

Evaluation of the UNCCD regional coordination units

Final report

August 2019



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification

This evaluation aims to support the development of the UNCCD regional coordination units (RCUs) in order to enhance their contribution to the implementation of the Convention. It approaches the task by analysing the current setting of the RCUs and considering what kind of functions, requirements or other developments could be used for and by the RCUs. It also includes information about similar regional coordination functions in other intergovernmental organisations. The evaluation is primarily for internal learning within the UNCCD secretariat, but it may be of interest to also other stakeholders working on the UNCCD and/or regional coordination functions.

This evaluation was prepared by the UNCCD Evaluation Office with the support of Mr. Ante Galic in April - August 2019.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Evaluation approach and methodology	5
3. The UNCCD regional coordination units.....	5
3.1 Set-up of the regional coordination units	5
3.2 Findings on the regional coordination units as organisations	6
4. Conclusions and recommendations.....	14
4.1 Recommendations.....	15
Annex 1: Questionnaires.....	16
Annex 2: Other regional offices that were studied for the evaluation	18
Annex 3: Examples from other regional offices	19

1. Introduction

The implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is organized around five regional implementation annexes focusing on Africa (Annex I), Asia (Annex II), Latin America and the Caribbean (Annex III), Northern Mediterranean (Annex IV) and Central and Eastern Europe (Annex V). The annexes specify how the Convention will be implemented in each region and suggest the focus and content for regional action programmes. Actions carried out at the regional level are meant to “harmonize, complement and increase the efficiency”¹ of national actions. They may include, among others, regional policy coordination, capacity building, promotion of information exchange and science-technology cooperation.

The Convention secretariat support to the regional implementation annexes has taken many forms over the years. Its regional coordination units (RCUs) were established in the follow-up to a 2009 decision of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP), by which the COP requested the secretariat to support regional coordination mechanisms and defined that these mechanisms could include RCUs, among other elements. The COP further authorized the secretariat to provide one staff post per region within the regular budget, to support the RCMs. Already prior to the 2009 COP, the secretariat had had staff working with the regions, but the COP decisions formalized their position within the secretariat structure and secured a minimum level of resources for their functioning.

Currently there are five RCUs, one for each regional implementation annex, as follows:

- African RCU hosted by the Government of Morocco in Rabat;
- Asian RCU hosted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, Thailand;
- Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) RCU hosted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in Santiago de Chile;
- Northern Mediterranean (NM) RCU hosted by the Government of Turkey in Istanbul, Turkey; and
- Central and Eastern European (CEE) RCU that is part of the UNCCD secretariat in Bonn, Germany.

Each RCU consists only of a regional coordinator. The African RCU has three additional staff that is covered from voluntary contributions.

Since their establishment, the RCUs have represented the secretariat within each region and assisted the countries in meeting various requirements under the Convention. They have been assigned numerous tasks, but at the same time, their exact purpose has not been well defined. Rather their role has varied according to the changing urgencies and priorities of the secretariat. The diversity of Parties’ views about the RCUs has further contributed to this lack of clarity: for the countries in each regional implementation annex, the RCUs represent both practically and politically essential support structure, while many donors seem to question their added value compared to one centralized secretariat office. The diversity of views has been reflected also in the COP debates about the operational modalities and resources for the RCUs, with some countries requesting significant upscaling of the RCUs and some others calling for further cost-efficiency.

With the aim to further develop the functioning of the RCUs, the secretariat through its Evaluation Office prepared in April-August 2019 an evaluation of the RCUs, which looked at the key characteristics of the RCUs and other similar regional offices. This report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations of that evaluation.

¹ Article 11 of the UNCCD.

https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-01/UNCCD_Convention_ENG_0.pdf

2. Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation of the RCUs was built around two interlinked aims, as follows:

- To clarify the role and potential of the RCUs: their operational modalities, the environment in which they work, and their strengths and challenges; and
- To identify functions and arrangements that could increase the effectiveness of the RCUs, building on the findings under the first aim.

The data collection on the RCUs was loosely built around an organizational assessment methodology that looks at (1) organisational motivation, (2) organisational capacity and (3) enabling environment of an organization². This methodology helps to recognize how the mentioned three factors influence the performance of an organisation, and to identify the need for changes or improvements. To provide the needed information, the RCUs responded to a questionnaire that presented a set of questions about the RCUs mandate and purpose, strategy and work programme, main activities, communication, advocacy and information-sharing, and organizational setting. The question template is in annex 1 of this report. In addition, the RCUs were requested to fill in another questionnaire about their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), which brought up some further aspects about their internal and external working environment. The SWOT question template is also in annex 1 of this report. The information from the two RCU questionnaires was summarized into the draft findings and conclusions, which were further developed into recommendations that are presented at the end of this report.

The RCUs were actively involved in all phases of the evaluation and exchanges and interviews with them were a major contribution to the data collection and analysis. At the beginning of the process, the RCU staff for Africa and CEE were interviewed in-depth, and all RCUs responded to the two questionnaires. The first summary of findings and draft conclusions was discussed with all RCUs, and they provided plenty of comments and ideas for further developing the RCU profile.

