

# **Evaluation of the Land for Life Programme**

**Final report  
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**United Nations**  
Convention to Combat  
Desertification

*This evaluation provides an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the Land for Life Programme, the results achieved and its strengths and weaknesses. In turn, it should help “revise and strengthen” the Programme by drawing out lessons and recommendations for its future development.*

*The evaluation was commissioned by the UNCCD Evaluation Office and prepared by Mr. Jeremy Smith in June-October 2023. The views presented in this report are of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the UNCCD.*

# Land for Life Programme Evaluation

## Purpose and Scope

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Land for Life Programme has three main strands: an Award which showcases initiatives which promote land degradation neutrality (LDN) and sustainable land management (SLM) and two sets of champions: Land / Goodwill Ambassadors, who tend to be artists, musicians or senior politicians or diplomats; and Land Heroes, young people mobilised as advocates and spokespeople. This evaluation provides an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the Programme, the results achieved and its strengths and weaknesses. In turn, it should help “*revise and strengthen*” the Programme by drawing out lessons and recommendations for its future development.<sup>1</sup>

The evaluation has two main, connected drivers:

- a sense on the side of UNCCD that the Programme – and specifically the Land for Life Award – has become stale, been overtaken by other awards and is in need of revitalising. Whether the Land for Life Award should continue is a question which this evaluation should inform.<sup>2</sup>
- The inability of the Elion Foundation, the lead funder of the Programme since 2014, to provide further funding for the Programme, at least in the short-term.

The broader context for the evaluation is that UNCCD has refreshed its branding<sup>3</sup> and is seeking to sharpen its communications. It is implicit that the Land for Life Programme should make a better contribution to promoting and reinforcing the UNCCD brand than it is currently believed to.

## Methodology

The evaluation’s methodology grew out of an initial review of key documentation and interviews with four key staff (the current and former Chiefs of Communications and two Programme Officers). A short inception note agreed by UNCCD laid out the process that has been followed.

The evaluation draws on two main sources of information:

1. a review of documentation including the original 2011 concept note, the 2017 progress report, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with the (current) lead funder and various notes relating to the process of selecting Land for Life Award winners.
2. interviews with, or written input received from, a total of 22 people, as below:

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the evaluation should “*provide an overview of the performance of the programme – what it has produced – since its establishment, and its results – how the products have been used...; inform about the successes and challenges, with the aim to assist in further development of the programme... [and] enhance the effectiveness of the Land for Life campaign and contribute to the visibility of the UNCCD and its priorities*”; Land for Life Programme Evaluation Terms of Reference, p2.

<sup>2</sup> Under the Award’s current schedule, there should have been a new round in 2023, but this was postponed in order to await the results of this evaluation. For there to be an award announced in late 2024, a call for nominations would need to be issued in early 2024 and so a decision to proceed is needed by the end of 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The organisation’s brand should have a stronger focus on UNCCD’s purpose and impact; centre on clearer, simpler communications that take UNCCD out of a ‘science-policy bubble’; assert UNCCD’s leadership, vision and voice on land issues; and show why land matters and why UNCCD is for all the world’s people; *UNCCD Brand Strategy*, January 2022.

UNCCD staff	Award winners	Ambassadors	Land Heroes	Comparator (UNEP)	Funder (Elion)
8	4	2	4	3	1

A draft report was shared with UNCCD in advance of meeting to discuss findings and suggested ways forward held in Bonn on 28 September. This final report reflects input received at this meeting, as well as other comments sent in writing.

## Outputs and Strategy

### The purpose and status of the Land for Life Award

The purpose of the Land for Life Award is threefold:

- to recognise and motivate those engaged in SLM, highlight good practice and incentivise SLM;
- to raise awareness of UNCCD as the foremost global authority on SLM; and
- to reach atypical / non-expert audiences.<sup>4</sup>

This purpose has remained essentially unchanged over the life of the Award: its operational objectives are almost the same in a 2020-25 MoU with the Elion Foundation as in the original 2011 Concept Note, except for a more explicit linking of the purpose of the Award to LDN, a concept which has itself grown in importance to UNCCD over the last 6-8 years.<sup>5</sup> The Elion Foundation MoU also includes an additional objective<sup>6</sup> to ‘educate and mobilise youth to make SLM a priority in their actions to fight climate change and to improve livelihoods in their communities’, presumably as a reflection of the growing status of youth mobilisation and advocacy in the Programme as a whole (as described below). Certainly, interviewees have a clear understanding of the purpose of the Award as being to grant visibility to effective grassroots initiatives and to use them as success stories to communicate UNCCD’s goals and raise its profile.

Criteria for the Award relate to outcome (preserving or regenerating soil, preventing land degradation, improving land management *etc.*), method (research, advocacy, community mobilisation) and quality (innovation, significance of impact, replicability and an initiative’s ability to set an example to, or to inspire, others).<sup>7</sup> Applications are solicited by promoting the Award through UNCCD networks. Partners are encouraged to nominate organisations whose work they are familiar with on the grounds that this is likely to lead to higher quality applications than would be secured (only) from an open call. In effect, and as a reflection of limited resources – to promote the call for proposals and to sift through a larger volume of applications – quality is preferred over quantity.

Winners have tended to be chosen through a two-step selection process with a short-list – typically of 15 candidates – drawn up by a panel of experts from which an expert jury selects two or three winners. The

<sup>4</sup> Paraphrased from *SLM Champions Award, Concept Note and Operational Modalities*, April 2011, p4.

<sup>5</sup> “In order to integrate the Award into the ongoing UNCCD advocacy to help reach the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) target, there is a need to re-strategize the programme so that policy makers at various levels see LDN as a viable, environmental, economic and social policy option through the Land for Life programme”; *Implementation of the comprehensive communication strategy and the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020)*, Note by secretariat, COP 12, 2015, p6.

<sup>6</sup> I.e. additional to those laid out in the 2011 Concept Note.

<sup>7</sup> Applicants should “provide fresh thinking to land degradation problems and /or ha[ve] developed practical new solutions [innovation]; have made a real difference in implementing and scaling up SLM with measurable positive impacts on the land, soils and people’s livelihood [impact]; inspire others to look at their own behaviour or actions and consider changing them; [and] demonstrate practical sustainable land management practice replicable by others”; *Land for Life Overview*, July 2011, p5.

2011 Concept Note cited the selection process, and specifically the composition of the jury, as an element of the Award’s prestige: ‘The credibility of the award begins with that of its jury’.<sup>8</sup> It is suggested, however, that after changes were made to the award in 2015, a shortlist of applications went straight to the Executive Secretary for a decision without the convening of a jury. Although there is reference to a jury being involved in the selection of the 2021 winner, the assertion that the process is “*almost an internal decision*” indicates that the idea of a prestigious jury being part of the attraction and profile of the award has lost ground. Staff themselves acknowledge that the process of selecting the 2021 winner was somewhat rushed and that “*sometimes as the UN, we know each other and assume that others do too*”; even if not all jury members are bureaucrats with a low public profile, neither have they tended to have high cachet as a group.

