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Procedural matters

Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Note by the secretariat*

Summary

By its decision 5/COP.13, the Conference of the Parties (COP) requested the secretariat to address a number of issues relevant to the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the process of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The COP requested the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of membership to the Civil Society Organization Selection Panel (the Panel). It also requested, in collaboration with the Panel, to take the necessary measures to implement the recommendations of the independent evaluation.

By the same decision, the COP requested the Executive Secretary to report at its fourteenth session (COP 14) on the implementation of the decision, including the report of the Panel on the implementation of its tasks.

This document contains the reports of the Executive Secretary and the Panel on the measures undertaken by the secretariat to implement the above-mentioned decision and provides recommendations for consideration at COP 14.

* The present report was submitted after the deadline due to constraints in documentation processing.

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Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Background	1–5	3
II. Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification	6–20	3
A. Renewal of the membership of the Civil Society Organization Selection Panel	6–8	3
B. Support to the Civil Society Organization Panel in discharging its mandate .	9–13	4
C. Implementation of the recommendations identified by the independent evaluation on the effectiveness of the UNCCD support for civil society organization participation	14–20	4
III. Report of the Civil Society Organization Panel	21–44	5
A. Activities undertaken by the Panel	21–23	5
B. Work of the Civil Society Organization Panel	24–28	6
C. Civil Society Organization Panel participation during the seventeenth session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention.....	29–34	7
D. DesertifActions 2019	35–36	8
E. Preparations for civil society organization participation in the fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties	37–38	9
F. Lessons learned.....	39–44	9
IV. Conclusions and recommendations	45	10

I. Background

1. Decisions 5/COP.9, 5/COP.10, 5/COP.11, 5/COP.12 and 5/COP.13 set the basis for the organization and engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD. Since then the UNCCD CSO Panel has been ensuring the coordination of all the CSOs accredited to the Conference of the Parties (COP) and providing regular guidance and feedback to the work of the secretariat and the Global Mechanism.
2. For the last four years the Panel and its constituencies have been working on priorities identified by civil society, including land tenure and gender. At COP 13 the Panel presented, on behalf of the CSOs, a set of recommendations to ensure responsible land tenure while achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN). In this regard, decision 5/COP.13 invited the Parties to consider the recommendations made by the Panel regarding land rights.
3. Decision 5/COP.13 encourages the Panel to consider the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework and topics under the COP when designing its programme of work, and to review its working modalities with a view to enhancing its effectiveness in the Convention processes.
4. COP 10 requested that COP 13 undertake an overall review of the results achieved with the revised procedures for accreditation of CSOs in terms of the increased effectiveness of their involvement in the implementation of the Convention. Parties at COP 13 requested the secretariat, in collaboration with the Panel, to take the necessary measures to implement the recommendations of that independent evaluation.
5. The Parties also requested the secretariat to report on the implementation of the decision at COP 14.

II. Participation and involvement of civil society organizations in meetings and processes of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

A. Renewal of the membership of the Civil Society Organization Selection Panel

6. By decision 5/COP.13, paragraph 8, the COP requested the secretariat to facilitate the renewal of membership to the Panel by January 2018. Following this provision, and as a result of the consultations reached with the accredited CSOs, the following members were appointed:
 - (a) Ms. Djatougbe Aziaka (Togo Welfare) – representative of the African Group;
 - (b) Ms. Jiajia Luo (China Green Foundation) – representative of the Asia Group;
 - (c) Mr. Octavio Perez Pardo (Colegio de Ingenieros Agrónomos de Santiago de Estero (CIASE)) – representative of the Latin America and the Caribbean Group;
 - (d) Mr. Valentin Ciubotaru (NGO Bios) – representative of the Eastern European Group; and
 - (e) Ms. Nathalie van Haren (Both Ends) – representative of the Western European and Others Group.
7. Since February 2018, the Panel has met 12 times (three times in person and the remaining via telephone conferencing) to deliver its original mandate. The secretariat has supported the work of the Panel and prepared the required documents for those meetings, including supporting the work of the Chair (Ms. Jiajia Luo), in the mandate given by the Panel.

8. The current Panel, which will serve until the end of 2019, is expected to meet at least four times in preparation for COP 14. From 19 to 22 June 2019, the Panel will be supporting the organization of DesertifActions19 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. This event has been conceived to prepare and coordinate the input of the CSOs to COP14.

