

Non-Paper 2

17 March 2015
English
Original: English, French and
Spanish

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Additional procedures or institutional mechanisms to assist the Conference of the Parties in regularly reviewing the implementation of the Convention

Summary

The reporting and review process under the Convention has revealed a number of assets but also many limitations in terms of relevance, efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, after 20 years of implementation, the Convention cannot rely on a baseline assessment and indication of trends of land degradation based on solid data and information reported by affected countries. At the same time, the Convention process has come to maturity as land issues are increasingly recognized as key in sustainable development. Any new assessment and review system under the Convention to be introduced after 2015 could include the following elements: (a) focusing the reporting on substance rather than on institutional processes; (b) enhancing the relevance of the review process, restoring the original mandate of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention and facilitating the integration of scientific advice into policy deliberations; (c) ensuring regional governance and continuity of the review process; and (d) adopting any other possible measures to increase the efficiency of the Convention's mechanisms.

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I. Background

1. Reporting is one of the key obligations that countries have assumed when ratifying or acceding to the Convention: each Party shall communicate to the Conference of the Parties (COP) the measures which it has taken for the implementation of the Convention.¹ Likewise, the review of the implementation of the Convention and the promotion and facilitation of the exchange of information on measures adopted by the Parties are among the main functions of the COP.² In turn, the main tasks of the secretariat are to facilitate reporting by Parties by providing assistance and compiling the submitted information.³

2. Until 2001, the Convention did not have any specific mechanism to review the reports submitted by Parties and other reporting entities, and the exercise was conducted during the ordinary sessions of the COP.⁴ The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) was established by decision of the Parties⁵ as subsidiary body to the COP to assist it in the review of implementation of the Convention. The CRIC met six times in the period 2002–2007 before the adoption of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008–2018) (The Strategy)⁶ and a further six times in the period 2008–2013.

3. With the entry into force of The Strategy, the mandate of the CRIC was revised in order to conduct the review of implementation within the results framework (operational and strategic objectives) of The Strategy. Together with the new mandate of the CRIC,⁷ the COP adopted the performance review and assessment of implementation system (PRAIS) which, building on the same results framework of The Strategy, identifies reporting entities, their specific reporting requirements and the time frame of the reporting and review exercise. At the time of its adoption, PRAIS was a real paradigm shift in the review of the

¹ Article 26 of the Convention, on communication of information, further directs that affected country Parties shall provide a description of the strategies established pursuant to their obligations in the implementation of the Convention and a detailed description of their action programmes if they are implementing such programmes; and developed country Parties shall report on measures taken to assist in the preparation and implementation of action programmes, including information on the financial resources they have provided, or are providing, under the Convention.

² In accordance with Article 22 of the Convention, establishing the COP as the supreme body of the Convention, the COP regularly reviews the implementation of the Convention and the functioning of its institutional arrangements in the light of the experience gained at the national, subregional, regional and international levels and on the basis of the evolution of scientific and technological knowledge; and promotes and facilitates the exchange of information on measures adopted by the Parties, and determines the form and timetable for transmitting the information to be submitted pursuant to Article 26, reviews the reports and makes recommendations on them.

³ In accordance with Article 23 of the Convention, establishing the secretariat, the secretariat compiles and transmits reports submitted to the COP and facilitates assistance to affected developing country Parties, on request, in the compilation and communication of information required under the Convention.

⁴ Procedures and guidelines for the review of implementation were included in decision 11/COP.1.

⁵ Decision 1/COP.5, 2001.

⁶ Decision 3/COP.8.

⁷ Decision 11/COP.9 states that the sessions of the CRIC shall be held during and once between each of the ordinary sessions of the COP. In sessions held between ordinary sessions of the COP the CRIC shall focus its work on the review of the implementation of the Convention by Parties through, inter alia: (a) undertaking an assessment of implementation against performance indicators every two years and against impact indicators every four years; (b) disseminating best practices on the implementation of the Convention; and (c) reviewing financial flows for the implementation of the Convention.

implementation of the Convention, as it turned the reporting from a qualitative to a quantitative, indicators-based exercise.

