In this regard, the current CSO Panel will serve until the end of COP 17, coordinating the participation of the accredited CSOs at the session. The panel also hold daily meetings during the CRIC23 organized in Panama to

coordinate the CSO inputs into the deliberations of the Committee. It is expected that the Panel will have met at least four times between May 2025 and August 2026 in preparation for COP 17 including a preparatory meeting in Ulaanbaatar prior to the beginning of the session to coordinate the CSO participation.

## **B. Support for the Civil Society Organization Panel in discharging its mandate**

8. Following the request and mandate given by the Parties, the secretariat has continued its engagement with civil society organizations, keeping them informed about the Convention's meetings and processes. During the current biennium, the secretariat has supported the Panel to ensure their active participation in implementing the Convention at all levels, coordinating the engagement of their constituencies, sharing the relevant information for the civil society and leading the engagement of the non-state actors, including the additional actors that are supporting the implementation of the Convention. This support has included organizing meetings, drafting agendas, and preparing reports to aid in following up on the recommendations made by the CSO Panel.

9. As a result of the outreach of the Secretariat and the CSO panel, the number of civil society organizations accredited to the UNCCD has increased significantly since the last session of the COP. More than 1,700 CSOs are accredited or provisionally accredited as of April 2026. It is expected that additional organizations will have fulfilled this requirement before the start of COP 17 in Ulaanbaatar. The total amount of CSOs for the consideration of the Parties will be included in document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.6.

10. The secretariat facilitated the participation of the accredited CSOs in the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 23), held in Panama City, Panama, from 1 to 5 December 2025. CSOs were able to present their position on each of the agenda items, and their recommendations were included in the final report of the session.

11. The secretariat ensured the availability of funding for the functioning of the CSO Panel thanks to the generous contribution of Switzerland and the participation of the CSOs in meeting of the subsidiary bodies and has secured limited additional resources that will enable CSO representatives and Indigenous Peoples as well as youth delegates to attend the forthcoming session of the COP. The representatives of the CSO Panel were able to secure additional financial resources to deliver the tasks entrusted to it by the COP.

12. In the current biennium, the secretariat has supported the elections for a new CSO representative as observers to the UNCCD Science–Policy Interface (SPI), as well as for the Intergovernmental Working group for the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention where two representatives have been included to support the work of the Parties.

## **C. Additional support provided by the secretariat in engaging with key stakeholders**

13. The secretariat has been working with the Global Environment Facility, IUCN, Drynet and the CSO panel in the implementation of the GEF medium size project proposal titled: Strengthening Civil Society Role in Achieving Land Degradation.<sup>1</sup> The project, launched at COP 16 has supported the work to increase the capacities and recognition of the CSOs to contribute to the adherence of LDN principles in policies, programs and investments.

14. The project, led by Drynet, Both ENDS, and IUCN, has a \$2 million investment over three years. It is implemented in close collaboration with the UNCCD Secretariat and the CSO Panel and directly serves the UNCCD CSO community in order to influence LDN policy and mobilize funding for locally-led solutions. It does so through two strategic pillars:

- (a) Influencing LDN: CSOs have access to training to advocate for inclusive LDN

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/projects/10993>.

policies, raise the visibility of community-driven restoration efforts, and shape decision-making at national and global levels, including UNCCD processes such as CRIC and COP.

(b) Leveraging LDN: The project boosts CSOs' access to finance by building fundraising capacity, facilitating connections with donors and investors, and organizing an LDN Donor Roundtable to unlock support for community-based initiatives.

15. Since the beginning the teams have organized 4 UNCCD/ LDN Webinars, published 3 Newsletters and relaunched the Drynet website as a knowledge portal. There have been 2 side events presented at the IUCN Congress, and a preparatory on-line meeting for CRIC was held. 12 Mentees were recruited and all have set goals, entered into formal mentorship agreements and prepared mentorship plans. In the next months the team will organize additional UNCCD/LDN related and communications webinars. There will also be training workshops on business plan development/investment proposal development convened in Asia, Africa and LAC in June and July, targeting grassroots to medium-size and an LDN Donor Roundtable to facilitate direct engagement and dialogue about funding for LDN initiatives between CSOs and funding entities

16. Decision 5/COP.16 requested the secretariat to continue working with key stakeholders and identifies several on which to focus. During the reporting period, the secretariat ensured active participation of key stakeholders including Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, local communities, women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Using the available resources and with the support of the accredited CSOs, the secretariat has been engaging actively with the following stakeholder groups.

## 1. Indigenous People

17. The unprecedented participation of Indigenous Peoples representatives at COP16 lead to the "Sacred Land Declaration"<sup>2</sup> and the decision requesting the preparation of the Terms of Reference for the creation a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples, separate of a Caucus for Local Communities.

