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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, including a specific request to the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the Civil Society Organization Panel (CSO Panel). The secretariat was requested to assess the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy, support the establishment of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities and compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of CSOs in multilateral environmental agreements and United Nations bodies.

By the same decision, the COP requested the secretariat to report at its seventeenth session on the implementation of the decision, including the report of the CSO Panel on the implementation of its tasks.

This document contains the reports of the Executive Secretary and the CSO Panel on the measures undertaken by both to implement decision 5/COP.16. It also provides recommendations for consideration by the COP at its seventeenth session.

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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 the ninth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 9) set the basis for the civil society in general and the Civil Society Organizations Panel (CSO Panel) established at that time in particular. The CSO Panel has been ensuring the coordination of all 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 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 CSOs 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, facilitate consultations for the development of terms of reference (TOR) for the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities and compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of CSOs in multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and United Nations bodies for the consideration of the COP at its seventeenth session.
4. This document provides information on the activities of the CSO Panel and the secretariat in the follow-up to decision 5/COP.16.

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

A. Renewal of membership to the Civil Society Organization Selection Panel

5. By its decision 5/COP.16, paragraph 10, the COP requested the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the CSO Panel until the next COP starting immediately after COP 16. Following this provision, and as a result of the consultations reached with the accredited CSOs, the following members were appointed:
 - (a) Ms. Marioldy Sánchez Santivañez from the Association for Integral Research and Development (AIDER) (Peru), representing Latin America and the Caribbean and serving as Chair;
 - (b) Mr. Amiya Prapan Chakra Borty from Dhrubotara Youth Development Foundation (Bangladesh), representing Asia;
 - (c) Ms. Ellen Otaru-Okoedion from the Journalist Environmental Association of Tanzania (United Republic of Tanzania), representing Africa;
 - (d) Mr. Andrew Morris from the British Society of Soil Science (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), representing Western Europe.
6. As the secretariat did not receive applications from accredited CSOs from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) for this membership renewal, the CSO Panel suggested that the CEE representative of the previous CSO Panel, Ms. Sopiko Babalashvili (Georgia), could continue representing this regional group until the end of this CSO Panel term.
7. Since 8 April 2025, the CSO Panel has met nine times with the secretariat and eight times in its capacity as 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 accredited CSOs at the

session. The CSO Panel also held daily meetings during the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 23), organized in Panama from 1–5 December 2025, to coordinate the CSO input into the deliberations of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). It is expected that the CSO 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 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 CSOs, keeping them informed about the Convention’s meetings and processes. During the current biennium, the secretariat has supported the CSO Panel to ensure its active participation in implementing the Convention at all levels, coordinating the engagement of their constituencies, sharing relevant information for the civil society and leading the engagement of the non-governmental 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 the follow-up to the recommendations made by the CSO Panel.

9. As a result of the outreach of the secretariat and the CSO Panel, the number of CSOs 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 number of CSOs for consideration by the COP will be included in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/INF.6](#).

10. The secretariat facilitated the participation of the accredited CSOs in CRIC 23. CSOs were able to present their position on each agenda item, 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 a generous contribution from Switzerland) and the participation of the CSOs in meetings of the subsidiary bodies. The secretariat has also secured limited additional resources that will enable CSO representatives, Indigenous Peoples, and 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 new CSO representatives to serve as observers to the Science–Policy Interface (SPI) (one observer) and the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework of the Convention (IWG-FSF) (two observers) 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 (GEF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Drynet and the CSO Panel in the implementation of the medium-sized GEF project Strengthening Civil Society Role in Achieving Land Degradation (CS4LDN).¹ Launched at COP 16, the project has supported work to increase the capacities and recognition of the CSOs in facilitating adherence to land degradation neutrality (LDN) principles in policies, programmes and investments.

14. The project, led by Drynet, Both ENDS and IUCN, is receiving USD 2 million in funding 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

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

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

(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 of the project Drynet and IUCN have organized four UNCCD LDN webinars, published three newsletters and relaunched the Drynet website as a knowledge portal. Two side events took place at the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025, and an online preparatory meeting was held for CRIC 23. Twelve 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 and investment proposal development convened in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean in June and July 2026, targeting grassroots to medium-sized organizations 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 such 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 COP 16 led to the Sacred Land Declaration² and a request in decision 5/COP.16 for the preparation of a TOR for the creation a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities.

