

**UNCCD COP 14 - Opening statement on behalf of the European Union and its
Member States
Monday, 2 September 2019 in New Delhi, India**

Honorable Minister of Environment, Excellencies, the Executive Secretary of UNCCD,
Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege to deliver this statement on behalf of the European Union and its
Member States.

Let me start by expressing our deep gratitude and sincere appreciation to the
Government of India for hosting the 14th Conference of the Parties of the UNCCD. India
is uniquely suited for our theme and allows us to see and experience some of the
extensive national efforts to rehabilitate and restore degraded landscapes. For
instance, the forest cover in India has increased by six hundred and seventy thousand
hectares since 2015. We believe the encouraging examples of India will inspire and
motivate even more ambitious action around the world, and that under India's
leadership, the international effort towards achieving land degradation neutrality
could rapidly move forward.

In addition, we would also like to thank the outgoing Chinese Presidency along with
the COP Bureau and outgoing Executive Secretary Monique Barbut. We also welcome
Mr Thiaw, the new Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, who has with his hardworking
Secretariat and Indian hosts made significant efforts in preparing this conference. This
14th COP of UNCCD is very timely since the role of land use has reached global interest
as significant player in global change as a culprit and solution.

This year we also celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Convention. Since 1994 we have co-operated in combating desertification and in mitigating the effects of drought under the UNCCD which is the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is estimated that two billion hectares of land is degraded worldwide, and we continue to degrade another 12 million hectares of productive land every year. According to the 2018 World Atlas of Desertification produced by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, 75% of the Earth's land area is already degraded, and over 90% could become degraded by 2050. This is not only happening in drylands, but also in regions with humid and temperate climates. The recent IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change) report on Climate Change and Land and the earlier IPBES (The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) work show that land degradation is strongly linked to both global climate change and biodiversity crisis and recognize the role of sustainable land management in relation to climate adaptation and mitigation, desertification, land degradation and food security. For these reasons, it should be at the heart of development, climate change and biodiversity strategies and plans. This is already the case for several national determined contributions in the framework of the Paris climate change agreement, or national biodiversity strategies and plans of several UNCCD Parties.

The IPCC report also clearly demonstrates the wide-ranging impacts of land degradation. Land degradation risks our ability to feed the world, threatens the survival of over a million species, severely disrupts and in some cases destroys ecosystems and undermines resilience. It also drives resource-related conflicts and

forced displacement that demand costly international interventions. If current trends continue, 135 million people could be forced to leave their homes by 2045.

Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union and its Member States welcome the various large-scale efforts that have already been made to tackle these pressing problems and to increase resilience and stability. Thanks to earlier efforts within the UNCCD we have a science-based concept of LDN (Land Degradation Neutrality) the focus of the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework adopted at the last COP. LDN has become the key driver for the implementation of this Convention and that has also linked the UNCCD more closely to the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, being also custodian agency for the target 15.3.

The LDN Target Setting Programme is exceeding our expectations. We welcome progress in setting voluntary LDN targets in 122 countries. We also welcome the efforts by the Global Mechanism and the Global Environment Facility in instrumentally assisting countries in this process. We also appreciate a successful reporting and review process. This has enabled the Convention to gather data for better monitoring of its implementation.

What is now necessary is to translate the ambitious targets set by countries into action by integrating them into relevant policies and budgets. Policies promoting the target of land degradation neutrality can also support food security, human wellbeing,

improved ecosystem resilience, and climate change adaptation and mitigation. Ecological restoration can also create jobs, spur innovation, and offer new opportunities in the green economy. Multilateral financial institutions and the private sector need to be engaged to channel funds more efficiently into sustainable land management and land restoration projects. In this regard we support innovative financing schemes and the necessary adjustments for full operationalization of the LDN Fund. The UN Decade on ecosystem restoration also offers large opportunities to that end.

We also value the actions carried out for raising awareness on land degradation and on the importance of land in addressing pressing global challenges, notably through the Global Land Outlook and the campaign the UNCCD undertook in support to the Great Green Wall Initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Land is where we live. Land is under growing human pressure, but land is also a part of the solution. Improving land use planning and management practices is essential for achieving land degradation neutrality. Therefore, we must focus on creating an enabling environment for transformative and inclusive projects, including those created under the LDN framework. An integrated approach to sustainable land management would help reduce pressure on and mitigate conflict over various land uses, and address concerns regarding land grabbing and access rights.

Furthermore, by improving livelihood opportunities, it will help address some of the root causes of environment-induced displacement and change the narrative in communities impacted by desertification/land degradation and drought. National

action programmes, sustainable development strategies, multi-stakeholder platforms and frameworks at all levels, and sound policies provide the necessary framework for action. We also need to take into account specific local conditions and engage land users and local communities, particularly women, youth, and other relevant stakeholders in planning and decision making-processes at all levels to achieve desired results while doing no harm.

Strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones by working closely with local communities, the private sector and civil society organizations will ensure a more equitable outcome. We encourage the Secretariat to continue enhancing existing partnerships and fostering cooperation with various stakeholders. We also want to highlight the importance of further enhancing synergies among the three Rio Conventions, and further harnessing opportunities, such as the Climate Action Summit this year and the development of the post-2020 global Biodiversity Framework for action at CBD COP15. Land is at the heart of the three Rio Conventions as well as in several Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Achieving land degradation neutrality can make considerable contribution to the achievement of several other goals, such as poverty reduction, food security, climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, enhancing resilience, stability and security.

Implementation of the Strategic Framework of the Convention

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We welcome the advances made in the reporting on the implementation of the Convention and on LDN. For the first time, affected and non-affected Parties reported in a standardized, quantitative manner and against the five Strategic Objectives of the Convention for 2018-2030. For some of the EU countries the new reporting framework enabled to more widely engage the public and private actors in the process and thus increase awareness of the Convention. The EU stands ready to participate in constructive discussions on how to fine tune the reporting process.

We welcome the report of the results achieved within the framework of the drought initiative and other drought-related activities of the UNCCD secretariat and the Global Mechanism.

In addition, we believe that it is vital to ensure the full and effective participation of both men and women and enhance empowerment of women and girls to fully implement the UNCCD. Women are key agents of change. However, only about 20 per cent of agricultural land is held by women globally. In order to achieve the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda the empowerment of women and girls is crucial. Therefore we invite Parties to create enabling environments and undertake reforms at the national level to make the implementation of the Convention gender-responsive and transformative. Gender Action Plan is a good starting point for actions to mainstream gender equality, but the implementation of the Plan requires more concrete and systematic actions in its four priority areas.

We welcome the new agenda item on land tenure. Responsible land governance, secure land tenure and strengthened land use and access rights, are fundamentally important components of sustainable land management and sustainable use of natural

resources and would also contribute to the achievement of LDN. We believe that the UNCCD parties can build upon the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests that represent a global consensus on the principles of responsible governance of tenure of land and the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems that constitute the international code of conduct for investment in land.

The Sustainable Development Goals and their targets are interlinked and indivisible. The UNCCD Parties have taken action to integrate SDG 15 and related target 15.3 in implementing the Convention. The successful harmonization with reporting on the target 15.3 was a significant step forward in increasing coherence and strengthening the role of the Convention, but we must also recognize the importance of working towards other SDGs in parallel, to have truly transformative change in terms of sustainability, equality and economic development.

Science-based Decision-Making is essential /

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Science is key to the Convention. Sound scientific understanding of the causes and processes of land degradation and desertification is necessary for designing effective measures to avoid, reduce and reverse land degradation. Science is also central for monitoring and evaluating progress towards combating desertification and restoring degraded land. Appropriate knowledge management mechanisms, dissemination and application are needed in order to harness the potential of sustainable land management at scale. However, to have a tangible impact and transition towards

more sustainable land management, the research must be translated into clear and practical policy recommendations and technical guidance for action. Therefore, promoting scientific research and evidence-based decision-making should be our highest priority. At this CoP, we also look forward to the outcome of the Science Day coordinated by the SPI (Science-Policy Interface) on 5 September.

In the UNCCD, the Science-Policy Interface has since 2011 provided scientific direction. During the biennium 2018-2019 the SPI was able to continue developing concrete science-based publications directly relevant for the implementation of the Convention, for instance in elaborating guidance for creating an enabling framework for Land Degradation Neutrality. We appreciate SPI's cooperation with other scientific panels and bodies, but also want to underline that the SPI should make maximum use of synergies and collaborations with other technical partners in order to avoid duplication.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We may say that the UNCCD is still quite unknown Convention for the larger public. Therefore, we support the efforts of the UNCCD Secretariat to raise awareness of the Convention. The efficient, active and innovative communication is key in this regard. We welcome the UNCCD Secretariat's goal to outreach children and youth, while reinforcing efforts to reach to policy makers and the private sector. Young people are critical thinkers and they have already demonstrated their power to act and mobilize others and impact policy makers in environmental matters. Moreover, we emphasize that gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment should be an integral part

of the communication activities. We fully agree with the Executive Secretary that it is of importance to give a human face to the Convention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the European Union and its Member States, I would like to emphasize our continued support to the UNCCD as the main international framework to combat desertification, land degradation and drought. Time is running out however to take decisive action in synergy with the climate change and biodiversity agenda, and meet our citizens' expectations for bolder support to climate action and biodiversity protection, as movements around the world have shown in recent months. We are looking forward to the discussions with all Parties and regions, and remain confident that the decisions taken here, will allow us to make significant strides towards a land degradation neutral world.

Thank you for your attention!