To support the identification of functions and arrangements that could increase the effectiveness of the RCUs, the evaluation process included a study of regional coordination functions in selected international organisations. Close to ten regional offices of other organisations were identified for this evaluation, with the main criterium that their size, mandate and functions are not very different from those of the RCUs. They were first approached by email, but as only a few replies were received, the information was eventually collected through online research targeting seven regional offices, which are listed in annex 2 to this report. This information consisted of answers to the same questions as for the RCUs in their first question template, and it was compiled in a generic form, without reference to the specific substantive focus areas of each regional office. It is provided in annex 3.

3. The UNCCD regional coordination units

3.1 Set-up of the regional coordination units

As mentioned in the introduction, the RCUs were established in the follow-up to a 2009 decision of the COP, by which the COP requested the secretariat to support regional coordination mechanisms. The COP defined that these mechanisms were to *“facilitate the implementation of the Convention..., facilitate cooperation among affected country Parties within the regions, and to enhance synergies among the relevant institutions, programmes and mechanisms of the United Nations system, multilateral development banks, bilateral donors*

² For more information, please see <https://www.universalia.com/en/services/institutional-and-organizational-performance-assessment>

and other regional and subregional actors and mechanisms in order to facilitate regional and subregional action programmes and, where appropriate, provide technical assistance to the national action programmes”, and that they could include RCUs, among other elements.

In the following years, at COP 10 in 2011 and COP 11 in 2013, the expected role of the regional coordination mechanisms as well as the tasks of the RCUs were further considered by the COP but the resulting guidance was broad and general: the mechanisms were to be strengthened, the regional and subregional action programmes aligned with the UNCCD strategy, and the functioning of the regional thematic programme networks improved. The RCUs were called upon to be more effective in key issues of UNCCD implementation such as resource mobilization, capacity building, reporting and knowledge management.

Since these decisions, the UNCCD has gone through major developments. Land degradation neutrality (LDN) has become the key organising concept for the UNCCD implementation and following its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals as target 15.3, more than 120 countries have started working on their national LDN targets. Mitigating the effects of drought has become a UNCCD priority and over 70 countries are working on their national drought preparedness plans. Many new policy approaches, such as those on gender mainstreaming, sand and dust storms and land-security nexus, are being considered in the context of the UNCCD now. Scientific data is increasingly used under the Convention as the basis for national reporting and also through the inputs of the UNCCD Science-Policy Interface, established in 2015, to the UNCCD deliberations.

These developments in the UNCCD have introduced new and often intensive work at the national level, notably on the LDN targets and national reporting, while less attention has been placed on regional coordination and cooperation. In fact, regional and subregional action programmes have been barely noted in the COP decisions of 2017 and 2015, and last mentioning of the thematic programme networks is from 2013. Accordingly, focus of the support provided by the Convention institutions has shifted from assisting general (regional) coordination processes to offering more targeted and substantive guidance for applying the UNCCD priorities at the national level. The secretariat and the GM are increasingly delivering their activities in collaboration with various UN system organisations and other partners.

The evolving UNCCD context is influencing also the work of the RCUs. Technical assistance services to countries have become more specified and substantive, and maintaining the needed knowledge level on LDN, drought mitigation, the UNCCD reporting system and other key areas of work is challenging for the RCU staff. On the other hand, tasks and operations that used to be geared through the RCUs are increasingly carried out by experts from the UNCCD headquarters or partner organisations, while the role of the RCUs in these processes is limited to information-sharing and logistical arrangements for meetings and events within each region. However, it seems that the expectations concerning the RCUs have not changed accordingly: both the countries in each region and the UNCCD staff at headquarters seem to still expect the RCUs to be fully knowledgeable and an active participant in “everything” concerning the Convention in the region, although the extent of expertise and workload that such involvement would entail is significantly larger than before. These developments call for a re-thinking of the role of the RCUs.

3.2 Findings on the regional coordination units as organisations

As mentioned in chapter two, with the aim to gain a detailed understanding of what the RCUs are currently doing and how, two of them were interviewed in-depth and all were requested to respond to two questionnaires. The first questionnaire asked about some basic components of the RCUs as organisations: their mandate and purpose, strategy and work programme, main activities, communication, advocacy and information-sharing, and organizational setting. The second one presented more subjective questions of what the RCUs perceive as their main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A brainstorming meeting involving all RCUs was organised to discuss and further specify their responses to the questionnaires.

The resulting information was analysed and organised according to the three factors of organisational performance that are the focus of the methodology used in this evaluation: organisational motivation, organisational capacity and enabling environment, as presented below. For the purposes of this analysis, all the RCUs together were understood as an “organization” within the broader setting of the UNCCD secretariat and the collected information is summarized accordingly, without bringing up specific features concerning only one or two RCUs. Thus, while the information presented below is relevant to all RCUs, some nuances that are specific to only one or two RCUs are not included.

(1) Organisational motivation

Organizational motivation represents the underlying “personality” of the organization. It is what drives the members of the organization to perform. Assessing organizational motivation may involve examining how and why the organization got started and what are its mandate, mission and goals, in order to understand the driving forces behind it. The culture operating within an organization and the incentives it offers also contribute to organizational motivation. Taken together, these factors influence the organization’s performance and quality of work.³

As indicated in the introduction, the RCUs were formally established ten years ago. They were set up as part of the Convention secretariat, while their purpose and the activities that they were to carry out were defined in a broad manner. The ambiguity of the role of the RCUs can be seen to reflect the diverse views that the Parties had of the RCUs: it was easier to conclude the COP decisions on the role of the RCUs in broad terms than to reach a consensus among Parties of the exact tasks for the RCUs to deliver and to identify related resources. On the other hand, this ambiguity allows the RCUs, at least in principle, to take a wide variety of measures in carrying out their work.