B. Support to the Civil Society Organization Panel in discharging its mandate

9. Following the mandate provided by the Convention and the decisions of the COP, the secretariat has been supporting the work of the CSOs and the Panel to ensure that they are involved in the implementation of the Convention at all levels.

10. The secretariat continued facilitating the accreditation of the CSOs. At the time of this document, an extra 57 organizations had correctly submitted their documents for accreditation as observers to the COP. It is expected that additional organizations will have fulfilled this requirement before the beginning of COP 14.

11. Furthermore, the secretariat assisted the CSOs, including the Panel, in raising funds to allow the functioning of the Panel and the participation of the CSOs in meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies. In this regard, the government of Switzerland, through its Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the government of Turkey via the Ankara Initiative have provided the funds needed for the Panel to carry out its tasks over the past few years. Additional resources were secured by the CSO Panel members to carry out their day-to-day duties.

12. In addition to participation in the 17th session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention, held in Georgetown, Guyana from 28 to 30 January 2019, the Panel was also represented at the first meeting of the Steering Committee of the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund (LDN Fund) through the participation of Mr. Octavio Perez Pardo. He represented the views of the CSOs, bringing them to the members of the committee and ensuring that CSOs' interests are taken into consideration. The Panel also participated actively in the work of the UNCCD Science–Policy Interface (SPI) with Ms. Marioldy Sanchez. She is providing monthly reports to the Panel, keeping the members involved in the work of the SPI and its priorities.

13. Section III contains the report of the Panel, which includes the work undertaken to further involve the CSOs in the implementation of the convention.

C. Implementation of the recommendations identified by the independent evaluation on the effectiveness of the UNCCD support for civil society organization participation

14. The independent evaluation identified four conclusions and three recommendations which were presented to the Parties at COP 13 in document ICCD/COP(13)/15. Decision 5/COP13 requested the secretariat in collaboration with the Civil Society Organization Panel, and subject to the availability of resources, to take the necessary measures to implement the recommendations.

15. The first recommendation requests the Panel to develop its operational guidelines or terms of reference, including a time-bound strategic plan, for CSO participation in the UNCCD and the functioning of the Panel. In order to ensure a transparent process, the secretariat facilitated the organization of a meeting with representatives of the previous and current Panel members with the aim of finalizing and agreeing on the operational guidelines of the Panel. The document will regulate the work of the Panel in the future and will help its members in carrying out their mandate. The current Panel members devoted part of the meeting to finalizing its work programme, identifying the necessary resources and sources of funding (both internal and external).

16. The second recommendation focuses on the need for the Panel to establish a communication plan. Luckily, one of the members of the Panel, Ms. Djatougbe Aziaka, is

also a trained journalist and has experience in the area of communication thanks to her television programme “Ecoconscience”. The Panel used her expertise to come up with a communication plan that has been helping to strengthen this important area. Relevant information is available on the Panel website.¹

17. The last recommendation instructs the secretariat to continue supporting the effective participation of accredited CSOs in the UNCCD process at the global, regional and national levels, paying particular attention to: (a) actively engaging new CSOs to become involved in the UNCCD, so as to broaden the substantive basis and influence of the UNCCD CSO community; and (b) facilitating follow-up of CSO activities to deepen the impact. In this regard, the secretariat has been engaging key stakeholders that could be more involved in the work of the Convention. These are youth, local governments and faith-based organizations.

18. The secretariat has become an active partner within the Interagency Network for Youth Development, getting involved in several initiatives, particularly youth green jobs and decent jobs for youth. Furthermore, the three Rio Conventions are working together with the United Nations Development Programme/Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme and Television for the Environment to bring the voices of youth to the Secretary-General Climate Summit in September through videos presented on the topics of climate, land and biodiversity. COP 13 was capital for the engagement of youth since the host country and the Chinese Academy of Forestry organized the first ever UNCCD Global Youth Initiative for Combating Desertification.² This event was the inception of the youth movement within the UNCCD that is being currently developed by the Mayor Group on Children and Youth, YOUNGO and more than 120 youth representatives. It is expected that youth around the world will attend COP 14 to ensure the rights of future generations to enjoy a healthy land.

19. The COP 13 high-level segment focussed among other things on the role that local governments could play in addressing the challenges of desertification, land degradation and drought. Since then, the secretariat has been working with ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, Climate Chance and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) to ensure that cities will be able to manage the future pressures on land and maintain a sustainable equilibrium between urban and rural areas and communities.

