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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 organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Note by the secretariat

Summary

Document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/3](#) contains information related to the engagement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Given the size limitation of official documents, the present document includes the full reports requested from the secretariat regarding the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy, the draft terms of reference of the caucus for Indigenous Peoples and the caucus for local communities and compiles rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organizations in the Rio conventions.



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I. Background

1. The present document complements the information contained in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/3](#) titled “Participation and involvement of civil society in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification”.
2. It includes the reports and terms of reference (TORs) requested of the secretariat by decision 5/COP.16, which could not fit in document [ICCD/COP\(17\)/3](#) due to their size and the necessity to finalize consultations with Parties and observers. These elements are the assessment of the implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy (YES), the draft TOR for the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples, the draft TOR for the Caucus for Local Communities, and the compilation of the rules of procedure for the engagement of civil society organizations.

II. Implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy

A. Introduction

3. Youth inclusion and participation in environmental decision-making processes were recognized as early as 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992).¹ Chapter 25 of the Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development emphasizes the importance of youth participation in decision-making at national, regional and global levels through consultations, dialogue, involvement in policy processes, education, project implementation, employment opportunities, and support for youth in building networks. This recognition positioned young people not merely as beneficiaries of sustainable development, but as critical stakeholders and partners in shaping environmental governance.
4. Over the years, this global commitment has continued to evolve, with increasing acknowledgement that meaningful youth engagement goes beyond symbolic participation. It requires deliberate structures, sustained investment, and inclusive approaches that reflect the diversity of young people across different regions and socioeconomic contexts (United Nations, Youth2030 Global Progress Report, 2025).² In this regard, youth are not a homogeneous group; their experiences, access to opportunities, and ability to engage in decision-making processes vary significantly depending on geography, resources and institutional support (United Nations, Youth2030 Global Progress Report, 2025).
5. In line with this broader global agenda, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has developed, to date, several mechanisms to engage youth within its processes, recognizing both their potential and the need to create enabling environments for their participation.³ A milestone in this journey was the first UNCCD Youth Forum, held in Ordos, China, in 2017, which brought together approx. 200 young people from 25 countries.⁴ The forum focused on empowering youth to contribute to efforts to combat desertification and promote sustainable land management (SLM), marking an important step in creating dedicated spaces for youth dialogue and engagement within the Convention.
6. Building on this momentum, youth engagement within the UNCCD process was further formalized in 2019 through decision 5/COP.15, paragraph 4.⁵ Since then, a number of initiatives have been established to strengthen youth participation. These include the establishment of the UNCCD Youth Caucus (UYC) as a coordination and advocacy platform, the introduction of the Land Heroes awards to recognize youth-led contributions, and the establishment of capacity-building programmes such as the Land Youth Negotiators

¹ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/168679?v=pdf>.

² <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en/youth2030/progress-report>.

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

⁴ <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/youth/global-youth-initiative-combating-desertification>.

⁵ https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-10/5_cop15.pdf.

Academy.⁶ These initiatives, among others, reflect a growing commitment to embedding youth engagement across different dimensions of the Convention, ranging from advocacy and recognition to technical capacity development and participation in negotiations.⁷

7. Youth engagement within the UNCCD framework is currently guided by the UNCCD Youth Engagement Strategy and Action Plan 2024 (YES), which provides a structured approach to strengthening youth participation. The YES seeks to empower young people at the national level while enhancing their meaningful participation at regional and global levels. It places particular emphasis on advancing youth-focused policies, fostering partnerships, providing financial and technical support, and building capacity and networks.⁸

8. Despite these advancements, questions remain regarding the extent to which youth engagement within the UNCCD process is effective, inclusive and impactful. While multiple initiatives and platforms have been established, there is a growing need to assess whether these efforts translate into meaningful participation and influence in decision-making processes. Understanding the real impact of youth engagement, identifying existing gaps and highlighting best practices are essential steps towards strengthening the role of youth within the Convention.

9. It is within this context that this report has been developed. This report responds to [decision 5/COP.16](#), paragraph 7,⁹ which requests the secretariat to include in its reporting an assessment of youth engagement in the implementation of the Convention and provide best practices for accelerating meaningful youth participation in UNCCD meetings and processes. Furthermore, paragraph 15 of the same decision requests the secretariat to report on the implementation of this decision at the seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 17), which is scheduled to take place in Mongolia.¹⁰ Therefore, this report will focus on the following objectives:

(a) Objectives 1 – To assess the impact of youth engagement in the implementation of the UNCCD, including participation in policy development, negotiations, capacity-building initiatives, and implementation-related activities;

(b) Objective 2 – To evaluate the adoption, implementation and effectiveness of the YES in guiding youth participation, partnerships and capacity-building within the UNCCD framework;

(c) Objective 3 – To identify and document best practices that have enabled meaningful and effective youth participation in the UNCCD process, as well as gaps, challenges, and lessons learned in youth engagement

B. Assessment of youth engagement in implementation of the Convention

1. Background

10. This chapter focuses on five key initiatives that are either youth-led or youth-inclusive and currently being implemented within the UNCCD process. These initiatives include the UYC, the Land Youth Negotiators Programme (LYNP), the UNCCD Youth Forum (UYF), the Land Heroes campaign and the Youth Ecopreneur Programme (YECO). This chapter seeks to provide an analysis of these initiatives by assessing their objectives, implementation approaches, impact, and contribution towards strengthening meaningful youth participation within the UNCCD framework. The chapter further examines how these initiatives align with the YES and contribute towards advancing youth inclusion at national, regional and global levels. Table 1 below highlights the purpose of the initiative, evidence of meaningful youth engagement, benefits to youth, and challenges and gaps.

Table 1

⁶ <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/youth/land-heroes>.

⁷ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/other/unccd-youth-engagement-strategy>.

⁸ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/other/unccd-youth-engagement-strategy>.

⁹ <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2025-03/5-cop16.pdf>.

¹⁰ <https://www.unccd.int/cop17>.

Youth engagement assessment table

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Evidence of meaningful youth engagement</i>	<i>Benefits to youth</i>	<i>Challenges and gaps</i>
UNCCD Youth Caucus (UYC)	Represent youth within UNCCD processes.	-Youth now have a recognized constituency able to engage directly with Parties, the secretariat and other stakeholders. -Youth recommendations are increasingly reflected in negotiation outcome documents -The UYC is youth-led, ensuring regional balance and an inclusive space for all youth to participate.	-Expanded networking, leadership opportunities, regional coordination and policy engagement -Membership has grown substantially. -Funding opportunity to participate at Conference of the Parties (COPs), Committees for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention and other important meetings.	-Representation at COPs remains unequal because participation depends on funding, particularly affecting the Global South.
Land Youth Negotiators Programme (LYNP)	Capacitate young negotiators.	-Moves beyond consultation and activism by equipping youth to participate directly in decision-making as members of national delegations.	-Builds negotiation skills, technical knowledge, leadership and access to international policy processes. -The LYNP is scaling up from 100 young negotiators from 35 countries to 155 negotiators from 44 countries in the 2026–2027 cohort.	-Participation depends on government nomination and available funding.
UNCCD Youth Forum (UYF)	Create space for dialogue and collective youth action.	-Facilitates direct interaction between youth, Parties and partners. -Contributed to advocacy leading to the Youth Engagement Strategy and provides a platform for the Youth Declaration to be shared with and submitted to Parties.	-Strengthens peer learning, networking, confidence and collaboration among youth organizations. -Youth participation has increased over the years from 200 youth participants at the thirteenth session of the COP (COP 13) to 300 at COP 16.	-Physical participation remains inaccessible for many due to travel costs and accreditation requirements.
Land Heroes campaign	Recognizes and promotes outstanding youth-led initiatives contributing to land restoration	-Demonstrates that young people are implementing the Convention on the ground by recognizing successful youth-led restoration initiatives and showcasing good practices globally.	-Gives exposure to youth leaders. -Encourages hard work in the implementation of UNCCD objectives.	-To date, 20 young people have benefited directly since 2020. -Benefits are limited to a

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Evidence of meaningful youth engagement</i>	<i>Benefits to youth</i>	<i>Challenges and gaps</i>
	and sustainable land management (SLM).		-Travelling opportunities to important UNCCD discussions.	relatively small number of awardees, with limited follow-up support to help scale successful initiatives.
Youth Ecopreneur Programme (YECO)	Empowers young entrepreneurs developing innovative land restoration and green business solutions.	-Enables young people to translate knowledge into practical action through entrepreneurship, innovation and SLM.	Provides training, mentoring, coaching and business development support. The programme has mobilized investment, restored degraded land, created green jobs and strengthened youth livelihoods.	-The programme currently reaches a limited number of young people and relies on continued partner investment and external funding for expansion.

2. Youth engagement analysis

11. The YES provides the overarching framework for youth engagement under the Convention. Overall, the assessment indicates that youth engagement has evolved from ad hoc consultations to a more institutionalized and meaningful approach. Through initiatives such as the UYC, UYF, LYNP, the Land Heroes campaign and the YECO, the Convention has created formal mechanisms that strengthen youth participation in governance, policy development, leadership, capacity-building and the implementation of SLM initiatives. These mechanisms have also supported youth entrepreneurship and contributed to the creation of green jobs.

12. The UYC has become the primary platform for coordinating youth engagement by connecting young people directly with the secretariat, Parties and other stakeholders. Through the UYC, young people have benefited from capacity-building programmes, stronger regional and global networks, and increased opportunities to participate in key UNCCD processes, including Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and Committees for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRICs). Membership growth from approximately 200 in 2019 to around 4,000 in 2026 further demonstrates increasing demand for an organized youth platform.

13. The UYF complements the work of the UYC by providing a dedicated platform for intergenerational dialogue, peer learning and collaboration during COPs. Beyond networking, the UYF enables young people to develop common positions, exchange experiences and present collective recommendations through the Youth Declaration. It also played an important role in advocating for and increasing the visibility of the YES. These achievements indicate that the UYF has strengthened the quality of youth engagement by fostering collaboration and creating opportunities for direct interaction with Parties and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, its impact is limited by the high costs of attending COPs, making participation inaccessible for many young people.

14. The LYNP represents one of the strongest examples of meaningful youth engagement under the UNCCD. Rather than limiting young people to observer roles, the programme equips them with the technical knowledge, negotiation skills and practical experience needed to participate effectively as members of official Party delegations. Through training, mentoring and continuous engagement, the programme has strengthened the capacity of young negotiators to contribute directly to multilateral decision-making. The programme's

expansion from 100 negotiators representing 35 countries in 2024–2025 to 155 negotiators from 44 countries in 2026–2027 demonstrates growing recognition of the value of youth participation in negotiations. However, participation remains dependent on nomination by national focal points (NFPs) and the availability of financial support, limiting access for young people in some countries.

