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Future functioning of the Science-Policy Interface

Ways of ensuring adequate technical support for the Science-Policy Interface

Note by the secretariat

Summary

By decision 20/COP.16, paragraph 18, the Conference of the Parties requested the secretariat to prepare a feasibility study on ways of ensuring adequate technical support for the Science-Policy Interface (SPI), including the possible use of an external technical support unit (TSU) provided by partners, similar to arrangements used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. In response, the secretariat engaged the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research (Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung) to draw on its comparative experience with both bodies and to explore options for the establishment, mandate and functioning of such a unit for the SPI. This document outlines the problem statement and context for strengthening SPI support; describes the possible functions, mandate and core tasks of a TSU; and examines options for hosting arrangements, selection criteria, structure, governance, reporting, staffing and capacity, as well as the associated financial implications. It concludes that a dedicated TSU could enhance the quality, timeliness, visibility and uptake of SPI outputs, strengthen engagement with Parties and other stakeholders, and provide a more stable and effective operational foundation for the SPI over future work cycles.



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I. Background

1. In accordance with decision 20/COP.16, paragraph 18, and decision 10/COP.16, paragraph 24 (c), the Conference of the Parties (COP) requested the secretariat to prepare a feasibility study to identify ways of ensuring adequate technical support for the Science-Policy Interface (SPI), including the possible use of an external technical support unit (TSU) provided by partners, similar to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).
2. The secretariat engaged the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research (Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung), which has relevant experience in supporting both the IPCC¹ and IPBES,² to develop and refine a document on the feasibility of a TSU for the SPI based on its experience.
3. This document explores options for the establishment of a proposed TSU, informed by the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research's comparative analysis and experience with the TSUs of the IPCC and IPBES.

II. Problem statement and context

4. The SPI of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) works to ensure the delivery of policy-relevant information, knowledge and advice to support the implementation of the Convention. This includes taking the scientific lead on thematic assessments forming the basis of Global Land Outlook (GLO) products or similar flagship reports, preparing fast-track assessments, information products and advice, and collaborating with other intergovernmental science bodies and panels.
5. The external assessment of the SPI, summarized in document [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/6](#), highlights several areas where its full potential has yet to be realized. While the SPI has enhanced the UNCCD's credibility as a science-policy platform, it faces persistent challenges in ensuring the uptake and impact of its outputs. Gaps remain in systematically engaging national focal points and science and technology correspondents, tailoring products to the needs of Parties, and effectively communicating results to diverse stakeholders across geographical scales. Coordination with other scientific bodies, as well as regional and sub-regional experts, has been uneven, and limited technical and financial resources have constrained its capacity to respond flexibly and in a timely manner. Addressing these shortcomings is essential to strengthen the SPI's relevance, effectiveness and sustainability.
6. In this context, the establishment of a dedicated TSU, as recommended in document [ICCD/COP\(16\)/CST/6](#), could help address these gaps by providing the SPI with consistent technical, operational and communication support, thereby enhancing its responsiveness, visibility and long-term impact

III. Functioning of a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

7. A TSU for the SPI would serve as the operational foundation of the SPI and as a bridge between SPI experts, policymakers, the Bureau of the CST and the UNCCD secretariat. Its objectives would contribute to filling the gaps identified in the SPI external review report. These include:
 - (a) Strengthening the quality and impact of deliverables by providing dedicated scientific and technical support, including for engagement with relevant science partners and

¹ See the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Task Group on Data (TG-Data) at <https://www.ipcc.ch/data/>.