18. Since the adoption of decision 5/COP.16, the work of the secretariat has being aimed at ensuring that Indigenous Peoples, Parties, United Nations organizations and other partners are helping identify ways and means 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 TOR.

19. In this regard, the secretariat has engaged with the members of the United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) during its twenty-fourth and twenty fifth 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 during which the representatives of the Rio conventions presented the work of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)), the establishment of the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) (Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)) and the creation of the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples.

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

21. Additionally, there were consultations with Indigenous Peoples organizations during global observance of Desertification and Drought Day held in Bogotá on 17 June 2025, with members of the International Land Coalition, on the sidelines of the thirteenth meeting of the Facilitative Working Group of the LCIPP as well as the resumed sixteenth session of the

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

Conference of the Parties to the CBD (CBD COP 16) and the 2025 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Science & Innovation Forum 2025.

22. During CRIC 23, session 1 of the Gender Caucus was devoted to the leadership and worldviews of Indigenous women for sustainable land management (SLM). Indigenous Peoples representatives took part in the session, highlighting the ongoing gaps in land ownership, decision making and access to financing and demonstrating how Indigenous women’s knowledge and leadership directly support community resilience and SLM.

23. Since COP 16, the active participation of Indigenous Peoples within the UNCCD process has been essential for the preparation of the TOR for the creation of their caucus. Section IV below describes their participation and engagement in the preparation of the TOR.

2. Local communities

24. The Convention is one of the few MEAs that recognizes the value of traditional and local knowledge and the importance of local communities in the implementation of the Convention and their engagement in reporting, the preparation of the national action programmes, and the management of land resources.

25. In implementing decision 5/COP.16, 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 thirtieth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (UNFCCC COP 30), the Facilitative Working Group of the LCIPP, the Global Alliance for Rangelands and Pastoralists as well as the constituencies within the CBD and the United Nations Environmental Assembly.

26. Document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/10](#) includes more detailed information related to engagement with pastoralists.

27. Section V below includes more information on the consultations carried out with the local communities for preparing the TOR for the creation of their caucus.

3. Youth

28. The UNCCD recognizes youth as key changemakers. Over the last few years, thanks to the various initiatives, including the establishment of the UNCCD Youth Caucus, the Land Heroes campaign and the Land Youth Negotiators Programme, the youth’s potential has been proven in spearheading the desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) initiatives.

29. Under the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy (YES), young people engaged in Youth Conferences and Youth Caucuses at COP 16 in Riyadh and at CRIC 23, presented recommendations, advocated for LDN, and explored pathways to decent green and land-based employment for youth.

30. In the area of advocacy, the secretariat continued the promotion and engagement of young ambassadors through the UNCCD Land Heroes campaign.³ 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 COP 17, and the secretariat is expecting to launch another call to select the next generation of Land Heroes that will continue with this work.

31. The Group of 20 Global Land Initiative (G20 GLI) 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. These activities are as follows:

(a) G20 GLI supported 225 ecopreneurs through its YECO programme in 2025. In 2026, the third cohort of YECO will be launched and continue to expand the G20 GLI engagements supporting ecopreneurs in Brazil and Kenya, focusing on supporting early-stage

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

ecopreneurs through awareness-raising and ideation and helping identify promising solutions to nurture from the ground up;

(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,⁴ 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 COP 16 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 ability of the Caucus to mobilize young people across regions, support knowledge exchange, and facilitate meaningful participation in UNCCD processes. The Youth Caucus has also been working closely with YOUNGO (the official children and youth constituency of the UNFCCC) and the Global Youth Biodiversity Network to present common positions and strengthen synergies among 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 CSOs, 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, including the Decent Jobs for Youth platform, which is managed by the International Labour Organization.

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

⁴ <https://unccdyouthcaucus.org/>.

4. Women's organizations

37. The secretariat, together with the CSO Panel, has been engaging with women's organizations to gather their input and contributions in the areas of awareness-raising, decision-making processes and capacity-building. Several CSO representatives have been actively involved in the work of the UNCCD Gender Caucus by participating in the online meetings and consultations as well as in the event organized on the sidelines of CRIC 23 in Panama.