## Winners

First run in 2012, the Award has been granted to a total of 18 individuals and organisations. It has, at various points, been awarded annually or biannually to either two or three individuals / organisations. After the Elion Foundation agreed to fund a large portion of the Programme’s budget, the award settled into a format by which the Award is issued to three entities – but only two in 2021 – on a biannual basis with a prize ceremony at the Kubuqi International Desert Forum, an event coordinated by the Elion Foundation, with one of the awards reserved for a Chinese individual or organisation.<sup>9</sup>

Year	Award winners	Kubuqi Special Award
2021	ShyamSunder Jyani, Familial Forestry, India	Saihanba Forest Farm
2019	Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transition, Ministry of Agriculture, Ethiopia Mathieu Ouédraogo, President of Réseau MARP, Burkina Faso	Mr. Yun Dan
2017	UN Environment and Practical Action Sudan Watershed Organization Trust, India	Ms. Yingzhen Pan
2015	SEKEM, Egypt	Mr. Ying Chengguo, Elion Resource Group
2014	The Conservation Organization for Afghan Mountains Areas, Afghanistan Green Asia Network, Republic of Korea	
2013	World Vision Australia working in West Africa Foundation for Ecological Security, India <i>Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible</i> , Mexico	
2012	Conservation Efforts for Community Development, Uganda Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods, Haiti Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion	

The Award was imagined as having a clear niche, rooted in its focus on grassroots examples of good practice in SLM and the restoration of degraded land. For each award cycle, a particular theme has been chosen as a priority, usually one which matches that made the focus of the World Day for Desertification and Drought.

<sup>8</sup> *SLM Champions Award, Concept note and Operational Modalities*, April 2011, p31.

<sup>9</sup> The UNCCD Executive Secretary accepted the renaming of the award (to the Kubuqi Land for Life Award) and for Kubuqi to be permanent host of the award ceremony in 2014; *Minutes of meeting on further cooperation between EF and UNCCD*, 22 July 2014.

## Land for Life Award themes

2012	2013	2014	2015	2017	2019	2021
Forests	Water	Climate	Biodiversity	Land and human security	Decades of impact <sup>10</sup>	Healthy land, healthy lives

In spite of these thematic choices, the perception within UNCCD is that *“the Award is routine and the same sort of initiative always wins – forest planting with a livelihood element”*.

## The money question

Award winners originally received a financial prize of \$50K<sup>11</sup>, but this ended in 2015 with the effect that the main benefit to winners has been the prestige accruing from UN recognition and the opportunity to have their work showcased at high-level events. The financial element was dropped because of a senior management decision to allocate resources to other strands of the Programme, although already in 2014 *“the total prize money for the Award was reduced to US\$70K, with just two winners... due to unclear prospects”*.<sup>12</sup>

There is no unanimity as to how important it is that the Award no longer has a monetary element. On the one hand, other awards have a very significant financial component: winners of both the [Earth Shot Award](#)<sup>13</sup> and the [Prince Talal International Prize for Human Development](#) receive \$1 million, for example, and it is hard not to see that as a motor for greater interest. Staff certainly believe that having no financial prize has led to a drop in the number and quality of applications and that the Land for Life Award suffers in comparison to other awards in terms of levels of interest from potential applicants and among the media.<sup>14</sup> Data for the number of applications and nominations for the Award show a decline in 2014 and a further, albeit uneven, decline thereafter.

<sup>10</sup> The idea being to *“spotlight individuals and organizations which have made an outstanding contribution to LDN on a large scale, with sustainable changes and dedicated actions over 25 years or longer and remarkable positive impacts on land, people, communities and society”*; *Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification Communication Plan and the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020), Decision 4, COP14.*

<sup>11</sup> *“Awardees will receive a certificate from UNCCD as “Sustainable Land Management Champion”, a medal, a cash award (USD 50,000) for scaling-up their SLM activity”, as well as an invitation to the award ceremony and the development of a video of the winner published on the UNCCD website; Land for Life Overview, July 2011, p6-7.*

<sup>12</sup> *Implementation of the comprehensive communication strategy and the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020), Note by secretariat to COP 12, 2015.*

<sup>13</sup> *“The Earthshot Prize is awarded to five winners each year for their contributions to environmentalism. It was first awarded in 2021 and is planned to run annually until 2030. Each winner receives a grant of £1 million to continue their environmental work. The five categories were inspired by the UN Sustainable Development Goals; they are ‘restoration and protection of nature’, ‘air cleanliness’, ‘ocean revival’, ‘waste-free living’, and ‘climate action’”*; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthshot\\_Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthshot_Prize)

<sup>14</sup> The Secretariat reported to COP15 that *“there has been a reduction of entries and interest since the award stopped including a monetary prize for the winners”*; *Report on progress in the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification communication plan and the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020), Note by the Secretariat, COP15, May 2022.*

### Number submissions for the Land for Life Award

Monetary prize			No monetary prize			
2012	2013	2014	2015	2017	2019	2021
102	134	76	?	72	36	52

If having a financial element to the Award is part of the reason for this decline, it is not the only factor in play and there is no simple correlation between the size of the prize and the level of interest. There are awards which draw a high level of attention without a large financial reward. The Champions of the Earth Award run by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which like Land for Life used to have but no longer has a monetary award, drew a record number of applicants in 2022. For UNEP, this “reflects the increasing number of people standing up for the environment and greater acknowledgement of the value of this work”.<sup>15</sup> As such, the profile of the Award and the number of applications may as likely reflect the acknowledged lack of a ‘big push’ to promote it. For one member of staff, “the Award is well-known among and important to CSOs affiliated to UNCCD but states are not all aware of it”. Subsidiary factors here are the lack of a prestigious jury to attract applications and the ‘un-user-friendly’ nature of the registration form on the UNCCD website.

### The ceremony

More than one winner expresses a degree of disappointment at the ceremony where they received their award. One felt marginalised and concludes that the presentation did not match the supposed importance of the Award to UNCCD.

Holding the award ceremony at the Kubuqi International Desert Forum rather than UNCCD Conferences of the Parties (CoPs) due to Elion Foundation sponsorship arguably diminishes the level of prestige the Award brings. The Kubuqi International Desert Forum is “someone else’s event” and, while generating a good level of attention in China, is a less potent vehicle for garnering global attention than a CoP, in part due to restrictions in using social media for live feeds from the ceremony.

