



Local authorities and their role in implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

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This note was prepared by CARI as part of the GTD and the PASS-LCD Project .¹

With a view to COP16, CARI is offering a decoding note based on a reading and analysis of the official documents of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), available at: <https://www.unccd.int/convention/official-documents>

Introduction

To achieve sustainable actions, practices need to be adapted to the context of each area. Local authorities working at local and regional level are key players in the development and implementation of sustainable land and natural resource management strategies. They can ensure that people live sustainably on their land and in good conditions. The involvement of local authorities in sustainable land management is essential. This is why local authorities, which play a key role in steering territorial development and land management, are essential players in the fight against desertification and the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Since its adoption in June 1994, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has provided an international framework for addressing land-related issues in drylands². The UNCCD Strategic Framework 2018-2030 represents the most comprehensive commitment to achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN)³ to (i) restore the productivity of vast tracts of degraded land, (ii) improve people's livelihoods and (iii) reduce the environmental, social and economic impacts of drought.

The text of the Convention stresses the importance of "multi-stakeholder partnerships" and the involvement of all stakeholders in sustainable land management and the fight against desertification. This includes **local and regional authorities**, which are seen as key players in implementing the Convention on the ground.

Article 2 of the Convention states that to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in severely affected countries: "[...] **long-term integrated strategies shall be applied, focusing in particular on the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, and leading to improved living conditions, particularly at the community level**".

In addition, Article 3 paragraph a states that: "*The Parties should ensure that decisions concerning the design and implementation of programmes to combat desertification and/or mitigate the effects of drought are taken **with the participation of local populations and communities**, and that an enabling environment is created at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local levels*".

¹ PASS-LCD: Structured action programme for actors in the fight against desertification (2023-2026) implemented by CARI, ENDA Pronat and ReSaD. Co-financed by AFD.

² Dry zones are arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid zones where the humidity index, representing the ratio between average annual rainfall and potential evapotranspiration, is between 0.05 and 0.65. https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2017-09/GLO_Full_Report_low_res_French_0.pdf

³ The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification defines Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) as: "a state in which the quantity and quality of the Earth's resources necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and enhance food security remain stable or increase within an ecosystem and over specific spatial and temporal scales". **For more information:** <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/land-degradation-neutrality/ldn-principles>

✓ You can find the text of the CNULCD here: <https://www.unccd.int/resource/convention-text>

Local authorities are the ones who implement the decisions taken by the States Parties at the Conferences of the Parties (COPs). They are essential partners in the implementation of the Convention's actions at local and national level. Within the UNCCD, local authorities still have very little involvement or representation, even though, as leaders of territories, they have a voice to play in international negotiations and are key players in developing responses to the fight against desertification, in the same way as the civil society organisations that are heavily involved in this Convention.

It should be noted that until the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP14) of the UNCCD, the involvement of local authorities remained implicit. It was in decision 5 of COP14⁴ that the term "local authorities", which implies local communities, was clearly mentioned: "[The Parties] Request the Secretariat to continue to work with key stakeholders, including youth, faith-based organizations, **local authorities**, farmers, pastoralists, women's organizations, indigenous peoples and local communities".

1. The UNCCD's consideration of local authorities

Several actions under the Convention must be implemented by the States Parties at national level and are directly linked to the management and development of territories at local level, areas in which local authorities are major players.

The UNCCD recommends a bottom-up approach to combating desertification, i.e. one that starts from local needs and realities. This approach emphasises the central role of **local authorities** in implementing adaptation programmes and combating land degradation. In particular, local authorities are called upon to :

- Designing and implementing appropriate local initiatives.
- Participate in the development of national and regional public policies.
- Ensuring local governance and management of natural resources.

Local authorities are directly involved in the practical implementation of strategies to combat desertification. For example, local authorities are responsible for developing **land management plans** that integrate the fight against desertification, sustainable management of natural resources and adaptation to climate change. Local authorities are stakeholders in national action programmes and play a key role in their development and implementation.⁵

Capacity building of local actors, including **local governments**, is a significant aspect of the implementation of the UNCCD. Local governments must be trained and supported so that they can fully play their role in land management and the prevention of desertification. In its strategic framework (2018 - 2030), the Convention calls on States Parties to mobilise more financial and other resources from local governments so that they can implement the Convention and its strategic objectives at national level.⁶

a. A major role in land governance

⁴ Decision5/COP14: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/sessions/documents/2019-11/5-cop14.pdf>

⁵ Text of the Convention p.9: <https://www.unccd.int/resource/convention-text>

⁶ ICCD/COP(13)/21/Add. p.21: https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-02/cop21add1_SF_FR.pdf

Land governance is defined as the rules, processes and structures by which decisions are made about access to and use of land, how decisions are implemented and enforced, and how conflicts of interest over land are managed. (Palmer, Friccka and Wehrmann, 2009).⁷

At COP14, in decision 26, the UNCCD recognised the importance of land governance for the LDN and encouraged countries to integrate the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure Systems (VGRS) into the implementation of the LDN.

CNULCD's Policy Science Interface (SPI), supports the links between land tenure, sustainable land management and land degradation in the context of the LDN and its 2019 technical report "Creating an Enabling Environment for Land Degradation Neutrality".⁸

The DVGTs, devised by the UNCCD and the FAO in 2022, represent a non-binding legal instrument based on human rights. Their aim is to help political decision-makers, and the stakeholders concerned to plan land use, using what already exists in terms of the land tenure framework, to improve it and to implement it.