18. Since the adoption of the decision the work of the secretariat has being aiming at ensuring that Indigenous Peoples, Parties, United Nations Organizations and other partners are contributing to identify means and ways the Indigenous Peoples could contribute to the implementation of the Convention and at the same time draw elements to be included in the preparation of the terms of reference.

19. In this regard, the Secretariat has engaged with the members of the United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues at the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> sessions with the aim of ensuring their active participation in the work of the UNCCD. During these sessions there were two Dialogues on Indigenous platforms established within United Nations entities where the Rio Conventions presented the work of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platforms (UNFCCC) the establishment of the Subsidiary Body on article 8.j) (CBD) and the creation of the UNCCD Indigenous Peoples Caucus.

20. Members of the UNPFII highlighted the groundbreaking decision taken by the Parties to the UNCCD in separating the Caucuses for Indigenous Peoples and for Local Communities.

21. Additionally, there were consultations with Indigenous Peoples organizations during global observance of Desertification and Drought Day held in Bogota on 17 June 2025, with members of the International Land Coalition, on the sidelines of the 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Facilitating Working Group of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform as well as the resumed session of the CBD COP16 and the 2025 FAO Science and Innovation Forum 2025.

22. During the 23<sup>rd</sup> session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 23) the session 1 of the UNCCD Gender Caucus was devoted to the "Leadership and worldviews of Indigenous women for sustainable land management". Indigenous Peoples representatives attended the session and contributed highlighting the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/IP%20Declaration%20UNCCD%20COP16%206dec2024%20Final.pdf>.

ongoing gaps in land ownership, decision making and access to financing, while demonstrating how Indigenous women's knowledge and leadership directly support community resilience and sustainable land management.

23. Since COP 16, the active participation of the Indigenous Peoples within the UNCCD process has been capital for the preparation of the terms of reference for the creation of their Caucus as requested by the COP decision. Section IV of the present document describes their participation and engagement in the preparation of the TOR.

## 2. Local Communities

24. The UNCCD is one of the few multilateral environmental agreements that recognizes on its text the value of traditional and local knowledge and the importance of "local communities" in the implementation of the Convention and their engagement in the reporting, the preparation of the national action programs and the management of land resource.

25. In implementing the COP decision, the secretariat has been working with partners that include Local Communities among their members. These include the International Land Coalition, the Global Forum of Local Communities on Climate Change that was created on the sidelines of the 30<sup>th</sup> Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, the Facilitating working group of the LCIPP, the Global Alliance for Rangelands and Pastoralists as well as the constituencies within the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Environmental Assembly.

26. Document ICCD/COP(17)/10 includes more detailed information related to the engagement with the pastoralists.

27. Section V of the current document includes more information on the consultations carried out with the local communities for the preparation of the terms of reference for the creation of their caucus.

## 3. Youth

28. The UNCCD recognizes youth as key changemakers and in the last years thanks to the different initiatives which includes the establishment of the UNCCD Youth Caucus, the Land Heroes Campaigns and the Lan Youth Negotiators Program it has been proven the youth's potential in spearheading the DLDD initiatives.

29. Under the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy, young people engaged in Youth Conferences and Caucuses at COP 16 in Riyadh and at the 23rd session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 23), held in Panama City, Panama, presented recommendations, advocating for land degradation neutrality, and explored pathways to decent green and land-based employment for youth.

30. In the area of advocacy, the secretariat continued the promotion and the engagement of young ambassadors through the UNCCD Land Heroes<sup>3</sup>. During the last two years they have been sharing their achievements, inspiring change, uniting their peers, and proving the transformative power of collective young action. The present cohort will finish their mandate at the end of the COP and the secretariat is expecting to launch another call to select the next generations of Land Heroes that will continue with this work.

31. The G20 Global Land Initiative has also supported the engagement of youth through three initiatives aimed at young actors of different age groups. These include the Youth Ecopreneur (YECO) programme for young entrepreneurs, the "Trigger Change!" online university coursework for professors, and the Land Restoration Labs for schools.

(a) In 2025 G20 GLI supported 225 ecopreneurs through its Youth Ecopreneur programme, and in 2026 the third cohort of the YECO will be launched and continue to expand the G20 GLI engagements supporting ecopreneurs in Brazil and Kenya focusing on supporting early-stage ecopreneurs through awareness-raising and ideation, helping identify promising solutions and nurturing them from the ground up.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/youth/land-heroes>.

(b) The Trigger Change courses, designed as resource kits for university professors, have reached over 600 universities. These courses provide practical tools and knowledge for sustainable land use and restoration, with dedicated topics on sustainable agriculture and urban land restoration. The materials are easy to download and ready to use, helping educators prepare students for real-world challenges. The courses have been designed in partnership with leading universities and experts and delivered through modular, interactive learning formats that combine theory, case studies and practical applications.

(c) The Land Restoration Labs to be launched in 2026 aim to promote education in land restoration and sustainable land use in primary and secondary schools by training teachers to provide students with relevant curricula and hands-on experiences to foster a deeper connection to nature.