### Land for Life versus Champions of the Earth

Inherently broader in scope than the Land for Life Award, the UNEP [Champions of the Earth](#) award “honours individuals, groups, and organizations whose actions have a transformative impact on the environment”. It has a particular theme each year – in 2023, the lead theme is plastic pollution<sup>16</sup> – and fixed categories (Lifetime Achievement, Policy Leadership, Inspiration & Action, Science & Innovation, Entrepreneurial Action<sup>17</sup>), which make it easier to classify winners and show continuity of purpose. This gives UNEP the scope to include one or more higher-profile winner whose involvement helps to elevate the visibility of the others.

By contrast, the Land for Life Award shines a spotlight on little-known individuals and initiatives. It has generic criteria and, while it does link to the chosen theme for the World Day for Desertification and

<sup>15</sup> [Nominations open for UNEP’s 2023 Champions of the Earth Award with a focus on plastic pollution solutions](#), UNEP website, 14 March 2023.

<sup>16</sup> The award’s themes themselves have a clear political driver: plastic pollution was both the subject of a 2022 UN Environment Assembly decision to push for a binding treaty on this issue and the subject of World Environment Day 2023.

<sup>17</sup> These categories have not always existed. In an earlier iteration, Champions were chosen on a regional basis.

Drought, it has no standing categories which means a change in theme each award cycle rather than recurring priority issues. For one UNCCD staff member, the effect is that there is “*no consistency. It's changing all the time. And every winner has a different focus, so it is harder for them to interact*”.

The criteria for selecting Champions of the Earth are almost identical to those employed by Land for Life, i.e. impact, innovation, inspiration, replication.<sup>18</sup>

As noted above, both Land for Life and Champions of the Earth used to have but no longer have a financial prize.<sup>19</sup> In that sense, the evolution of the Land for Life Award is not unusual, nor is the absence of a financial component necessarily the only or the main cause for a decline in attention and relevance.

Both Land for Life and Champions of the Earth are intent on providing connections, introductions and advice to winners on an ongoing basis. Neither have a formal alumni scheme. Quality of follow-up seems to be determined by (human) resources, with UNEP able to spend more energy on featuring the work of its Laureates and offering them access to key fora, while UNCCD's follow-up with its Laureates is limited. The broader point of contrast is that Land for Life is run by a small team – and, in large part, by a single member of staff – while UNEP has more staff available for promoting the award, maximising the value of winners' stories and following up with winners so that they valued in the absence of monetary prize.

## The Programme's evolution

If at the outset, 'the Programme was the Award', this changed in March 2015 when the Programme was expanded to include other awareness-raising activities designed to promote the UNCCD's thematic priorities. As well as various promotional activities on key dates – e.g. World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, 17 June – and at events such as CoPs, the Programme has come to centre on two sets of high-level champions, 'Land Ambassadors' and 'Goodwill Ambassadors'<sup>20</sup>; and a group of youth advocates, the 'Land Heroes'.

The primary role of both Land and Goodwill Ambassadors is to promote UNCCD goals at events and through social media. They may be invited to speak at CoPs and other key fora, participate in missions to areas at risk of desertification and to front communications campaigns. They are chosen as “*prominent personalities who have sufficient clout to influence a wide range of groups in the society*”<sup>21</sup> and should support a minimum number of activities each year.

UNCCD has a standing Youth Forum / Caucus and has historically run several initiatives targeted at youth – including the 2016 Youth Social Media Activists Challenge<sup>22</sup>, for example – before developing the Land

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<sup>18</sup> “Impact – *have the nominee's actions resulted in profound environmental gains or demonstrated significant potential for replication and scaling?*; Novelty – *has the nominee done or achieved something new and innovative?*; Power of the story – *how compelling and inspiring is the nominee's story?*”; <https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/how-we-find-our-champions>

<sup>19</sup> The suggestion is that the level of Land for Life's original monetary prize was set as a deliberate effort to 'outbid' that of Champions of the Earth at the time: “[as of 2011] *UNEP's Champions of the Earth award grants US \$ 40,000 per winner. If the resources can be raised, it would be advisable not to grant a lower reward and possibly to start at US \$ 50,000*”; *SLM Champions Award, Concept note and Operational Modalities*, April 2011, p45.

<sup>20</sup> Goodwill Ambassadors, who tend to be musicians, artists and other celebrities, have a pan-UN remit while Land Ambassadors, more usually experts, (former) diplomats and (former) politicians, work only for UNCCD. Three Ambassadors – Inna Modja, Ricky Kej and Baaba Maal – who were originally recruited as UNCCD Land Ambassadors have been made UN Goodwill Ambassadors.

<sup>21</sup> *UNCCD Land Ambassadors ToR*, p1.

<sup>22</sup> A competition organized in collaboration with Korea Future Forest in December 2016. The three winners of the Challenge were sponsored to participate in a 2017 Green Corps event held in Inner Mongolia organized by Future Forest and China International Youth Exchange Centre; *Progress Report, Jan 2016 – Dec 2017*, p9.



Heroes concept in 2020, initially as a time-bound campaign that was later formalised as a standing element of the Programme. A key driver was the need to formalise and expand UNCCD's work with youth which otherwise appeared too thin.

Land Heroes should “*demonstrate the potential to create positive impact by promoting actions to combat desertification / land degradation and drought and achieve land degradation neutrality and drought resilience*”.<sup>23</sup> Like Ambassadors, the role of Heroes is to act as spokespeople, generate stories and to help UNCCD reach a wider audience. Their intended reward is a small financial sum, the opportunity to attend international events and the chance to access UNCCD expertise.<sup>24</sup>

This evolution of the Programme reflects the different visions of the UNCCD's Executive Secretaries since the Award's genesis and the need to address gaps such as the engagement of young people. While wider imperatives may justify how the Programme has evolved, the effect is that the Programme has shifted in scale and scope in quite ad hoc ways with levels of resourcing not always well-aligned with objectives and levels of activity.

## Coherence and synergy between the different strands of the Programme

In broad terms, Award winners are chosen for the impact of their work, not for their promotional / presentational skills and profile, although some may be very good spokespeople. Ambassadors are chosen for their reach and profile, although some clearly have a good level of knowledge and an existing commitment to UNCCD issues. Heroes occupy a middle position on the content : profile spectrum – they are activists with their own projects and campaigns but are also chosen because of their reach and abilities as advocates.<sup>25</sup> Speaking of Award winners, one UNCCD staff member notes that “*we expect them to speak for us and to be useful for communications, but it is not their lead competence and not the lead criterion in choosing them*”. Explicitly chosen for their value to communications (and advocacy), Ambassadors and Heroes are, simply put, more useful for UNCCD's visibility and advocacy than Award winners.