II. Assets and limitations of the current reporting and review mechanisms

A. Reporting

4. All Parties are currently requested to **report every two years against the performance indicators and their global targets**, set by the COP to measure progress towards achieving the five operational objectives of The Strategy (concerning awareness, policy, science, capacity and funding).

5. In addition, affected country Parties are also requested to **report every four years against the progress indicators** set for the four strategic objectives of The Strategy (concerning populations, ecosystems, global benefits and resources/partnerships). No targets were set for the strategic objectives.

6. Specific reporting obligations were set for subregional and regional entities and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which are also requested to report biennially, while all other observers are only invited to provide complementary information.

7. Reporting against performance indicators took place in 2010, 2012 and 2014. Affected country Parties received technical assistance (the PRAIS project and the Global Support Programme) in 2010 and 2014 and, for the first time, in the 2014 reporting exercise, financial assistance (the United Nations Environment Programme umbrella programmes and the funding made available through other implementing agencies or directly) through GEF resources under the fifth replenishment of the Trust Fund.

8. The results of the performance reporting are quite promising: 94 per cent of affected country Parties and 69 per cent of developed country Parties submitted their reports in 2014, with an increased level of reliability of such information.⁸ Parties have acquired the capacity to report against quantitative data and have met their reporting obligations fully and in a timely manner and it is now possible to assess progress in the implementation of the institutional mechanisms of the Convention over time and across regions. This is undoubtedly the main asset of the reporting system under the Convention.

9. While PRAIS and the CRIC with its revised mandate led to an evidence-based assessment of the implementation of the Convention with regard to the institutional commitments taken by Parties, **a limited outcome was delivered with regard to the assessment of the impact of the implementation of the Convention** through the compilation of the progress indicators, previously known as impact indicators.⁹

10. Reporting against progress indicators took place only in 2012. The second reporting exercise under PRAIS – which should have led to the first assessment of implementation against impact indicators – did not deliver the expected outcomes¹⁰ for a number of reasons,

⁸ A protocol for the improvement of data quality, which was implemented in the 2014 reporting exercise against completeness, coherence and consistency of submissions, led to the revision and resubmission of approximately half of the national reports submitted by affected country Parties and one third of those submitted by developed country Parties.

⁹ The definition changed from “impact indicators” to “progress indicators” after COP 11 (2011).

¹⁰ About 42 per cent of affected country Parties provided information on impact indicators on strategic objectives 1 to 3. However, not all Parties delivered quantitative information, resulting in a global

including: (a) the lack of technical and financial assistance to affected countries; (b) the limited number of reports received; (c) the low reliability of information produced with regard to the impact indicators; and (d) the lack of specific targets against which the impact of the implementation of the Convention on the ground could be measured.¹¹ After 20 years of implementation of the Convention, **Parties still do not have a baseline assessment and indication of trends of land degradation based on solid data and information reported by affected countries.**¹²

11. Against this background, the COP took action by: (a) adopting a more effective approach to monitoring and assessing progress made towards the strategic objectives of The Strategy;¹³ (b) inviting affected countries to set national voluntary targets within their national policy and planning instruments and monitoring progress towards achieving such targets using progress indicators; (c) advocating simplified reporting guidelines¹⁴ in order to reduce the reporting burden; and (d) calling on the international community for increased support in developing national capacity to report to the COP.¹⁵ The second reporting against progress indicators is to take place in 2016 under these auspices, whereby the secretariat is requested to facilitate the reporting by providing affected country Parties with national estimates of each progress indicator based on available data sources.