² See the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Technical Support Unit for Data and Knowledge Management at <https://www.ipbes.net/knowledge-data>.

science-policy interfaces (e.g., IPCC and IPBES), to ensure the high scientific quality and relevance of SPI outputs;

(b) Enhancing the capacity and continuity of institutional memory by ensuring a stable support structure that maintains knowledge and operational experience across SPI work cycles;

(c) Facilitating workstream delivery by coordinating activities and providing logistical support throughout the development process, increasing the responsiveness of the SPI and ensuring the timely delivery of SPI outputs;

(d) Strengthening and supporting engagement with the UNCCD national focal points and science and technology correspondents;

(e) Improving communications and uptake by refining the presentation of SPI products (e.g., policy factsheets, media assets) and supporting capacity-building efforts to promote effective use, including at the sub-regional level;

(f) Leveraging external partnerships and in-kind contributions to maximize resources without placing additional burdens on the Convention's budget. This includes collaborations with ongoing initiatives (e.g., Economics of Land Degradation Initiative), and data platforms at the global (e.g., the Group on Earth Observations Land Degradation Neutrality Flagship) and regional level for increased efficiency;

(g) The TSU could also coordinate with initiatives such as the International Drought Alliance, which mobilizes political, technical and financial capital to enhance the collective capacity to prepare for and adapt to drought, and the aligned International Drought Resilience Observatory and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered data platform designed to monitor, analyse and strengthen resilience to drought by connecting science, data and decision-making for governments and other stakeholders.

IV. Mandate and core tasks of a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

8. The mandate of the SPI TSU would include:

(a) Providing technical and scientific support to the SPI for the preparation of high-quality products, including thematic assessments forming the basis of GLO products and similar flagship reports, preparing fast-track assessments, information products and advice, and providing technical guidance, data syntheses and science-policy briefs;

(b) Supporting the development and implementation of an outreach strategy and stakeholder engagement, ensuring SPI products reach and resonate with diverse audiences.

9. The SPI TSU core tasks would include:

(a) Coordinating with the UNCCD secretariat and the Bureau of the CST for the timely delivery of high-quality, scientifically robust products and outreach in line with the UNCCD SPI procedures;

(b) Establishing and implementing procedures, workflows, timelines and guidelines, from author selection through to outreach, in consultation with the secretariat and the Bureau of the CST;

(c) Providing administrative support for meetings, communications, conflict-of-interest protocols and publication logistics;

(d) Also providing scientific and technical support during the production of deliverables, including policy-relevant editing, harmonization, integration of multiple values and knowledge systems, data curation and management (per the Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics (CARE) principles³ as well as the Findability,

³ See <https://ardc.edu.au/resource/the-care-principles/>.

Accessibility, Interoperability and Reusability (FAIR) principles⁴ of data governance), graphic design and layout and, as appropriate, translations into the six official languages of the United Nations;

(e) Supporting the identification of and collaboration with relevant science networks, individual authors and practitioners, including from the business sector, throughout the development of SPI products;

(f) Also supporting communication and active collaboration with intergovernmental bodies and other science-policy platforms for better alignment of timelines and work programmes, including participation in their exchanges, dialogues and processes. More specifically, the SPI TSU will actively engage with the IPCC, IPBES and other relevant science-policy interfaces by participating in joint workshops, contributing to assessment scoping and review processes, submitting SPI technical inputs and data, co-organizing workshops or side events, and systematically incorporating its guidance into SPI outputs. These actions will ensure that SPI deliverables reflect the latest scientific evidence, maintain high quality and are directly relevant to global policy processes;

(g) Developing and implementing communication and outreach strategies for SPI deliverables, including multimedia assets (press releases, infographics, videos) and digital dissemination campaigns across geographical scales;

(h) Providing technical and administrative support for stakeholder engagement and capacity-building initiatives such as webinars, workshops and training resources;

(i) Monitoring the uptake and impacts of SPI products, including peer-reviewed publications, on UNCCD-relevant processes and target groups.

V. Hosting arrangements for a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

10. The SPI TSU is envisioned as a long-term, stable entity to maintain institutional memory, ensure continuity across SPI work cycles and support the consistent delivery of high-quality, policy-relevant scientific outputs. The hosting arrangements are envisioned to be determined by the host country (or countries) and/or the organization(s) having collaborated on the offer to host.

11. To maximize scientific depth, credibility and access to specialized expertise, the TSU (or parts of it) may be hosted within a research institute, university or other recognized scientific organization in the host country. Whether a single Party or multiple Parties collaborate in generating an offer to host the TSU, one or more organizations may be engaged. Whether it be a single organization or several working together, this structure would allow the TSU to benefit from existing academic and technical capacities while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to evolving SPI priorities and work programmes.