While the Award and the Ambassadors and Heroes schemes have a common purpose – to promote the UNCCD and its goals – they have not been conceived as mutually reinforcing elements of a single, coherent, long-term Programme strategy. This reflects how the Programme has grown incrementally with pragmatic decisions taken as to where different work strands sit, usually reflective of common funding – there is some Elion Foundation funding for Ambassadors as well as the Award – and a shared lead staff responsibility. Staff themselves are concerned, however, that there is “*a lack of clarity about the scope of the Programme*” and how its different parts relate to each other; for one, “*bundling everything together under one staff member does not mean it's one strategy*”.

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<sup>23</sup> Draft Concept, UNCCD Land Heroes, 2023-24, p1.

<sup>24</sup> There is some reference to Heroes receiving \$1,000 [Land Heroes Draft Concept [Note], Land Heroes, p2], although the 2020 competition winner is said to have got \$500. UNEP ran a similar scheme – [Youth Champions of the Earth](#) – from 2017-20 and is intent on reviving it for 2024. This scheme is very similar in scope and purpose to Land Heroes, but somewhat larger in scale: seven Youth Champions selected each year by region (including two from Asia) receive \$10K seed funding for their projects and a more substantial package of meeting invites, contacts and mentoring. In advance of the ceremony where they are to receive their award, Champions attend a training camp where they can connect with each other as well as receive bespoke support in formulating a plan to upscale their project with the prize money.

<sup>25</sup> An external commentator involved in a comparable youth champions scheme argues from their experience that those selected “*have won a prize not pitched to be an ambassador, so there's a limit to what you can expect [of them]. Some are always ready to show up, while some don't do much [‘ambassadorial work’] beyond the award ceremony*”.

From the side of Laureates, Ambassadors and Heroes themselves there is little sense of being part of a unitary programme. Although open to promoting and sharing their stories, Ambassadors and Heroes have had little or no interaction with Award winners. Award winners are in theory open to working with Ambassadors and Heroes, albeit only if, as one puts it, *“they talk about our work in the right sort of way”*: Award winners are not going to turn down promotion of their work but are not interested in spending time prepping champions (of any sort) if their engagement is ephemeral.

Award winners are keen to be connected to each other and see *“lots of potential from making links to other [winners], assuming we have topics and fields of activity in common”*. The sense is that some feel somewhat isolated and would benefit from feeling part of a group of Laureates if this could be given a bit more focus and purpose than a simple get-to-know-each-other forum.

Several Ambassadors and Heroes met at CoP 15 in Abidjan in May 2022 with an intent to formulate a common campaign in the run up to the next CoP, but no concrete proposal was put to UNCCD after the meeting and, for one Hero, *“it seemed like we were setting out on something that we would not be able to deliver”* because there was not enough time to agree a sufficiently developed plan that those involved would adhere to. Another Hero is disappointed with their experience with Ambassadors at CoPs because Ambassadors draw all the attention and, inadvertently perhaps, push Heroes to the margins. The inference is that in advance of major events like CoPs, Ambassadors should be encouraged to promote the work of Heroes and also Award winners.

Heroes are also frustrated at what they see as the limited opportunities to collaborate with each other. Some, but not all, Heroes met in Abidjan but this served to raise rather than meet expectations for closer interaction. Heroes variously talk of the need for a common agenda or a *“large common Land Heroes project”* and, without denying their own responsibility to connect with each other, regret that UNCCD has not taken a more proactive view of facilitating cooperation among them.

In the case of Ambassadors, the picture is rosier. Ambassadors are working together on a film about women and land, with different individuals contributing stories, music and / or contacts. The key success factor here seems to be the drive of one particular Ambassador who has a clear vision the project and who is able to make specific requests of peers. Without the same level of experience and / or confidence, no individual Hero is in a position to corral their peers and the light UNCCD support which Ambassadors find sufficient is not enough to take Heroes to the point of organic collaboration.

## The programme and the rest of UNCCD

This evaluation has not consulted UNCCD staff whose work puts them at a greater distance from the Programme but the perception among those who are closely involved is that their work is not well known and / or underappreciated. In part, this is said to reflect that the UNCCD operates in a relatively siloed way. It is also a particular challenge of the Land for Life Programme that other staff *“have a low opinion of the Award and are not interested in engaging with Laureates”*. The notion that *“there is more chance that [other staff] know who has won the Earth Shot prize”* and the inference that *“if you cannot convince internally, you’ll struggle to convince outsiders”* is clearly undesirable and unsustainable.

One Laureate is particularly concerned at the lack of connection between Land for Life as a communications-focused programme and the work of UNCCD policy experts. This Laureate, who has had no contact with UNCCD policy leads, considers that their organisation's work has had a profound impact in their country and has proven to be a more effective solution to desertification than tree-planting, prompting the question "*why would [UNCCD] not want to make more of it and use it in their own advocacy?*"

Another symptom of a lack of integration of the Programme with other workstreams is that Laureates and Land Heroes have struggled to hook up with their national UNCCD Focal Point. In one positive example, a Hero was able to form a connection with their Focal Point and has since been invited to events and to join consultation processes which is to both their and UNCCD's benefit. This sort of 'joined up' operating would ideally come naturally; that it does not points to an issue of a lack of capacity (time, clout) among those responsible for the Programme.

The G20 Initiative<sup>26</sup> has drawn on the support of an Ambassador during a visit of the UNCCD Executive Secretary to India and consulted a Hero on its communications strategy. At the same time, the G20 Initiative represents a form of 'internal competition' to the Land for Life Programme in that it plans its own annual award. The profile of the G20 award differs from that of Land for Life<sup>27</sup> – the intention is to reward high-level government and corporate figures for playing a leadership role or committing to significant measures to protect land – but it may still 'consume the same oxygen' in terms of internal energies and external attention. It is also somewhat worrying that there has been no substantive discussion between the G20 Initiative and the Land for Life Programme regarding the intended G20 award. That this is said to reflect an assumption that the Land for Life Award was in indefinite hibernation points to the need to communicate a clear line on the Programme's future to the rest of UNCCD as soon as possible.

## Gender

At the genesis of the Land for Life Award, the possibility to define specialized awards including a 'gender award' was considered.<sup>28</sup> However, it was decided not to tie an Award to a specific criterion such as gender, albeit gender is one of the Award's many criteria<sup>29</sup> and those nominating or choosing winners are pressed to "*do their best to identify women candidates*".<sup>30</sup> This may be hard in practice in that it is beyond UNCCD to correct gender imbalances in the leadership of the CSOs from which it chooses the winners. It has though sought out organisations led by women.

