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Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Committee on Science and Technology
Analysis by the Group of Experts of the reports submitted by Parties to the fifth session of
the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention

**Synthesis of the analysis by the Group of Experts of the reports submitted
by Parties to the fifth session of the Committee for the Review of the
Implementation of the Convention**

Note by the secretariat*

Summary

The Group of Experts (GoE) of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) was requested by the Conference of the Parties to provide input to the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC), as defined by decisions 1/COP.5 and 1/COP.6, by reviewing provisions of the report of the CRIC on participatory processes, benchmarks and indicators, drought and desertification monitoring and assessment, early warning systems for mitigating the effects of drought, research, technologies and knowledge and know-how, with a view to proposing appropriate scientific measures while taking into account progress made in the respective regions. A synthesis of the analysis of 73 national reports from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Mediterranean, Central and Eastern Europe, and other affected country Parties submitted to the fifth session of the CRIC has been prepared by the GoE. This synthesis provides observations on these reports together with comments and recommendations on how to improve them. It also contains reflections on further action by the CST and GoE, additional research, and renewed interaction among countries, both developing and developed, as well as the United Nations and other international organizations. The full analysis of the reports prepared by the GoE is contained in document ICCD/COP(8)/CST/INF.2.

* The submission of this document is 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.

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I. Introduction

1. The Conference of the Parties (COP), by its decision 15/COP.6 on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), requested the Group of Experts (GoE) to focus on issues emerging from the review of national, subregional and regional programmes and other relevant reports, and to advise the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC), through the CST, of the efficacy and adequacy of these programmes for implementing the Convention.
2. This report presents a synthesis of the national reports submitted by Asian, Latin American, Northern Mediterranean, Central and Eastern European, and other affected country Parties. A total of 73 national reports have been reviewed, and the review is contained in document ICCD/COP(8)/CST/INF.2.
3. There are differences in format and content between reports from Parties whose national action programmes (NAPs) are well established within the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) process, and those which have only recently presented their NAPs, or are still in the formulating and ratifying stage. As a result many of the reports discuss plans rather than actions. In some cases the categories in which this review presents the country reports do not capture the variety of activities that have been taking place.

II. Global conclusions

4. The reports provide an overview of countries' efforts to meet their obligations under the UNCCD. Many of the countries are in the early stages of involvement with the UNCCD and their reports discuss a lack of land-use policies, policy conflicts, and the fact that too many ministries are involved – hampering the process, and their progress.
5. In many cases, there is excellent awareness of the issues, causes and implications of desertification. There is, for example, recognition that deforestation may be a “first phase” in the desertification process. However, one of the major challenges facing the Convention is distinguishing between those countries where there is a real risk and which are genuinely embarking on preventative and rehabilitation measures, and those who identify “desertification” with a chance to acquire international funding based on an over-interpretation of definitions. In this context many reports present a wealth of qualitative description but a disconcerting lack of quantification.
6. With few exceptions, institutions tend to make access to information on natural resources difficult. There is no real comprehension concerning public interest in creating channels to facilitate access to databases. Additionally, information is spread over many institutions. It is disappointing that some reports presented by countries whose NAP is operational show little evidence of indicator development, resulting in a low level of assessment, and negligible monitoring. Without these components in place, it is impossible to measure progress. There are many declarations on the importance of indicator, monitoring and assessment issues, but few concrete actions.

7. Land degradation is realistically considered not merely as an ecological threat, but as a detriment to social and economic development. Nevertheless the link between biophysical, socio-economic and cultural knowledge on the one hand, and activity to combat land degradation on the other, is not reflected in national reports. In many reports the assessment methodology of this process is not shown clearly.

8. Reports tend to refer only to positive aspects of the implementation of the Convention, and give the impression that everything is going well. Rarely do they make an analysis of the problems encountered. Such an analysis could be useful in looking for strategies to face these problems.

9. Many reports do not distinguish between actions implemented in the context of national policies and those developed as a consequence of the existence of the NAP. This makes it difficult to achieve an objective evaluation of the degree of commitment of governments.

A. Thematic issue comments

1. Desertification assessment and monitoring

10. Most countries provided baseline information in the assessment category, with varying degrees of quantification, either in the text of the report or in the country profile. Some countries either did not discuss monitoring, or provided little information. Many countries mentioned that a lack of established systems and funding were constraints on progress. There is a lack of technology transfer from countries that have developed effective monitoring systems to those that state that they could use it. Thus few countries have used monitoring systems for decision-making. Channels for information sharing are needed.

2. Benchmarks and indicators

11. Progress on developing benchmarks and indicators has been slow. Many countries report that indicators are being developed, but they do not provide specific information. Benchmarks are rarely discussed. Most indicator discussion relates to either biophysical or socio-economic indicators of landscape condition. There is almost no discussion of indicators of the effectiveness of management.

3. Early warning systems

12. Many countries mention early warning systems as a component of their NAP, or have a partially operating system (for example, a meteorological network) that will be upgraded as funds and technology are available. Most countries recognize the desirability of these systems. But as with monitoring, there is a lack of technology transfer from those countries that have developed early warning systems to those that could use them.

4. Rehabilitation

13. Although most countries that provided country reports have some figures for rehabilitation there is a noticeable lack of real quantification on this topic.

5. Traditional knowledge

14. There is a clear lack of connection between traditional knowledge and scientific understanding of the same phenomena. Such a connection would help in understanding practices and aid in technology transfer. Access to traditional knowledge is limited, and unless this limitation is addressed urgently and immediately, much traditional knowledge will be lost.

