ADVANCE COPY*

~~ICCD~~/~~COP(17)/8~~

Convention to Combat Desertification

~~Distr.: General~~
~~3 June 2026~~

~~Original: English~~

Conference of the Parties
Seventeenth session
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 17–28 August 2026
Item 5 of the provisional agenda
Policy frameworks and thematic issues

The positive role that measures taken under the Convention can play to address desertification, land degradation and drought as one of the drivers that causes migration

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This note responds to the request made to the secretariat in decision 23/COP.16 to report on progress made to the Conference of the Parties at its seventeenth session (COP 17). It highlights the activities undertaken by the secretariat and the Global Mechanism since COP 16 regarding the positive role that measures taken under the Convention can play to address desertification, land degradation and drought as one of the drivers that causes migration.

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I. Introduction

1. COP decisions on migration have highlighted the positive role that sustainable land management (SLM) can play in promoting stable livelihoods, food security and employment creation for rural communities, thereby establishing the enabling conditions for them to remain on their land or ensuring that rural out-migration is safe and voluntary. Specifically, Parties have requested guidance on governance frameworks that can be used to more effectively manage urban–rural linkages (URLs) and reduce their negative impacts on land and livelihoods in rural areas. They also requested assistance on developing resource mobilization strategies to leverage private sources of investment or to establish integrated initiatives that address land degradation as one of the drivers of migration and displacement.

II. Urban–rural linkages and land

2. In decision 23/COP16, Parties welcomed the collaboration established between the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), as well as the publication of the "Primer on urban-rural linkages and land" in 2024.[1] The Primer identifies the key functional characteristics of URLs that pose unique challenges to the health and productivity of the land, and describes the relevant URL actors, approaches and tools that can be used to enhance land degradation neutrality initiatives. In the same decision, Parties requested further support to strengthen URLs through territorial governance systems, and for the Primer to be used as guidance.

3. Land and territorial governance frameworks are still largely focused on fixed boundaries and area-based measures. While these approaches are necessary, they are often insufficient to address the flows of people, goods and services that generate pressures and impacts on land, water and livelihoods. Governance systems often fail to recognize that decisions taken in one jurisdiction can have harmful social, economic and environmental outcomes in nearby or distant ones. As a result, many URLs that tend to drive land degradation and rural out-migration are not well understood and adequately considered in the relevant political and administrative spheres of land governance and management.

4. A note developed with UN-Habitat and published by the secretariat, with funding from China, introduces the Flows-to-Action Framework – a phased approach to the application of flow-based governance strategies and response measures. The framework integrates an evidence-based governance logic into existing policy, planning and decision-making processes to more effectively manage URL flows and their functional interdependencies, with a focus on the indirect and distant drivers of land degradation, migration and rural decline:

(a) Flow-based governance can complement and strengthen existing territorial governance approaches by making URL flows more visible and actionable. Flow-based governance does not require new institutions or major reforms. Proactively and responsibly managing priority flows of goods and services (e.g., food, water, energy) can support sustainable land and water management, diversify rural livelihood opportunities, and promote greater urban–rural equality, while avoiding or reducing migration and displacement;

(b) Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are necessary to govern URL flows and their supporting infrastructure and networks, enabling cooperation and coordination among actors and across territories. Collaboration around a shared goal to avoid and reduce URL impacts on land and livelihoods is an essential part of a unified, integrated governance framework; one that leverages legal, regulatory, and budgetary procedures to foster a culture of responsibility and sustainability;

[1] See https://www.unccd.int/resources/publications/primer-urban-rural-linkages-and-land.

(c) Ensuring transparency and accountability for the risks and responsibilities associated with URL flows can help prevent demand-driven risks, pressures and impacts from being disproportionately transferred to rural areas. The evidence base for flow-based governance strategies should be developed using robust data and information systems that align functional and spatial planning across different sectors and scales. Ultimately, URL flow interdependencies must be recognized as a legitimate governance responsibility, normalized within collaborative planning and management practices, with the aim of diversifying livelihood opportunities and avoiding harmful impacts in rural areas.

III. Related knowledge products

5. In collaboration with partners, the secretariat produced two significant reports in 2025 that explore integrated approaches aiming to simultaneously address land degradation and improve rural livelihoods.

6. With the Convention on Migratory Species and other partners, the "Global Land Outlook Thematic Report on Ecological Connectivity and Land Restoration" was launched at the International Union for Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress in October 2025.[2] Ecological connectivity is a broad concept that considers the biotic and abiotic structures and functions that support healthy populations and the delivery of the ecosystem services underpinning our societies and economies. For instance, clean air and water, pollination and pest control, soil erosion and flood control, and climate regulation are all dependent on ecological connectivity. Connectivity allows for the flow of resources, information and species which are necessary for enhancing the resilience of socioecological systems in the face of climate change, land degradation, drought and biodiversity loss. Restoring and maintaining ecological connectivity is often considered an essential element in land restoration initiatives aiming to regenerate natural capital for long-term resilience and stable rural development.

