UNITED

NATIONS

Convention to Combat Desertification

Distr.
GENERAL

ICCD/COP(8)/CST/2/Add.2
17 July 2007

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Report of the fifth meeting of the Group of Experts of the Committee on Science and Technology

Note by the secretariat*

Addendum

Communication strategy: development of a mechanism for an interactive and thematic data/metadata network (THEMANET)

Summary

The review and synthesis of recommendations made by country Parties and relevant organizations on the work programme of the Group of Experts (GoE) defined the terms of reference for the activities of the GoE. These activities include the development of a communication mechanism that would, by facilitating coordination activities and the exchange of data, experience and results, ensure sufficient information flow among national coordinating bodies in the periods between sessions of the Conferences of the Parties (COP). A prototype of such a mechanism, a thematic data network called THEMANET, to be hosted by the secretariat, was presented to the seventh session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), and the GoE was requested to improve it. At the eighth session of the CST the GoE will present the updated prototype website of THEMANET.

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* The submission of this document was delayed due to the short time available between the fifth session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention and the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties.

GE.07-62894

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I. Introduction

1.   The Group of Experts (GoE) of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) worked during 2004 and 2005 to define the objectives and methodologies for a communication strategy and to develop a mechanism for an interactive and thematic data/metadata network, to be known as THEMANET. The result of this activity was the prototype of a website <http://themanet.casaccia.enea.it/> that was presented at the seventh session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 7). The COP, by its decision 15/COP.7, requested the GoE to improve this prototype. Since COP 7 the strategy for the improvement of communication and diffusion of science and technology information has been discussed and reviewed by the GoE by means of e-mail exchanges and personal contacts, and during a meeting in Bonn, Germany, on 23–24 April 2007. The elements of the proposed strategy were identified on the basis of the experience gained since the launching of the THEMANET prototype.

2.   THEMANET shows the feasibility and usefulness of a web-based approach to the collection and diffusion of information and communication on scientific and technological issues relating to desertification and within the context of the Convention.

3.   The information contained or linked in THEMANET is primarily in English, but information in other languages is also included; no attempt has been made to translate the latter information, as that is outside the means and the objective of the project.

4.   THEMANET is a first attempt to bridge the existing gap between the scientific and the policy community and the perceived marginal role of scientists and scientific institutions in the implementation of the Convention.

II. The rationale for THEMANET

5.   Scientific and technological data and information, the products or results of research or other activities, are essentially worthless unless and until they are effectively disseminated in a form that is appropriate and useful for their intended audience. Most of the vast amount of scientific and technological information on desertification issues is contained in various journals and proceedings, or on websites, or is simply not recorded at all, and so is not readily available for the purpose of improving the knowledge base of the Convention or contributing to its implementation. The objective of the THEMANET initiative is to create a strategy for collecting and storing existing information and making it available to people involved in the Convention process. The improvement of knowledge at all levels is an important step in the fight against desertification and this objective should be supported by the Convention through the provision of appropriate tools.

6.   THEMANET is not only a mechanism for collection and storage of data. To have informational value, data must be organized, transformed and presented in a way that provides meaning also to non-experts. But information is also not the end of the continuum of understanding. Just as data can be transformed into meaningful information, so can information be transformed into knowledge, and further, into wisdom. This is done through the presentation of best practices, of success and failure stories, of work on assessments. It is extremely difficult to transfer to others information about a meaningful experience. It is first necessary to

understand the needs, abilities, interests and expectations of the target audience and how to reach them. The tools available today make it possible to use interactive media for the purpose of transferring not simply information, but also experience.

III. The proposed strategy

7.   Four priority issues have been identified by the GoE for coverage by THEMANET: improvement of living conditions in drylands; natural resources management; technology development, application and transfer; and monitoring and assessment.