When asked about their mandate and purpose, some RCUs responded that they do not have a mandate, while others referred to tasks emanating from various sources, such as the COP decisions or the regional annexes of the Convention, as the basis of their mandate. Similarly, to a question about their goals and work programme, most RCUs responded that they do not have specific goals or a work programme of their own, while some linked their work with the overall UNCCD work programme and its priorities.

Both types of responses can be considered relevant. Indeed, the RCUs are covered by the mandate, objectives and work programme of the secretariat, while their specific role is not defined in any of the strategic documents. The results framework for the secretariat and the GM is built around the five objectives of the Convention’s 2018-2030 strategic framework, their priority outcomes are defined for each four-year period and approved by the COP, and internally the secretariat establishes practical targets covering every two-year budget period. One secretariat unit or the GM is assigned responsible for each target and the RCUs are expected to be involved in several of them, but none of the targets are specified as the responsibility of the RCUs.

As the RCUs were established without clear formal guidance (through a COP decision) on what they should achieve and how, a more precise definition of their mandate and operational modalities at the level of the secretariat, accompanied by time-bound work programmes detailing their expected results and main activities would be important for ensuring their effectiveness. Keeping in mind the small size and limited resources of the RCUs, the likelihood of achieving the best results would improve if the RCUs were to concentrate their resources on their greatest strengths and opportunities and, as the often-repeated marketing mantra goes, define for them *a niche small enough that they can dominate it*.

The ambiguity of the role of the RCUs is affecting their working culture. The RCUs reported that the requests coming from the headquarters occasionally cover such a wide variety of actions that the RCU skills are not

³ For more information, please see Lusthaus, C. and others (2002) *Organizational Assessment: A Framework for Improving Performance*. Inter-American Development Bank and International Development Research Centre.

adequate to cover all of them. Then again, sometimes they are requested to carry out mundane but time-taking tasks, such as translating documents. According to the RCUs, in the absence of a clear shared understanding of what is included in their responsibilities, they feel unable to turn down the requests from the headquarters. Not being able to deliver what they are requested to or working on tasks well below the usual grade expectations is frustrating for the RCUs themselves and may also generate negative perceptions of their abilities among the headquarters staff. Appreciation from colleagues tends to be an important incentive for staff in small independent UN system entities such as the UNCCD secretariat that cannot offer many types of rewards for good performance. Not having that appreciation may be a particularly difficult factor of motivation for the RCU staff that is already by location separated from other colleagues.

Preparing a work programme specifically for the RCUs would mitigate also motivational issues, as it would enable the RCUs to focus on their essential tasks, spell out what is (and what is not) expected from them, and provide the basis for assessing their performance on a sound basis. Their effectiveness could be further improved by opportunities to develop their capacity and improve their knowledge on the priority areas of their work.

(2) Organisational capacity

Organizational capacity is the ability of an organization to use its resources to perform. It involves, among others, the strategies, specific areas of expertise and tactics that set the direction for the organization; the ability of the organization to carry out its role; the ability of the organization to manage its external relationships; and the way the organization manages its resources.⁴

The educational and professional background of most of the RCU staff is environmental or agricultural sciences, thus they are specialists in the substantive aspects of the Convention. When asked about the comparative advantages and specific strengths of the RCUs, they emphasized three features: the regional identity, the status as a UN office, and the knowledge of the UNCCD.

The RCU location within the regions distinguishes them from the other UNCCD entities. They are constantly exposed to the policies, trends and processes in the region and have a thorough knowledge of the regional priorities and specificities. As the RCU staff are nationals of a country in the region, speak the main language(s) used in the region and understand the culture and habits of the region, contacting them is likely to be easier than contacting the Bonn headquarters for the national focal points and other interested stakeholders. Similarly, the RCU staff may be considered as adept to “mingle” with a variety of representatives in the region. Physical proximity of the RCUs to the countries, organisations and institutions in the same region facilitates interaction with the countries, as they are in the same or close time zones, and often also traveling within the region is cheaper than travels from Bonn.

As part of the UN system, the RCUs enjoy similar rights and privileges as other UN entities in the regions, and although the RCUs are smaller than many others, their staff is treated with similar respect. The RCUs can have access to the coordination and cooperation activities as well as various networks among the UN organisations at the national and regional levels.

Within the regions, the RCUs are the UNCCD experts and the representatives of the Convention. The countries, organisations and other stakeholders in each region can approach them for information about the UNCCD priorities and activities, and they can be asked to provide related guidance and inputs.

The RCUs themselves identify as their most important activities the following:

⁴ For more information, please see Lusthaus, C. and others (2002) *Organizational Assessment: A Framework for Improving Performance*. Inter-American Development Bank and International Development Research Centre.

- Support to the effective implementation of the UNCCD priority activities, such as the national reporting and work on LDN and drought;
- Support to regional coordination;
- Awareness raising and information dissemination concerning UNCCD matters; and
- Promotion of the mainstreaming of UNCCD priorities into relevant regional processes and events.

As mentioned in the previous section, the RCUs have not been assigned responsibility for any UNCCD targets or aims, and consequently there are no specified expectations or indicators that would establish the basis for measuring the extent of their achievements.