15. The assessment also demonstrates that meaningful youth engagement extends beyond participation in policy processes. The Land Heroes campaign recognizes and amplifies outstanding youth-led land restoration initiatives, increasing the visibility and credibility of young environmental leaders. Similarly, the YECO supports young people to translate knowledge into action by providing training, mentorship and business development support for SLM enterprises. Unlike initiatives focused primarily on governance and advocacy, YECO demonstrates tangible environmental and socioeconomic outcomes, including land restoration, investment mobilization and the creation of green jobs, illustrating how youth engagement contributes directly to the implementation of the Convention.

16. Despite these achievements, important challenges remain. Participation in international processes continues to rely heavily on external funding, limiting equitable representation, particularly for young people from the Global South. While institutional mechanisms for youth engagement have expanded considerably, greater investment is needed to strengthen national implementation, increase access to financial and technical resources, and ensure that recommendations from the youth consistently influence decision-making. Addressing these gaps will be essential to achieving youth engagement that is not only broad but also equitable, impactful and sustainable.

3. Assessment matrix on meaningful youth engagement

Table 2

Matrix on meaningful youth engagement

United Nations core principle for meaningful youth participation	Assessment under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
Institutionalized participation	Strong. The UYC, UYF, Land Heroes campaign and LYNP provide formal mechanisms for youth engagement.
Capacity-building	Strong. The UYC, Land Heroes campaign, LYNP and YECO provide training, mentoring and leadership development.
Intergenerational collaboration	Strong. The UYF and COP processes facilitate dialogue between youth, Parties and the secretariat.
Resourcing and enabling participation	Moderate. The secretariat has mobilized funding for youth participation, but support remains insufficient and uneven.
Transparent information and participation opportunities	Strong. The UYC and the secretariat regularly share information and opportunities, although outreach varies across the region.
Feedback and accountability	Moderate to weak. Youth recommendations, such as the Youth Declaration, are presented to Parties, but there is limited evidence of systematic feedback.

C. Implementation of the Youth Engagement Strategy

1. Background

17. Several data collection methods were used in preparing this chapter. One survey was circulated to Parties, and a separate survey was distributed to young people. In addition,

regional consultations and interviews were conducted with representatives from different organizations. The findings presented are based on information gathered through these data collection methods.

2. Party survey

18. The survey was circulated through the Parties' mailing list, with several reminders issued to encourage participation. Despite these efforts, only 20 NFPs from 16 countries responded. Responses were received from Argentina, Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Iraq, Mexico, the Philippines, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of Moldova, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Romania, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Viet Nam and Yemen. Consequently, the findings presented in this report reflect only the perspectives of the countries that responded to the survey and should not be considered representative of all UNCCD Parties.

a. Youth participation in policy development and implementation

19. Figure 1 in the annex highlights how youth participate in policy development and implementation related to desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD). The findings indicate that youth participation remains relatively limited. Forty per cent of respondents reported that youth engagement is limited, while a further 20 per cent indicated that there is no youth engagement at all. Together, these responses suggest that in 60 per cent of the responding countries, youth have little or no influence on national policy development related to the UNCCD. Conversely, 25 per cent of respondents considered youth engagement to be moderate, while only 15 per cent reported strong (5 per cent) or very strong (10 per cent) youth engagement. These findings suggest that although some countries have established mechanisms that facilitate meaningful youth participation in policy development, such practices are not yet widespread.

20. Overall, the results demonstrate that opportunities for youth to contribute to national UNCCD-related policymaking remain uneven across Parties. While the establishment of initiatives such as the UYC and the LYNP has strengthened youth participation at the international level, these mechanisms have not yet resulted in consistent engagement in national policy processes. Strengthening institutional mechanisms for youth participation, improving coordination between NFPs and youth organizations, and providing dedicated financial and technical support will be critical to ensuring that young people can contribute meaningfully to the development and implementation of national DLDD policies.

b. Integration of the YES at national level

21. Figure 2 in the annex highlights how Parties are integrating the YES into national policies, programmes and/or processes. The findings indicate that YES integration remains at an early stage. Forty per cent of respondents reported that their countries had partially integrated aspects of the YES, while only 5 per cent indicated that it had been fully integrated. Conversely, 35 per cent reported that the YES had not yet been integrated, and a further 20 per cent indicated that they were not aware of whether such integration had taken place. These findings suggest that although awareness of the YES is growing, its translation into national implementation remains uneven. The fact that only one respondent reported full integration indicates that the YES has yet to be systematically mainstreamed into national DLDD policies and programmes. The relatively high proportion of respondents reporting either no integration or a lack of awareness (55 per cent) further points to gaps in communication, institutional coordination, and implementation at the national level.

22. The findings are also consistent with the earlier assessment of youth engagement in national policymaking, where 60 per cent of respondents reported limited or no youth participation. Together, these results suggest that the limited institutionalization of the YES at the national level may be contributing to the relatively low levels of youth engagement in policy development. Strengthening support for the implementation of the YES, improving awareness among NFPs, and integrating its principles into national strategies and action plans could help create more structured and meaningful opportunities for youth participation.

c. *Where youth are engaged in the implementation of the YES*

23. Figure 3 in the annex indicates that youth engagement is concentrated in the early stages of the policy cycle rather than throughout the full implementation process. Policy consultations were identified as the most common stage of engagement at 30 per cent, while agenda-setting was reported at 50 per cent, suggesting that young people are increasingly being invited to share their views and contribute to identifying priorities. This demonstrates that Parties recognize the value of youth perspectives during the initial stages of policy development. Only 10 per cent of respondents indicated that young people are involved in decision-making, suggesting that although youth may be consulted, they are rarely empowered to influence or approve final policy decisions. Similarly, only 10 per cent reported youth involvement in monitoring and evaluation. Overall, these findings suggest that youth engagement under the UNCCD remains largely consultative rather than collaborative or empowering. While progress has been made in creating opportunities for youth to participate in discussions and agenda-setting, there are fewer opportunities for them to share decision-making authority or contribute to accountability and learning. This indicates that youth engagement has not yet been fully institutionalized across the entire policy cycle.

3. **Youth survey**

24. The youth survey was shared across several UNCCD youth platforms, and regular reminders were sent to encourage participation. A total of 265 young people responded to the survey. Africa recorded the highest number of respondents (206), followed by Asia (38). Middle East had 8 respondents, while Europe and Latin America each recorded 4 respondents. North America had the fewest respondents with 3. The regional distribution of respondents should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, as the results are heavily influenced by responses from Africa.

a. *Awareness of the YES*

25. Figure 4 in the annex shows the level of awareness among youth respondents regarding the YES. A majority of respondents (83 per cent) indicated that they were aware of the YES, while 17 per cent reported that they were not aware of it. The high percentage of respondents who are aware of the YES is an encouraging indication that many young people have some understanding of the YES and the role expected of them at the local level. However, the findings also suggest that a notable proportion of youth remain unaware of the YES. This highlights the need for continued outreach, communication and awareness-raising efforts to ensure that more young people are informed about the YES, understand its objectives and feel included in its implementation.

b. *Implementation of YES elements at national level*

26. In line with the four objectives of the YES (Advancing youth-focused policy advocacy; Strengthening youth participation in governance; Providing dedicated financial and technical support; and Building capacity and supporting networking), the survey sought to understand which elements youth organizations and youth groups are implementing at the national level. The findings indicate that **21 per cent** of respondents are implementing all four objectives of the YES, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to youth engagement. A further **14 per cent** reported implementing three objectives, specifically youth-focused policy advocacy, strengthening youth participation in governance, and capacity-building and networking. **Five per cent** reported implementing youth participation in governance together with capacity-building and networking, while another **5 per cent** are focusing on youth policy advocacy and strengthening youth participation in governance. The findings also reveal that providing dedicated financial and technical support is the least implemented objective when undertaken in isolation, with only **1 per cent** of respondents reporting activities focused solely on this area. This may suggest that access to dedicated financial and technical resources remains a challenge for many youth organizations. Overall, the results indicate that youth organizations are more likely to prioritize policy advocacy, governance and capacity-building, while financial and technical support is most often implemented alongside other objectives rather than as a stand-alone intervention.

c. *Partnerships in the implementation of the YES at national level*

27. The survey sought to identify the stakeholders with whom youth organizations collaborate in implementing the YES at the national level. The findings show that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the most common partners, with 23 per cent of respondents indicating that they work exclusively with NGOs. Nineteen per cent reported collaborating with other stakeholder groups not specified in the survey; these might include movements and community-based organizations or groups, while 11 per cent indicated partnerships spanning government, NGOs and academic institutions. Collaboration between the government and NGOs was reported by 10 per cent of respondents, highlighting the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in advancing youth-led initiatives. Overall, the findings suggest that youth organizations frequently engage in cross-sectoral partnerships, particularly with NGOs, while collaborations involving government and academic institutions are also evident. This reflects the multi-stakeholder approach promoted by the YES, although there remains an opportunity to strengthen collaboration across all sectors to enhance the effectiveness and reach of youth-led action.

4. Best practices

Table 3

Best practices in the implantation of the Youth Engagement Strategy

Youth Engagement Strategy (YES) strategic objectives	YES strategic approach	Best practices
Advance youth-focused policies	Support youth to be part of decision-making within the Convention and in official policy development processes at the international, regional, national and local levels.	JUHUDI Community Support Center (an NGO in Kenya) The organization has used edutainment to translate technical global targets into culturally resonant learning modules. By using community theatre and role-play, the organization equips youth to lead land-use planning dialogues with local elders and authorities. This approach has fostered structured youth participation in decision-making, where youth leaders successfully advocate for the formal protection of blue carbon sinks and biodiversity hotspots, contributing directly to local and national land degradation neutrality frameworks.
Support meaningful participation and partnerships	Support youth-led research and inputs to inform policy at the national level. Create awareness around successful youth initiatives and the need to involve youth in sustainable land management (SLM) and land restoration efforts.	Experimental land restoration project in semi-arid degraded areas in Ankara, Türkiye The project focuses on rehabilitating degraded soils using treated municipal sludge, beneficial microorganisms, and native plant species such as black pine, juniper, hawthorn and saltbush. Different treatment plots were systematically designed and established to monitor plant survival, adaptation, and soil improvement over time. This project demonstrated how science-based field applications, combined with interdisciplinary collaboration and institutional support, can create practical and scalable solutions for combating land degradation and desertification. The project also helped strengthen cooperation between researchers, public institutions, and technical teams, showing the importance of connecting policy, research, and on-the-ground implementation within the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) framework. Mashal Women Welfare Society in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan One successful best practice in support of the YES was the active involvement of rural youth and young women in community-based land restoration and environmental awareness activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Through youth-led mobilization campaigns, training sessions, and community dialogues, young people were engaged in promoting SLM, tree