32. The Youth Caucus<sup>4</sup>, formally recognized by Parties at COP 14 as the Convention's official youth engagement mechanism, continued to expand its reach and influence over the course of the reporting period. Membership grew from 1,800 prior to COP16 to more than 4,000 by the end of April 2026, strengthening the Caucus as a global platform for youth leadership in land governance. This growth enhanced the Caucus' ability to mobilize young people across regions, support knowledge exchange, and facilitate meaningful participation in UNCCD processes. The Youth Caucus have also been working closely with YOUNGO and the Global Youth Biodiversity Network presenting common positions and strengthening the synergies for the three Rio Conventions. The GEF has also supported the participation of some members to attend GEF events.

33. CRIC 23 marked a significant step forward in the institutionalization of youth and children's engagement within UNCCD processes. Led by the UNCCD Youth Caucus, two dedicated days of the session focused on youth and children, reflecting growing recognition of young people as essential contributors to the monitoring and implementation of the Convention. More than 100 youth participants, including substantial participation from Panamanian youth, took part, demonstrating a clear shift from observational attendance toward active leadership and structured engagement. Together with civil society organizations, they called for enhanced youth leadership opportunities, targeted capacity-building and removal of barriers to youth participation and financing, particularly at national level.

34. Sustained investment in youth leadership, institutional pathways and strategic communications will be critical to maintaining momentum, translating global commitments into national and local action, and ensuring that young people continue to shape, inform and support the Convention's work. As the UNCCD moves toward COP 17 and beyond, the foundation established during the last biennium provides a strong basis for deepening intergenerational collaboration and embedding youth as long-term partners in implementation, accountability and impact.

35. The secretariat continued its engagement with the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD), including the Decent jobs for Youth, managed by the International Labour Organization.

36. The secretariat has also continued the support to the Land Youth Negotiator Programme (LYNP). Launched in 2023 and for the first time delivered in 2024 as a two-year programme, LYNP enables young land negotiators within the UNCCD negotiations. In 2024 - 2025, LYNP trained 100 young negotiators from 35 countries, 49 of whom participated at COP 16 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 2026 - 2027, the programme extended to 164 negotiators from 44 countries. LYNP is building diverse ecosystem of young negotiators globally through capacity development, community and network building, travel and subsistence grants and advocacy and outreach.

#### 4. Women's organizations

37. The secretariat together with the CSO panel has been engaging with women's organizations to ensure their input and contributions in the areas of awareness-raising,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://unccdyouthcaucus.org/>.

decision-making processes and capacity building. Several CSO representatives have been actively involved in the work of the UNCCD Gender Caucus participating at the online meetings and consultations as well as at the event organized on the sidelines of CRIC 23 in Panama.

38. Women's organizations have also benefited from the capacity building programs organized by the European Union for female delegates prior to the CRIC and to the forthcoming COP 17 and the GIZ for the Women's Empowerment for Resilient Rural Areas. Both facilitated the participation of CSO female representatives attending the CRIC and will also support it for COP 17.

39. Document ICCD/COP(17)/9 contains additional information on the engagement with women's organizations.

## 5. Persons with disabilities

40. Globally, persons with disabilities face mortality rates up to four times higher than those without disabilities during natural disasters. Yet despite making up 15 per cent of the world's population, they remain routinely excluded from environmental governance and decision-making.

41. The Secretariat has continued using the opportunity of the UN climate conferences held during the last two years to engage in conversations with the representatives of the disability constituency that was recognized by the UNFCCC in March 2026.

42. Within the Sports4Land campaign, the Secretariat has continued to engage with Jitske Visser, UNCCD Sports4Land Champion and Dutch Paralympic wheelchair basketball player, a gold medallist with Team Netherlands at both the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Paralympics. As the UNCCD Sport4Land Champion for Inclusion, Jitske leads the charge at the powerful intersection of healthy land, social inclusion and the rights of persons with disabilities.

43. In this regard, the secretariat together with Jitske, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, members of the disability caucus and other partners organized a side event in the margins of the Bonn Climate Conference in June 2025 looking at the urgent need for disability-inclusive strategies in tackling land degradation, desertification, and drought.

## III. Implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy

44. Pursuant to decision 5/COP.16, paragraph 7, the secretariat is preparing a comprehensive assessment of the youth engagement in the implementation of the Convention and identification best practices for accelerating meaningful youth participation across UNCCD meetings and processes.

45. The secretariat has been in consultations with representatives of the UNCCD Youth Caucus and youth leaders to undertake an evidence-based data collection and analysis process to deliver the tasks entrusted by the COP. The work has been designed to document the current state of youth engagement in the UNCCD process, assess the effectiveness of existing modalities, identify gaps and enabling factors, and formulate practical options to strengthen meaningful and inclusive youth participation in line with the UNCCD Youth Engagement Strategy (YES).