20. Faith-based organizations are already contributing to the momentum to address environmental challenges. There has been a steady increase in the level of engagement and number of religious groups at the local, national and international levels acting on environmental challenges in a practical way. Environment and development work are often seen as a moral issue and action as an expression of faith. The secretariat has started reaching out to the Faith Based Organizations to work together in the protection of the environment and the land, and the living creatures that live on it.

III. Report of the Civil Society Organization Panel

A. Activities undertaken by the Panel

21. The UNCCD Civil Society Organization Panel (CSO Panel) was established in 2009 by the Conference of the Parties (COP) through its decision 5/COP.9.

22. The CSO Panel has five members, who represent the five United Nations regional groups. The current panel was elected in January 2018 by the CSOs accredited to the UNCCD. The composition of the Panel has since been as indicated in paragraph 6 above.

23. At the first Panel meeting held on 14 February 2018 in New Delhi, India, Ms. Jiajia Luo was elected as the permanent co-chair, and Ms. Nathalie van Haren, Ms. Djatougbe

¹ <<https://www.csopanel.com>>.

² <<https://www.unccd.int/actions/actions-around-world/global-youth-initiative-combating-desertification-starting-point>>.

Aziaka, Mr. Octavio Perez Pardo and Mr. Valentin Ciubotaru as rotating co-chairs, each for a period of six months.

B. Work of the Civil Society Organization Panel

24. The CSO Panel has met 11 times since February 2018. Three were in-person meetings (New Delhi, India in February 2018, Georgetown, Guyana in January 2019, and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in June 2019) and eight were virtual meetings.

25. During its first meeting, the CSO Panel agreed on its *modus operandi* and prepared the programme of work for the biennium 2018–2019 that will enable it to fulfil its mandate.

26. It is important to point out that, in addition to the formal CSO Panel meetings, the CSO Panel members held informal consultations among themselves, either by e-mail or by telephone, in order to address and discuss many varied issues. In addition, CSO Panel members have been in constant contact with their constituencies, in order to ensure that the voice of civil society is reflected in the CSO Panel discussions.

27. The CSO Panel also had face-to-face meetings with the UNCCD Executive Secretary, the UNCCD Deputy Executive Secretary, national government representatives and other relevant stakeholders. In the same spirit, discussions have taken place among individual CSO Panel members and national focal points.

28. The main issues considered by the CSO Panel were:

(a) Interaction with CSOs;

(i) Facilitation of the nomination and election of alternative CSO observers to the UNCCD SPI who would act as alternatives to and be the successor of the current CSO observer Ms. Marioldy Sanchez from Asociación para la Investigación y Desarrollo Integral, Peru. In May 2018, Noel Oettle, from the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) in South Africa was elected;

(ii) Follow-up of the discussions in the SPI meetings, through meetings between the CSO Panel and the CSO observer to the SPI;

(iii) Support for the implementation of the Comprehensive Communication Strategy of the UNCCD, including the involvement of CSO Panel members (and their constituencies) in the World Day to Combat Desertification;

(iv) Publication of the CSO Panel newsletter; one newsletter has been issued and coordinated by the CSO Panel;

(v) Regularly updating activities undertaken by the CSO Panel and SPI on the CSO Panel website;

(vi) Engagement with CSO constituencies through, amongst other things, organizing a regional coordination meeting of CSOs in Latin America and the Caribbean, and sharing eight newsletters to CSOs from the Western Europe and Others Group;

(vii) Facilitation of CSO participation during sessions of the Committee on Science and Technology, the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention and the COP;

(b) Participation in official meetings;

(i) Development of CSO Panel Guiding Principles, Operational Rules and Procedures to improve the functioning of the CSO Panel during a special meeting between the newly-elected CSO Panel and the former CSO Panel at the World Sustainable Development Summit in February 2018 in New Delhi, India;

(ii) The CSO Panel member from Western Europe and Others Group, Nathalie van Haren, was invited by TEMA Foundation, one of the CSO-organizers of the official celebration of the 2019 World Day to Combat Desertification in Ankara,

Turkey, to give an input on the contribution of community-based initiatives to LDN and enabling conditions that support community-based initiatives;