		planting, water conservation, and awareness on climate change and desertification challenges. Youth volunteers played a key role in educating local communities about the importance of protecting natural resources and preventing land degradation. Young women in particular were encouraged to participate in decision-making forums and environmental activities, which strengthened their leadership and civic participation. As a result, local communities demonstrated improved awareness regarding sustainable land-use practices, while youth participants developed stronger leadership, advocacy, and community engagement skills. This initiative highlighted that meaningful youth participation can contribute significantly to achieving the objectives of the UNCCD by combining local knowledge, community ownership, and youth-driven action for environmental sustainability.
Provide dedicated financial and technical support	Provide financial and technical support for youth engagement. Build capacity among youth groups and individuals to mobilize resources.	Tanzania Agricultural Modernization Association Between 2018 and 2025, the Tanzania Agricultural Modernization Association, with financial support from the Embassy of Finland, implemented a transformative land governance project in the Muleba District of the United Republic of Tanzania, which focused on women's land rights, land tenure security, and equitable access to land resources. The project addressed long-standing customary practices that limited women's ownership and control over land despite existing national legal protections. The initiative promoted inclusive land governance and strengthened understanding of statutory land rights among rural communities through community dialogues, legal awareness campaigns, capacity-building, engagement with local leaders, and collaboration with district authorities. As a result, the project directly impacted approximately 3,600 women and 2,300 youth by improving awareness of land rights, increasing participation in land-related decision-making, and strengthening access to productive land for agriculture and livelihoods. The intervention also contributed to a gradual shift in social norms, with several communities abandoning discriminatory customary practices that historically excluded women from land inheritance and ownership. Cameroon Inclusive Volunteering Action Service for Solidarity This non-governmental organization (NGO) works with youth on land restoration. It organizes young people around community tree nurseries and dune fixation activities, where they train them to raise drought-resistant seedlings like acacia and neem and plant them on degraded communal land during the rainy season. Young people are taught to sell surplus seedlings to local schools and farmers, and the council has supported them with basic tools and public recognition. Because the youth could see the impact in their own villages and earn a small income from it, participation remained consistent and they took real ownership of the restoration work.
Build capacity and support networking	Ensure youth have access to the knowledge and support needed to meaningfully participate in national and local-level planning, decision-making and management practices, such as those employed in regenerative agriculture, agroforestry and pastoralism, forest and watershed	Centre for Women and Food Security-Ghana This NGO has engaged young women and youth in SLM through agroecology training, community education, and advocacy. Through the Indigenous Women Pioneering Conservation Leadership initiative, it has empowered 826 young Indigenous women to restore degraded land, conserve biodiversity, and strengthen food security while amplifying their voices in national and international environmental discussions. The Initiative is currently aiming to restore 500 hectares of degraded savannah forest landscape, with 26 hectares already restored. Global Landscape Forum and GLFx – Sisal, Mexico

	restoration, and green, blue, and renewable energy infrastructure.	Led by the community youth group Reciclando Dunas in Mexico, the Global Landscape Forum aims to restore deforested coastal dunes in Sisal, Yucatán, by creating local capacity for their protection. This includes reforestation degraded areas with native plants and implementing environmental education programmes involving students, teachers, NGOs and the wider local community.
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D. Recommendations for accelerating meaningful youth participation

1. Institutionalize youth participation within national UNCCD processes

28. The findings indicate that youth participation in national policy development remains limited and that the YES has not yet been fully integrated into many national processes, although progress is being made in some countries. To further strengthen the meaningful engagement of young people in the implementation of the Convention, Parties may wish to consider establishing or strengthening formal mechanisms that facilitate youth participation throughout the policy cycle, including policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

29. Such mechanisms could include youth advisory groups, youth representation within national UNCCD coordination structures, and regular dialogue and consultation between NFPs and youth organizations. These approaches can help ensure that the perspectives, knowledge and contributions of young people are meaningfully reflected in national efforts to address DLDD. Promising practices are already emerging in some countries; for example, Zimbabwe has adopted an open door approach that encourages regular engagement between the NFPs and youth organizations, providing opportunities for young people to present their priorities, share their annual work plans related to UNCCD processes, and contribute to national discussions.

2. Strengthen implementation of the YES

30. Although awareness of the YES among young people is high, its implementation at the national level remains uneven. The secretariat should continue supporting Parties by developing practical implementation guidance, promoting the exchange of good practices, and encouraging the integration of the YES into national action programmes, land degradation neutrality strategies, and other policies and programmes addressing DLDD. Strengthening the implementation of the YES will also contribute to achieving the objectives of the Riyadh Action Agenda, launched by the COP 16 Presidency in Saudi Arabia to accelerate global action on land restoration and drought resilience. This will provide an opportunity to further integrate youth engagement into efforts to combat DLDD.

3. Move from consultation to meaningful participation

31. The survey findings indicate that youth engagement is strongest during the agenda-setting and consultation stages, reflecting encouraging progress in the implementation of the YES. However, opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making, implementation planning, monitoring and evaluation remain limited. Parties are encouraged to continue building on this progress by creating additional opportunities for meaningful youth engagement throughout the policy cycle, including participation in decision-making bodies, implementation planning, and the monitoring and evaluation of national DLDD programmes.

4. Increase financial and technical support for youth-led initiatives

32. The findings from both the Party and youth surveys highlight the important role that financial and technical support plays in enabling young people to contribute effectively to the implementation of the Convention. While several initiatives already support youth engagement, stakeholders identified the need to further expand access to financial resources, capacity-building, and technical support, particularly at the national level. Parties are

encouraged to continue strengthening their support for youth-led initiatives by working collaboratively with the secretariat, development partners, civil society, and the private sector. This could include expanding access to dedicated funding mechanisms, small grants programmes, mentorship opportunities, and technical assistance for youth-led land restoration, SLM and green entrepreneurship initiatives.

5. Strengthen partnerships between governments and youth organizations

33. The findings indicate that youth organizations are actively collaborating with NGOs and a range of other stakeholders. Building on these existing partnerships, Parties are encouraged to further strengthen collaboration between governments and youth organizations to support the effective implementation of the YES. NFPs may wish to consider establishing or enhancing regular dialogue platforms with youth organizations and fostering partnerships with civil society, academia, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders. Through the Eskwelahang Munti initiative in the Philippines, senior high school students are encouraged to pursue soil science courses. Government representatives visit schools to promote awareness and interest in the field of soil science.

6. Expand capacity-building opportunities

34. The UYC and LYNP have demonstrated the value of building youth capacity in governance and negotiations. Similar training opportunities should be expanded to the national and regional levels, enabling more young people to understand the UNCCD process, engage effectively in policy discussions, and contribute to implementation. Iraq highlighted that the participation of their youth in the LYNP has helped strengthen their knowledge and engagement in UNCCD negotiation processes.

7. Encourage national reports on youth engagement

35. Parties are encouraged to voluntarily report on youth engagement through their national reports, as this information could help inform the work of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Future Strategic Framework and strengthen the integration of youth considerations within the Convention. The assessment found that youth participation in monitoring and evaluation remains limited. To address this gap, Parties should consider developing indicators to measure both the quantity and quality of youth engagement in the implementation of the Convention. Reporting these indicators through existing UNCCD reporting mechanisms would strengthen accountability, facilitate the monitoring of progress over time, and enable the exchange of good practices and lessons learned among Parties.

8. Consider a youth contact person within the UNCCD secretariat

36. During the consultations, a number of stakeholders proposed the establishment of a dedicated youth contact person within the secretariat. Stakeholders observed that such a role could strengthen communication and coordination between the secretariat, Parties and youth organizations, improve the dissemination of information and engagement opportunities, and contribute to the effective implementation of the YES. This suggestion reflects the views expressed by participants during the consultation process.

III. Draft terms of reference for the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples

A. Background and rationale

37. Indigenous Peoples represent approximately 476–500 million people worldwide, despite being over 6 per cent of the global population.¹¹ For generations, Indigenous communities have served as protectors of the world's remaining biodiversity. Indigenous

¹¹ https://www.fao.org/indigenous-peoples/who-we-are/en?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Peoples own or manage at least one quarter of world's land surface¹² and contribute to the preservation of 25 per cent of the world's carbon sinks.¹³ They are recognized as being present in the seven sociocultural regions: (i) Africa; (ii) the Arctic; (iii) Asia; (iv) Central and South America and the Caribbean; (v) Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; (vi) North America; and (vii) the Pacific. However, they are frequently underrepresented or marginalized in national censuses and data systems, which hinders the effective planning and delivery of their positive actions on land restoration and ecosystems preservation.

38. 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 ownership, access and use of their lands and territories that have kept people, lands and biodiversity thriving in harmonious coexistence.

39. International recognition of Indigenous Peoples is grounded primarily in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007),¹⁴ which affirms their rights to self-determination, lands and territories, natural resources, culture, and effective participation in decision-making processes that affect them. Over the last decade, Indigenous Peoples' participation in multilateral environmental agreements construction and implementation has grown significantly. Both the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2021) emphasize the increased need to include Indigenous Peoples' rights in environmental frameworks and their implementation mechanism, with a critical recognition of the importance of their knowledge.

40. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) recognizes the vital role of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems and community-based monitoring 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 land restoration and drought resilience practices that are resilient to climate variability. In many contexts, these practices can prevent soil erosion, restore degraded lands, and maintain ecological function. Parties to the Convention have consistently acknowledged the essential contributions of Indigenous Peoples to the effective implementation of the UNCCD.

41. In this context, decision 5/COP.16¹⁵ requests the secretariat to support the development of relevant terms of reference (TOR) for the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples, ensuring an approach that guarantees its representativeness and recognizes the unique perspectives and priorities of Indigenous Peoples. A Caucus for Indigenous Peoples under the UNCCD is a dedicated, self-organized, and representative mechanism to enable the effective, inclusive, and full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in UNCCD processes and decision-making.

42. The present draft TOR are intended to complement and maintain coherence with other participatory mechanisms established under the Convention.

43. The draft TOR build upon consultations already organized with Indigenous Peoples involved in the implementation and established practices and institutional precedents

¹² <https://www.un.org/en/desa/indigenous-peoples-continue-face-barriers-realizing-rights-lands-and-territories>.

¹³ World Bank (2023). Indigenous Peoples context. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/Indigenouspeoples>.

¹⁴ https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf.

¹⁵ Decision 5/COP.16 titled "Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification", para. 9(b): "Support, as appropriate, the development of relevant terms of reference for the creation of a Caucus for Indigenous Peoples and a Caucus for Local Communities, ensuring an approach that guarantees its representativeness and the unique perspectives and priorities of Indigenous Peoples as well as of local communities, and in alignment with the principles of the Convention."

identified through the desk review in the annex, with particular references to experiences and arrangements under the Rio conventions, as outlined below:

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform and its Facilitative Working Group;¹⁶
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), including Articles 8(j) and 10(c), and the establishment of the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) and Other Provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities at COP 16 in Cali, Colombia,¹⁷ which have facilitated the direct participation of Indigenous Peoples and contributed to consensus-building processes within the Convention;
- The participatory engagement models of the UNCCD Gender Caucus¹⁸ and the Youth Engagement Strategy;¹⁹
- The United Nations Environment Programme's engagement with Indigenous Peoples under Indigenous Peoples and their Communities;²⁰
- The Indigenous Peoples Major Groups for Sustainable Development, Indigenous Peoples-led Global Coordinating Committee;²¹ and
- The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.²²
- Lessons learned from Indigenous Peoples' participation mechanisms under other multilateral environmental agreements highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, access to information, and effective participation. They further underscore the need for transparent selection procedures for Indigenous representatives and knowledge holders, timely access to documentation, and institutional arrangements that safeguard the autonomy and effectiveness of Indigenous Peoples' contributions to decision-making processes.