46. As of the end of April, the team has been working in the preparation of an initial assessment on how young people are currently engaged in the implementation of the Convention, including their participation in policy development, negotiations, capacity-building initiatives and in the implementation of activities at national, regional and global levels. This assessment is intended to capture both the existing engagement opportunities and the extent to which participation is experienced as meaningful, effective and responsive to youth priorities.

47. A youth-focused survey has been prepared and disseminated through youth groups and networks engaged in UNCCD-related processes, with questions addressing how youth currently participate, how meaningful participation is within negotiation and policy spaces,

and how relevant existing capacity-building initiatives have been in equipping youth to contribute effectively.

48. In parallel, an interview guide has been developed to engage partners and organizations that support youth participation within the UNCCD process. These interviews will provide complementary institutional perspectives on what has worked, where support is most needed and how cooperation arrangements can be strengthened to enable sustained engagement between sessions.

49. The final report on this assessment will address the adoption, implementation and effectiveness of the UNCCD YES as the guiding framework for youth participation, partnerships, capacity-building and support within the UNCCD. The analysis is being structured around the Strategy's four strategic objectives (advancing youth-focused policies; supporting meaningful participation and partnerships; providing dedicated financial and technical support; and building capacity and strengthening networks)

50. A targeted survey for Parties has been developed to gather information on how youth engagement is being operationalized at the national level, including the extent of policy integration, partnership modalities and the availability of resources for youth-related initiatives. In addition, regional consultations with youth and youth-led organizations have been scheduled during the months prior to the COP to explore contextual insights and identify region-specific challenges and opportunities that may require differentiated approaches.

51. The first draft report is scheduled for submission in May and will include a clear assessment of the current state of youth engagement, an analysis of the effectiveness of the UNCCD YES, and a set of practical options and best practices to accelerate meaningful youth participation for consideration at COP 17. The final report will be available on document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.5.

#### **IV. Terms of Reference for the Indigenous Peoples Caucus**

52. Indigenous Peoples represent approximately 476–500 million people worldwide. Indigenous Peoples Own or Manage at Least One Quarter of World's Land Surface<sup>5</sup>. However, they are frequently underrepresented or marginalized in data systems, which hinders the effective planning and delivery of their positive actions on land restoration and ecosystems preservation.

53. Historically, Indigenous Peoples' have governed and steward land, territories and various natural resources sustainably, harnessing the ecosystem services and securing the benefits for subsequent generations. Their traditional and customary authorities govern ownership, access and use of their lands and territories that have kept people, lands and biodiversity thriving in harmonious co-existence.

54. UNCCD recognizes the vital role of Indigenous Peoples and their traditional knowledge systems in addressing desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD), strengthening climate resilience, and conserving biodiversity. Indigenous Peoples' knowledge is fundamental to advancing the sustainable management of land, soils, rangelands, and water, as well as to agricultural and silvo-pastoral practices that are resilient to climate variability. In many contexts, these practices have proven effective in preventing soil erosion, restoring the fertility of degraded lands, and maintaining fragile ecological balances. Parties to the Convention have consistently acknowledged the essential contributions of Indigenous Peoples to the effective implementation of the UNCCD.

55. The UNCCD Secretariat was requested to convene consultations to strengthen Indigenous Peoples participation, to support the development of Terms of Reference for the creation of an Indigenous Peoples Caucus that reflects Indigenous Peoples perspectives and priorities, and to report to COP 17.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/desa/indigenous-peoples-continue-face-barriers-realizing-rights-lands-and-territories>.

56. Since the decision was taken by the Parties, the secretariat, thanks to the support provided by the Government of Australia, has been working with representatives of the Indigenous Peoples to carry out consultations with relevant actors. The main consultations organized until the end of April 2026 include:

- (a) United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> sessions;
- (b) Facilitative Working Group of the UNFCCC Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform;
- (c) African gathering of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists;
- (d) Members of the CBD Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities constituency;
- (e) Members of the International Land Coalition;
- (f) Mayor group of Indigenous Peoples and their communities of the United Nations Environment Program;
- (g) Dedicated regional webinars with Indigenous representatives and relevant organizations;
- (h) Consultations with the members of the seven socio-cultural regions that attended COP 16;
- (i) Meeting with the Parties and observers to the UNCCD attending CRIC 23.

57. In addition to the consultations a desk review was carried out on the relevant established practices and institutional precedents identified, with particular references to experiences and arrangements under the Rio Conventions

- (a) The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), including Articles 8(j) and 10(c), and the creation of the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities body under COP 16 in Cali
- (b) UNFCCC Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) and its Facilitative Working Group
- (c) The participatory engagement models of the UNCCD Women's and Youth caucus
- (d) The UNEP' engagement with Indigenous Peoples under Indigenous Peoples and their Communities
- (e) The Indigenous Peoples Major Groups for Sustainable Development, IP-led Global Coordinating Committee (GCC)

58. After all these consultations the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus has been conceived as a mechanism to facilitate the meaningful, effective, and coordinated participation of Indigenous Peoples in the processes of the UNCCD. This will be done to strengthen dialogue, coordination, and engagement between Indigenous Peoples and Parties to the Convention in matters related to policy development, negotiations, implementation, monitoring, and review.