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<sup>26</sup> Launched in November 2020 at the Riyadh (Virtual) Summit of the G20 leaders, "*The Global Initiative on Reducing Land Degradation and Enhancing Conservation of Terrestrial Habitats* [has an] *ambition to prevent, halt and reverse land degradation and reduce degraded land by 50 per cent by 2040*"; <https://www.unccd.int/our-work/flagship-initiatives/G20-Initiative>

<sup>27</sup> The Initiative includes and is hosted by UNCCD but can also claim to be distinct from a pure UNCCD programme like Land for Life.

<sup>28</sup> I.e. the idea that "*one laureate is selected from any eligible audience category for achieving something based on women empowerment which resulted in improved SLM and/or soils enhancement with subsequent benefits for the community and/or the environment*"; *SLM Champions Award, Concept note and Operational Modalities*, April 2011, p39.

<sup>29</sup> Or rather an element of one criterion, that relating to community empowerment: successful initiatives should "*benefit and engage women and other marginalized groups (such as youth, the aging, disabled, people living with HIV, ethnic minorities, indigenous people or otherwise disempowered populations) in sustainable land management*"; *Land for Life Application Screening Criteria*.

<sup>30</sup> *SLM Champions Award, Concept note and Operational Modalities*, April 2011, p37. It was also proposed that "there should be some gender balance in the jury" responsible for selecting the winners; *Ibid.*, p60.

It is easier to ensure a gender balance of Ambassadors and Heroes. Of the current ten Heroes, six are female and four male<sup>31</sup> while there is also an equal gender split among current Land Ambassadors and UNCCD-affiliated Goodwill Ambassadors.

At the formation of the Land Ambassador scheme, it was asserted that *“empowering women and achieving gender equality are important messages that Land Ambassadors will carry forward in the next two years”*.<sup>32</sup> Without a more forensic analysis of the work of Ambassadors, it is not easy to measure against this aim. It is reported that one Ambassador launched the first-ever charitable non-fungible token auction in support of women-led land restoration projects in 2021 or 2022;<sup>33</sup> this reflects this individual’s focus on the intersection between women’s rights and climate / desertification. And Ambassadors have collaborated in promoting the *Her Land* messages around the 2023 World Day for Desertification and Drought.

## Outcomes

### Benefits to participants

#### Award winners

##### Prestige

Laureates are grateful and proud of having won the Land for Life Award. They tend to situate the greatest value in the prestige accruing which leads to them being taken more seriously by local and national government officials. One *“mentions [the fact of having won the Award] whenever he can and believes it has contributed to an improvement of the image [of his organisation] in the international community of people working on sustainable land management”*. Another describes how the Award was *“a gateway to legitimacy and greater awareness”* of the then-relatively unknown concepts and ideas that they were developing in their work: *“getting a UN award made people sit up”*, even in their own organisation.

For most winners, one award has led to others. One Laureate went on to receive an award from their own government; combined, the two awards *“made me a national hero [and] improved the credibility and visibility of my organisation”*. In effect, the Land for Life Award has proved to be a stepping-stone to other awards which indicate and embody the higher profile achieved by the organisations concerned.<sup>34</sup>

For one Laureate who was won several awards, *“the higher the public awareness of the award, the better it is [to win it]”*. Implicitly, by this measure, the Land for Life Award is less valuable than those of bodies with a wider reach and higher profile. For this Laureate, the Land for Life Award is nice to have but not critical to their organisation’s success. For others, perhaps especially those who received the Award when there was less ‘competition’ from other awards and / or those whose work centres on a pioneering, but as-yet unrecognised concept, receiving the Land for Life Award was more ‘life-changing’.

##### Profile and contacts

In the early years of the Award, social media was less ubiquitous, websites mattered more and being

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<sup>31</sup> Nature Bodies, a team of students in India has also been granted Land Hero status.

<sup>32</sup> *ToR, Land Ambassadors*, p1.

<sup>33</sup> [NFT event to fund women-led solutions in the Great Green Wall | UNCCD](#)

<sup>34</sup> There is an interesting question here as to whether all those granting awards in the environmental field are drawn to those with some existing profile rather than seeking out, and giving a platform to, those doing important work who are as yet unrecognised.

profiled on the UNCCD site had more value. In more recent years, the benefit for winners is being able to refer to themselves as Laureates on their own channels.

Winners tend to get invited to events by UNCCD in the immediate aftermath of having won or if an event is being held in their region. Beyond that, the connections that winners are able to make tend to depend on their own initiative and the indirect effect of the Award having boosted their profile. For more than one, there is an interesting dynamic by which they have been able to make a 'sideways step' into UNFCCC fora, which may be considered both a loss to UNCCD – in the sense that Laureates may focus more on UNFCCC than UNCCD – and an opportunity to have land issues elevated in those fora.

### Influence

It is questionable whether the greater legitimacy that winners feel themselves to have, and the greater access they may now have with their governments, translates into policy influence. One reports positive rhetoric from provincial and national government figures, but no concrete change in policy: having a UN stamp may take organisations closer to power but does not easily trigger an increase in support for the ideas that they espouse. In another case, an award winner very much focused on work on the ground has not done much to engage a government which has nonetheless gradually become increasingly supportive. Here the dynamic is not that the Award elevates a winner into a position to affect policy, more that the quality of the work and the increase in its profile has slowly seeped through into national policy.

### Money

Award winners are not motivated by money but it is clearly useful. The 2013 winner used his \$30K prize to fund a conference on farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) in Malawi which helped expose Ministers, civil society groups and farming organizations to the concept at a time when funding for FMNR was hard to secure.

Even when not receiving a monetary prize as part of their Award, winners judge that they are more likely to be successful in their fundraising from being able to cite their status as Land for Life Laureates. No detailed analysis of winners' funding before and after receiving the award has been made, but it seems a reasonable hypothesis that UN validation helps with the two hardest parts of fundraising: getting funding from a donor for the first time, and getting core funding.

### **Ambassadors**

Artist / musician Ambassadors generally do not need help in terms of volume of reach but benefit in terms of an enhanced credibility from being able to leverage UNCCD expertise and draw on its name.

Ambassadors tend to have their own agenda – and may have their own staff – but rely on UNCCD for 'stories and stats' to animate their communications and underwrite the advocacy they undertake directly. There is also a sense that UNCCD staff play a role of advisor, even mentor, frequently offering input and helping instil confidence in (artist / musician) Ambassadors before they interact with organisations or in fora which are new to them.

For Ambassadors who are more comfortable in inter-governmental settings, the primary benefit of collaboration with UNCCD is not only the validation that comes with the title of Ambassador, but also its organisational support, as with Her Land, Her Rights activities in June of this year.