B. Purpose

44. The Caucus for Indigenous Peoples aims to facilitate the meaningful, effective, and coordinated participation of Indigenous Peoples in the processes of the UNCCD, enabling Indigenous Peoples through financing and capacity development. In doing so, it strengthens dialogue, coordination and engagement between Indigenous Peoples and Parties to the Convention in matters related to policy development, negotiations, implementation, monitoring and review.

45. The Caucus serves as the primary advisory and consultative mechanism through which Indigenous Peoples collectively provide inputs, recommendations, and expertise with and to Parties, subsidiary bodies and the secretariat on matters related to Indigenous Peoples, including traditional knowledge systems, customary governance, land stewardship and sustainable land management (SLM).

46. To support this purpose, the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples, as a consultative, representative and participatory engagement body within the Convention's processes, provides a structured platform for dialogue and engagement between Indigenous Peoples and Parties to the Convention. Through this mechanism, Indigenous Peoples' representatives and

¹⁶ <https://lcipp.unfccc.int/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-16/cop-16-dec-05-en.pdf>.

¹⁸ <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2025-07/Gender%20Caucus%20TOR.pdf>.

¹⁹ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/other/unccd-youth-engagement-strategy>.

²⁰ <https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/major-groups-modalities/major-group-categories/indigenous-peoples>.

²¹ <https://www.indigenouspeoples-sdg.org/index.php/english/who-we-are/gcc>.

²² <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/unpfii>.

Parties can engage in discussions related to the development and implementation of policies, strategies, and actions under the Convention.

47. Indigenous Peoples are already organized as a constituency through the Indigenous Peoples' Plenary Caucus, which serves as their informal coordination and dialogue mechanism. This space enables Indigenous Peoples to meet, exchange information, coordinate positions, and organize around issues affecting their rights, priorities, and participation in the UNCCD process. The Caucus for Indigenous Peoples established under decision 5/COP.16 does not replace or substitute the existing Indigenous Peoples' Plenary Caucus. Rather, it complements and builds upon this established coordination mechanism by providing a formal consultative structure to facilitate engagement between Indigenous Peoples, Parties and the secretariat, while maintaining full coherence with the Indigenous Peoples' Plenary Caucus.

48. Together, these two complementary spaces aim to ensure that Indigenous Peoples' rights, knowledge systems, cultural practices, governance institutions, and priorities are effectively reflected in the work of the Convention, consistent with the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

C. Mandate

49. Pursuant to Decision 5/COP16, the Indigenous Peoples Caucus under the UNCCD is mandated to function as a self-organized, representative, and inclusive mechanism to facilitate the effective, meaningful, and full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in the meetings, decision making and other processes of the Convention.

50. Within this mandate, the Caucus shall engage in UNCCD processes, including the Conference of the Parties, subsidiary and intersessional bodies, in accordance with the objectives of the Convention and relevant COP decisions and the UNDRIP.

D. Objectives

51. The objectives of the Indigenous Peoples Caucus Consultative Body under the UNCCD are to:

(a) Enhance the full and effective participation and visibility of Indigenous Peoples in UNCCD policy and decision-making processes, including negotiations subject to the UNCCD Rules of Procedure for non-Party members and implementation-related discussions, and facilitate engagement with all relevant stakeholders;

(b) Promote the recognition, protection and application of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, practices, culture, technologies, innovation, perspectives and experience to support the implementation of the Convention, particularly in relation to DLDD, land restoration, drought resilience and SLM, including with the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) and the Science-Policy Interface (SPI);

(c) Facilitate coordination, dialogue and information-sharing among Indigenous Peoples across their regions, particularly regions affected by DLDD, ensuring inclusive engagement of knowledge holders, elders, women and youth;

(d) Strengthen coherence and synergies with Indigenous Peoples' engagement bodies under other Rio conventions (UNFCCC and CBD) and with other UNCCD mechanisms, including the Gender Caucus, the Youth Caucus and the Caucus for Local Communities;

(e) Promote the recognition and integration of Indigenous Peoples' rights, priorities and safeguards in UNCCD policies, strategies and relevant initiatives, consistent with applicable international frameworks and national policies;

(f) Support the follow-up and implementation of relevant COP decisions and contribute to mutual learning and exchange of good practices and knowledge related to Indigenous Peoples' contributions under the UNCCD;

(g) Encourage the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the implementation of COP decisions, where relevant, and other frameworks, policies and actions serving the objectives of the UNCCD.

E. Scope of work

52. The Caucus, as a representative and participatory body, may engage in, but is not limited to, the following activities, as appropriate:

- Preparation of joint statements, submissions and policy recommendations to the COP, CRIC, CST, SPI, working groups and subsidiary bodies;
- Participation in negotiations, contact groups and informal consultations, as well as dialogue with implementation entities consistent with the UNCCD Rules of Procedure;
- Engagement with Parties, the UNCCD secretariat, the Global Mechanism, and relevant stakeholders, including contributions to the implementation, monitoring and review of UNCCD programmes and decisions affecting Indigenous Peoples;
- Organization of side events, dialogues, workshops, and knowledge exchanges, including promotion and sharing of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, practices, innovations and experiences, as well as capacity strengthening and information exchange among Indigenous Peoples and UNCCD stakeholders;
- Monitoring and assessment of UNCCD decisions and implementation affecting Indigenous Peoples;
- Liaison with Indigenous Peoples' bodies under the UNFCCC, CBD and other relevant international processes.

F. Functions

53. The Caucus for Indigenous Peoples functions on four pillars:

1. Participation and representation

(a) To facilitate the effective, coordinated and inclusive participation of Indigenous Peoples in UNCCD meetings and processes, including the Conference of the Parties (COP), subsidiary bodies, and intersessional meetings, and thematic engagement with due respect for the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples, in a manner consistent with COP decisions as appropriate and subject to the UNCCD Rules of Procedure;

(b) The Caucus shall seek to promote institutional arrangements that enable the effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in relevant Convention processes, including opportunities for direct interventions, structured dialogue, participation in preparatory meetings, and other modalities that may be agreed by the Parties;

(c) To facilitate communication and coordination between Indigenous Peoples participating in both formal and informal UNCCD spaces;

2. Knowledge, culture and policy inputs

(d) To contribute Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, cultural practices, values, innovations and technologies, including commitments to protect the holistic integrity of traditional knowledge, values and practices, and to ensure that their use is based on the FPIC of Indigenous Peoples to UNCCD policy discussions, scientific and technical work, and implementation processes related to DLDD, land restoration, drought resilience and SLM;

3. Capacity for engagement

(e) To promote coordination, dialogue, and information-sharing and training among Indigenous Peoples across their regions, particularly regions affected by DLDD, and to support inclusive engagement of knowledge holders, elders, women and youth, including through regional gathering, capacity-building and mutual learning in person and online;

4. Implementation

(f) To support the implementation at the national, regional and international level, follow-up and visibility of relevant COP decisions and UNCCD initiatives concerning Indigenous Peoples, and to engage, as appropriate, with Parties, the secretariat and relevant stakeholders to identify opportunities for strengthening Indigenous Peoples-led actions and initiatives that contribute to the objectives of the Convention, and share experiences and good practices, including supporting the financing and upscaling of good practices.

G. Membership and governance

1. Meetings and activities

54. To strengthen effectiveness and avoid delays in the functioning of the Caucus, a simple majority of members shall allow meetings and activities to proceed. Members who are unable to attend a particular meeting should be able to join ongoing work at a later stage without delaying the commencement or continuation of Caucus activities. The absence of a representative from any region shall not prevent the Caucus from undertaking its work. Alternate representatives shall have the same access to information and participation opportunities as primary representatives.

2. Membership principles and basis

55. The membership to the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples will be based on the UNCCD Convention and Strategic Framework objectives and the Indigenous Peoples principles: full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples; regional representation of Indigenous Peoples, particularly regions affected by DLDD and of Parties; leadership rotation roles; self-identification and selection of Indigenous Peoples representatives in accordance with their own procedures; and adequate funding from the secretariat subject to the availability of resources and voluntary contributions to enable the implementation of the functions above.

a. Eligibility

56. Membership in the Caucus is open to Indigenous Peoples from the seven Indigenous Peoples' sociocultural regions who self-identify and are endorsed through their own regional governance and decision-making processes and selected in accordance with their own regional procedures, as well as to regional representatives from Parties to the Convention in the five UNCCD regional and interest groups, nominated in accordance with the established procedures of their respective regional groups, with priorities given to regions affected by DLDD. Participation of the members of the Caucus follow the UNCCD accreditation, registration and observer participation procedures.

b. Representation principles

57. The Caucus shall strive for:

- The composition of the Caucus shall ensure balanced geographical representation while giving due consideration to regions and Indigenous Peoples most affected by DLDD. Regional representation is as follows: Africa; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; the Pacific and the Arctic; and the five UNCCD regional and interest groups (Africa, Asia and Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern European Group and Western Europe and others Group) model of 7+5;

- Priorities to regions affected by DLDD: Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, South America, Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation, Central Asia, and North America;
- Gender balance;
- Inclusion of Indigenous youth and elders;
- Respect for Indigenous Peoples' diversity, autonomy and self-determination.

c. Composition and representation structure

58. The composition of the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples shall ensure regional representation between Indigenous Peoples' seven sociocultural regions and Parties' five United Nations regions (7+5); each member should have one designated alternate representative. It is strongly recommended that the Caucus designate standing members as follows:

- **Option 1:** Co-chairs (from among the members): Indigenous Peoples' representative and a representative from the Parties to the Convention; each should have one designated alternate. The co-chairing arrangement should rotate among their respective regions at each COP, with priority given to regions most affected by DLDD;
- **Secretariat:** UNCCD secretariat;
- **Option 2:** Co-chairs (from among the members): Indigenous Peoples' representative and a representative from the Parties to the Convention; each should have one designated alternate. The co-chairing arrangement should be only from the regions most affected by DLDD and on a rotational basis at each COP;
- **Thematics groups leads:** members volunteering depending on their expertise (in the base of a working programme to adopt by the Caucus and can be supported by appropriate United Nations agencies, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations);
- **The working language:** English with interpretation into all the rest of the United Nations languages as appropriate.

