

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Conference of the Parties

Eleventh session

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Outcomes of the consultative meeting of experts on a land degradation neutral world

Summary

Pursuant to decision 8/COP.10, the secretariat actively participated in the preparations for and attended the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). Paragraph 206 of the Rio+20 outcome document “The future we want”¹ states: “We recognize the need for urgent action to reverse land degradation. In view of this, we will strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world in the context of sustainable development”. Together with paragraphs 205–209 on desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD), this global consensus at the highest level provides a unique opportunity for taking action towards setting target(s) to achieve land degradation neutrality in the context of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Establishing quantitative targets for improving land productivity, monitoring progress at all scales and promoting holistic approaches to reversing land degradation trends would address the core issues in implementing the Convention.

A group of experts and specialists from around world met in Seoul for two days of intensive deliberations resulting in a collection of ideas and suggestions for a sustainable development goal (SDG) on achieving a land degradation neutral world (LDNW) and a possible associated target of zero net land degradation (ZNLD). Representing academia, government, civil society organizations, the private sector and international institutions, participants strongly emphasized that healthy and productive land is the fundamental basis for long-term food, energy and water security, and a prerequisite for socioeconomic development, climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and combating desertification and drought.

¹ United Nations General Assembly document A/RES/66/288.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Opening plenary	1–3	3
II. Outcomes of Working Group I.....	4–7	3
III. Outcomes of Working Group II	8–16	5
A. Outcomes of Working Group II.a	11–14	6
B. Outcomes of Working Group II.b.....	15–16	7
IV. Closing plenary session.....	17	7
V. Press conference.....	18	8

I. Opening plenary

1. During the opening plenary, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Mr. Luc Gnacadja welcomed the participants and stated that he looked forward to robust discussions and concrete proposals for the ways and means by which the UNCCD could effectively follow up on the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and leverage the subsequent momentum that has been generated. The Vice Minister of the Korea Forest Service Mr. Yongha Kim gave his opening remarks and stressed that experiences with national forest plans in the Republic of Korea, first launched in the early 1970s, proves that rehabilitating land leads to economic growth and that his country is eager to share these experiences with the rest of the world.

2. This was followed by the appointment of the Chair Ms. Jia Xiaoxia, Division Director of the National Bureau to Combat Desertification, State Forestry Administration of China, who introduced a series of five short presentations: (1) Mr. Melchiade Bukuru on the outcomes of and follow-up to Rio+20 relevant to desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD) issues; (2) Ms. Pamela Chasek on the definition of a land degradation neutral world (LDNW) and the zero net land degradation (ZNLD) target, including perspectives from the 4th International Conference on Drylands, Deserts and Desertification held in Sede Boqer, Israel; (3) Ms. Irene Heuser on the legal options for integrating land and soil issues in the UNCCD; (4) Ms. Ivonne Lobos Alava on the outcomes and follow-up to the 1st Global Soil Week Dialogue Sessions; and (5) Mr. Victor Castillo on impact indicators in the context of the UNCCD. The Chair then opened the floor for questions and comments from the participants. Videos of the opening plenary and presentations are available at: <www.unccd.int/en/programmes/RioConventions/RioPlus20/Pages/LDNW-Expert-Meeting.aspx>.

3. The opening plenary closed with the Chef de Cabinet of the UNCCD Mr. Mansour N'Diaye presenting the terms of reference for the two working groups and the appointment of their moderators, Mr. Ralph Ashton and Mr. Jonathon Davis. It was agreed that each working group would address the following: (1) how best to define and communicate the concepts of an LDNW (goal) and ZNLD (target); (2) the ways and means to position DLDD in the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, focusing particular attention on a sustainable development goal (SDG) aimed at halting and reversing land degradation; (3) the feasibility of target-setting in the context of DLDD and the proposal of options for operationalizing these targets; (4) the potential role of a UNCCD working group during the intersessional period; and (5) recommendations for the Conference of the Parties (COP) at its eleventh session and a road map for the future in terms of both goals and targets.