8.   THEMANET identified the following currently available sources of scientific and technological information on combating desertification: refereed and non-refereed scientific journals, and papers not published in journals; Internet websites of scientific research projects; documents describing projects relevant to the implementation of the Convention, newsletters, international conferences; side events and presentations made during sessions of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) and the COP; the database "Networks and Institutions"; and video recordings of projects, documentation and lectures.

9.   The papers published in refereed and non-refereed scientific journals cannot be reproduced in THEMANET as they are protected by copyright. Most international journals also publish electronic versions but access to the texts has a cost that varies from journal to journal. The information included in THEMANET is actually only the titles of selected international journals and their websites. Authors of papers may ask the publishers for authorization to reproduce their articles on the THEMANET website, but the availability of the full text will be decided on a case-by-case basis.

10.   The scientific papers included in THEMANET to date do not satisfy sufficiently the need to make available the necessary knowledge to support the implementation of the Convention, because they are more oriented to scientists than to policymakers and decision makers. The scientific papers should be used to meet the need for a deeper understanding of the issues that underpin the implementation of the Convention. The information needs of decision makers cannot be addressed only through scientific papers.

11.   Members of the roster of independent experts and of the GoE may provide scientific papers to the CST through THEMANET. This function of THEMANET is important because it gives members of the scientific community an opportunity to participate to the activities of the Convention.

12.   In order to make information on websites of research projects more accessible to users, the THEMANET links will include the following:

AID-CCD	http://nrd.uniss.it/sections/aid-ccd/index.htm
CLEMDES	http://www.clemdes.org/
DESETART	http://www.desertart.casaccia.enea.it/
DESERTLINKS	http://www.kcl.ac.uk/projects/desertlinks/
DESERTNET	http://www.european-desertnet.eu/
DESERTWATCH	http://dup.esrin.esa.it/desertwatch/project.asp
DESIRE	http://www.desire-project.eu/
DSURVEY	http://www.desurvey.net/
FOGGARA	http://www.laureano.it/ipogea/foggara/foggara.htm
GEORANGE	http://www.georange.org/georange/
INDEX	http://www.soil-index.com
LADAMER	http://www.ladamer.org/ladamer/
MEDACTION	http://www.icis.unimaas.nl/medaction/
MEDCOSTLAND	http://medcoastland.iamb.it/index.php
MEDRAP	http://nrd.uniss.it/medrap/index.htm
REACTION	http://www.gva.es/ceam/reaction/Project.htm
RECONDES	http://www.port.ac.uk/research/recondes/
RIADE	http://www.riade.net/
SCAPE	http://www.scape.org/
Newsletters addressing desertification relevant issues	ftp://tc_guest:public123@ftp.tcdialogue.be http://medcoastland.iamb.it/modules.php?name=Newsletter

13.   Documents describing projects and case studies relevant to the implementation of the Convention will be included in THEMANET in order to document methods and results available in affected country Parties. THEMANET will give country Parties access to information according to a standard format. The case studies made available by the work of the GoE are:

- Community-based revival of traditional water harvesting systems (India)
- Management of degraded lands allotted to landless people through adoption of agroforestry (India)
- Joint forest management by involvement of communities (India)
- Greening of degraded lands by plantation for bio-diesel and paper pulp production (India)
- Afforestation in Sierra Espuna mountain (Spain)
- Rehabilitation of degraded pastures lands in Lavalle (Argentina)
- Restoration in degraded peat lands (Belarus)
- Integrated rural development in the Keyta district (Niger)
- Use of TerraCottem in China and Africa.