## Land Heroes

The Land Heroes scheme is lauded for bridging grassroots programmes and high-level advocacy and showing that young people can be constructive players as well as protestors. For Heroes, there has been a direct benefit in terms of access to international fora, and an indirect benefit in terms of greater recognition from and access to their own governments. Several refer to securing invitations to other international events through contacts made at UNCCD events or from the simple fact of having the status of a UN-endorsed youth advocate. One describes how, after having been chosen as a Hero, he was invited to pitch for UN Development Programme funding. This same Hero also received a further award from his own government while another, who had found it hard to get a hearing from key Ministries in their country, *“was listened to more as soon as [they] became a Hero”*; this Hero reaches the conclusion that being a Land Hero has been a *“transformative experience”*. A third makes a similar point in reporting that their government *“assumes that since UNCCD validates me, my work is good. The name gives us significance”*.

Since there is a high appetite for engaging with youth among governments and inter-governmental organisations, for the UNCCD to give young people a title creates its own momentum: simply endorsing them as Heroes goes a long way to increasing their access and the seriousness with which they are treated.

## Benefits to UNCCD

### Political outcomes

There is an argument that, with its focus on grassroots solutions, the Land for Life Award has helped to counter scepticism as to whether land restoration is possible and desertification ‘solvable’. Although this evaluation does not have sufficient external input to verify specific claims about the contribution of the Award, it can be argued that states are increasingly active on climate and on land degradation and desertification, are looking for solutions and prefer to be engaged positively rather than criticised for their shortcomings. Nonetheless, it is a stretch to argue that the Award has had a singular impact on policy and practice given the lack of investment put into promoting winners’ examples.

Land Heroes report that politicians and officials are open to engagement and that there are increasing opportunities to influence policy. One Hero who is said to have received many invitations to speak at government events judges that *“the context for advocacy on land issues is favourable. There is further to go, but the government is receptive”*. Another who was consulted in the formulation of a National Climate Action Plan notes that recent trends have been positive, with greater acknowledgement of land as an asset that cushions nations from food insecurity and biodiversity loss as well as changes made to land tenure laws to grant title to women and to communities. Without a closer examination of the change process in specific countries, it is not possible to claim that a Hero has had a decisive influence, but the fact that the direction of travel is positive and that youth advocates are able to insinuate themselves in policy processes is itself a justification for what UNCCD is attempting with the Land Heroes element of the Programme.

The logic behind the involvement of Ambassadors is that they help to generate more attention around an issue and make it easier for governments to act, in effect with the wind of public opinion behind them. One Ambassador argues that publicising the Great Green Wall initiative helped to raise interest outside the Sahel, also given recognition of desertification and resource scarcity as a driver of conflict and migration.

Whether similar claims about momentum on women and land following recent Ambassador-supported initiatives hold up would seem worthy of further scrutiny.

Ambassadors with a political background have proved useful in mobilising states and getting them diplomats the table. In one specific case, an Ambassador is said to have had a decisive impact on the level of seniority of attendees at an event in New York.

## The profile of UNCCD

There are signs that governments take patriotic pride in an organisation from their country winning the Land for Life Award. The government of Niger is said to have been boosted by the country's status as the locus of FMNR and to have become a more progressive, vocal actor in international fora as a result. Together with it having hosted CoP 14 in 2019, the fact of the 2021 award going to an organisation from India has built the profile that UNCCD has in the country. As such, the Award does seem to contribute to raising the profile of UNCCD in individual countries.

The picture in terms of wider benefits is less positive. The overwhelming impression of UNCCD staff is that Award winners "*make good stories*" but their value is under-exploited. Several issues seem to be in play:

- UNCCD has, in effect, lost control of the award ceremony and so cannot maximise its value in communications / promotional terms.
- Insufficient resources are available to promoting Laureates – something which UNCCD staff acknowledge and which winners perceive themselves.
- The lower value of Laureates in communications terms which reflects that they may not make good spokespeople and may not always be accessible. In turn, at events like CoPs, officials from states and the UNCCD itself are said to gravitate towards Ambassadors and pay less attention to Award winners.<sup>35</sup> That Heroes report the same suggests an (unconscious) hierarchy by which first Ambassadors then Heroes and only lastly Award winners are made the focus of networking and profiling efforts.

The deployment of Ambassadors and Heroes is said to function better in communications terms than Laureates. There is a risk with Ambassadors that they may be perennially busy and / or too 'precious' about their involvement but UNCCD seems to have chosen well in that it has a set of Ambassadors who seem to be committed and in need of less steering than may be the case with similar initiatives. Ambassadors open doors and can reach wider audiences than UNCCD can itself. There is a certain vagueness to this: someone who follows a celebrity may endorse a message without really absorbing it or there being much meaning from having done so. But in a context where both politicians and the public are, in broad terms, receptive to the need to act on climate and land, there is value in artist-celebrity Ambassadors 'creating noise' and adding to the groundswell of attention on an issue, further pressing politicians to act.

Land Heroes are similarly effective in taking UNCCD messages to wider audiences, especially on social media. States and inter-governmental organisations want to (be seen to) engage with youth so mobilising youth spokespeople opens another avenue for UNCCD to get its asks across. Working with young people

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<sup>35</sup> More than one winner describes their ceremony as underwhelming. One in particular "*feels like he has given a lot and got a poorly resourced award and been invited to event where he was ignored*".

comes with the risk that their lives develop in different directions and the investment made in them dissipates. The better case scenario is that they grow into senior positions in CSOs, government or inter-governmental agencies and carry their support for UNCCD into places of direct influence.

## Ways of working and resourcing

### Communication with Award winners, Ambassadors and Heroes

Award winners report little or no sustained contact with UNCCD. After receiving the Award and perhaps one or two further invitations to attend a CoP or other event, those interviewed do not appear to have had further communications with UNCCD. There is no organised attempt to maintain the engagement of Laureates and further develop them in communications and advocacy terms.

The role of Ambassadors and Heroes is laid out in Terms of Reference which provide clarity of mutual expectations. One Ambassador reports that *“cooperation has been smooth and there is continuous communication and regular meetings with the Secretariat”*. The nature of the demands made of this Ambassador is considered appropriate and there is even *“some room for increasing the level of activity”* which is itself a confirmation of commitment, although the importance of receiving information in a timely manner was also flagged.