(iii) Promotion of the participation of CSOs in the reporting of the official UNCCD reporting exercise in the lead-up to the seventeenth meeting of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 17) in Georgetown Guyana;

(iv) Participation of the CSO Panel in the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSDS 2018 Partnerships for a Resilient Planet) in February 2018. In the framework of the Summit, the CSO Panel members were invited to give a presentation on the participation of CSOs in the matter of LDN;

(v) Participation of two CSO Panel members in the Global Land Forum organized by the International Land Coalition in September 2018. The CSO Panel members [Valentin Ciubotaru](#) and Nathalie van Haren organized, together with the UNCCD secretariat, a break-out session on the contribution of community-based initiatives to LDN and the measures needed to create an enabling policy environment. Potential policy improvements were proposed for further promotion of responsible governance of land, e.g. the Food and Agriculture Organization Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT), in the frameworks of UNCCD processes of national target setting and COP 14 in 2019;

(vi) Participation of one CSO Panel member in Africa Climate Week in Accra where [Djatougbe Aziaka](#) highlighted the importance of land restoration in the issue of climate change mitigation as one of the options and met with youth from 27 African countries on how to contribute to land restoration and rehabilitation;

(vii) Participation of three CSO Panel members in the Belt and Road International Forum on Public Cooperation on Ecological Remediation in September 2018 in Gansu Province, China. [Djatougbe Aziaka](#), Jiajia Luo and Octavio Perez Pardo attended meetings with about 20 CSOs from the Belt and Road countries, and the Deputy Executive Secretary of UNCCD to share best practice in sustainable land management and non-governmental cooperation in ecological restoration; and

(viii) Mobilization of CSOs and other existing networks;

(c) Activities regarding the LDN Fund and Technical Assistance Facility to the LDN Fund;

(i) Acceptance of the invitation to give feedback to the Global Environment Facility proposal for the development of the Technical Assistance Facility (TAF) to provide project preparedness and technical assistance services to build a balanced portfolio of effective projects for the LDNF. The CSO Panel formulated questions, comments and suggestions for concretization on land tenure; gender; impact and transformative actions; eligible project proponents; and governance, stakeholder involvement and roles. The feedback was well received; and

(ii) Participation in the LDN Fund Strategic Board meeting. The CSO Panel elected CSO Panel member Octavio Perez Pardo to participate in the LDN Fund Strategic Board, which has met in January 2019 face to face.

C. Civil Society Organization Panel participation during the seventeenth session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

29. CRIC 17 was held at the Arthur Chung Conference Centre from 28 to 30 January 2019 in Georgetown, Guyana. The CSO Panel members attended three parallel training fairs:

(a) Gender issues for the neutrality of land degradation;

(b) Perspectives on the implementation of the neutrality of land degradation; and

(c) Drought preparedness: the Drought Initiative led by the UNCCD and beyond and building resilience to sand and dust storms.

30. The Panel coordinated the mobilization and facilitation of CSOs in the discussions and delivered statements in the opening and closing session, and five interventions, namely on Objective 1~5, in LDN, in gender, in finance and in the communication of information. Prior to CRIC17, the CSO Panel facilitated a discussion with the attending CSOs in Georgetown which resulted in five CSOs' priorities:

(a) Recognition by policy makers, financial institutions and others that community-led initiatives are contributing to LDN;

(b) Land tenure security of communities in general and of women and young people specifically must be secured through a UNCCD COP14 decision on the implementation of VGGT;

(c) Participation of civil society and especially women's groups throughout the decision-making processes regarding LDN target and National Drought Plans is crucial to guarantee sustainability;

(d) Finance must be accessible and appropriate for civil society organizations supporting communities especially women in achieving LDN and/or monitoring the implementation of LDN projects; and

(e) Transform our society so as to achieve greater sustainability and equity, especially gender equity.

31. The CSO Panel was invited to give a presentation during the interactive session on Gender, together with representatives of the India, South Africa, Gambia, Canada, and UN Women. Nathalie van Haren gave a presentation on the importance of tenure security for women and their contributions to LDN through sustainable land use and restoration practices.

32. At the end of the session, CRIC 17 constituted a contact group to elaborate the recommendations that will be considered by its governing body, the COP, which will meet in September 2019 in New Delhi, India. Three CSO Panel members were authorized to attend these meetings as observers.