14.   International conferences and workshops are a source of information of great importance for the scientific community. Only a part of the contributions presented in such contexts may be of interest to the Convention. THEMANET collected the conclusions of the following conferences held during 2006, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification:

- Workshop on combating desertification and poverty, Rome, Italy, 19–20 January
- Seminar on desertification and environmental security: consequence and prevention, Madrid, Spain, 9–11 March
- Combating desertification, hunger and poverty, Geneva, Switzerland, 11–12 April
- 14th Conference of the International Soil Conservation Organization, Marrakesh, Morocco, 14–19 May
- Women and desertification, Beijing, China, 29 May to 1 June
- Desertification and global change, Bern, Switzerland, 31 May
- The future of drylands, Tunis, Tunisia, 19–21 June
- Living with the deserts II, Tokyo, Japan, 25 August
- Dryland studies and combating desertification, Tottori, Japan, 27 August
- Youth and desertification, Bamako, Mali, 4–6 September
- Civil society and desertification, Montpellier, France, 21–23 September
- From desert to oasis, Niamey, Niger, 23–25 September
- Symposium on desertification and migrations, Almeria, Spain, 25–27 October
- Deserts and desertification: challenge and opportunities, Sede Boqer, Israel, 6–9 November
- Climate and land degradation, Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania, 11–15 December
- Desertification and the international policy imperative, Algiers, Algeria, 17–19 December

15.   In order to improve communication, it is essential to take advantage of events such as workshops and conferences making available the relevant scientific information presented and

discussed in that context. The organizers of events held under the auspices of the Convention should be requested to collect and make available for the benefit of a larger public abstracts of the presentations and, where available, the most important text and the full presentations. Storing this information would give visibility and consistency to the organization of events and safeguard information that would otherwise be lost.

16.   During sessions of the CRIC and the COP, Parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations should present activities and results that may have scientific and technological relevance. For example, THEMANET includes several presentations made during CRIC 5 and, where available, summaries of presentations prepared by speakers at request of THEMANET. Voice recordings could be made available online using software that can be downloaded at no cost. THEMANET is supported by software developed for online and offline e-lectures.

17.   During sessions of the CRIC and the COP, side events address issues of interest to the Convention that might be documented and made available through THEMANET. For example, the side event jointly organized by the Sahara Sahel Observatory (OSS) and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit: GTZ) during CRIC 5, addressing the impact of climate change on drylands, is presented through summaries and presentations made by the speakers.

18.   Access to the database on "Networks and Institutions", transferred from the website of the University of Arizona to THEMANET, will be facilitated by the secretariat. The database has been developed by the consortium led by the United Nations Environment Programme in the first phase of the project on networks and institutions.

19.   Video recordings of project documentation and lectures can be managed by THEMANET through specific software developed for distant (or off-site) learning activities. Video recordings will give scientists the opportunity to communicate information about their work. The system will have free access and can also be used to disseminate, in real-time, presentations made during conferences and lectures.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

20.   The present stage of development of THEMANET includes the identification and collection of scientific and technological information from many sources in order to create a solid scientific consensus on policy-relevant issues. The CST should give priority to the issue of assessments and the elaboration of reports on scientific knowledge on desertification and on the technologies available**.**

21.   Science and technology have yet to make a full impact on the Convention implementation. The GoE should be provided with the necessary means to implement its approved programme of work, in order to fulfil its mandate effectively.

22.   The GoE recommends that the CST evaluates the work done so far, with minimal resources, and decides about the continuation of the activities, making sure that the necessary resources will be allocated for the work.

23.   THEMANET can also make an important contribution to the promotion of intercultural exchanges among local entities, such as NGOs, schools, universities and local authorities, in order to raise awareness about desertification issues from the global to the local level and activate a new concept of world citizenship, particularly within the young generation.

24.   In this regard, THEMANET could support projects carried out to improve awareness and information exchanges addressing education and information in schools. The actions necessary to enable progress on the development of the communication strategy for the CST include:

        (a)   Endorsement by the CST of the THEMANET;

        (b)   Giving a mandate to the GoE to finalize the system;

        (c)   Requesting Parties to contribute to THEMANET by providing documents and information;

        (d)   Including the topic of information and communication as a standing item in the agendas of CST meetings;

        (e)   Allocating the financial resources required to implement the system, and to collect the information and manage the database.

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