Below is an overview of the priorities of the secretariat in 2018-2019⁵ and the respective work carried out by the RCUs. This overview focuses only on the main priorities and cannot be considered as a comprehensive description of the activities of the RCUs. Nevertheless, it offers an outline of the type of work carried out by the RCUs that is adequate for the purposes of this evaluation.

Priorities of the secretariat	Activities of the RCUs
<p>Support to the implementation of LDN:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promotion, advocacy to ensure that LDN remains high on the political agenda - Production of brochures, guides and tools on LDN; update of the UNCCD Knowledge Hub - Preparation of an E-learning course and other capacity building material on LDN - Implementation of “Greening Drylands” projects on LDN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in major meetings and processes on land restoration in the region - Promotion of the World Day to Combat Desertification (WDCD); guidance to countries on WDCD organisation at country level - Organisation of UNCCD high level country visits - Local interviews, media inputs, presentations and lectures on LDN, DLDD - Participation in the Greening Drylands projects in Armenia and Belarus
<p>Showcasing and catalysing the use of effective policies and approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical guidance on the preparation of national drought plans, preparation of the Drought Toolbox - Sand and dust storms (SDS) guidance documents, pilot projects and partnerships - Guidance on gender mainstreaming to national reporting, LDN, drought and SDS work - Advocacy on land-security nexus, promotion of land-based green jobs, support to the 3S 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in high-level meetings on disaster risk reduction (SDS, drought) and/or gender in the region - Support to the Drought Initiative: awareness raising, information-sharing to countries, organisation of the Toolbox validation workshop*, identification of regional partners
<p>Support to scientific collaboration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support to the SPI in the preparation of its reports concerning LDN and drought - Promotion of synergies with measures on climate change and biodiversity - Inputs to scientific processes and events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishment of cooperation with the climate change regional centers - Participation in regional and national high-level meetings on climate change and biodiversity - Africa: membership in the Moroccan national UN group on climate change
<p>Support to national reporting and review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparation of the updated reporting tools - Provision of “default data” - Continuous helpdesk support - Analysis and compilation of information - Organisation of the CRIC review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisation of regional training workshops* - Organisation of regional consultations before and during the CRIC - Serving as the first contact point for countries on requests for guidance on the reporting - Information sharing and reminders on the reporting process and deadlines

* The RCUs were in charge of the logistical arrangements of the meeting and liaison with the participating countries, while the content was provided by the secretariat or the GM.

⁵ Sources: UNCCD 2018-2021 workplan and 2018-2019 work programme in document ICCD/COP(13)/8-ICCD/CRIC(16)/2 and UNCCD performance report 2018-2019 in document ICCD/CRIC(18)/3.

Further examination of the results of the work of the RCUs through available documentation and comments from the secretariat and the GM staff indicates that the RCUs bear an important share of the workload of many key UNCCD activities and that they are actively representing the UNCCD in regional processes and events and through bilateral contacts. However, with a few exceptions, it seems difficult to identify a concrete initiative, a policy development or a partnership that would be a direct result of the activities of an RCU.

A comparison between the RCU skills and strengths and the tasks that they carry out indicates that their expertise and status could be used more effectively. Although the professional background of the RCU staff is in environmental/agricultural sciences and knowledge of the regions is one of their strengths, their expertise is used mostly for general UNCCD representation functions, such as participation in meetings on topics relevant to the UNCCD and responding to requests for information on the UNCCD from the region. Often their participation in the UNCCD activities in the region, such as the national reporting process or the LDN target-setting programme, is about support in logistics - meeting arrangements, participants travel etc – with only limited role in the substantive work.

Development of policies and approaches on key topics and themes of the UNCCD and planning of related actions are among the responsibilities of the specialized staff at the UNCCD headquarters, but the RCUs could contribute to these processes by providing region-specific information and inputs. They could also support the application and adjustment of various global UNCCD provisions, policies and approaches to their region, taking into account the particular needs and circumstances of each region, so that it would be easier for the countries to use the information deriving from the Convention process. However, as mentioned earlier, it would be unrealistic to expect that the one-person RCUs could master a wide scope of substantive developments that are dealt with at the headquarters level. Instead, they could focus and further develop their expertise in a small number of topics that are of particular importance in their region, either because they are priorities for the countries or hold high potential for the UNCCD work. For example, in the LAC region such topics include now landscape rehabilitation and organic economy, while in the NM region countries are interested in the climate change - land nexus and land tenure questions. By focusing on a limited number of important topics, the RCUs could deliver tangible results in selected substantive areas in their region instead of “spreading too thin” - trying to cover all UNCCD topics but without notable effect on any of them. It would also ensure that the substantive work of the RCUs generates added value to the considerations under the UNCCD process and at the headquarters.

Support to regional coordination as one of the key activities of the RCUs tends to refer to the organisation of regional consultations, support to countries in preparing their positions for the UNCCD meetings, and facilitation of communication among countries and between them and the secretariat. The identified RCU strengths, particularly those on familiarity with the regions and status as a UN office, imply that much more could be done in this field. The RCUs themselves consider that developing and leveraging coordination and joint activities with other regional organizations and institutions is one of their main opportunities for improving effectiveness. The UNCCD headquarters would certainly benefit from more information about relevant activities of other UN system organisations in each region, and the RCUs would be in a prime position to collect and deliver such information. Even more importantly, the RCUs could ensure that those UN organisations and other major organisations and institutions in the region that work on matters relevant to the UNCCD are continuously informed of related UNCCD priorities and activities, including through the UN “delivering as one” framework in those countries that have adopted it.