59. At the last 25<sup>th</sup> session of the UNPFII held in April 2026 (document E/C.19/2026/L.8 paragraph 2), the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues "welcomes the establishment of an Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, and a separate Caucus of Local Communities, at the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, to engage with Indigenous Peoples, recognizing that Indigenous Peoples are distinct from local communities. The Forum welcomes the terms of reference of the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, prepared in consultation with Indigenous Peoples; calls for their adoption at the seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention; and requests that adequate and sustained funding be secured to ensure the effective and meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples".

60. To support this purpose, two complementary engagement spaces have been identified:

(a) The Indigenous Peoples' Plenary Caucus that will serve as an Indigenous-only coordination platform for representatives from the seven socio-cultural regions to exchange information, consolidate positions and prepare collective inputs to UNCCD deliberations.

(b) The Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, established as a constitutive engagement body within the Convention's processes, which provides a structured interface for sustained dialogue, consultation and engagement between Indigenous Peoples and Parties, and supports the integration of Indigenous perspectives into policy development, negotiations, implementation, monitoring and review.

61. Membership to the Indigenous Peoples' Caucus, as a constitutive body should maintain a regional representation model between Indigenous Peoples' seven socio-cultural regions and Parties' five United Nations regional groups (the 7+5 model).

62. The Caucus further seeks to promote the recognition, protection and application of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, practices, technologies, innovations, perspectives and experience in support of the implementation of the Convention, particularly with regard to desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD), land restoration, drought resilience and sustainable land management, including through engagement with the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) and the Science-Policy Interface (SPI). It also aims to facilitate coordination, dialogue and information-sharing among Indigenous Peoples across regions, ensuring the inclusive engagement of knowledge holders, elders, women and youth, and to strengthen coherence and synergies with Indigenous Peoples' engagement bodies under other Rio Conventions as well as with relevant UNCCD mechanisms, including those for women, youth and local communities.

63. In addition, the Caucus has been designed to promote the recognition and integration of Indigenous Peoples' rights, priorities and safeguards in UNCCD policies, strategies and initiatives, consistent with applicable international frameworks and national policies; to support follow-up and implementation of relevant COP decisions; and to contribute to mutual learning and the exchange of good practices related to Indigenous Peoples' contributions under the UNCCD, including by encouraging participation in implementing COP decisions and other frameworks serving the Convention's objectives.

64. The Indigenous Peoples' Caucus may operationalize its work through four mutually reinforcing functional pillars.

(a) Supporting the participation and representation Indigenous Peoples in UNCCD meetings and processes.

(b) Strengthening knowledge, culture and policy inputs by bringing Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, cultural practices, values, innovations and technologies into UNCCD policy discussions.

(c) Building capacity for engagement through coordination, dialogue and information-sharing across regions.

(d) Supporting implementation by contributing to follow-up and visibility of relevant COP decisions and UNCCD initiatives concerning Indigenous Peoples.

65. The modalities and mechanisms for the engagement, selection, operationalization, consultations, the relations with the UNCCD of the Caucus as well as the elements related to the resources, meetings, review and amendment and entry into force of the Terms of Reference will be finalized in consultations with the Parties during the course of May.

66. The Terms of Reference will be presented to the Parties and Indigenous Peoples representatives to check the draft against consultation inputs, improve clarity where needed, and build shared ownership ahead of COP 17 consideration. The TOR that resulted from the final consultations will be available in document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.5.

## V. Terms of Reference for the Local Communities Caucus

67. The UNCCD Secretariat was requested to convene consultations to strengthen Local Communities' participation, to support the development of Terms of Reference for a Local Communities Caucus that reflects Local Communities' perspectives and priorities, and to report to COP 17.

68. In this regard, the work was carried out in a practical and inclusive framework for Local Communities to engage in UNCCD processes, shaped through consultation with Local Communities, Parties, and stakeholders and consistent with UNCCD procedures.

69. By the end of April 2026, the secretariat completed a comparative landscape review, prepared consultation materials, and run global and regional consultations with local communities' representatives. Next steps underway included the consultation with the Parties foreseen by the beginning of May as well as the final validation with local communities before the end of the month.

70. The work carried out confirmed the need to follow procedural support rather than political negotiation which included an agreed core design principles (legitimacy, coherence with UN practice, and institutional viability).

71. It also included a short comparative review at how other UN and MEA processes support participation, including approaches under the UNFCCC (including LCIPP-related practice), the CBD (Article 8(j) and related bodies), and UNEP and the Major Groups and Stakeholders system. Across these, several consistent elements emerged the following elements:

- (a) Observer-based participation,
- (b) Facilitative coordination roles,
- (c) Community validation,
- (d) Rotation, and
- (e) Safeguards for traditional knowledge—which helped shape the initial ToR architecture.