59. To ensure continuity, transparency and effectiveness across all UNCCD-related engagement spaces, the alternate representatives shall be formally recognized and fully integrated into all communication flows, meetings, and capacity-building activities, enabling their effective participation and ensuring uninterrupted engagement when primary representatives are unavailable.

d. Mandate and term of office

60. The Caucus members should be elected for a four-year mandate (with two additional years for half of the seats), four from Indigenous Peoples' and two from Parties' representatives with priorities to regions affected by DLDD in a rotation based on ensuring continuity and institutional learning.

e. Modalities for the operationalization

61. The Caucus shall become operational upon receipt of a majority of nominations from both Indigenous Peoples and Parties, while ensuring equitable regional representation across the seven Indigenous Peoples' socio-cultural regions (Africa; the Arctic; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific) and the five UNCCD regional and interest groups (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern European Group, and Western European and Others Group), with priorities given to regions affected by desertification, land degradation and drought, to enable the immediate functioning of the Caucus. Regions that have not yet completed nominations may join at a later stage upon designation, without delaying the work of either the formal or informal Caucus mechanisms.

H. Mechanisms of engagement

62. The modalities of work of the Caucus may be further developed by its members, in coordination with the Secretariat and consistent with decisions of the Conference of the Parties.

1. Operational Responsibilities

63. The operational responsibilities of the members of the Caucus may:

- Develop a 4-year work programme aligned with the objectives of the Convention and relevant COP decisions;
- Undertake monitoring and evaluation of the work programme in collaboration with the Caucus and the UNCCD secretariat;
- Facilitate dialogue between Indigenous Peoples and Parties on matters related to implementation of the Convention;
- Contribute to the sharing of experiences and good practices at global, regional, and national levels;
- Organize meeting of the Caucus yearly coinciding with the meetings of the COPs and the subsidiary bodies and participate in the plenary sessions during COP and CRIC meetings in accordance with the work programme subject to the availability of resources;
- Provide with opportunities to formally submit position papers, declarations, recommendations, and other agreed outputs for circulation as official information documents and, where appropriate, for consideration by the Conference of the Parties (COP), the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC), the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), and other relevant subsidiary bodies;

2. Thematic and technical working groups

64. To support the effective contribution of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, traditional knowledge safeguards, cultural practices and expertise to the work of the Convention, the Caucus for Indigenous Peoples may establish thematic and technical working groups.

65. The participation of Indigenous Peoples should be facilitated in the scientific and technical work of the Convention, including through sustained engagement with the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), its expert bodies, and other relevant scientific and technical processes, to contribute Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems, innovations, and practices to the implementation of the Convention.

66. These working groups may be established provide technical inputs and analysis to address priority issues relevant to Indigenous Peoples within the framework of the Convention. These may include, inter alia:

- Land tenure and governance;
- Drought resilience and early warning systems;
- Indigenous Peoples' knowledge systems and community-based monitoring;
- Gender equality, youth engagement, and intergenerational equity;
- Finance, safeguards, and implementation mechanisms.

I. Decision-making

67. Decision-making within the Caucus consultative body shall be guided by Indigenous Peoples' customary practices, prioritising consensus-based approaches. Where consensus cannot be reached, decisions may be taken through agreed procedures defined by the

members, pragmatic procedures shall be applied to ensure the continued functioning of the Caucus without interruption of its work.

J. Relationship with the UNCCD

68. The Caucus operates as an autonomous, self-organized entity.

69. The UNCCD secretariat may provide logistical and facilitative support, subject to available resources, without interfering in the Caucus' internal governance or positions and encourage Parties and other relevant partners to actively participate in the Caucus consultative body activities.

70. The secretariat shall facilitate timely access to meeting documentation, summaries, reports and relevant information related to the activities of the Caucus, subject to available resources.

K. Resources and support

71. Participation in the Caucus is voluntary. Efforts shall be made to mobilize resources and support from Parties and other partners to guarantee a dedicated financial mechanism for:

- Travel grant and participation of Indigenous Peoples, particularly from developing countries, particularly regions affected by DLDD;
- Capacity-building activities;
- Regional gathering;
- In person, hybrid and virtual meetings;
- Interpretation, translation and accessibility in the six United Nations languages and shall be made available as appropriate to other languages including Portuguese and Indigenous Peoples' languages, subject to the availability of resources.

L. Review and amendment

72. These TOR may be reviewed and amended by the Parties in coordination with the Indigenous Peoples every 4 years in accordance with the UNCCD COP review processes.

M. Entry into effect

73. These TOR shall take effect upon the adoption of the decision by the Parties to the Convention at the COP.

IV. Draft terms of reference for the Caucus for Local Communities

A. Mandate, purpose, and scope

Mandate and purpose

74. The Caucus for Local Communities is established to support enhanced, meaningful, and inclusive participation of local communities, pursuant to decision 5/COP.16 and consistent with relevant COP decisions and the UNCCD procedure for observers.

75. The Caucus provides a coordinated interface through which local communities may contribute perspectives, knowledge, and experience to UNCCD deliberations and implementation-relevant discussions, while respecting the roles of Parties and established UNCCD bodies, aligned with the UNCCD Rules of Procedure.

Scope of engagement

76. The Caucus operates as a self-organized observer modality grounded in self-organization and community-validated participation, supporting the coordination of Local Community inputs across UNCCD bodies, including the Conference of the Parties (COP), the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC), the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), and relevant meetings as appropriate and where participation is provided for under UNCCD procedures. It may liaise with the UNCCD CSO Panel and other relevant platforms, as appropriate. Where appropriate, and without prejudice to its self-organized character, the Caucus may also facilitate information exchange with relevant national focal points or national institutions, consistent with UNCCD procedures and national frameworks. The Caucus supports the sharing of local experience into global policy dialogue, with the aim of informing deliberations and strengthening implementation of the Convention and its associated processes. Such contributions do not imply any formal role in decision making, consistent with applicable UNCCD procedures.

77. In carrying out its functions, the Caucus shall promote equity and inclusion, recognizing that land degradation, desertification and drought may disproportionately affect historically marginalized communities. Participation, representation, and governance arrangements should seek to address barriers to engagement in UNCCD processes, consistent with UNCCD mandates, decisions, and observer procedures.

Complementarity

78. The Local Communities Caucus is distinct from, and complementary to, any Caucus for Indigenous Peoples envisaged under decision 5/COP.16. Each caucus engages from its own identity and mandate, while collaboration on shared priorities may occur, as appropriate. This distinction is intended to reinforce, not dilute, existing mechanisms for Indigenous Peoples' participation, and support constructive collaboration based on mutual respect and clarity of roles. Complementarity may include information exchange, coordination of inputs, alignment on shared priorities, and joint or parallel briefings, as appropriate, while respecting the distinct mandates and modalities of each caucus.

79. The Caucus recognizes the important contributions of local communities and their traditional territories to biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation, combating desertification, sustainable land management, and the strengthening of socio-environmental resilience. It aims to promote the visibility and consideration of such contributions in UNCCD processes and implementation activities.

B. Membership, accreditation, and community validation

UNCCD procedures

80. Participation in the Caucus follows UNCCD accreditation, registration, and observer participation procedures.

Organizations which may affiliate

81. Local communities under the UNCCD include self-identified and community-recognized groups with shared social, cultural, historical or livelihood ties to the land particularly in the context of land degradation and desertification and drought, who exercise collective stewardship or knowledge practices in their territories, maintain their own forms of representation or governance, and are validated through mechanisms recognized by their community²³. Criteria for local communities include those who exercise collective stewardship or land-related practices, hold and transmit traditional or locally grounded knowledge, maintain customary or community validated forms of organization or representation. Government recognition may exist where applicable and consistent with community validation in some contexts; participation under these terms of reference is not contingent upon such recognition.

82. Organizations and networks that meet the following indicative conditions may be eligible to affiliate, subject to these terms of reference and UNCCD procedures:

- Self-identify as local community organizations or networks;
- Are validated and recognized by their communities;
- Endorse these terms of reference; and
- Participate through an accredited CSO observer in accordance with UNCCD procedures.

83. External designation of representatives by non-community actors should be avoided, as it may undermine legitimacy and accountability.

84. For purposes of affiliation and coordination, community validation may be demonstrated through transparent processes determined by the communities concerned. These may include customary or community-recognized governance arrangements, documented endorsement by relevant community organizations or networks, or other locally appropriate validation methods. Such validation should not replace applicable UNCCD accreditation and observer procedures. Community-based groups seeking accreditation are encouraged to partner with accredited CSOs and use UNCCD accreditation guidance, with secretariat support where needed.

Inclusion and accessibility

85. The Caucus may actively support participation of underrepresented groups, as feasible and within available resources. The Caucus shall strive to ensure the full, effective, and meaningful participation of women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and other groups that may face barriers to participation in environmental governance processes, through accessible formats, inclusive outreach, and participation practices that are inclusive of diversity.

C. Governance and regional focal points

Principles

86. Governance arrangements are non-binding and internal to the Caucus. Arrangements should prioritize inclusivity, transparency, rotation, and the avoidance of undue concentration of influence. Coordination roles are facilitative and procedural, not representative or substitutive of community decision-making. Governance arrangements should seek to promote equitable and diverse representation across regions and community contexts, with attention to groups that may be underrepresented or face barriers to participation, as appropriate.

²³ These may include, inter alia, communities with distinct cultural, historical, or livelihood ties to land and natural resources, including those affected by historical marginalization, exclusion, or discrimination, as recognized through community validation processes.

Regional focal points

87. The Caucus may designate at least two regional focal points per region through transparent, community-led consultative processes, including selection, election, consensus-based nomination, or other community-recognized methods, as appropriate. The Caucus may have flexibility to adapt the number of focal points. Focal points may serve for terms of up to four years, with staggered renewal where feasible, to support continuity and rotation. Term lengths and renewal arrangements may be reviewed by the Caucus in light of experience and comparable UNCCD engagement mechanisms.

88. Focal point arrangements should reflect regional balance. Such arrangements may also take into account sociocultural constituencies, livelihood systems, ecological contexts, and subregional realities directly affected by desertification, land degradation and drought. Each focal point may have an alternate, selected through the same community-led process, to support continuity, broaden participation, and ensure follow-up where the focal point is unavailable. Focal points and alternates should reflect different community, livelihood, ecological, or sociocultural perspectives within the relevant region or constituency where feasible. The Caucus may consider, where appropriate, alternative or complementary livelihood based coordination through community-driven regional consultation processes.

Role of focal points

89. Focal points act as coordinators and facilitators of the Caucus, and do not speak on behalf of communities beyond agreed procedural coordination. Their functions include:

- Coordinating regional inputs and statements;
- Facilitating information flow between the Caucus, the secretariat and UNCCD bodies;
- Supporting inclusive participation and speaking order;
- Maintaining concise records and summaries;
- Flagging potential conflicts of interest.

90. Focal points and co-facilitators complete conflict of interest disclosures.

Safeguards to prevent undue concentration of influence

91. Task distribution, rotation, transparency of actions, and consultative decision-making should be used to prevent capture or dominance by individuals or alliances.

D. Operating modalities and decision-making

Mode of operation

92. The Caucus for Local Communities operates on a voluntary, self-organized, and pragmatic basis. Administrative burden and formalization are kept to a minimum.