12. Reporting requires **extensive use of human and financial resources** by Parties and the international community.¹⁶ With the current frequency of two years, reporting stretches the availability of financial resources: GEF allocations under the enabling activities funding follow the frequency of the replenishments of the GEF Trust Fund and are provided every four years. The impact of technical and financial assistance to affected countries on the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of the reporting is evident given that the number of reports submitted in 2012 – where no such assistance was provided by the GEF – hardly reached half of those due for that exercise. It is evident that the limited quantity, and

data coverage varying from 7 to 36 per cent, depending on the specific question. Owing to the highly specialized/scientific nature of the information required, the coverage and comparability of reported national data have in general not been sufficient for obtaining statistically representative results from the analyses.

¹¹ For additional information, see document ICCD/CRIC(12)/7, “Improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and format of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties: Overall report on the fourth reporting and review process”.

¹² Many assessments of desertification and land degradation were made at the global level by a number of recognized institutions and organizations, including from the United Nations system, but none of them was used in the intergovernmental process as a solid reference for policy guidance on combatting land degradation.

¹³ Decision 22/COP.11.

¹⁴ Decision 16/COP.11.

¹⁵ Decision 11/COP.11, among the other relevant decisions taken at COP 11.

¹⁶ The establishment of a system based on quantitative reporting required substantial investment in terms of methodology, technology and organization, as well as in terms of assistance to Parties to develop the required capacity. The GEF has invested some USD 4.5 million (PRAIS and the Global Support Programme) over five years (2010–2014) and the contribution of the Convention institutions can be estimated at USD 1.5 million in the same period. This initial investment, however, would cover at least four reporting rounds (the reporting exercises expected during the term of The Strategy, from 2010 to 2018), hence a cost of USD 1.5 million per reporting exercise. The preparation of a cycle of reports would require an expenditure of some USD 75,000 per affected country on average (USD 50,000 from GEF enabling activities funding plus USD 25,000 from national budgets). With some 160 reports submitted by affected countries in 2014, the total cost of a reporting exercise could be estimated at approximately USD 13.5 million (USD 12 million of recurrent costs, plus USD 1.5 million of investments).

probably the limited quality, of national reports negatively affects the deliberations of the CRIC.

13. Another limiting factor is the **periodic adjustments of the reporting obligations** introduced with the “iterative process”. With the set of performance and progress indicators only provisionally adopted by the COP and subject to fine-tuning according to the results of the reporting exercises, a number of revisions have been introduced at every reporting exercise since 2010. In fact, reporting guidelines have been amended after each COP with the result that Parties would be able to initiate compiling the required data and information only at the beginning of the year immediately after the COP, that is, the same year by when this information should be revised by the CRIC. With the current timing allowed to Parties to prepare their reports – six months plus a period of three months for the validation of the data submitted – it has never been possible to meet the timeline set by the COP for convening the intersessional sessions of the CRIC.

B. The review process

14. The frequency of the sessions of the CRIC follows the frequency of the reporting exercise, and the CRIC is currently convened every two years to review reports on performance, and every four years – jointly with the Committee on Science and Technology (CST)¹⁷ – to review reports on performance and progress indicators, in addition to the sessions convened during sessions of the COP. Finding the required resources to convene the sessions of the subsidiary bodies has become increasingly challenging,¹⁸ and even obliged the secretariat to use the capital reserve to convene the most recent session of the CRIC (CRIC 11) in Bonn, Germany. At the same time, the meetings of the regional implementation annexes, which are an integral part of the review process and have proved to be a very effective and efficient way to support the process,¹⁹ had to be organized for a limited duration and back-to-back with the session of the CRIC.

15. Equally relevant is the effect on the timing of the CRIC: the CRIC could not convene its intersessional sessions the year after the COP as planned, and had to be reported to a few months before the following COP.²⁰

16. The CST continued making its deliberations, particularly on how to review progress in achieving the strategic objectives of The Strategy, without preliminary consultation with the body in charge of the review process. The first set of impact indicators was thus adopted without the advice of those who should have compiled such indicators and, regardless of

¹⁷ Decision 11/COP.9, annex, section V, on frequency of sessions; and decision 12/COP.9, paragraph 2, on the review of scientific information.