12. Hosting arrangements are intended to be flexible and inclusive, enabling collaboration with international science-policy networks and ongoing initiatives or data platforms.

VI. Financial arrangements for a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

13. A mechanism to transfer resources to the TSU must be identified by the UNCCD secretariat. Such a mechanism should enable the pooling of resources from multiple donors as well as other entities that would provide services to the TSU. The UNCCD secretariat could play this role or, alternatively, a trust fund could be established in an entity such as the United Nations Environment Programme or the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office administered by the United Nations Development Programme. The mechanism put in place should: (i) be able to enter into contribution agreements with donors; and (ii) transfer

⁴ See <https://www.nnlm.gov/resources/data/data-glossary/fair-principles>.

resources to the TSU and other relevant parties when instructed to do so by the structure governing the activities.

14. A stable combination of in-kind support from the host and dedicated trust funds (or a similar mechanism), with costs shared between the host country (or countries) and institution(s), would provide the basis for the TSU's long-term sustainability. This funding approach would ensure that acceptance of a proposal to host a TSU for the SPI would be budget-neutral for the UNCCD secretariat, notwithstanding potential secretariat–SPI–TSU coordination demands which might prove greater than current levels required to support the SPI.

15. When selecting a host, priority will be given to funding arrangements that safeguard the TSU's core functions and ensure continuous support for SPI activities, even as funding sources evolve or stakeholder priorities shift.

VII. Process and criteria for selecting technical support units for the Science-Policy Interface

16. Parties and relevant organizations will be invited, through the secretariat, to submit a formal offer, jointly by a Party (or Parties) together with its associated institution(s), to host a TSU through an open call.

17. The Bureau of the CST, with the support of the secretariat, will review formal offers and select a suitable host for the TSU based on the following criteria:

(a) **Research excellence:** Assessing whether the candidate institution has a strong track record in scientific research relevant to desertification, land degradation and drought, and associated thematic issues, across biophysical and socioeconomic fields. Evidence may include peer-reviewed publications, recognized expertise, participation in international research networks, and the ability to generate high-quality, policy relevant science;

(b) **Science-policy development and impact:** Evaluating the candidate institution's demonstrated ability to translate science into policy outcomes. This includes experience with policy briefs, assessments and decision-support tools, and engagement with national or international policy processes. Proposals should show how its work has influenced or can influence UNCCD objectives or comparable global environmental frameworks;

(c) **Host expertise:** Considering the candidate institution's specific capabilities in terms of support for the SPI, such as expertise in facilitating multidisciplinary scientific collaborations, leveraging scientific networks and establishing partnerships, experience with the United Nations or intergovernmental processes, and familiarity with monitoring frameworks, indicator development, modelling and scenario development and evidence synthesis relevant to desertification, land degradation and drought, and related thematic issues;

(d) **Resources and management:** Examining whether the candidate institution can reliably provide the administrative, logistical, financial and human resources required for the TSU. This includes staffing, project management systems, language capabilities, information management, facilities and the ability to ensure continuity, transparency and timely delivery;

(e) **Fit to scheme:** Assessing the overall alignment between the proposal and the SPI's mandate, the SPI work programme and the operational requirements of a TSU. This includes coherence with UNCCD governance, the ability to uphold impartiality and scientific independence, compatibility with timelines and outputs, and the extent to which the proposal contributes to the SPI fulfilling its mandate under the governance of the Bureau of the CST.

VIII. Proposed structure of a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

18. The TSU is proposed as a partner institute-based core unit, hosted within a research institute or university and supported by a network of specialist members embedded in partner institutions.

19. While the TSU would ideally be located in close proximity to the UNCCD secretariat to facilitate effective coordination, it should also ensure strong regional anchorage. This can be achieved through the establishment of specialized sub-units in different geographical regions, which would operate under the overall coordination and guidance of the TSU. This distribution model, combining global coherence with regional presence and responsiveness, would strengthen relevance and scientific excellence, ensure that diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous and local knowledge, are represented, and enhance the uptake of SPI outputs at national and sub-regional levels.