Discussions

93. Discussions are consultative and participatory, using cooperative or consensus-oriented approaches where feasible. Where consensus cannot be reached, broad regional convergence may be noted for coordination purposes. Indicative quorum thresholds may be considered by the Caucus for internal coordination purposes. Where time sensitive coordination is required (e.g. speaking order), focal points may act within clearly defined, procedural parameters, with prompt ex post communication and opportunity for member feedback. The Caucus may, as appropriate, convene participatory coordination discussions to consolidate inputs and priorities in advance of engagement with UNCCD processes.

Meetings

94. The Caucus may convene in conjunction with sessions of the Conference of the Parties and may hold virtual or hybrid meetings as needed, taking into account the availability of resources and connectivity constraints.

E. Communications, transparency, and participation support**Communications**

95. The Caucus maintains an updated contact list. Agendas are circulated in advance and summaries shared afterward using accessible formats. Communications should aim to use plain and accessible language, visual formats where appropriate, and translation or interpretation into languages widely used by participating communities, including local languages where feasible, subject to availability of resources of organizations and partnerships affiliated with the Caucus.

Participation support

96. Where feasible and appropriate, the Caucus may support:

- Measures to facilitate participation of underrepresented communities, including logistical and accessibility considerations, as appropriate;
- Translation and interpretation of UNCCD processes into locally accessible language;
- Capacity-building and mentoring support;
- Peer-to-peer and South–South learning;
- Documentation and sharing of local case studies and community practices;
- Use of digital media and culturally appropriate formats to broaden engagement.

97. The Caucus may identify participation barriers faced by resource-limited local community organizations and, where appropriate, share information on available opportunities, tools or modalities that may support participation, without prejudice to UNCCD procedures and available resources.

98. The Caucus should encourage the use of hybrid and remote participation modalities, as feasible, taking into account barriers that may affect the participation of local communities. An annual public summary of activities may be shared, including contributions to UNCCD processes. The effectiveness of such measures may vary depending on available resources, participation levels, and contextual conditions.

F. Traditional knowledge and safeguards**Principles**

99. Use of traditional and cultural knowledge shall be guided by ethical, respectful, consent-based, and purpose-limited approaches, including the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), as reflected in relevant international instruments and UNCCD decisions and, as appropriate, in accordance with community protocols.

100. Safeguards include:

- Explicit community consent prior to use;
- The ability of communities to withdraw consent or request cessation of use, in accordance with agreed conditions;
- No onward sharing without renewed approval;
- Protection against unauthorized use, commercialization, or misappropriation of traditional and local knowledge;

- Protection of sensitive knowledge and minimization of identifiable data;
- Recognition of intellectual property considerations and fair and equitable benefit-sharing arrangements, as appropriate and consistent with applicable legal frameworks;
- Accessible feedback, grievance, and redress mechanisms with indicative timelines and points of contact; respect for community protocols and customary governance systems related to traditional knowledge and cultural practices;
- Culturally appropriate procedures for the implementation of FPIC, including documentation and review, as appropriate.

101. The Caucus may explore voluntary, safeguarded repositories or directories of traditional knowledge holders to support responsible consultation and learning, subject to consent and community control.

G. Review, continuous learning, and amendment

102. These terms of reference may be reviewed on a periodic basis (e.g. every two years), or as guided by Parties, to reflect experience, lessons learned, and evolving needs. In support of such reviews and continuous learning, the Caucus may, on a voluntary basis, reflect on its participation, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, including the effectiveness of measures adopted to support meaningful participation and representation of local communities, as appropriate. The Caucus may periodically share non-exhaustive summaries of its activities to identify participation gaps, highlight good practices, and support continuous improvement.

103. Amendments are proposed by the Caucus and considered in line with UNCCD processes and mandate. Such reviews may also consider whether institutional arrangements remain fit for purpose, in light of experience and guidance from Parties.

V. Rules of procedure for engagement with civil society organizations

A. Rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organization at the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

1. Admission as an observer organization

104. Article 22 of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Rule 7 (document [ICCD/COP\(1\)/11/Add.1](#)) set the framework of the admission process.

105. This framework is further reinforced by regular decisions which revised the procedures and the eligibility criteria for the participation of civil society in the Conference of Parties and other UNCCD activities.

106. With decision 18/COP.3 the selection criteria and the mechanism to ensure a balance of participation from different regions are regularly discussed.

107. Decision 5/COP.9 establishes the UNCCD CSO Selection Panel to identify those organizations that will receive financial support to attend the sessions of the COP according to five selection criteria. Decisions 5/COP.10 and 5/COP.11 enlarged their composition to include five representatives from the different countries belonging to each of the five United Nations regional groups of Member States. Decision 5/COP.10 requested civil society organizations accredited to the Conference of the Parties to submit to the secretariat on 30 March 2012 a series of documents: a report on their activities and contributions made to the implementation of the Convention and a written confirmation of their interest in remaining accredited to the Conference of the Parties.

108. With decision 5/COP.15, Parties requested that the secretariat improves access to information on the accreditation process for civil society organizations.

109. Once accredited, civil society organizations join the existing network of organizations working on desertification and represented by the UNCCD CSO Panel.

2. Participation and engagement of civil society organizations in the UNCCD decision-making process

110. In accordance with Rule 7, para. 2, of the rules of the of the Conference of the Parties, the participation of civil society organizations in the UNCCD is subject to three conditions: “upon invitation of the COP President”, “participation without the right to vote” and “unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session object”.

111. The participation of civil society organizations in the UNCCD is analysed through two levels of the decision-making process : level one: the institutional structure and level two: the negotiation sessions.

a. *The institutional structure of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification decision-making process*

112. At the top of the institutional structure, the governing body serves as the highest decision-making organ. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention (Article 22 of the Convention). At the intermediate level, two subsidiary bodies in charge of assisting the governing bodies : the CRIC and the CST. The CRIC was established by COP 5 in 2001 to assist the COP in the review of the Convention under the authority and the guidance of the COP. The CST provides advice to the COP on scientific and technical matters regarding the combating of desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) (Article 24 of the Convention). The Committee of the Whole has been set to facilitate discussion during the sessions of the COP. At the bottom level, three advisory elements are established: a roster of independent experts (Article 24, paragraph 2 of the Convention), ad hoc panels to provide the COP with information and advice on specific issues on science and technology to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of the drought (Article 24, paragraph 3), the Science-Policy Interface to facilitate a two-way science-policy dialogue and ensure delivery of policy-relevant information, knowledge and advice on DLDD (decision 23/COP.11, para 1).

113. The rules of procedure set the participation of civil society organizations in the institutional structure. According to Rule 36, meetings of the COP shall be held in public, unless the COP decides otherwise. According to Rule 28, paragraphs 2 and 3, the meetings of the CST shall be public unless the subsidiary body decides otherwise and the meetings of the ad hoc subsidiary bodies shall be private unless the ad hoc subsidiary body decides otherwise.

114. The participation and the engagement of civil society organizations are further clarified by decisions.

(a) Decision 27/COP.1 requests “that additional open dialogue sessions organized by NGOs occur within the official programme of work of future sessions of the Conference of the Parties and that the Permanent Secretariat of the Convention make all efforts to facilitate inclusion of at least two half-day NGO sessions within the official programme of work”. Since the first session of the COP the open dialogue sessions have been organized by the civil society at all sessions of the COP;

(b) With decision 18/COP.3 the participation and the involvement of civil society is a regular agenda item, taken dedicated decision at each COP since COP 9;

(c) With the CRIC terms of reference in decision 11/COP.9, the participation of the accredited civil society organization is defined. The terms of reference of the CRIC are consistent with the UNCCD Rules of Procedure. In the framework of the work of the CRIC, the accredited civil society organizations are invited to prepare collaborative reports on their work for the implementation of the Convention (paragraph 12 of the annex to decision 11/COP.9 (TOR of the CRIC)). It contributes to the CRIC mission to assist the COP on the

review and the assessment of the Convention implementation (paragraph 17 of the annex to decision 11/COP.9 (TOR of the CRIC);

(d) Civil society organizations can also be formally nominated to contribute alongside Parties. According to the decision 23/COP.11, the Science-Policy Interface, as an advisory body, get together the members of the bureau of the CST, fifteen scientists and three observers (one from a civil society organization, one from an international organization and one from a relevant United Nations organization).

b. The negotiation formats of the UNCCD decision-making process

115. Negotiations take place in four formats of dialogue, distinguished by their level of formality, ranging from highly structured to more informal settings.

116. The plenaries are the formal forums for discussion and decision-making by Parties to the Convention. According to the standard practice the plenaries are open to the admitted CSOs allowing a representative from the CSOs to take the floor at each of the agenda items providing a consolidated intervention from all the accredited organizations.

117. Contacts groups are temporary ad hoc groups set up by the respective Presidents/Chairpersons of the COP/CRIC/CST/COW on the basis of the agenda requirement, for the duration of the session. Negotiations are done in the contact groups. According to the standard practice, the contact groups are closed to the accredited observers. There is no official decision on this practice.

118. Informal consultations are set up by the respective Presidents/Chairpersons of the COP/CRIC/CST/COW on the basis of the agenda requirement, for the duration of the session. The informal consultations are closed to the accredited observers. There is no official decision on this practice.

119. Small group settings, in particular the Friends of the Chairs sessions, are temporary ad hoc groups set up by the respective Presidents/Chairpersons of the COP/CRIC/CST/COW on the basis of the agenda requirement, for the duration of the session. The small group settings are closed to the admitted observers unless agreed otherwise. There is no official decision on this practice.

B. Draft rules of procedure being applied and practices related to the participation of observer organizations at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

1. Admission to the UNFCCC process as an observer organization

120. Article 7, paragraph 6, of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and Rule 7, paragraph 1, of the draft rules of procedure being applied (document FCCC/CP/1996/2) set the basis for the admission process.

121. This mandate is further operationalized by guidance from Parties through regular negotiations on arrangements for intergovernmental meetings under the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI).

122. Since 2015, the discussions have been held with the reference of the Paris Agreement (articles 16.5 and 16.8 of the Paris Agreement). With paragraph 133 of decision 1/CP.21, a new term, “non-Party Stakeholders”, was introduced to indicate stakeholders who can support Parties to fully implement the Paris Agreement.

123. The current discussion concerns enhancing the engagement of observer organizations in the intergovernmental process in a context of the physical and logistical challenges associated with the large number of applications waiting for admission, and the significantly increased number of organizations admitted as observers (documents FCCC/SBI/2026/4 and FCCC/SBI/2026/L.6).

124. Once admitted, IGOs and NGOs can register to attend UNFCCC sessions and in the case of NGOs, they could choose to join one of the nine NGO constituencies for more effective engagement joined voices. Since UNFCCC COP 28, new transparency measures

have been introduced over the years, including mandatory disclosure of Party overflow and their home organizations among Parties and observers, optional disclosure of funding sources, optional declaration of alignment with the objectives, goals and principles of the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, as well as additional information on home organization among observer organizations and Global Climate Action badge holders.

2. Participation and engagement of observer organizations in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change decision-making process

125. In accordance with Rule 7, para. 2, of the draft rules of procedure being applied, the participation of observer organizations in the UNFCCC is subject to three conditions: “on the COP President invitation”, “participation without the right to vote” and “unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session object”. It has been confirmed by the Kyoto Protocol (Article 13.8) and the Paris Agreement (Article 16.8).