72. In order to make engagement consistent across regions, a pre-consultation questionnaire gathered views on indicative conditions for eligibility to participate as Local Communities, barriers to participation, what meaningful engagement should look like, governance options and safeguards, and priorities for caucus design. These findings have directly informed the ToR design and include:

- (a) Local Communities face structural barriers to participation, including accreditation challenges, limited resources, language barriers, and short negotiation timelines.
- (b) Participation is often fragmented or mediated through external actors, limiting the visibility of LC perspectives.
- (c) There is strong support for a Caucus that is:
  - (i) self organized and community validated,
  - (ii) facilitative rather than representative,
  - (iii) complementary to Indigenous Peoples' mechanisms,
  - (iv) capable of coordinating LC inputs across UNCCD bodies.
- (d) Robust safeguards are essential to prevent extractive or inappropriate use of traditional and local knowledge.

73. Global and regional consultations were then carried out with Local Communities and LC-anchored organizations and networks. Discussions highlighted uneven engagement to date and practical constraints such as accreditation, language, resources, and timing. Participants also set expectations for a caucus that is self-organized, inclusive, and credible,

while still able to operate effectively within UNCCD modalities. Strong emphasis was placed on safeguards to prevent external designation, capture, or over-centralisation.

74. Drawing on the consultation results and the comparative review, a first draft Terms of Reference for a UNCCD Local Communities Caucus was prepared. The draft:

(a) Includes the mandate and scope positioning the caucus as a self-organized, observer-based, consultative interface to support Local Communities' engagement across COP and its subsidiary bodies, and relevant intersessional work.

(b) Sets out an approach to membership and legitimacy grounded in self-identification and community validation, without making government recognition a prerequisite. criteria grounding participation in self-identification and community validation, without making government recognition a prerequisite

(c) Proposes a governance model based on regional focal coordination, rotation, gender and intergenerational balance, and conflict-of-interest safeguards.

(d) Also outlines operating modalities that favour transparency, voluntary participation, low administrative burden, consensus-oriented coordination and practical functionality.

(e) Includes safeguards for traditional knowledge, including consent-based and purpose-limited use and protection against misuse. Overall, the draft is intended to be enabling and procedural, rather than prescriptive.

(f) Allows for periodic review and learning, without pre-empting future decisions by Parties.

75. The Terms of Reference will be presented to the Parties and Local Community representatives to check the draft against consultation inputs, improve clarity where needed, and build shared ownership ahead of COP 17 consideration. The TOR that resulted from the consultations will be available in document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.5.

## **VI. Rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organizations**

76. The secretariat was requested, subject to the availability of resources, to compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organizations in multilateral environmental agreements and United Nations bodies for the consideration of the Conference of the Parties at its seventeenth session.

77. The adequate financial resources necessary to work on the compilation of rules of procedure and practices were secured during the month of March providing limited time to work on the required elements to be presented to the Parties in this document.

78. The work carried out as of 30<sup>th</sup> of April included the desk review of the rules of procedure approved by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity and informal exchanges with the secretariats of the Rio Conventions to gather information on both the approved rules of procedures and the standard practices for the participation of civil society organizations.

79. For civil society organizations to attend the sessions of the Conference of the Parties and its subsidiary bodies all three conventions required a formal process for the accreditation or admission of observers which requires the formal approval by the Parties. Each one of the conventions requests the secretariats notify the Conference of the Parties on the interest of the observers to attend the session. In this regard, the secretariats are in charge of compiling the required documents and make the recommendation for the Conference of the Parties for the consideration of the observers at the beginning of the session.

80. The adopted rules of procedure for the conventions indicated that observers could attend the sessions of the COP (also applied mutatis mutandis to subsidiary bodies) unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session object (rule 7 of the rules of procedures).

81. In the case of contact groups or informal settings each process has a different way to address the observers participation. For instance Parties to the UNFCCC took decision COP Decision 18/CP.4 entitled “Attendance of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations at contact groups” Paragraph 1 - Decides that the presiding officers of Convention bodies may invite representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to attend as observers any open-ended contact group established under the Convention process, unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session of the Convention body setting up that contact group object, and on the understanding that the presiding officers of such contact groups may determine at any time during their proceedings that they should be closed to intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Paragraph 2. Invites the presiding officers of Convention bodies, at the time of their establishment of such a contact group, to ascertain if there are objections from Parties to attendance by intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations at that contact group under the conditions set out in paragraph 1 above. According to the practice, since the decision was taken at COP18, all contact groups have been opened with no exceptions. In the case of CBD there is no similar COP decision, but observers could attend the contact groups unless the chair indicates that the meeting is closed.