38. Women's organizations have also benefited from the capacity-building programmes organized by the European Union for female delegates prior to CRIC 23 and COP 17 as well as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) programme entitled "Women's Empowerment for Resilient Rural Areas". Both programmes also facilitated the participation of CSO female representatives attending CRIC 23 and will also support their participation in 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 UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties 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 who won the gold with Team Netherlands at both the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Paralympic Games. 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 on the margins of the Bonn Climate Change Conference in June 2025 highlighting the urgent need for disability-inclusive strategies in tackling DLDD.

III. Implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy

44. Pursuant to decision 5/COP.16, paragraph 7, the secretariat is preparing a comprehensive assessment of youth engagement in the implementation of the Convention and identifying 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 YES.

46. As of the end of April, the team has been working on 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 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 on 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 in 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 YES as the guiding framework for youth participation, partnerships, capacity-building and support within the UNCCD. The analysis is being structured around the four strategic objectives of the YES (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 of the report is scheduled for submission in May 2026 and will include a clear assessment of the current state of youth engagement, an analysis of the effectiveness of the 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 in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/INF.5](#).

IV. Terms of reference for the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples

52. Indigenous Peoples represent approximately 476–500 million people worldwide. Indigenous Peoples own or manage at least one quarter of world’s land surface.⁵ 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 stewarded land, territories and various natural resources sustainably, harnessing the ecosystem services and securing the benefits for subsequent generations. Their traditional and customary authorities govern the ownership, access and use of their lands and territories that have kept people, lands and biodiversity thriving in harmonious coexistence.

54. UNCCD recognizes the vital role of Indigenous Peoples and their traditional knowledge systems in addressing 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 silvopastoral 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. Decision 5/COP.16 requested the secretariat to convene consultations to strengthen Indigenous Peoples participation, support the development of a TOR for the creation of a

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

Caucus for Indigenous Peoples that reflects Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and priorities, and report at COP 17 on progress made.

56. Since the decision was taken by the Parties, the secretariat, thanks to support from 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) UNPFII at its twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth sessions;
- (b) Facilitative Working Group of the UNFCCC LCIPP;
- (c) African gatherings for 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 Programme;
- (g) Dedicated regional webinars with Indigenous representatives and relevant organizations;
- (h) Consultations with the members of the seven sociocultural 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 following relevant established practices and institutional precedents identified, with particular references to experiences and arrangements under the Rio conventions:

- (a) The CBD, including Articles 8 (j) and 10 (c), and the creation of the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities body at CBD COP 16 in Cali, Colombia;
- (b) UNFCCC LCIPP and its Facilitative Working Group;
- (c) The participatory engagement models of the UNCCD Gender and Youth caucus;
- (d) The engagement of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) with Indigenous Peoples on Indigenous Peoples and their communities;
- (e) The Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development and the Indigenous Peoples-led Global Coordinating Committee.

58. After all these consultations, the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples 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 twenty-fifth session of the UNPFII held in April 2026, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues welcomed "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 People's 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."⁶

⁶ Document E/C.19/2026/L.8, paragraph 2.

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

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

(b) The Caucus for Indigenous Peoples, which was established as a constitutive engagement body within Convention processes. It 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. As a constitutive body, membership of the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples should maintain a regional representation model between Indigenous Peoples' seven sociocultural regions and Parties' five United Nations regional groups (i.e. 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 DLDD, land restoration, drought resilience and SLM, including through engagement with the Committee on Science and Technology and the 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 for Indigenous Peoples 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; support follow-up and implementation of relevant COP decisions; and 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 Caucus for Indigenous Peoples may operationalize its work through four mutually reinforcing functional pillars:

(a) Supporting the participation and representation of 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 the follow-up to and visibility of relevant COP decisions and UNCCD initiatives concerning Indigenous Peoples.

65. The modalities and mechanisms for the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples' engagement, member selection, operationalization, consultations and relations with the UNCCD, as well as the elements related to the resources, meetings, review and amendment and entry into force of the TOR will be finalized in consultation with the Parties during May 2026.

66. The draft TOR will be presented to the Parties and Indigenous Peoples representatives so it can be checked against consultation inputs. They can also improve clarity where needed and build shared ownership ahead of its consideration at COP 17. The TOR that resulted from the final consultations will be available in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/INF.5](#).

V. Terms of reference for the Caucus for Local Communities

67. Decision 5/COP.16 requested the secretariat to convene consultations to strengthen local communities' participation, support the development of a TOR for a Caucus for Local Communities that reflects local communities' perspectives and priorities, and report at COP 17 on progress made.