On step further from information sharing would be to actively identify and generate opportunities for joint activities and partnership initiatives with the UN system organisations, as well as other major organisations and institutions active in the regions. Such activities could focus on a topic in which the UNCCD and the partner organisation have a shared interest and which is important for the countries in the region, and they could include, for example, joint publications, jointly organised meetings or workshops, cooperation on capacity building, integration of selected UNCCD components into a project of the partner, establishment of

a joint thematic working group, committee, platform or network or inclusion of the UNCCD in one maintained by the partner. In the exchanges during the evaluation process, the RCUs confirmed that there already exist numerous opportunities for collaboration in each region. Such partnerships could significantly enhance the visibility of the UNCCD in the region and provide added value to the activities of the partners. They would complement and contribute to the work done at the Bonn headquarters and compensate for the limited resources of the RCUs.

Communications and information-sharing are essential activities of the RCUs. The UNCCD has a corporate communication strategy, which does not include specific aims or tools targeting the regions or the RCUs and when asked, the RCUs responded that they are not well aware of the content of the strategy. At the moment there is no systematic approach to the RCU communication and information-sharing; rather related activities are based on periodic needs and opportunities. Nearly all RCU information-sharing is about forwarding information received from the headquarters, often as a request delivered for comments by the national focal points. The UNCCD website that is maintained from Bonn has a section dedicated to the “regions” with news from the regions, but most of the news stories are collected by the communications team in the headquarters. There are no UNCCD regional social media accounts, but some RCU staff deliver information about the UNCCD through their personal social media channels.

Active online communications and particularly social media may reach large audiences rapidly, but it can also be demanding in terms of both the workload and the media skills. Continuation of centralizing the UNCCD online communications to the headquarters is probably the most feasible option also in the future, while increasing the visibility of regional information, with support from the RCUs, could be worth consideration.

In general, the RCUs could have two important roles in the regional information-sharing: one to deliver information and another one to receive. Their own capacity to produce information is limited, and most of the UNCCD information that they could share within the region would be prepared at the headquarters and possibly partially tailored for each region. On receiving information, the countries, organisations and institutions in each region produce plenty of region-specific material that is relevant for the UNCCD and would be useful for both the headquarters and to the countries in each region. Such information includes, for example, major project concept notes and briefings, thematic studies and reports, and statistical data compilations. Information providers are usually aiming to maximise the use of their products and therefore the material is likely to be well available, but finding out about useful information in the first place may be challenging. Closer collaboration with major organisations in the regions could be helpful also in this regard.

Advocacy is another key function of the RCUs, and similarly to the communications and information-sharing, it is at the moment largely ad hoc. The RCUs represent the UNCCD frequently in meetings and events in the region and in their country of location, and while all these occasions are relevant to the UNCCD, most of them do not serve any defined aim other than generally enhancing the visibility of the UNCCD and its priorities. This is of some contrast to the representation tasks of the secretariat that tend to serve a pre-identified purpose, such as including specific UNCCD interests in the meeting outcomes or launching an initiative on a UNCCD priority topic.

The RCUs identified more intensive and targeted advocacy as one of their main opportunities for improving effectiveness. They listed some major international events and processes in the regions that the UNCCD could feed into and that in turn would contribute to the UNCCD priorities, such as the development of Africa’s Agenda 2063, the UNFCCC COP25 in Chile, and the 20X20 Initiative. For many such events and processes, currently the headquarters prepares the inputs and participates in related meetings. The potential role and input of the RCUs in the future could be planned case-by-case basis, so as to come up with an optimal combination of headquarters and RCU expertise.

With regard to bilateral advocacy with countries and regional organisations, in every region and also in most countries, some land related issues are high on the political agenda. Identifying those specific political interests that are the most relevant for the UNCCD priorities and planning the advocacy functions accordingly

could leverage valuable support to the achievement of the UNCCD objectives at national and regional levels, as well as in the global Convention process. Usually the approval of ministers and/or high-level authorities is needed for any major activities to take place, thus reaching them would be of particular importance.

The targeted advocacy as described above may be very effective, but it also comes with a significant workload. Should the RCUs start working in that manner, they should focus on a small number of countries or organisations within a given timeframe, perhaps only on two or three per region. This should make it possible for them to carry out a thorough analysis of the relevant priorities of the selected countries/organisations, identify the advocacy aims and approaches in collaboration with the headquarters, and establish the needed relations through meetings with a variety of key stakeholders. As feasible, the advocacy could also involve a resource mobilisation component that should be designed together with the headquarters.

The last topic of this sub-chapter is about the organizational structure of the RCUs and the way that their processes are governed and managed. In the structure of the secretariat, the RCUs are an integral part of one unit – currently, they are under the External Relations, Policy and Advocacy (ERPA) unit after a recent move from the Science, Technology and Implementation (STI) unit. Similarly to other staff of the unit, each regional coordinator is supervised by and reports directly to the ERPA unit chief, who is in turn accountable to the Executive Secretary and his Deputy. Online RCU meetings with the unit chief as well as online ERPA meetings are organised regularly, with the aim to exchange information among the unit staff and solve pending issues. There is no senior staff assigned only to manage the RCUs. In practice, often the RCUs are loosely coordinated by the CEE regional coordinator, as she is located in Bonn and thereby receives first-hand information of the headquarters processes and requirements, unlike the RCUs in the regions. Nevertheless, she has no supervisory role or decision-making authority over the other RCUs.