82. After the preliminary assessment the rules of procedure, the practices and the Conference of the Parties decisions these are some key elements that could assist the Parties in moving forward:

(a) Since the UNFCCC Decision 18/CP.4, Civil Society Organization can attend any open-ended contact group established under the Convention process, unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session of the Convention body setting up that contact group object.

(b) Standard practice with CBD allows observers to attend the contact groups unless the Chair indicates that the meeting is closed.

(c) The review indicates that no similar arrangement exists under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification regarding the contact groups.

83. The full report with the relevant information and a SWOT analysis on the different options is available in document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.5.

## **VII. Report by the Civil Society Organization Panel**

### **A. Activities undertaken by the Panel**

#### **1. Introduction**

84. The CSO Panel of the UNCCD was established in 2009 by the COP through decision 5/COP.9.

85. At the first CSO Panel meeting held virtually 08 April 2025, Ms. Marioldy Sanchez from AIDER was elected as its chair.

#### **2. Organization of the work of the Civil Society Organization Panel**

86. To pursue the UNCCD processes, the CSO Panel members agreed to organize periodic online meetings with the support of the secretariat. Since April 2025, the CSO Panel has held 9 virtual meetings and 2 in-person meetings and expected to have at least 3 more virtual meetings before COP 17. Holding these virtual monthly meetings was crucial to keep the CSO Panel actively involved in the actions and events happening under the Convention. Preparation, leadership, and reporting of the meetings were entrusted to the Panel members on a rotational basis. In addition, the five CSO Panel members held 8 working meetings since April 2025 in order to organize and implement its work.

87. At the beginning of its mandate, the CSO Panel agreed on its modus operandi and prepared its work plan for the 2025–2026 biennium to enable it to fulfil its mandate. The

work plan included four work packages with detailed activities. The four work packages were as follows:

- (a) Organization of CSOs for participation in UNCCD
- (b) Inclusion of Civil Society and the Caucuses in UNCCD processes
- (c) Visibility of Civil Society and the Caucuses within the UNCCD
- (d) Strategic positioning of Civil Society and the Caucuses within the UNCCD

88. Based on these work packages, the following is the collective summary of activities and results achieved by the CSO Panel members at various levels.

## **B. Organizations Panel for the organization of CSOs**

### **1. Preparation and participation at CRIC 23**

89. The CSO Panel coordinated the CSOs' preparations for CRIC 23, which was held from 1 to 5 December 2025 in Panama. To allow CSOs to prepare for CRIC 23, the CSO Panel organised a consultation process through 2 online meetings with accredited CSOs on 16 October 2025 and 12 November 2025. As a result, CSOs' Key Messages for CRIC 23<sup>6</sup> were developed in three languages, validated, and disseminated. Regional online meetings were also held to inform CSOs about the agenda and participation of CSOs. Using diverse online tools, the CSO Panel organized three working groups for CRIC 23 on communications, development of key messages for advocacy, and side event planning. The members comprised CSOs from all regions who were present in person at CRIC23 and those who were able to virtually participate in the processes.

90. An in-person Strategy meeting was held in Panama with accredited CSOs on 30 November 2025 to finalize key messages and recommendations to parties and organize teams to develop statements<sup>7</sup> for each of the CRIC 23 Agenda items.

### **2. Organization of COP 17**

91. Under its work plan, the CSO Panel developed a comprehensive strategy for CSO participation in COP 17, building on key messages and progress achieved in CRIC 23 and on synergies with key stakeholders.

92. The CSO Panel collaborated with the CARI-coordinated initiative Désertif'actions, which mobilized 350 participants from over 50 countries around COP 17. This year, the central theme of Désertif'actions was the drought-resilient territories and was supported by the CS4LDN project, as part of the preparations for COP 17. The CSO Panel members held regional consultation meetings and launched a global survey to collect CSOs perspectives inputs on drought resilient territories<sup>8</sup> that informed Désertif'actions deliberations. CSO Panel members also attended and participated actively in Desertif'actions 2026 in Djerba, Tunisia. The main conclusions are the urgent need to shift from reactive to proactive in the enhancement and integration of territorial realities, the local knowledge valorisation, and the strengthening of the political ambition for addressing the drought and land degradation crisis. The Summit outcomes were shared by the CSO Panel through an online global meeting and will be integrated into COP 17 plans.

93. Between April and August 2026, the CSO Panel will finalize the preparation of an informative package to support CSOs in COP 17 participation. Two global online consultations and preparatory meetings will be prepared ahead of COP 17 to organize working groups, collect inputs, and validate key messages. One in-person meeting for COP 17 preparation is expected at the venue in Ulaanbaatar.

<sup>6</sup> <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/11KpM2cSe0eIwQex9WkOaARRP5a4M0JYQ>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ry-XfKHGkk4QmcoS9nRdBasEEk916C8o/view>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1\\_1F2vWtCZZG1LuZa90I95\\_zyA8Lirkg/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_1F2vWtCZZG1LuZa90I95_zyA8Lirkg/view).