II. Outcomes of Working Group I

4. Tasked with focusing on the local and national perspectives and linking these with the global perspective, Working Group I acknowledged that most countries already have policies and action plans at various levels that encourage sustainable land management (SLM) practices. The adoption of global goals and targets on land management and use would add value and strengthen existing policies. A global target could raise the importance of land degradation neutrality at the subnational level and avoid undesirable trade-offs between ecosystems and communities. However, it is important to avoid the misconception that any targets provide a 'license to degrade', especially by clarifying what the metrics mean at the local level. A number of selling points emerged from the discussion and all agreed that there is a need to emphasize these. In terms of economics, for example, the cost

of preventing land degradation is less than the cost of restoring land or losing productive land, creating the need to clearly frame this as an investment opportunity. It also may be easier to ‘sell’ if the terminology used shifts from ‘degradation’ to ‘restoration’, reflecting a more positive stance.

5. The group agreed that the UNCCD should capitalize on the momentum generated at Rio+20 on the issue of land degradation. The group also agreed that in the proposals for SDGs, land degradation should not be subsumed under another goal (such as food security) but that there should be a separate, stand-alone goal, such as: “sustainable land management and use for all and by all”. Preliminary discussions focused on the following two possible targets and a menu of possible indicators.²

(a) Target 1: 50 per cent of anthropogenic degradation restored or under restoration. Possible indicators include those related to:

- (i) Return of the land to economic use;
- (ii) Total area of agricultural land;
- (iii) Rangeland vegetation cover;
- (iv) Forest land cover;
- (v) Agricultural land productivity;
- (vi) Soil structure/organic matter; and
- (vii) Water table/soil moisture.

(b) Target 2: Reduce anthropogenic land degradation in agricultural lands, pastoral lands and rangelands by 50 per cent. Possible indicators include those related to:

- (i) Area under sustainable land management;
- (ii) Stabilization of productivity;
- (iii) Maintenance of ecosystem services; and
- (iv) Improve land use structure to balance ecosystem services.

6. Finally, Working Group I considered the possible terms of reference for a UNCCD intersessional expert group. They agreed that the establishment of such a group should be considered by the COP at its eleventh session. This group is to carry out the necessary work, formulate proposals and make recommendations to the COP at its twelfth session on options to enable Parties to the UNCCD to implement the Rio+20 outcomes relevant to DLDD. The deliverables of this expert group could include some or all of the following:

- Advice to the COP on implementing the outcomes from Rio+20 (paragraphs 205–209 of “The future we want”³);
- Advice on linking the Rio+20 outcomes as they relate to DLDD with The Strategy;
- Proposals of options for setting targets and refining indicators;
- Advice on legal options;
- Proposal for a road map;

² Targets and indicators appear as agreed in the consultative meeting of experts without formal editing.

³ United Nations General Assembly document A/RES/66/288.

- Establishment of a process that includes expert panels by region/involvement in a consultative process;
- Document;
- Analysis of the roles of different stakeholders in implementing the Rio+20 outcomes on an LDNW;
- Recommendations to the COP that include synergies (between the Rio conventions) at the national and global levels;
- Analysis of implications/opportunities (legal, financial, etc.)
- Clarification/simplification of the relationship between LDNW and ZNLD, or an improvement in communication about the terminology;
- Identification of actions to be undertaken by UNCCD bodies and Parties to accommodate (1) the targets proposed in implementing the Rio+20 outcome, including any adjustments in the programmes of work of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the Committee on Science and Technology; (2) the facilitative role and functions of the secretariat; and (3) the identification of national strategies by the Global Mechanism (GM).

7. With regard to the composition of the group, it was noted that regional and gender balance should be taken into account to the greatest extent possible, and that experts should be selected from civil society, the scientific community, and national representatives.