¹⁸ In this regard, it should be noted that no provision has been made under the Convention budget to fund the intersessional sessions of the subsidiary bodies for the review of implementation, including the CRIC, which meets every two years. In addition, owing to considerable direct and indirect incremental costs, it has become increasingly difficult to identify a Party willing to host the CRIC intersessional session and meet the costs associated with its organization. Since 2008 (CRIC 7, Istanbul, Turkey), the secretariat has had to raise voluntary contributions to cover the local costs of organizing sessions in Bonn, in addition to the usual fundraising for the participation of entitled countries.

¹⁹ The costs for the organization of stand-alone regional meetings in the five regions are estimated at a total amount of USD 453,000, including local costs and participation of entitled delegates, which is approximately half of the cost of the organization of a CRIC session in Bonn.

²⁰ Only CRIC 7 – which did not review national reports – was convened in the year between two COPs (November 2008); CRIC 9 was convened in February 2011; CRIC 11 in April 2013; and CRIC 13 is scheduled to take place in March 2015.

the relevance of such indicators, the capacity of countries could not be developed in a period of a few months. Owing to the failure of the progress reporting in 2012, the first joint sessions of the two subsidiary bodies in the same year did not produce the expected results and, as recalled in paragraphs 9 and 10 above, the review was conducted only on the implementation of institutional mechanisms.

17. The original mandate of the CRIC²¹ has been evolving over time, through a number of COP decisions that added new items on the agenda of its intersessional sessions (e.g. synergies with other conventions; governance of the Global Mechanism; progress reports of ad hoc intergovernmental groups, etc.). This resulted in less time being available for the review of national reports, which remains the core task of the CRIC.

18. As a result of an agenda of the CRIC limited to the review of performance and charged with a number of matters which required further consultation at the COP level before clear decisions could be made, the attendance to the intersessional sessions of the CRIC has declined over time.²²

III. Rationale and options for change

19. Beyond the above-mentioned considerations on the reporting and review process, three new elements would also need to be taken into consideration when envisaging any future improvement in the assessment of the implementation of the Convention:

(a) According to the outcomes of the 2014 reporting exercise, the global operational targets have already been achieved or will be achieved in the course of the current biennium;

(b) The post-2015 sustainable development framework being discussed at the General Assembly is likely to deliver specific objectives and targets relating to desertification and land degradation at the global level, which would need to be integrated into the Convention process through its current mechanisms;

(c) The increasingly recognized linkages of land and land issues with other multilateral environmental agreements, particularly the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, where specific indicators and targets have been established.

20. Any new assessment and review system under the Convention to be introduced after 2015 with a view to increasing the relevance and efficiency of the reporting and review process could include the following elements:

(a) Focusing the review exercise on substance rather than on institutional processes; and adjusting the frequency of the reporting and review process accordingly;

(b) Enhancing the relevance of the review process, restoring the original mandate of the CRIC and facilitating the integration of scientific advice into policy deliberations;

(c) Ensuring regional governance and continuity of the process in the period when the CRIC and the CST would not meet intersessionally, including by organizing stand-alone regional meetings;

²¹ See footnote 7.

²² Attendance records at:

- CRIC 7: 145 Parties and 49 civil society organizations (CSOs);
- CRIC 9: 144 Parties and 42 CSOs; and
- CRIC 11: 122 Parties and 20 CSOs.

(d) Adopting any other possible measures to increase the efficiency of the Convention's institutional procedures and mechanisms.

A. Focusing the review exercise on substance

21. Starting from and including 2016, national reporting would be streamlined along the following patterns:

(a) Reporting against performance indicators would be discontinued, as many targets on operational objectives have already been achieved or will be achieved by the end of 2015;

(b) Data from accredited global sources would be compiled by the secretariat for a core set of progress indicators,²³ to be further validated and complemented by affected country Parties;

(c) Affected country Parties would be requested to report on the implementation of national action programmes and the achievement of voluntary targets of land degradation neutrality, or any other global target relevant to the Convention that the General Assembly adopts within the Sustainable Development Goals;

(d) Data reported by developed country Parties in other relevant reporting commitments, particularly within the Creditor Reporting System of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee,²⁴ would be used for the assessment and review of financial flows for the implementation of the Convention.