68. In this regard, work was carried out in a practical and inclusive framework so local communities could engage in UNCCD processes, shaped through consultations 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 ran global and regional consultations with representatives of local communities. The next steps include consultations with Parties foreseen by the beginning of May as well as the final validation with local communities before the end of May.

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

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

- (a) Observer-based participation;
- (b) Facilitative coordination roles;
- (c) Community validation;
- (d) Rotation of membership; 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 local communities' 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 local communities' 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 organizations and networks anchored in local communities. 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-centralization.

74. Drawing on the results of the consultation and the comparative review, a draft TOR for a Caucus for Local Communities was prepared, which:

(a) Includes the mandate and scope, positioning the caucus as a self-organized, observer-based, consultative interface to support local communities' engagement across the 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) 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 TOR will be presented to the Parties and local community representatives so it can be checked against consultation inputs. They can also improve clarity where needed and build shared ownership ahead of its consideration at COP 17. 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. Decision 5/COP.16 requested the secretariat, subject to the availability of resources, to compile rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of CSOs in MEAs and United Nations bodies for consideration at COP 17.

77. The adequate financial resources necessary to work on the compilation of rules of procedure and practices were secured during the month of March 2025, 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 April 2026 included the desk review of the rules of procedure approved by the UNFCCC and CBD and informal exchanges with the UNFCCC and CBD secretariats to gather information on both the approved rules of procedures and the standard practices for the participation of CSOs.

79. For CSOs to attend the sessions of COPs and subsidiary body meetings of all three Rio conventions, there is an accreditation/admission process for observers, which requires the formal approval by the Parties. Each Rio convention requests the secretariats to notify the COP on the interest of the observers to attend the session. In this regard, the secretariats are in charge of compiling the required documents and making a recommendation to the COP on the consideration of the observers at the beginning of the session.

80. The Rio conventions' rules of procedure indicate that observers could attend 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 in all rules of procedures of the Rio conventions).

81. In the case of contact groups or informal settings, each process has a different way of addressing observer participation. For instance, by UNFCCC decision 18/CP.4 on the attendance of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) at contact groups, the UNFCCC COP decided that the presiding officers of Convention bodies may invite representatives of IGOs and NGOs 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 IGOs and NGOs; and invited 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 IGOs and NGOs at that contact group under the conditions set out in paragraph 1 above. According to practice since that decision was taken, all contact groups have been opened to IGOs and NGOs with no exceptions. In the case of CBD, there is no similar decision by the CBD COP, but observers can attend the contact groups unless the chair indicates that the meeting is closed.

82. After the preliminary assessment of the rules of procedure, practices and decisions taken by the Conferences of the Parties to the other Rio conventions, some key elements emerged that could assist the Parties moving forward:

(a) Since UNFCCC decision 18/CP.4 was taken, CSOs 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 under the 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 UNCCD regarding contact groups.

83. The full report with the relevant information and a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat (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 Civil Society Organization 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 in 2025, held virtually on 8 April, Ms. Marioldy Sánchez Santivañez from AIDER was elected as its chair.

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

86. In accordance with 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 nine virtual meetings and two in-person meetings and expected to have at least three more virtual meetings before COP 17. Holding these virtual monthly meetings was crucial to keeping the CSO Panel actively involved in the actions and events happening under the Convention. The preparation, leadership and reporting of the meetings were entrusted to CSO Panel members on a rotational basis. In addition, the five CSO Panel members held eight 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 CSOs and caucuses in UNCCD processes;

- (c) Visibility of CSOs and caucuses within the UNCCD;
- (d) Strategic positioning of CSOs and 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. Coordination of the civil society organizations

1. Preparation and participation at the twenty-third session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

89. The CSO Panel coordinated the preparations of the CSOs for CRIC 23, which was held from 1 to 5 December 2025 in Panama. To this end, the CSO Panel organized a consultation process via two online meetings with accredited CSOs on 16 October 2025 and 12 November 2025. These consultations helped CSOs develop key messages for CRIC 23⁷ in three languages, which were validated and disseminated by the accredited CSOs. 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, the development of key messages for advocacy, and side event planning. The members comprised CSOs from all regions who were present in person at CRIC 23 and those who were able to participate virtually.

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 statements⁸ for each of the CRIC 23 agenda items.