Were the RCUs to develop toward more substantive functions and visibility in the regions, the need to ensure coherence and complementarity between their work and that of the headquarters would become more pressing. This need could be met by, for example, more detailed planning of the work of the RCUs vis-à-vis the rest of the secretariat and the GM; frequent exchanges between the RCUs, relevant units of the secretariat and the GM on specific tasks, their aims, preparations and allocation of work; and regular monitoring and reporting on the results and activities in shared fields of work. To cover the additional workload, the responsibilities of the unit chief could be revised so as to allow for more time for the RCU coordination. Alternatively, the overall coordinating role of the CEE regional coordinator could be strengthened or formalized, or a new RCU coordinator post could be established.

The budget of the RCUs is within the budget of the unit and the regional coordinators have not been allocated any resources of their own. All of their travels, consultancies and other expenses are considered on a case by case basis by the unit chief. If the unit chief accepts the proposed costs, they are submitted for approval at the executive direction and management. This centralized approval procedure is not only for the RCU expenses but applied to all units of the secretariat. While it may continue also in the future, earmarking at least some amount for the RCUs would assist them in making realistic plans for their activities.

(3) Enabling environment

Organizations are open systems and the external environment in which they operate is very important, as it determines how well the organization can carry out its activities. Thus, in assessing an organization, attention needs to be paid to those political, sociocultural and technological conditions that influence its functioning.⁶

⁶ For more information, please see Lusthaus, C. and others (2002) Organizational Assessment: A Framework for Improving Performance. Inter-American Development Bank and International Development Research Centre.

The set-up of the RCUs within the evolving UNCCD process was described in section 3.1. This section focuses on their main external influences: their clients and the hosting arrangements.

When asked, all RCUs identified the countries in their region and the respective national focal points as well as the civil society as their main clients. Other UN and international agencies and key regional groups and organisations were mentioned too.

Most national UNCCD focal points in the developing countries are senior officers in the ministry of the environment; occasionally also in the ministry of agriculture. While the RCUs commend the commitment and expertise of the focal points, they also recognize that many focal points, and often the ministries of the environment in general, do not hold significant political powers within the countries and their potential to influence national decision-making processes is limited. This may be reflected as low visibility of and limited investments in activities to implement the UNCCD at the national level. In fact, the RCUs mentioned among their concerns that land matters under the UNFCCC may capture more attention at the national level than those under the UNCCD. Another challenge for the RCUs is the frequent change of national focal points due to post rotation in the ministries, as well as ministers changing after each election.

The UNCCD has various information products about the Convention in general and about its specific priorities and concepts. This information, perhaps with a regularly updated overview of the UNCCD issues and activities in each region, could support the focal points in bringing up the Convention within their countries, and it would be particularly useful for newly appointed focal points and ministers in familiarizing themselves with the UNCCD process. Such information could also present the role of the RCUs, so as to avoid misunderstandings that have been reported on, for example, national officers having compared the RCUs to FAO or UNDP regional offices.

The role of the countries in each region in guiding the work of the RCUs has been discussed in the past, and supporting the priorities defined in each region has occasionally been referred to as the most important duty of the RCUs. Earlier this was understood as setting the RCUs as “secretaries” for each region, whereby they assisted the countries in meeting their obligations under the Convention and coordinating their activities. The RCUs were considered as accountable to the countries in the region, not only to the secretariat, which placed them in a difficult situation when countries requested them to deliver services that were not taken into account in the budget or compatible with the mandate of the secretariat. Nowadays the RCUs are more clearly considered as part of the secretariat, although away from the headquarters. Serving the priorities of the countries in each region is interpreted to mean the priorities that have been decided at the level of the COP, with the RCUs facilitating the implementation of these decisions according to the specific features, needs and opportunities in each region. This perception of the RCUs as an integral part of the secretariat but specialized in the regions could be further strengthened, as it underlines the coherence of activities between the headquarters and the RCUs, while recognizing that different measures should be used in different regions.

The RCUs are hosted through diverse arrangements, and they benefit from and cooperate with their hosts in various manners. Being part of a major regional UN organisations, such as ECLAC for the LAC RCU in Chile, offers information and contacts that can be very useful for advancing the UNCCD. On the other hand, it seems that being hosted by a government, as is the case for Africa and NM, brings strong political backstopping and more immediate cooperation opportunities. This aspect of the RCUs would benefit from further research and comparison.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings presented in the previous sections suggest several developments for improving the effectiveness of the RCUs. These suggestions are summarized below.