6. Participatory approach

15. Many countries report workshops and community involvement in the preparation of their NAPs. Capacity-building at all stages in the implementation process is an urgent need mentioned by more than half of the countries.

7. Link with other Conventions

16. Almost all countries mention their status vis-à-vis the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and some also mention the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Many took advantage of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/Global Environment Facility (GEF) national capacity self-assessment project to initiate their participation in the UNCCD. Some discuss synergy between and among conventions and several indicate that their national coordinating bodies (NCBs) are responsible for all three conventions. However, examples of real synergy are scarce.

B. Main positive aspects

17. Many countries have created or adopted legislation to facilitate the implementation of the Convention. This includes specific laws or decrees aimed at regulating land use – to prevent its degradation, to protect biodiversity or to facilitate environmentally friendly production systems. This is one of the most remarkable outcomes of the UNCCD.

18. Implementation of the UNDP/GEF project “National Capacity Self-Assessment for Global Environmental Management” has promoted links between the CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD. The programme enabled countries to elaborate and initiate implementation of the United Nations environmental conventions. Some reports mention that countries are ready to accept and to implement the European Charter for the Protection and Sustainable Management of Soil and to move towards a Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection, which has application in combating degradation.

19. Many countries have established or identified an NCB for their NAP. These bodies operate in ministries or government agencies with varying degrees of political power. In some cases the NCB is supported by a technical multidisciplinary group. This experience should be replicated in all countries.

20. In some countries, the NAP (or parts of it) is included in national development strategies. This generally increases possibilities to access national and stable funds for implementation. In addition, it provides political support that otherwise would be impossible to get.

21. Almost all countries have accessed some international funds for the implementation of specific actions or programmes. In some cases these funds have been augmented by additional funds from national sources. This is a clear indicator of the increased concern provided by the Convention.

22. Policymakers are increasingly conscious of the importance of halting land degradation, and reports reveal an increased degree of international cooperation, especially among countries of the same region. It is probable that NAPs will start to gain political support, especially in those countries with economies more open to international markets, and this will facilitate implementation of the Convention.

23. There are encouraging references to involvement of women and girls in programmes, and to their role in rehabilitation, education and decision-making processes. However, countries often fail to discuss and provide examples of some activities that are likely to be taking place, such as the role of the media, and outreach to holders of traditional knowledge. Many countries are developing interactions between the NAP and the regular educational system, with aspects of sustainable land management being included in curricula.

C. Main negative aspects

24. Despite many countries' efforts in the NCSA programme, there is a continued lack of promotion of synergy among United Nations conventions, and examples of real synergy are scarce. Countries may need more technical assistance to implement effective synergy by means of integrated programmes.

25. Reports do not show real progress in the development of public concern and awareness. With few exceptions, there are no programmes to increase public concern. Institutions are rather insular and not easily accessible to users. There is some lack of public interest in the biophysical information on natural resources, and it appears that the channels of access to socio-economic information are better.

26. Public participation is sporadic and non-systematic, with few countries reporting the establishment of regular channels of participation. Occasional workshops (national and local) are conducted, but feedback to end-users is not stressed. This may provide disincentives to participation in the long term.

27. Remediation has still more priority than prevention. It appears that countries find it easier to undertake remedial action on a problem than to prevent it in the first place. Actions are often more oriented to tackling symptoms rather than causes of desertification.

28. There is an almost total lack of economic evaluation of land degradation and cost/benefit analyses of actions to prevent and mitigate land degradation. Figures would be very useful to convince policymakers.

29. There is some development of benchmarks and indicators, but most countries do not use them effectively. There is a lack of use of monitoring systems and early warning systems.

30. There is a lack of connection between traditional knowledge and scientific understanding.

D. Variability/similarity between countries and regions

31. Reports from the other affected country Parties are moderately consistent with each other, but most other regions show considerable internal variation between countries well advanced in the process, and those just starting out. In general, this range of variability within regions is comparable. Asian countries and the Middle East, in particular, show evidence of regional cooperation.

III. Conclusions and recommendations

32. The following conclusions can be drawn from the synthesis of the national reports:

(a) There is need to understand whether or not the measures being put in place for implementation are having their intended effect;

(b) Science and technology are critical to the ability to understand both the phenomena and the efforts to affect the phenomena;

(c) There is need to follow the “help guides” so that the results can be compared and evaluated;

(d) Countries have made tremendous contributions towards their understanding of the phenomena;

(e) There is need for paradigm change from reactive and rehabilitation measures (which are, of course, highly desirable) to also include proactive and preventive mechanisms or actions;

(f) Indicators are not being developed rapidly enough, with the result that measures of success are lacking, and programmatic effectiveness is less than optimum;

(g) Science should be accessible to the people who are affected, not just to scientists for exchange at meetings;

(h) The task, then, is to break down the barriers of inaction and connect existing capabilities with developing interventions. Without that, discussing the problems may not be effective because that falls short of taking action where it is needed most.

33. The following recommendations, drawn from the synthesis of the national reports, are presented for consideration by the CST:

(a) Provide mechanisms to facilitate the development and use of indicators;

(b) Facilitate capacity-building;

- (c) Improve capacity to work with early warning and monitoring systems;
- (d) Improve institutional articulation and coordination and provide assistance in developing synergy between and among conventions and convention-implementing bodies
- (e) Translate traditional knowledge into scientific understanding
- (f) Ensure that, in the future, two sets of criteria for reviewing national reports are developed for use in order to reflect the differences in reporting requirements between countries at varying stages of the implementation process.