20. Clear institutional arrangements would be formalized through a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). The PCA will define roles, administrative responsibilities, budgetary modalities, the staff selection process and governance mechanisms.

21. The TSU at the host institute would provide administrative support, local coordination and operational infrastructure, while sub-units hosted by partner institutions would supply specialized expertise and scientific input. This arrangement would facilitate access to a broad range of expertise, ensure scientific credibility and international collaboration and allow for flexible integration of external specialists. The host institution would provide institutional memory, long-term stability and oversight of TSU operations.

IX. Governance and reporting

22. The TSU would be accountable to the secretariat, the Bureau of the CST and the SPI Co-Chairs, ensuring scientific and technical alignment with CST priorities and COP mandates. The modalities of work for the TSU would be established in a memorandum of understanding with the secretariat.

23. A Management Committee would convene quarterly to provide strategic oversight to the TSU regarding deliverables and timelines, and ensure that SPI outputs respond directly to CST approval and the strategic direction of the COP. It would comprise the Chair and Vice Chairs of the Bureau of the CST, the SPI Co-Chairs, the Chief Scientist from the UNCCD secretariat, the Head of the TSU, and independent observer experts (on an ad-hoc basis).

24. Reporting would comprise:

- (a) Quarterly progress updates to the Management Committee and the Bureau of the CST;
- (b) A comprehensive annual report to the full CST Plenary at each COP, detailing SPI outputs, workload, stakeholder engagement and budget status;
- (c) Ad-hoc briefings upon the request of the Bureau of the CST or the COP;
- (d) Annual memorandum of understanding reviews to ensure TSU alignment with updated COP/CST mandates.

X. Staffing and capacity of a technical support unit for the Science-Policy Interface

25. The TSU would consist of a minimum of 4.0 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members, including a dedicated administrative staff member, to ensure continuity, coordination and quality control. In addition, at least 4.0 FTE staff members would be embedded in sub-units hosted by partner institutions, constituting a flexible pool of ad hoc or seconded experts engaged on a task-specific basis. This composition would allow the TSU to manage multiple

deliverables effectively, while retaining the flexibility to bring in specialized expertise, as needed.

26. Specialist members could work remotely from their host institutions, contributing to specific deliverables, serving on drafting teams and ensuring access to cutting-edge knowledge. Where appropriate, specialist members should also include regional coordinators or focal points to strengthen engagement with national focal points, subregional stakeholders and ongoing land degradation initiatives.

27. The TSU would be comprised of the following staff:

(a) A TSU Head (0.5 FTE) to provide strategic leadership and coordination, overseeing the work of sub-units, and serving as the primary focal point for the SPI and the UNCCD secretariat;

(b) A Science Coordinator (1 FTE) to oversee scientific quality and manage the day-to-day work of the SPI and the TSU, including supervision of technical officers, such as the Science Editor and Communication Officer;

(c) A Technical Coordinator (0.5 FTE) to lead data transparency, digital publishing and knowledge management systems, and provide support with data analysis tools (including AI) in coordination with secretariat information technology functions;

(d) A Science Communication Officer (0.5 FTE) to develop and implement science communication strategies, support the preparation of accessible outputs and work closely with the secretariat communications team;

(e) A Capacity-Building Officer (1 FTE) to work with the Secretariat communications and capacity-building teams, develop outreach and training materials and support engagement with national focal points and other stakeholders;

(f) Administrative staff (0.5 FTE) to provide institutional and financial liaison functions and manage logistical and operational arrangements.

28. Sub-units comprised of externally hosted specialist members would include:

(a) A Scenarios and Modelling Expert (1 FTE) to provide expertise on modelling approaches, scenario development and integration of scientific evidence for SPI deliverables;

(b) An Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) Expert (1 FTE) to ensure meaningful integration of ILK into SPI processes, fostering inclusive approaches and engagement with knowledge holders;

(c) Other Specialists (2 FTE, flexible) with expertise in areas such as socioeconomic and policy analysis, soil and land degradation, and data science. These positions may be adapted over time to respond to evolving SPI priorities.