- The RCUs should have more clearly defined mandate and operational modalities at the level of the secretariat.
- They should have a results-oriented work programme that is based on the overall UNCCD work programme and specifies the targets and activities of the RCUs. Progress made in implementing the work programme should be regularly monitored.
- They should concentrate their resources on areas where they have competitive advantage and can generate added value to the UNCCD.
- They should focus on the achievement of a limited number of important results, on which they would work intensively, instead of trying to cover a wide range of matters but lightly.
- The professional background of the RCU staff and their knowledge of the regions should be taken into use more effectively by involving them better in the development of policies and approaches on key topics and themes of the UNCCD and planning of related actions.
- The RCUs should work more effectively in developing and leveraging coordination, joint activities and partnership initiatives with other regional organizations and institutions.
- They should ensure that those UN organisations and other major organisations and institutions in the region that work on matters relevant to the UNCCD are continuously informed of related UNCCD priorities and activities.
- The communication role of the RCUs should be revised, possibly focusing on both information delivery and information collection.
- The advocacy functions of the RCUs should be better targeted and more intensive.
- For effective bilateral advocacy with countries and regional organisations, the RCUs should focus on a small number of countries or organisations within a given timeframe and build their activities on thorough analysis of the relevant priorities of the selected countries/organisations.
- Their advocacy could also involve a resource mobilisation component
- Coherence and complementarity between the work of the RCUs and that of the headquarters should be ensured, which could involve, for example, more detailed planning of the work of the RCUs vis-à-vis the rest of the secretariat and the GM; frequent exchanges between the RCUs and the headquarters; and regular monitoring and reporting on the results and activities in shared fields of work.
- Additional staff time should be allocated for RCU coordination at the headquarters, either by revising the responsibilities of current staff or by establishing a new RCU coordinator post.
- At least some funding from the regular budget should be earmarked for the RCU activities.
- The RCUs should compile and/or develop an information package that could be provided to new focal points and other newcomers to assist them in starting to work on the Convention
- Information clarifying the role of the RCUs as an integral part of the secretariat but specialized in the regions should be also prepared and made available.
- The pros and cons of different RCU hosting arrangements should be further studied and analysed.

4.1 Recommendations

Building on the above, the following evaluation recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the RCUs are made:

- 1. The planning, coordination and monitoring of the work of the RCUs is improved.**
- 2. The RCUs focus on specified and targeted activities and results that can generate added value to the UNCCD, and for which they have comparative advantage.**
- 3. The RCUs enhance the effectiveness of their advocacy functions as well as their liaison with relevant organisations and institutions in each region, with the aim to leverage partnerships to support the implementation of the UNCCD.**
- 4. The communication and information-sharing functions of the RCUs are revised for optimal visibility of the regional dimension of the UNCCD, while taking into account the limited resources of the RCUs.**

Annex 1: Questionnaires

Questionnaire 1: Information of regional offices (ROs)

Questions	Answers
Mandate and purpose	
What is the mandate of the office?	
Who are the main clients of the RO?	
Strategy and work programme	
Does the RO have a strategy or specific objectives of its own?	
Activities	
What are the activities of the RO?	
Are some of its activities carried out with partners (or by partners)? If yes, what kind of activities?	
Communication, advocacy and information-sharing	
Does the RO have communication functions (own website, provision of information to media, organisation of campaigns...)?	
Organisational setting	
Who does the RO report to?	
How is the RO hosted?	

Questionnaire 2: RCUs: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats - SWOT

The SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an organization or company. It provides information that is helpful in matching the organization's resources and capabilities to the environment in which it operates. Strengths and weaknesses are internal, i.e. the organization can influence them. Opportunities and threats are external, i.e. usually the organization can only react to them, not influence them.

Questions	Answers
<p>Strengths Consider this from your own point of view and from the point of view of the people the RCU deals with. Don't be modest. If you are having any difficulty with this, try writing down a list of your RCU's characteristics. Some of these will hopefully be strengths! You can also think about them in relation to the other secretariat units and the GM – what makes the RCU special and necessary? Be realistic and limit the RCU strengths to those that you have actually and currently, don't include those that you would like to have.</p>	
What are the advantages of this RCU? What does it do well?	
What relevant resources does the RCU have access to? Resources include also non-financial assets such as knowledge, willing partners...	
What do the countries, other organizations or colleagues see as the strengths of the RCUs?	
<p>Weaknesses Consider this from an internal and external viewpoint: Do others (some Parties, your national/regional contacts, colleagues) seem to perceive in the RCUs weaknesses that you do not see? Are other units doing better results than the RCUs? Be realistic and truthful.</p>	
What could the RCUs improve? What do they do badly?	
What should the RCUs avoid?	
<p>Opportunities Useful opportunities can come from changes in the UNCCD priorities or government policies related to your field, changes in global or regional organizations (priorities, approaches, staff...) or from new processes or events in your region. Another approach to identifying opportunities is to look at the RCU strengths and ask yourself whether these open up any opportunities. Alternatively, look at the RCU weaknesses and ask yourself whether you could open up opportunities by eliminating them.</p>	
Where are the good opportunities in front of you?	
What are the interesting trends you are aware of?	
<p>Threats These are changes in the external environmental that may present threats to the RCU. Some examples of such threats include shifts in political priorities (away from land issues) in your region or among the Parties/donors in general, or emergence of other "players" that draw attention from the RCU, for example.</p>	
What are the main external obstacles that the RCU faces?	
Are the required specifications or skills for the work of the RCU changing?	