Another Ambassador who is also in very regular contact with the Programme Coordinator considers that *“it has been a great collaboration... it's been super easy... I have been super-empowered by UNCCD. My ideas are never dismissed ... [and, in supposed contrast to other government and inter-governmental bodies,] there is no obsession with seniority”*. The key attribute of UNCCD which this Ambassador appreciates is its flexibility and willingness to support their ideas. In contrast to a more highly-resourced organisation able to (attempt to) take a more 'controlling' view of their relationship with champions, the lower level of capacity available to UNCCD chimes with the high level of autonomy and commitment of (at least some) Ambassadors: more capacity might convert into more bureaucracy and more 'treading on Ambassadorial toes' which might put them off.<sup>36</sup>

Heroes likewise feel well-supported by UNCCD. One does judge that *“it sometimes feels like they want a young person on a panel without thinking about the work of the young person”* or whether they are the best person for the role. Importantly, this is attributed to a lack of capacity and not to any 'instrumentalising' of Heroes. UNCCD goes about working with Heroes in the right way and any lack of deeper strategizing of their role is a sin of omission (lack of capacity) rather than a sin of commission (getting young people to say what UNCCD want them to say without regard for their own agency).

### Human resourcing

At least at certain points in the cycle (shortlisting and the ceremony in particular), the Award process is labour-intensive. At least one Laureate had little knowledge of UNCCD before winning which meant that they were not in a good position in terms of understanding what to expect, and what is expected of them, a gap which other award schemes can more easily fill with their greater staffing levels.

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<sup>36</sup> With capacity being limited, and there being little scope to invest all that much in developing the skills and experience of Ambassadors, the implication again is that the crux is to select the right Ambassadors in the first place.



The primary input to working with Ambassadors and Heroes is staff time for relationship-management. There is a clear signal from UNCCD staff that the level of human resources available for running the Programme is insufficient for maximising the value of its three main elements. Certainly far fewer human resources are devoted to the Programme than is the case in the UNEP comparator explored in this evaluation.<sup>37</sup> There is also a suggestion that the key staff member is relatively junior and that this itself sends a signal as to the importance accorded to the Programme.

The Programme's 'resource squeeze' plays itself out in the level of promotion of, and follow-up with, Laureates. One Laureate passes implicit comment on Land for Life in describing how another award has "*an active, engaged media team [behind it]. It's not just an award where they pat you on the back and set you off. They have invited me to a series of events and meetings and helped a lot in bringing [my work] in front of policy-makers*" – to a greater extent, again implicitly, than Land for Life has.

Without the capacity to give the tailored support to Laureates than would be ideal<sup>38</sup>, the lead staff member is obliged to focus her energies where she thinks there is more potential; in practice, this tends to mean the current Laureate and one or two others, alongside a primary focus on Ambassadors and Heroes.

In this, Land for Life stands in unfavourable contrast not only to UNEP but also other initiatives such as Earth Shot which exist solely as award-granting entities. In resourcing terms, Land for Life is a 'lightweight' competing with 'heavyweights'.

## Financial resourcing

Throughout its history, the Programme has depended on a single lead funder for a significant portion of its budget – first the Government of the Republic of Korea, then the Elion Foundation, the latter in two five-year grants, 2014-19 and 2020-25. The risk this poses to the stability of the Programme is not only demonstrated by the financial problems affecting the Elion Foundation having brought into question the Programme's (or at least the Award's) future, but also in the potential for resourcing to 'fall off a cliff face' even if funding was secure for the whole of a grant period. At stake here is not only UNCCD's dependence on what is still non-core funding even when granted for multi-year periods, but also a particular tendency for communications work to be seen as an add-on to core programming and consequently reliant on project funding. In turn, this is both cause and effect of a lack of a strategic vision for the Programme itself.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> One UNCCD staffer contends that "*other organizations have one staff member per Ambassador. We have one person covering all of them plus the award*". Others argue that the whole Secretariat is stretched and that "*every unit complains about the same thing*", that is, the level of human resourcing available for the tasks they are assigned.

<sup>38</sup> As such it is hard to argue that the standard of engagement with Laureates has met that laid out in programme documentation where it is noted that Award winners are meant to "*receive an individually-tailored support package from UNCCD which includes networking to interested organisations, profiling their initiatives nationally and internationally and opportunities to showcase their award-winning actions at national and international events*"; *Land for Life Award Programme, 2020-25, annex to MoU between UNCCD and Elion Foundation, 2020-25*, p6.

<sup>39</sup> This same tendency for "*too many decisions [to be] taken for short-term, tactical decisions*" is also illustrated by the decision to hold the Land for Life Award Ceremony at the Kubuqi International Desert Forum.

## Conclusions and propositions

While UNCCD has maintained engagement with Ambassadors and Heroes, the Award has effectively been put on hold.<sup>40</sup> Staff variously describe the Award as having “*lost its way*” or become reduced to a cycle of activities without a deeper strategic rationale. Its problems can be summarised as follows:

- the Award is less novel than at its outset and has become less attractive – including in financial terms – all the while competition from other awards has increased.
- While Ambassadors and Heroes are recruited specifically for communications purposes, there is an ambivalence about the role of Award winners.<sup>41</sup> On its own terms, the Award spotlights and rewards good grassroots practice but while winners are chosen with communications in mind, their value to communications is uneven.<sup>42</sup> And moving the ceremony to the Kubuqi International Desert Forum arguably reduces this value.
- High-level support for the Award has shifted over time, itself a sign that its purpose is unclear.
- Resources, especially human resources, are too thinly spread between the three main elements of the Programme. The greater attention given to Ambassadors and Heroes is an indicator of their greater value to communications than that derived from Laureates.

Although not every Ambassador and Hero has been spoken with as part of this assessment, the prevailing sense is that they are enthused, committed and enjoy their role. Award winners, by contrast, seem to be somewhat disappointed at their experience as Laureates.

Relations between UNCCD and the Elion Foundation have been close, efficient and productive. There is no sense that Elion is wavering in its support for UNCCD *per se*. Equally though, there are no unequivocal signals about future levels of financial support.

In broad terms, there are two main options for the future of the Award:

1. Catch up with the reality that the Programme is overstretched and that Heroes and Ambassadors bring an easier return in communications terms than the Award. Hence, drop the Award, focus on Ambassadors and Heroes and on trying to influence the scope of other, already-prestigious awards.<sup>43</sup>
  - **Pros:** it is more cost-effective, given Programme capacities, to look at prizes organised by philanthropic foundations, governments and other branches of the UN and persuade them to incorporate UNCCD issues.

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<sup>40</sup> This evaluation is arguably overdue. UNCCD reported to CoP15 that the Award would be evaluated in 2022 with an “*aim of making it a more prestigious environmental/land restoration award and increasing the number of entries*”; Report on progress in the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification communication plan and the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020), Note by the Secretariat, COP15, May 2022. It had previously asserted an aim “*to receive 100% more nominations for the 2023 Land for Life Award than for the previous one in 2021 by including a Prize amount with a reviewed and revamped award*”; *Land for Life Programme Progress Report, 2020–21*, p9.