2. Organization of the seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties

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 drought-resilient territories, which 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 on drought-resilient territories⁹ that informed Désertif'actions deliberations. CSO Panel members also attended and participated actively in Désertif'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, valorization of local knowledge and the strengthening of political ambition for addressing the drought and land degradation crisis. The Désertif'actions 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 held ahead of COP 17 to organize working groups, collect inputs, and validate key messages. One in-person meeting for COP 17 preparation is planned to take place at the venue in Ulaanbaatar.

3. Actions undertaken by the Civil Society Organization Panel for strengthening the engagement of 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-

⁷ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/11Kpm2cSe0eIwQex9WkOaARRP5a4M0JYQ>.

⁸ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ry-XfKHGkk4QmcoS9nRdBasEEk916C8o/view>.

⁹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_1F2vWtCZZG1LuZa90I95_zyA8LirgkG/view.

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 the CSOs mailing list and social media, thereby increasing the availability of high-quality and timely information for CSOs. This information was shared in English, French and Spanish.

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

96. Together with the secretariat, the CSO Panel facilitated the election process for an alternate CSO observer to the SPI, CSO representatives in the IWG-FSF and a representative for the Steering Committee of the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership. The elected CSOs report back regularly to the CSO 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 Youth Caucus, the Gender Caucus, Indigenous Peoples representatives and Drynet.

98. In addition, the CSO Panel 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 the visibility of the UNCCD agenda and the role of CSOs in the Convention, as indicated in the full report in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/INF.5](#).

5. Lessons learned

100. CSO Panel members have mainly collaborated online, and they also benefited from the positive effects of face-to-face meetings during CRIC 23 and Désertif'ation. The CSO Panel recommends that arrangements be made for a transitional handover to the newly elected Panel of at least six months to allow for a sustainable and consistent transition, successful continuation of work and avoidance of repetition/duplication of work.

101. At the time this document was prepared, the number of accredited and provisionally accredited CSOs number close to 1,700. Given the challenge for the CSO Panel and the secretariat to engage with an increasing number of accredited CSOs, considering the diversity of languages, livelihoods, geographical predisposition, political situations and access to communication tools, the work of the CSO Panel requires of more resources and tools to facilitate information dissemination, consultations, translations, accessibility and capacity-building activities for CSOs in multiple languages and formats.

102. The coordination role of the CSO Panel has been expanded with the establishment of new initiatives related to civil society participation in the UNCCD (caucuses, global programmes and projects, etc.). New opportunities for strengthening the contributions of CSOs to the implementation of the Convention are arising under this scenario. In this sense, it is necessary to find new strategies for strengthening the CSO Panel, considering challenges related to the length of its mandate (biennium), digital communication tools and translation, among other things.

103. Considering the expertise and knowledge of CSOs representatives in the Panel, it is crucial to implement mechanisms to retain the trained CSO Panel members as a "pool of resources" for collaboration in capacity-building and consultations with CSOs and the secretariat for various levels and thematic areas.

104. The CSO Panel appreciates the CSO participation in and contributions to the IWG-FSF and the SPI and recommends more collaborative engagements with CSOs.

105. As CSOs are key partners in the implementation of the UNCCD agenda at the national level, the CSO Panel therefore urges Parties, through their national focal points, to include CSOs' input in their national reports through regular meetings and participation in local forums.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

106. The role played by CSOs, 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.

107. The CSO Panel has expanded its role of supporting the active engagement of CSOs, ensuring that those experiencing vulnerabilities are aware of the priorities and the work of the secretariat and the Parties. The representatives of the CSO Panel have worked on a voluntary basis to ensure the coordination and the sharing of information among the non-governmental actors.

108. The Parties and other actors have already commenced the implementation of the YES. Youth are a powerful force in the implementation of the Convention and are ready to assume their position to support the efforts made by governments. Parties may wish to harness this momentum and include young people as one of the emerging issues to be addressed at COP 18.

109. After eighteen months of consultations, Indigenous Peoples have developed a consolidated TOR for the creation of their constituted caucus to ensure their meaningful engagement with 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 these groups to play a more active role in the implementation of the Convention.

110. The UNCCD does not regulate the participation of CSOs in contact groups, while other processes (UNFCCC and CBD) generally allow participation unless there are objections from Parties or the meeting chair.

111. Elements from these conclusions are presented in the form of a draft decision for the consideration of Parties in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/12](#).