22. In accordance with paragraph 21 above, affected country Parties, and other reporting entities as relevant, would be requested to report every four years; the CRIC would review this information with the same frequency, convening its intersessional sessions every four years.

B. Enhancing the relevance of the review process

23. Starting from and including 2016, the review process would be restructured along the following pattern:

²³ The Global Mechanism is currently working on a proposal for a new set of financial progress indicators better aligned with the emerging post-2015 agenda. Specifically, in line with the provisions of decision 14/COP.11, financial needs for the implementation of integrated investment frameworks should be assessed. Using an approach similar to the other progress indicators, national estimates would be generated on the basis of global reference datasets, to be validated by the countries through the reporting and review process. The estimated investments needs would then be compared with the financial resources actually invested or committed.

²⁴ By its decision 14/COP.11, the COP requested the Global Mechanism to explore the possibility of capturing the financial flows and investments made by innovative funding sources, such as foundations, businesses, the financial industry and CSOs, given the difficulties encountered by reporting entities, and present the proposal at COP 12. In this regard, data from the Creditor Reporting System may need to be complemented with data from other sources, given that the Creditor Reporting System (a) is the authoritative source of Official Development Assistance and other official flows (since 1960) but some of the developed country Parties do not report to the Development Assistance Committee; (b) covers Official Development Assistance, but not the national budget allocations from recipient countries or other partner organizations; and (c) includes information on concessional and non-concessional flows from some multilateral institutions, but not investments from foundations, CSOs or the private sector.

(a) The provisional agenda and programme of work of the CRIC at intersessional sessions would focus on the review of the implementation of the Convention, discarding other matters that have recently been added to its original mandate;

(b) The CRIC would convene its intersessional sessions jointly with, or subsequent to, sessions of the CST, which in turn would advise the CRIC on how best to review progress towards achieving strategic objectives and/or targets and ensure that the CRIC relies on solid, scientifically sound data;

(c) CRIC sessions held between ordinary sessions of the COP (intersessional sessions) and held in conjunction with the sessions of the CST would last one week, including the duration of the session of the CST;

(d) The provisional agenda of sessions of the CRIC held during sessions of the COP would remain as it currently stands, and focus mainly on the translation of policy recommendations into actionable decisions by the COP.

C. Ensuring continuity and regional governance

24. In the period when the CRIC and the CST would not meet between the sessions of the COP, the following measures would be taken:

(a) Meetings of the Regional Implementation Annexes would be organized as stand-alone meetings, to be convened in the regions with the logistical and financial support of a host country from the region, including for the cost of participation of entitled countries;

(b) The Bureaux of the CRIC and the CST would convene joint meetings every six months, and be supported by an additional officer from each regional and interest group.

D. Adopting any other possible measures to increase efficiency

25. Among the measures aimed at increasing the efficiency of the review process, the following could be considered:

(a) Reducing the formalities of the intersessional sessions of the CRIC, and adopting a format that facilitates the exchange of experience and the dialogue among Parties;²⁵

(b) Convening the intersessional sessions of the CRIC back-to-back with other relevant meetings, reducing the impact of the participation costs on the review process.

²⁵ According to the terms of reference of the CRIC, the review of implementation shall be “open and transparent, inclusive, flexible and facilitative, as well as effective in terms of the use of financial, technological and human resources, with due regard to geographic regions and subregions. It shall be an experience-sharing and lessons-learning exercise in an interactive format, which will identify successes, obstacles and difficulties with a view to improving the implementation of the Convention, but it will not be an assessment of compliance”.