Annex 2: Other regional offices that were studied for the evaluation

With the aim to identify concrete ideas and approaches for the development of the RCUs, the evaluation process included a research of regional offices of other organisations, with focus on offices that are not very different from the UNCCD RCUs in terms of size and functions, although they cover a wide variety of topics. These regional offices are the following:

International Organisation for Migration Regional Office of the Caribbean

<https://www.iom.int/central-and-north-america-and-caribbean>

Regional Coordinating Unit of the Abidjan Convention

https://abidjanconvention.org/?option=com_content&view=article&id=95&Itemid=195&lang=en

Regional Support Office of the Bali Process

<https://www.baliprocess.net/regional-support-office/>

United Nations Environment Caribbean Regional Coordinating Unit

<http://www.cep.unep.org/content/about-cep/unep-car-rcu/unep-caribbean-regional-coordinating-unit>

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Regional Coordination Centre (RCC) in Kampala

<https://unfccc.int/about-us/regional-collaboration-centres/rcc-kampala>

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Regional Office for Southern Africa

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/SouthernAfricaSummary10.aspx>

World Tourism Organisation Regional Support Office of Asia-Pacific

<http://asiapacific.unwto.org/>

Annex 3: Examples from other regional offices

The information and examples collected from the regional offices of other organisations are compiled below under four headings: (a) Mandate and purpose, (b) Strategy and work programme, (c) Main activities and (d) Organisational setting. These examples are meant to serve as material for developing the same aspects of the RCUs by presenting a variety of approaches that are being used by other regional offices. Some are alternatives (the defined mandates, for example) while others can be combined (main activities). The examples are either in a generic form, without reference to any particular topic or theme, or modified to refer to possible use by the RCUs. The modifications are shown in square brackets.

(a) Mandate and purpose

The mandate statements of other regional offices included the following:

- To operationalize a regional cooperation framework
- To serve as a regional focal point for coordination, capacity building and sharing best practices
- To provide technical assistance to all countries of the region, strengthen national, subregional and regional institutions, coordinate regional and international technical and financial assistance and promote technical co-operation among countries and partner agencies.
- To support national action through capacity-building, technical assistance and strategic networking, sourcing know-how and resources [to drive LDN; to improve drought preparedness].
- To advance understanding of [land] issues.
- To encourage social and economic development [through LDN].

(b) Strategy and work programme

The objectives and work programmes of the studied regional offices differed greatly, and below are some examples of their approaches:

- The regional office has four key objectives. It has an annual work plan that is approved by the headquarters for two years at a time. There is also a biennium regional strategic plan.
- The office has a biennium work plan and budget approved and funded by regional member states.
- Under the overall strategy of the headquarters, the regional office implements three specific programmes.
- The regional office work programme is developed on the basis of the objectives of its headquarters and its host institution.
- The regional office work programme is an extension of the programme of its headquarters.

(c) Main activities

Below is a list of a variety of main activities that are carried out by the regional offices. The activities are loosely grouped around information management, capacity building, partnership building and cooperation, and support to projects.

Information management:

- Monitoring and analysis of developments in the region and facilitation of information sharing amongst countries.
- Preparation of papers, reports and thematic briefs on matters specific to the region
- Collection, review and dissemination of information sheets, studies, publications and results of relevant projects and activities, including those of other organisations and the host organisation/country
- Preparation of handbooks and guides on matters and practices specific to the region
- Support to cross-border information sharing and access to information
- Promotion of the availability of timely, reliable and disaggregated data from the region
- Commission or conduct regional assessments on key topics
- Collection of information from member states and relevant organisations for reports and briefings on specific topics

- Consulting with member states on approaches, programmes and procedures that are being developed to ensure that they reflect the needs and practices of the countries
- Establish a network of institutions in the countries of the region, to conduct related research and studies and set policies on matters specific for the region

Capacity building:

- Delivery of training and briefings on selected topics
- Cooperation with regional training institutions, including annual meetings or workshops with them
- Facilitation of training for developing national information campaigns
- Maintenance and update of regional catalogue of training and capacity building through compilation of offerings by interested parties and partners
- Support to working groups on, for example, specific legal matters, training and capacity building, private sector engagement and public-private collaboration
- Organization or co-organization of workshops, meetings and roundtables of experts

Partnership building and cooperation:

- Establishment or improvement of working relationships and cooperation with other UN and non-UN organizations on relevant projects and activities
- Launching or participation in a collaboration platform for UN organizations
- Promotion of policy and programme coherence at the regional level through exchanging views on major strategic developments and challenges facing the region
- Facilitation of pooling of common technical resources
- Joint analysis, advocacy and policy coordination with partners on issues of shared interest
- Leveraging partnerships, including fundraising and liaison with bilateral and multilateral donors
- Fundraise for voluntary contributions from governments in the region for a regional trust fund

Support to projects

- Enhance regional cooperation with other major projects and initiatives
- Logistical, administrative, operational, and coordination support to projects.
- Identification of interested partners to pilot regional projects
- Provide expert support to pilot initiatives

All studied regional offices have individual websites or webpages, often linked to the main website of the organisation. The content and frequency of updates in different webpages varies greatly: some have a wide range of relevant information and plenty of recent updates, while others offer only basic or historical data about the office. All studied regional offices are active in sharing information about their field and have at least some representation functions.

(d) Organizational setting

The regional offices have a variety of arrangements for hosting and reporting lines. Here are some examples of their approaches:

- A regional office reports to / is shared by two UN entities working on similar issues.
- A regional office reports regularly to a regional steering committee (of member states), which reviews the activities and outcomes of the regional office every 24 months.
- A regional office receives secondments of government officials and other contributions from its member states in the region.
- A regional office has a trust fund for voluntary contributions from the countries in the region and other donors.