126. In accordance with decision 18/CP.4, paras. 1 and 2, “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”. Also “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”. This decision also 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”.

127. In accordance with document FCCC/SBI/2011/7, para. 167, “*In the event that there is not contact group for an agenda item, the SBI recommended that at least meetings the first and the last meetings of the informal may be open to observer organizations, recognizing the right of Parties to keep informal meetings closed*”. However, the established practice in recent years is that all the informal consultations start by default open to observer organizations, and the co-facilitators ask at the beginning of the meetings whether the Parties agree to keep them open. If one Party objects, that meeting will be closed.

128. All the negotiation meetings that are procedurally open to observers as well as mandated events and side events are streamed on the platform for all those who register for conferences to follow.

129. Based on the foundational mandated listed above, the subsequent sections analyse the UNFCCC modes of engagement in terms of (1) the institutional structure; and (2) the negotiation formats.

a. The institutional structure of the UNFCCC decision-making process

130. At the top of the institutional structure, the governing body serves as the highest decision-making organ. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention, while the CMP and the CMA serve as the corresponding supreme bodies of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, respectively. At the intermediate level, two subsidiary bodies in charge of assisting the governing bodies: the SBSTA and the SBI. The SBI assists in the assessment and review of the implementation of the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. The SBSTA assists by timely inform and advice on scientific and technological matters. In addition, the COP, the CMP and the CMA can establish other ad hoc subsidiary bodies to address specific issues. At the bottom level, constituted bodies are established to support Parties and the intergovernmental process, providing advice, technical inputs and expertise.²⁴

131. The draft rules of procedure being applied set the participation of observer organizations in the institutional structure. The meetings of the COP shall be held in public and the meetings of the subsidiary bodies shall be held in private unless the COP decides otherwise (Rule 30 paras. 1 and 2 of the draft rules of procedure being applied). Rule 8 of the

²⁴ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Guide for presiding officers*, 2017.

draft rules of procedure being applied emphasizes the role of the Secretariat, notifying observers on the date and venue of any session scheduled by the COP.

132. The participation and the engagement of observer organizations are further clarified by decisions.

(a) Observer organizations attend and follow the meetings as observers. They can exchange views with Parties, the secretariat and the COP President. These different ways to contribute to the process are organized through diverse manners, through bilateral meetings with Parties, mandated open dialogues facilitated by the COP Presidency and the Secretariat, side events, townhall meetings with the Executive Secretary, COP President-designate, High-Level Climate Champions, Subsidiary Bodies Chairs facilitated by the secretariat, intervention opportunities at plenary meetings through the framework of their NGO constituencies if they are NGOs;

(b) Observer organizations can also be formally nominated to contribute alongside Parties, mainly at the constituted bodies level. The Technology Executive Committee (TEC), established in 2010 by the COP, is the policy arm of the Technology Mechanism. Its mandate is to enhance action on technology development and transfer in support of action on mitigation and adaptation. For the implementation of its mandate, the TEC may establish working groups. In these groups, NGO constituencies are at the same level of Parties in the discussions and preparation of the outputs (see document TEC/2025/31/16). With decision 2/CP.24, paragraph 3, the Facilitative Working Group is established to operationalize the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform and facilitate the implementation of its functions. This Facilitative Working Group brings together fourteen representatives, including seven representatives from Indigenous Peoples' organizations. According to paragraph 15 of decision 2/CP.24, the Facilitative Working Group operates on the basis of consensus.

b. The negotiation formats of the UNFCCC decision-making process

133. Negotiations take place in four formats of dialogue, distinguished by their level of formality, ranging from a plenary setting to more informal settings.

134. Plenary meeting, serving as the formal cornerstone of the UNFCCC process, is the official setting for discussion and decision-making by Parties²⁵. The plenary meetings of the governing bodies are publicly open for viewing through webcast unless Parties decide otherwise (Rule 30 of the draft rules of procedure). The plenary meetings of the subsidiary bodies are closed unless the COP decides otherwise (Rule 30 of the draft rules of procedure being applied). In practice, meetings of the SBI and the SBSTA are always open to the public²⁶. While three types of plenaries exist (opening plenary, stocktaking plenaries, closing plenary), in practice, plenary can be convened at any moment during a session.

135. Contact group is a group formed by a governing or subsidiary body (or bodies, for joint items), based on a proposal by the President, Chair, or a Party, to negotiate specific agenda items with the aim of achieving an agreed outcome²⁷. Governed by rules 7 and 30 of the draft rules of procedure,²⁸ the contact groups were closed to observers until decision 18/CP.4. With this decision, observer attendance is permitted unless one-third of Parties formally object, while co-chairs maintain full discretion to close the meeting at any time. In practice, there has been a consistent preference for maintaining the contact group open.²⁹

136. Similar to the contact groups, the informal consultations aim to facilitate negotiations on specific agenda items with the objective to achieve an agreed outcome.³⁰ Historically, informal consultations had a restricted access to observers. The SBI in its conclusions (document FCCC/SBI/2011/7, paragraph 167) recommended to open at least the first and the

²⁵ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers' Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

²⁶ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers' Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

²⁷ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers' Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

²⁸ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Guidelines for the participation of representatives of non-governmental organizations at meetings of the bodies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, 2012.

²⁹ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers' Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

³⁰ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers' Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

last meetings to observers organizations where no contact group exists. To this, co-facilitators seek consensus at each meeting to allow observers attendance.³¹ In practice, informal consultations meetings are open to observers.³²

137. Smaller group settings such as “Friends of the Presidency/the Chair”, “Informal Informals” or “Presidency/Chair’s Consultation” are established by Parties to advance negotiations, particularly when issues are technically complex, politically sensitive, or require rapid progress.³³ According to the UNFCCC secretariat, observers are not permitted to attend these smaller group meetings.³⁴ They remain closed to observers unless Parties decide otherwise. In the case of these settings are closed to observers, specifically the “Friends of the Chair” and “Informal Informals” meetings, the outcomes must be reported to their parent body to ensure transparency and inclusivity.³⁵

C. Rules of procedure and practices related to the participation of civil society organization at the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

1. Admission as an observer organization

138. Article 23, paragraph 5, of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Article 29, paragraph 8, of the Cartagena Protocol, Article 26, paragraph 8, of the Nagoya Protocol, and Rule 7, paragraphs 1 and 2 of the rules of procedures of the Conference of the Parties, set the framework of the admission process.

139. This framework is further reinforced by decision IX/29, paragraph 17, and its annex. A list of documents to submit in the admission process is required, which include official letter, statement demonstrating the organization’s qualifications in fields relating to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and the organization’s statutes/by-laws or terms of reference.

140. Once admitted, the civil society organizations can nominate representatives to participate as observers in the meetings of the COP, COP-MOP and subsidiary bodies.

2. Participation and engagement of civil society organizations in the CBD decision-making process

141. In accordance with Rule 7 para. 2, the participation of civil society organizations in the CBD is subject to three conditions: “upon invitation of the President”, “participation without the right to vote” and “unless at least one third of the Parties present at the session object”.

142. The participation of civil society organizations in the CBD is analysed through two levels of the decision-making process : level one, the institutional structure and level two, the negotiation sessions.

3. The institutional structure of the CBD decision-making process

143. At the top of the institutional structure, the governing body serves as the highest decision-making organ. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention (Article X of the Convention). The COP-MOP of the Cartagena Protocol is the supreme governing body for the Cartagena Protocol. The COP-MOP of the Nagoya Protocol is the supreme governing body for the Nagoya Protocol. At the intermediate level, three subsidiary bodies are established to provide procedural or substantive conclusions. The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) is established by the Constitution to provide information and advice on scientific, technical and technological matters relating to the implementation of the Convention. The Subsidiary Body

³¹ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers’ Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

³² UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers’ Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

³³ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers’ Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

³⁴ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Presiding Officers’ Guide to the UNFCCC Process*, 2025.

³⁵ UNFCCC Secretariat, *Guide for presiding officers*, 2017.

on Implementation is responsible for reviewing relevant information on progress in the implementation of the Convention and assist COP in the preparation of the decision on enhancing the implementation of the Convention. With decision 16/5 a subsidiary body on Article 8 (j) and other provisions of the CBD is established. The two Protocols established two committees to support Parties and the intergovernmental process in providing advice, technical inputs and expertise. Thus, the Compliance Committee under the Cartagena Protocol is a limited number membership body mandated to promote compliance with the provisions of the Protocol, to address cases of non-compliance by Parties, and to provide advice or assistance, where appropriate (decision BS-I/7 of the COP-MOP of the Cartagena Protocol). The Compliance Committee under the Nagoya Protocol is a limited number membership body mandated to promote compliance with the provisions of the Protocol and to address cases of non-compliance (decision NP-1/4 of the COP-MOP of the Nagoya Protocol).

144. The rules of procedure set the participation of civil society organizations in the institutional structure. The meetings of the COP shall be held in public, unless the COP decides otherwise (Rule 29, paragraph 1). The meetings of the subsidiary bodies shall be held in public unless the subsidiary body decides otherwise (Rule 29 paragraph 2). According to the Rule 14 paragraph 1 of the Rules of the procedure of Compliance Committee under the Cartagena Protocol (Decision BS-II/1), the Committee shall decide on whether it will meet in open or closed session.

145. The participation and the engagement of civil society organizations are further clarified by decisions:

(a) Paragraph 4 of decision 16/5 states that the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) and other provisions of the CBD related to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities “apply *mutatis mutandis* the consolidated *modus operandi* of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice and established procedures and practices of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions of the Convention on an interim basis, until the Conference of the Parties adopts the *modus operandi* of the Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) and Other Provisions of the Convention Related to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities at its seventeenth meeting”;

(b) With decision XIII/25, section C, paragraph 6, the work of the Subsidiary Body on Implementation is conducted in plenary sessions or in open-ended sessional working groups which are open to all Parties and observers;

(c) With decision NP-1/4, Annex, Section B, paragraph 2, the Committee shall consist of 15 members nominated by Parties. Nominees could include representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. In addition, two representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities shall serve as observers and shall be entitled to participate in the deliberations of the Committee except in the taking of decisions. In its paragraph 2, Indigenous Peoples and local communities should provide one alternate observer to be elected by the COP-MOP to the Nagoya Protocol to replace an Indigenous Peoples and local communities observer who resigns or is unable to complete his/her term of office.

4. The negotiation formats of the CBD decision-making process

146. Negotiations under the CBD process take place in several forums, in particular four main forums: plenary, working groups, contact groups, and informal consultations. In addition, the President of the COP and COP-MOPs and the chairs of the in-session working groups may also establish, with the agreement of Parties or under their own responsibility, contact groups and smaller group settings, such as Friends of the Chair to hold consultations with Parties on key issues or agenda items. Plenaries are the formal forums for discussion and decision-making by Parties to the Convention and the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols. Plenary meetings are open to participation by all Parties, observer States and organizations, the media and other participants registered for the CBD sessions.