<sup>41</sup> Judging that senior UNCCD officials rush to meet Heroes and Ambassadors but ignore them, winners feel themselves to be less useful to UNCCD. Staff themselves accept that “*Land Heroes and Ambassadors are invited more frequently to other UNCCD events than award winners [who tend to get one promotional hit at the time of the award ceremony] ... There is less engagement with winners than Heroes and Ambassadors*”.

<sup>42</sup> UNCCD staff do feel that the work of award winners does make for good stories, but a lack of time or ‘communications presence’ may mean that these stories written up are better than the winners orally / in-person.

<sup>43</sup> As is already happening with the Talal Prize in [2023](#). Both the Talal Prize and the Earth Shot Prize have as their sole *raison d’être* to raise attention; UNCCD by contrast is “*not an award-making body*” in the sense that it has a far wider and more diverse set of goals and mode of operating.

- **Cons:** UNCCD has less control over others' awards and less of its brand comes through. Without a specific land / desertification award<sup>44</sup>, there is less value in terms of the potential boost to UNCCD's profile and support for its goals.
  - **Implications:** the function of relationship-management with Ambassadors and Heroes can be separated from that of engaging other awards / organisations to get them to privilege UNCCD-relevant topics in their themes and criteria.
2. Maintain the award since it has a good brand and because awards can 'work', otherwise others would not be developing them. In turn, this suggests either (a) increasing Programme resources to make it 'competitive', alongside the Ambassador and Heroes schemes; or (b) dropping the Ambassadors and Heroes strands of the Programme. *There is no support among those interviewed for option b; it is included here under the logic that if the Award is to be retained, either total Programme resourcing needs to increase or another part of the Programme needs to be deprioritised.*
- **Pros:** the Award is a way to connect UNCCD to CSOs. In turn, UNCCD derives more value from an award that it controls.
  - **Cons:** There may be a risk that UNCCD adopts what is a *status quo* option without sufficient additional resourcing and so recreates rather than resolves the issues that have driven the need for this evaluation.
  - **Implications:** opportunities for leveraging additional resources from other programmes / the Global Mechanism should be explored, alongside efforts to secure the support of other, external sponsors to fund the revival of the award. In turn, this depends on lead donors' willingness to provide further support and to 'share' the award with other entities.

It is not the job of this evaluation to recommend one option over the other. **The key is for UNCCD to form a clear view of the priorities of the Programme as a whole and to decide on the future of the Award in that context.** While the first set of ideas and suggestions elaborated below apply only if the Award is retained, the second set would be relevant under either option 1 or 2a.

## Revamping the Award

There is scope to sharpen the Award's focus and tie it more tightly to a specific theme: for one staff member, it would "*freshen it up and make it more interesting if the brief was narrower*".

The idea of a specific Award for women or young people can be considered again. The latter would need to complement not duplicate the Land Heroes scheme. New Heroes could in effect be chosen as Award winners – a higher-profile selection process that could help to further entrench Heroes' commitment.

More attention can be given to the Award's prize, whether or not this includes a financial element. Current winners do not feel as if they are treated as special and there are ways to address this which do not themselves carry a high cost (e.g. a phone call from or a 1-2-1 meeting with the Executive Secretary). Likewise, more could be made of the award ceremony, both by involving a larger pool of land activists – including Ambassadors and Heroes – and by UNCCD sending an unambiguous signal that it considers the Award to be the pinnacle of achievement in SLM. In turn, this raises the question of whether the ceremony

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<sup>44</sup> For one respondent, the key strength of the Award is that it is "*focused on desertification prevention and land degradation management [and] is the [leading] professional award in this field*".

is best held at the Kubuqi International Desert Forum or a CoP. The consensus among respondents to this evaluation is that a CoP is the most appropriate venue; to argue for this is not to deny the need for trade-offs when negotiating large grants but does suggest exploring different options in discussions with Elion.<sup>45</sup>

Follow-up with Laureates has two elements: continuing to invite them to events and to connect them with other key actors in their region; and taking their work more seriously.<sup>46</sup> There are some calls for the creation of an alumni scheme for award winners, but this may be too formal a means for ensuring follow-up with, and exchange among, Laureates. UNCCD can seek to encourage winners to connect to each other without committing itself to doing so if organic demand does not exist.

There should be more internal promotion of the Award and of Laureates themselves. This is a matter of giving the Award more attention within the Secretariat, injecting winning organisations' examples into UNCCD policy positions and of encouraging Focal Points to be more involved in promoting it and seeing it as something that it would be good for an organisation in their country to win. Policy and technical staff can be more involved in the selection of winners and in the presentation ceremony. Use of an email signature highlighting the Award by senior managers would also send a clear signal of its importance.

## Priorities for the Ambassador and Heroes schemes

The nature of the relationship between Ambassadors and UNCCD and between Heroes and UNCCD is different: Ambassadors have their own profile and are less dependent on UNCCD than Heroes for choosing and implementing an agenda. The key lesson in the case of Ambassadors is to choose the right people: those who are committed, on-message and more or less self-servicing.

Heroes make more demands of UNCCD, including:

- support for scaling up their projects.
- More and better networking and advocacy opportunities.
- Providing funding and / or connecting them to potential funders.
- Spotting training opportunities and placements and pairing Heroes with UNCCD staff with expertise in areas of greatest interest.

Some of these demands have a financial cost. All involve staff time to solicit and fulfil individual support needs. With new Heroes and to reaffirm the commitment of current Heroes, the crux is for UNCCD to reiterate what it can offer, as well as what it expects. Comparative experience suggests that *"the key with young activists is to make them feel part of a group [and ensure] regular communications to build a sense of common purpose and of being part of the same cohort [so as to] make people accountable to each other"*.

Personalised engagement of Heroes is time-intensive but should be undertaken with a long view. It is reasonable to expect that some may rise to senior positions in government, civil society or academia and play an ongoing, *de facto* UNCCD champion role. As such it is important to be clear when a Hero ceases to be a Hero (since no longer a youth) and what ongoing status such individuals have and what further

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<sup>45</sup> One mooted compromise is for the winners to be announced at the Desert Forum but for the Award to be presented at a CoP.

<sup>46</sup> If winners' projects represent good practice then they are not just nice stories but should form policy examples that are prominent in UNCCD's own outputs.

support they can expect. Assuming that they continue to be involved in UNCCD-related work, maintaining the engagement of Heroes as they 'age out' should be the default.

New Heroes should be consciously selected to complement – in terms of geography, gender and skills profile, among other factors – those who are already part of the initiative. Opportunities for current Heroes to mentor new Heroes can be explored. It is understood that UNCCD is developing a Youth Engagement Strategy; if it is not already the case, current Land Heroes should be key stakeholders in the design of this new Strategy.