**3. Actions undertaken by the CSO Panel for strengthening the engagement of the Civil Society**

94. The CSO Panel implemented different communication and engagement activities with the aim of increasing understanding and awareness of the UNCCD agenda and UNCCD-related initiatives supported by CSOs, contributing to greater inclusiveness of civil society in the UNCCD.

95. The CSO Panel shared relevant information about the UNCCD, including participation processes, news, information on events, initiatives, and publications and reports related to the Panel's work, through CSOs mailing list and social media, thereby increasing the availability of high-quality and timely information for CSOs. This information was shared in English, Spanish, and French.

**4. Activities undertaken by the Civil Society Organizations Panel for visibility and positioning of civil society within the UNCCD**

96. The CSO Panel facilitated together with the UNCCD Secretariat the election process of an alternate CSO observer to the UNCCD Science Policy Interface, the CSO representatives at the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention and a representative for the Steering Committee of the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership. The elected CSOs report back regularly to the panel and in meetings with accredited organizations to ensure full transparency and to benefit from inputs from other observers.

97. The CSO Panel also holds bilateral meetings and organized collaborative actions with relevant civil society actors such as the UNCCD Youth Caucus, UNCCD Gender Caucus, Indigenous Peoples representatives and Drynet.

98. The CSO Panel also supported and participated in the activities organized by the GEF-funded CS4LDN project executed by Drynet and IUCN

99. The CSO Panel also participated in other meetings and events to promote visibility of UNCCD agenda and the role of CSOs in this Convention, as described below.

100. Full report submitted by the UNCCD CSO panel is included in document ICCD/COP(17)/INF.5.

**5. Lessons learned**

101. The CSO Panel members have mainly collaborated online, however they also benefited from the positive effects of face-to-face meetings during CRIC23 and Desertif'ation Summit. The CSO Panel recommends that arrangements be made for a transitional handover with the newly elected Panel for at least 6 months, to allow sustainable and consistent transition, allowing for further continuation and reduce repetition/ duplication.

102. By the time of the preparation of this document, the number of accredited and provisionally accredited CSOs are close to 1,700. Despite the challenge for the CSO Panel and the secretariat to engage with an increasing number of accredited CSOs, considering the diversity of languages, livelihoods, geographic predisposition, political situations and access to communication tools, the CSO Panel work requires of more resources and tools to facilitate information dissemination, consultations, translations, adaptation (for those with disability) and capacity-building activities for CSOs in multiple languages and formats.

103. The coordination role of the CSO Panel has been expanded with the establishment of new initiatives related with the UNCCD with participation of civil society (Caucuses, global programs and projects, etc.). New opportunities for strengthening the contributions of CSOs to the Convention implementation are arising under this scenario. In this sense, it is required to continue identifying strategies for the strengthening of the CSO Panel, considering challenges related to the length of mandate (biennium), digital communication tools, translation, among others.

104. Considering the expertise and knowledge of CSOs representatives in the Panel, it is crucial to implement mechanisms to retain the trained CSOs Panel as a "Pool of Resources"

for collaboration in the capacity building and consultations with CSOs and the secretariat at various levels and thematic areas.

105. The CSO Panel appreciates the CSO participation in the IWG-FSF and in the SPI, in their consideration of contributions and recommends more collaborative engagements with the members.

106. CSOs are key partners in the implementation of the UNCCD Agenda at the national level, the Panel therefore urges the Parties, through National Focal Points to include CSOs inputs in the national reports, through regular meetings and participation in local forums.

#### **IV. Conclusions and recommendations**

**107. The role played by civil society organizations, indigenous peoples, women, youth, pastoralists and local communities, in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD has been greatly appreciated by the various stakeholders within the Convention.**

**108. The UNCCD CSO panel has expanded its role of supporting the active engagement of CSOs, ensuring that those that are in situation of vulnerability are aware of the priorities and the work of the secretariat and the Parties. The representatives of the panel have worked on voluntary basis to ensure the coordination and the sharing of information among the non-state actors.**

**109. The Parties and other actors have already started the implementation of the UNCCD Youth Engagement Strategy. Youth is a moving force in the implementation of the Convention waiting to have their place to support the efforts made by the governments. Parties may wish to use this momentum to include youth as one of the emerging issues to be addressed at COP 18.**

**110. After one and half years of consultations, Indigenous Peoples have come up with the consolidated terms of reference for the creation of their constituted Caucus to ensure their meaningful engagement with the UNCCD meetings and processes. Local Communities have also prepared theirs following an extensive consultation process. The approval of both Caucuses by the Parties will enable them to play a more active role in the implementation of the convention.**

**111. The UNCCD does not regulate the participation of CSOs in contact groups while other processes (climate and biodiversity) generally allow participation unless there are objections from Parties or meeting chair.**

**112. Elements from these conclusions are presented in the form of a draft decision for the consideration of the Parties, contained in ICCD/COP(17)/12.**

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