7. With the International Institute for Sustainable Development and the United Nations University Vice-Rectorate in Europe, "A natural fit: Renewable energy and sustainable land management" was published in December 2025.[3] A webinar in January 2026 highlighted how combining renewable energy development and sustainable land, water and grazing management practices can support multiple socioeconomic and development objectives.[4] These dual-use systems can provide clean energy alternatives to the millions of people who still lack access to electricity and rely on traditional biomass for cooking. Improved access to low-cost, clean energy at the farm and community levels provides critical support for sustainable water use in agriculture, zero-emission farm machinery, and food processing and storage that can reduce food loss, improve supply chain integration and enhance community resilience. The adoption of renewable energy technologies is closely linked to the effective implementation of the three Rio conventions, offering numerous entry points for scaling up projects and programmes that integrate renewable energy and SLM.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

8. The COP recognizes that desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) are among the factors that can contribute to migration and displacement, particularly by affecting food and nutritional security, and livelihoods, and by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and pressures. While migration is influenced by a range of social, economic and political factors, available evidence indicates that DLDD can play an important role in shaping migration dynamics.

[2] See https://www.unccd.int/resources/reports/glo-thematic-report-ecological-connectivity-and-land-restoration.

[3] See https://www.unccd.int/resources/reports/natural-fit-renewable-energy-and-sustainable-land-management.

[4] See https://www.iisd.org/publications/report/renewable-energy-land-management.

9. A 2023 study on Central Asia, commissioned by the UNCCD, finds that, while migration is primarily influenced by socioeconomic factors, DLDD can contribute to migration dynamics, particularly by affecting livelihoods and exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. The study shows that these linkages can be observed across different levels of society, from small-scale farmer households to broader institutional contexts.[5]

10. Available evidence further indicates that DLDD can exacerbate socioeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly where livelihoods depend directly on land, water and ecosystem services. Recent analysis by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) highlights that land degradation affects agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods and food security,[6] while the World Bank's Groundswell work identifies water scarcity and declining crop productivity as factors able to shape internal climate migration, and highlights the importance of green, inclusive and resilient development responses.[7] Recent international policy discussions, including the Group of Seven (G7) declaration on desertification and security, have also recognized DLDD as systemic environmental, economic, social and security challenges contributing to migration and displacement, and emphasized the importance of integrated, coordinated and forward-looking action to strengthen resilience and promote sustainable management and restoration in affected landscapes.[8]

11. Addressing DLDD through sustainable land and water management, drought resilience, improved governance of urban–rural linkages and other integrated approaches can contribute to reducing risks and vulnerabilities associated with migration and displacement, while strengthening livelihoods, resilience and long-term socioeconomic stability in affected rural areas.

12. Building on existing work, including the Initiative on Sustainability, Stability and Security (3S), the COP may wish to further explore the ways and means of further strengthening coordinated efforts among United Nations entities, international and regional organizations and other relevant stakeholders to promote the positive role that sustainable land, soil and water management, conservation and restoration can play in addressing DLDD as one of the drivers of migration, displacement and other forms of human mobility, while contributing to resilience, stability and security.

13. The COP may also wish to explore ways and means of integrating considerations related to displacement and other forms of human mobility into relevant national planning frameworks, including national action programmes to combat DLDD, with a view to strengthening anticipatory planning, risk-informed decision-making and investments in resilience-building efforts in affected areas.

14. The COP may further wish to explore ways and means of strengthening anticipatory planning, early warning systems and drought preparedness frameworks, including through improved data and information-sharing on the linkages between DLDD and human mobility, in order to support timely and integrated responses that reduce vulnerabilities associated with displacement, particularly in fragile and vulnerable contexts.

15. The COP may wish to explore the ways and means of scaling up context-specific land and water management responses that increase agricultural productivity, food security, freshwater availability and stable livelihoods in rural areas.

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[5] See https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2023-08/Study%20migration%20Central%20Asia%20full%20ENG.pdf.

[6] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2025. The State of Food and Agriculture 2025 – Addressing land degradation across landholding scales. Rome. https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd7067en.

[7] Clement, Viviane; Rigaud, Kanta Kumari; de Sherbinin, Alex; Jones, Bryan; Adamo, Susana; Schewe, Jacob; Sadiq, Nian; Shabahat, Elham. 2021. Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration. © World Bank. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/36248.

[8] See https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2026-g7-france-ministerial-meetings-environment-ministers-ministers-language-desertification-and-security.

16. The COP may also wish to request the secretariat and the Global Mechanism to develop strategies and initiatives to assist countries in their efforts to implement sustainable land and water management practices that increase sustainability, stability and security, particularly in rural areas, thereby contributing to resilience, supporting communities to remain in-place where they choose to do so, and addressing some of the underlying drivers of displacement and other forms of human mobility.