33. The CSO Panel also met with the Indian delegation to the participation of CSOs in COP 14, to be held in New Delhi, India in September 2019. The CSO Panel requested the Indian government and the UNCCD secretariat to support CSO participation in COP 14 and suggested a field trip during the weekend to some CSO project sites.

34. The members expressed their concern that owing to the limited budget that was allocated to the activities of the CSO Panel, no other CSO representatives (apart from the CSO Panel members, sponsored by the UNCCD secretariat) were supported to attend CRIC 17.

D. DesertifActions 2019

35. At the time of preparation of this report, the CSO Panel was working on preparations for DesertifActions 2019 which is organized by the CSO SPONG from Burkina Faso and CARI from France, which will be held from 18 to 23 June 2019 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and which is to bring together over 300 stakeholders from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Scientifics, local communities, international institutions, private and public sector.

36. The CSO Panel is actively involved in its organizing work, as one Panel member is part of the steering committee of the event. The CSO Panel members are to organize the session "Decoding UNCCD ongoing negotiations" to explain the CSO contribution to the UNCCD from Ordos to New Delhi and to engage with the people present at DesertifActions 2019 on the agenda and matters at stake for the UNCCD COP 14 in India.

E. Preparations for civil society organization participation in the fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties

37. At the time of preparation of this report, the Panel was working on preparations for the participation of CSOs in COP 14.

38. The main issues under consideration were:

- (a) Recommending Gram Bharati Samiti (GBS) to the secretariat as the CSO focal point for COP 14;
- (b) Organizing the CSO preparatory meeting before the COP, together with GBS;
- (c) Organizing an open dialogue session with the Parties. The subject is land rights and land tenure security which has been agreed on with all the CSO Panel members;
- (d) Facilitation of the participation of CSOs;
- (e) Publication of daily ECO newsletters to reflect CSOs' points of view and distributing them to the stakeholders;
- (f) Organizing CSO daily consultations;
- (g) Deciding on the allocation of financial support for CSO from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern Europe to participate in the COP; and
- (h) Implementing the communication strategy through social media.

F. Lessons learned

39. The two-year experience of participation in the Panel was considered very positive and valuable by its members.

40. The existence of the CSO Panel ensures that facilitation and coordination between CSOs at the global level is improved.

41. The World Sustainable Development Summit in New Delhi allowed the newly elected CSO Panel members to meet with the former CSO members; this was very helpful for the transferability of knowledge and experience which is very beneficial for the continuance of the UNCCD CSO Panel. Continuance can be even further improved, by documenting guidelines for the organization of the recurring CSO Panel activities.

42. It is good to have a biannual plan for the CSO Panel as it supports the coordination, communication and planning of the CSO Panel. Unfortunately, not all proposed activities from the biannual plan were met, as the financial commitments for the proposed budget were not always evident. It would be beneficial for the planning of the CSO Panel if, at an early stage of the working plan, for example: at the end of the first six months, the CSO Panel knew what the financial space is within which to organize events, publications, consultations and so on.

43. Improving visibility at the regional and national level remains a challenge for the Panel. Given the reporting exercise, for example, only very few CSOs received feedback from their national focal points. The Panel would like to suggest that the secretariat helps to strengthen the communication between CSOs and national focal points.

44. Not all accredited CSOs with the Convention are at the same level. Some are very active in terms of communication and coordination, while others are very quiet. The Panel will need to work to encourage their participation through the involvement of large international organizations. Besides the newsletter, a more comprehensive communication strategy must be developed, which should include the utilization of social media.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

45. With the aim of encouraging more effective participation of civil society in meetings and processes of the UNCCD, the COP at its fourteenth session may wish to:

(a) Encourage those countries with no or few CSOs accredited to the COP to promote the involvement of their organizations in the UNCCD process at the international level to ensure more balanced participation of CSOs in the sessions of the COP and its subsidiary bodies;

(b) Request the secretariat to continue working with the key stakeholders, including youth, faith-based organizations and local governments;

(c) Also request the Executive Secretary to facilitate the renewal of the membership of the Panel for two years in January 2020, in accordance with the previous decisions; and

(d) Urge developed country Parties, international and financial organizations and CSOs and private sector institutions to consider contributing substantially and promptly to the Supplementary Fund and Special Fund of the Convention with the aim of ensuring wider participation of CSOs in meetings and processes of the UNCCD as well as the work undertaken by the Panel of the UNCCD.