III. Outcomes of Working Group II

8. Working Group II was tasked with focusing on the global level and identifying the linkages to the national and local levels. At the onset, two participants expressed the view that the SDG negotiations are an ongoing process taking place in New York and that the UNCCD should not be engaged in any discussion that would somehow prejudice or prejudice those outcomes. Others felt strongly that this meeting – due to its informal nature – was an opportunity to discuss and deliberate ideas on how the UNCCD could provide further inputs into the SDG process and suggest potential pathways of action within the UNCCD framework to more effectively address DLDD issues in response to the Rio+20 outcomes, particularly in the context of sustainable development. All agreed that more clarity was needed with regard to Rio+20 outcomes and in defining LDNW and the role of the UNCCD. Reference was also made to the request that the UNCCD secretariat take the lead in drafting an Issues Brief on DLDD, which was peer-reviewed by other United Nations entities and circulated by United Nations Task Team to Member States prior to the third session of the Open Working Group which met in May 2013 in New York.

9. Although data gaps will present challenges for monitoring progress towards any goal or target on land, most participants felt that this should not be an excuse for not moving forward, highlighting the costs of inaction. In addition, the majority was of the view that land and soil issues could be adequately addressed within the likely SDGs on poverty, water, energy and food security, and that the likelihood of a stand-alone SDG on land may not be germane. Therefore, it would be more effective to focus on targets and indicators for addressing and monitoring land degradation. Any commitments on a new target or set of targets would need to be accompanied by resource mobilization and capacity-building, particularly for developing countries. In this regard, global partnerships and coordination with existing initiatives would be required for effective implementation. Several participants proposed that the UNCCD may wish to consider a legal and political

framework on soils to achieve progress towards an LDNW, perhaps in the form of an annex to the Convention, as indicated by article 31 of the Convention.

10. Overall, there was general agreement on the critical role of SLM in addressing the urgent challenges highlighted in the Rio+20 outcome document and the essential linkages between land, food, water and poverty. However, to more effectively address the diverse perspectives of participants, the working group held two simultaneous breakout sessions on the morning 27 June 2013.

A. Outcomes of Working Group II.a

11. Working Group II.a was tasked with providing concrete suggestions to address the Rio+20 outcomes within the existing mandate of the UNCCD. The first suggestion was to define an LDNW using the terms and definitions of the Convention as well as highlight the trade-offs in terms of neutrality while stressing that maintaining or increasing the productive capacity of land (beyond food) could be encouraged by indicators and targets at global, regional, national and local levels. One possible action by the UNCCD, the secretariat, its subsidiary bodies and the Parties would be to initiate a process to:

- (a) Establish a collective understanding of the LDNW concept and its linkages to the UNCCD mandate among the Parties; and
- (b) Define the expected outcomes of an LDNW.

12. Working Group II.a also discussed (1) strengthening implementation at the local level by repackaging existing knowledge and information on an LDNW; and (2) the win-win opportunities of any UNCCD topic. This may include bridging the gap between central ministries and the wide range of technical and/or implementing ministries to increase support for information exchanges and capacity-building at the local level. Likewise, implementation at the global level requires similar efforts of increasing South–South, North–South and trilateral cooperation. These cooperation schemes are envisaged to empower UNCCD Regional Coordination Units (RCUs), including in defining an LDNW at the regional level. In this regard, several possible actions were suggested:

- (a) Formulating an agreement to prioritize actions on the new Capacity-Building Marketplace and the Scientific Knowledge Brokering Portal;
- (b) Considering a decision to redesign or enhance the capabilities of RCUs, including its role as hub to link to other hubs, thus centralizing efforts to circulate and navigate existing information; and
- (c) Asking the secretariat to build templates for information sharing with decision-makers (based on experience made in countries).