147. In-session working groups are mandated by the COPs or the subsidiary bodies with the aim to review issues on the agenda. The in-session working groups are open and close meetings.

148. Contacts groups are set by the President, the Chair of the Subsidiary Body or the in-session working group, conduct negotiations on specific agenda items, with the aim of achieving an agreed outcome. According to Rules 7 and 29, and the Guidelines on conduct expected of participant in CBD processes, the contact groups are open-ended to observer organizations, who can make statements upon the invitation of the chair or contact group convenor. Meetings designated by the chair or contact group convenor as closed are not open to observers.

149. Informal consultations are set up by the respective Presidents/Chairpersons of a subsidiary body, in-session working group or contact group. Informal consultations can be open-ended allowing for observer organizations to participate, or closed if it is decided so by the President or the Chair. Small group settings are closed to observer organizations.

VI. SWOT Analysis

150. The purpose of this SWOT analysis is to assess the potential effects associated with giving access of the contact groups to the civil society organizations, examining its implications across three key dimensions of the governance: information quality, level of acceptance of the decisions and the visibility of the UNCCD.

151. The analysis relies on a SWOT framework applied separately to each dimension. This methodological choice makes it possible to identify and provide a comprehensive understanding, for each key dimension, of the internal strengths, and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and threats that may arise with giving access of the contact groups to the civil society organizations.

152. As a conclusion, a cross-examination of these three dimensions clarifies the anticipated benefits, the potential risks, and the conditions required, thereby informing the future decision regarding the relevance and modalities of opening the contact groups to the civil society organizations.

A. SWOT Analysis

1. Opening the contact groups to civil society organizations and its implications on the information quality

Internal strengths	Internal weaknesses
The UNCCD has the institutional capacity to ensure a high standard of transparency and inclusiveness, strengthening the quality and the circulation of information within the negotiation process. Indeed, the UNCCD has developed: - Transparency rules of procedure; - Institutional culture of inclusiveness; - Formalized admission and revocation procedure.	One internal weakness identified, related to the structural complexity of the UNCCD's negotiation structure. The coexistence of multiple negotiation formats, a characteristic of international organizations based on intergovernmental dialogue, can make access to information more challenging. It may also reduce the capacity to ensure information quality across the different negotiation spaces.
External opportunities	External threats

One external opportunity concerns the evolving international landscape, which is marked by a growing expectation for more accessible and comprehensive information (The 2030 Development Agenda, Aarhus Convention, Escazù Treaty, etc.) It reflects a broader commitment among stakeholders to strengthen transparency and offer a legal framework to foster inclusive dialogues.	One external threat concerns the growing exposure of informal discussions to external dialogue and negotiation formats. There is an increasing risk that sensitive information may leak into these parallels setting, undermining the confidentiality required for conducting informal exchanges. It could ultimately affect the quality and the reliability of information available to Parties.
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2. Opening contact groups to the civil society organizations and its implications to the level of acceptance of the decisions.

Internal strengths	Internal weaknesses
The UNCCD has the institutional capacity to mobilize and promote expertise of civil society organizations as well as to integrate their contributions into the decision-making process, making it more inclusive and co-constructed. Indeed, the UNCCD has historically built an inclusive governance model. Internal mechanisms exist that allow for the integration of civil society contributions, thereby strengthening the process's ability to generate co-developed solutions.	Two internal weaknesses can be identified within the current institutional arrangements. First, the logistical and organizational complexity associated with the opening of the institutional structure to the civil society organizations, and by extension to the negotiation spaces. Second, the challenges in reaching compromises, combined with the potential evolution of Parties' positions, inherent in opening formats of the negotiations originally designed for rapid and confidential intergovernmental exchanges.
External opportunities	External threats
One external opportunity arises from the increasing severity of land degradation, desertification and drought and the growing expectations for greater inclusiveness at the local level. These dynamics create an opportunity to enhance the acceptability of decisions by expanding civil society organizations' participation in informal formats. Bringing their expertise into these spaces can strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of information available to Parties.	The presence of civil society organizations in the contact groups may introduce politicization into the discussions, driven by external pressures and mobilizations dynamics. This could have effects on the fluidity of exchanges and the ability to reach compromises.

3. Opening contact groups to the civil society organizations and its implications to the visibility of the UNCCD

Internal strengths	Internal weaknesses
The UNCCD holds a high level of official recognition as the legitimate institutional forum for land degradation, desertification and drought and the only legally binding framework set up to address desertification and the effects of drought. Plus, with the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the sustainable development agenda recognizes the role of the UNCCD in achieving target 15.3. This provides a solid foundation of visibility, enabling easier integration of civil society organizations while preserving the perceived neutrality and authority of the UNCCD process.	One internal weakness can be identified within the current functioning of the UNCCD process. This weakness stems from the dynamics of the UNCCD, as the contact groups are spaces designed for reaching a compromise. Moreover, the UNCCD has limited experience and few appropriate mechanisms for integrating civil society organizations into such highly informal formats of negotiations.

External opportunities	External threats
On external opportunity arises from the increasing convergence and synergies among the three Rio Conventions in their approaches to civil society engagement. The CBD and the UNFCCC already apply more open practice for involving civil society organizations in certain informal formats, creating a precedent. Aligning with these standards would strengthen the UNCCD visibility in the Rio Conventions dialogue. A greater coherence across practices would reinforce the visibility of the Rio Conventions within the international environmental regime and in relation with the SDGs.	One external threat relates to the potential contestation surrounding the opening of the contact groups. It could generate blockages and weaken the UNCCD's leadership position within the international environmental regime and in interaction with the SDGs. It may also undermine the stability and authority required for the UNCCD to maintain its central role to combat land degradation, desertification and drought.

B. Conclusions

153. Opening the contact groups to civil society organizations offers significant advantages in terms of transparency process, information quality, UNCCD's visibility and the level of acceptance of the decision to address emerging DLDD-related challenges.

154. However, it also entails diplomatic and operational risks that could weaken the decision-making process, the decisions produced, and the Convention's visibility as a central actor in the international environmental regime.

155. The decision will therefore depend on the ability to define clear modalities for civil society organizations to access to these informal formats, to establish confidentiality rules, and to ensure that civil society organizations do not hinder compromise-building.

156. Thus, it would be valuable to recommend dedicating an interactive dialogue session on this issue at the next COP, which could ultimately lead to a COP decision on opening the contact groups to the civil society organizations.

Annex

Charts and figures

Figure 1

Youth participation in policy development and implementation

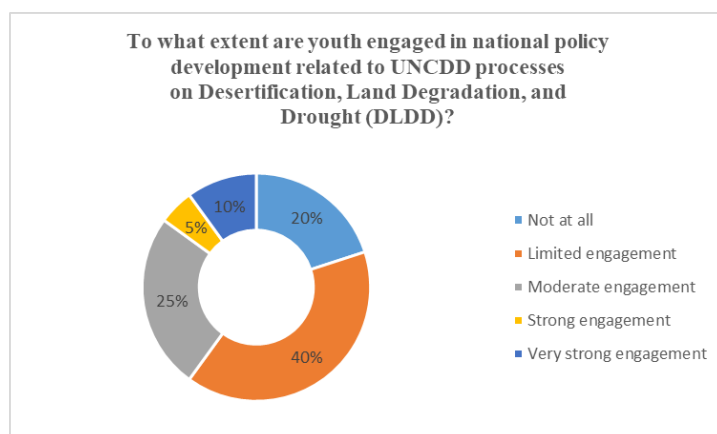


Figure 2

Integration of the YES at national level

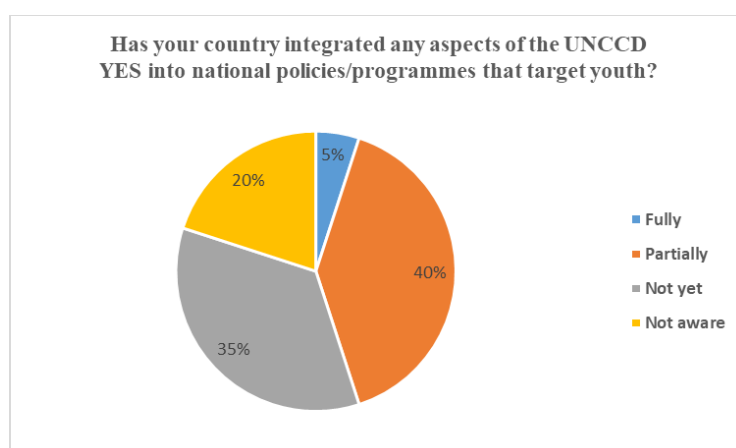


Figure 3

Stages of youth involvement

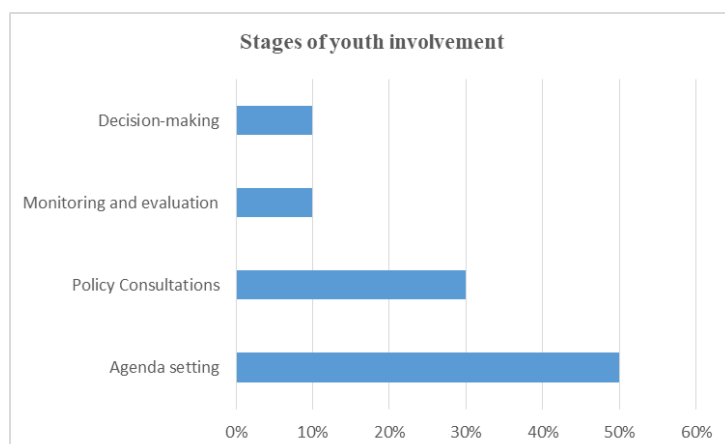
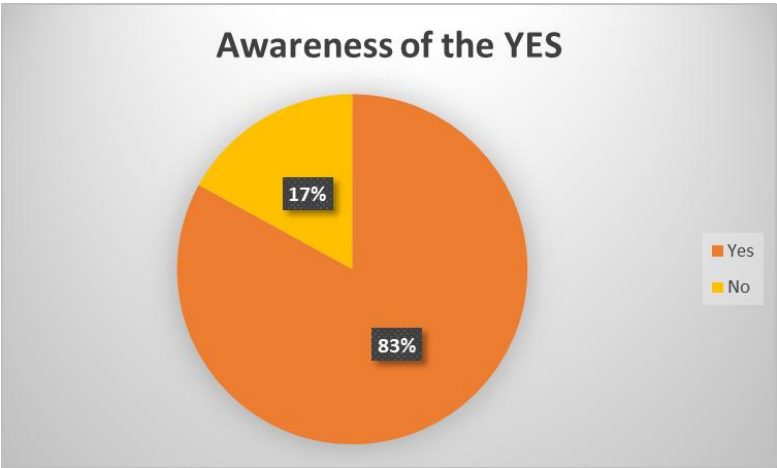


Figure 4
Awareness of the YES amongst youth



Note: Among respondents to a survey distributed to young people.