13. Working Group II.a stressed the importance of leveraging other efforts and mandates to increase collaboration and coordination across institutions (e.g. the Global Environment Facility, Convention on Biological Diversity, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). This can be done by more effectively communicating how the UNCCD and the Rio+20 outcomes can support other efforts by providing multiple benefits and increased economic opportunities. This would allow the international community to leverage scarce resources and investments from a variety of public and private sources. In order to increase the effectiveness of The Strategy and track actions by other entities that contribute to the UNCCD goals and an LDNW, the following actions to be taken by the UNCCD secretariat and Global Mechanism were suggested:

- (a) Prepare a simple guidance document to map opportunities for linkages, drawing, inter alia, on GM work for the Central and Eastern Europe region;

- (b) Increase efforts to promote capacity-building for sustainable financing; and
- (c) Provide webinars, online resources and e-learning modules.

14. Finally, Working Group II.a discussed how best to address data gaps, the complexity of current indicators and methodologies, and the lack of reporting by countries. Given these current limitations, it was suggested that global databases may provide a starting point for considering ways to effectively integrate these databases and develop methods for their harmonization. With regard to indicators, capacity-building and the formulation of baselines (including for an LDNW), the following actions were suggested:

- (a) Follow-up on the suggestion from the CRIC of including a narrative component in UNCCD reporting; and
- (b) Funding a workshop of experts on data and indicators to specifically address the needs of practitioners, policymakers and focal points, including a re-evaluation of the reporting data that is currently required.

B. Outcomes of Working Group II.b

15. Working Group II.b was tasked with making suggestions and recommendations on how to make progress in achieving an LDNW. The group began by highlighting the complexity of land issues and discussed the fundamental elements that should be incorporated into the three dimensions of sustainable development: environment, society and economics. They also exchanged on the legal options available under the Convention that might expand its mandate. All agreed that these elements need to be framed in a positive light (“more of a good thing, less of a bad thing”) and that the overarching goal should be “sustainable land management and use for all and by all”. Some emphasized the importance of including land-use planning in the goal and not just focusing on management practices.

16. Working Group II.b proposed various elements which could be targeted, taking into account the social, economic and ecological dimensions of sustainable development. These included:

- Restoration of degraded land;
- Increased productivity/land cover;
- Sustainable land, soils and forest management;
- Irrigated land/water-holding capacity;
- Drought policies and measures;
- Access to land/tenure and rights; and
- Investments in SLM/the role of the private and public sector.

IV. Closing plenary session

17. The closing plenary session opened with the remarks of the UNCCD Executive Secretary who expressed his gratitude for the contributions of the participants over the last two days. The moderators of the working groups made presentations on the outcomes and suggestions that emerged from the two groups which are detailed in chapters II and III above. The Chair also expressed her appreciation and reminded the participants that this was an informal consultative meeting with the aim of seeking a broader understanding and collection of ideas including suggestions for the way forward. She then summarized her

understanding of the meeting outcomes and presented the Chair's Summary, which highlighted the following elements:

(a) Participants agreed that actions to address DLDD are already happening at the local and national levels with the majority agreeing on the need to set targets to address DLDD issues by using commonly understood methodologies;

(b) Many participants stressed that land needs to be at the centre stage of the SDG negotiation process while some made reference to the inclusion of land degradation in other SDG clusters;

(c) Some participants focused on enhancing existing opportunities within the current mandate of the Convention, while the majority suggested that leveraging the momentum generated by Rio+20 would broaden the scope of the mandate;

(d) Most participants agreed that there is a need for clarifying the concept of an LDNW and the role of the UNCCD in translating the Rio+20 outcomes into action on the ground, including options for increasing the effectiveness of the UNCCD in implementing The Strategy; and

(e) Most participants suggested considering the establishment of a working group to address different issues related to the LDNW concept, including work to propose options and recommendations to the COP at its twelfth session for a target-setting approach within the UNCCD legislative framework.

V. Press conference

18. The meeting concluded with a press conference and the issuance of a press release. The Executive Secretary of the UNCCD and a senior official of the Korea Forest Service offered their perspectives on the outcomes of the meeting, highlighting its importance in laying the foundation for the future work of the Convention.