For more information: <https://www.unccd.int/resources/publications/technical-guide-integration-voluntary-guidelines-responsible-governance>

Within the UNCCD, there is a major issue around land tenure which is directly linked to issues related to the governance of tenure over land, fisheries and forests⁹. The Convention encourages "*responsible and inclusive land tenure governance and improved security of tenure [which] are factors that make a major contribution to achieving the NDT, combating biodiversity loss, adapting to climate change, establishing sustainable food systems and accelerating progress towards many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*".¹⁰ "

Local authorities have a major role to play in ensuring that land use is considered in the implementation of the Convention, and more specifically in achieving Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN). The Secretariat and the Global Mechanism are asked to take several measures, in which local authorities are a key player¹¹. One of the aims of these measures is to promote responsible governance of land tenure systems¹² to combat desertification, land degradation and drought.

As part of a programme led by the UNCCD Secretariat and the FAO to promote an integrated approach to land governance, national consultations based on country needs and situations were held in Kazakhstan, Kenya, Mexico, Senegal and Sri Lanka in 2023 to, among other things, "**support the design and implementation of NDT and land restoration initiatives at sub-national and local levels, where strengthening land tenure security can be both a means of promoting SLM and an outcome of land projects and programmes**".¹³

The Convention also identifies "responsible and inclusive land governance" as an important element in preventing and reducing forced migration and displacement of people¹⁴.

b. Essential involvement in the fight against drought

- ✓ *To find out more about how drought is considered and the action taken by the UNCCD to manage drought, consult the dedicated decryption note.*

Local authorities also have a role to play in mitigating the effects of drought on ecosystems and populations. They are key partners in implementing national plans to combat drought in their areas.

⁷ Palmer D., Friccka S. and Wehrmann B., 2009. Towards improved Land Governance. Land Tenure Working Paper 11. Rome, FAO

⁸ <https://www.unccd.int/resources/reports/creating-enabling-environment-land-degradation-neutrality-its-potential>

⁹ ICCD/COP16/22, p.19: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2417283F.pdf>

¹⁰ ICCD/COP(16)/19, p.3: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2415624F.pdf>

¹¹ ICCD/COP(16)/22 paragraph 6 p.20: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2417283F.pdf>

¹² The responsible governance of land promoted within the Convention implies improving land governance by considering all stakeholders in the territory, with particular attention to "vulnerable and marginalised" populations, and taking into account national legislation and the local context.

¹³ ICCD/COP16/19 paragraph d, p.4: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2415624F.pdf>

¹⁴ ICCD/COP(16)/18 p.7: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2413797F.pdf>

Local authorities are active and influential on the ground. They have a number of skills and know-how in spatial planning that they could share within the learning communities and communities of practice developed by the UNCCD Secretariat and the Global Water Partnership, to encourage the adoption of an approach based on integrated drought management involving land and water resources management.¹⁵

c. Establishment of a partnership with the global network ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability

In its efforts to mobilise stakeholders, the Convention secretariat has established a partnership with ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, a global network of local and regional authorities committed to sustainable development, which plays a key role in supporting local and regional authorities in their commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development.

This collaboration covers various aspects:

- Strengthening local capacities to combat desertification;
- Sharing information and best practice between local authorities around the world;
- Advocacy and raising awareness of local authorities in international policies, including the implementation of the UNCCD;
- Assistance in accessing international funding, particularly from initiatives such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), to support projects related to land degradation;
- Supporting local authorities in integrating actions to combat desertification into their action plans for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG15 (Life on Earth);
- Supporting local authorities in documenting and reporting their actions and progress under the Agreement.

The collaboration between ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability and the UNCCD secretariat is an example of a strategic partnership aimed at actively involving local governments in the fight against desertification. Through this partnership, local governments can better understand and implement sustainable land management strategies, access international funding and share their experiences to help achieve the objectives of the Desertification Convention. This support strengthens the impact of local actions on the preservation of ecosystems and the long-term sustainability of territories.

- ✓ For more information, see paragraphs 23 and 24 p.6 of document ICCD/COP(16)/12: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2416449F.pdf>

2. Possible advances at COP16

a. Setting up sustainable land use systems

In the draft decision to be submitted to the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), with the aim of improving the link between science and policy, the Parties are encouraged to take decisions relating to the implementation of sustainable land use systems by specifying several points on which local authorities could make recommendations, being at the helm of the territories:

¹⁵ The sustainable management of land and water resources represents a relevant lever for reducing the effects of droughts and improving the resilience of livelihoods to cope with them. For more information: <https://www.unccd.int/resources/reports/land-drought-nexus-enhancing-role-land-based-interventions-drought-mitigation-and>

→ ICCD/COP16/CST10 Decision 7 p.4

- a) Foster multi-stakeholder partnerships by encouraging collaboration between government, the private sector and local stakeholders to develop and implement comprehensive land use and land management plans that promote sustainable land use and incorporate local and indigenous knowledge;
- b) Establish participatory governance in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable land use policies in order to improve security of access to land, promote social and environmental justice, and ensure the participation of all legitimate land rights holders and land users in spatial planning and land management, which must be cooperative;
- c) Strengthen multi-sectoral coordination at all levels to promote synergies and harmonisation of policies relating to agriculture, the environment, economic issues and development, taking care to integrate sustainable land use principles and approaches where appropriate to avoid contradictory measures;
- d) Provide incentives for long-term investment in trans-disciplinary research, collaborative monitoring and the provision of data and tools to support the development and deployment of sustainable land use systems, and for investment in activities to demonstrate such systems in the field;
- e) Identify and support local leaders who will perpetuate sustainable land use systems by adapting them to changing circumstances;
- f) Promote transformative, multi-stakeholder learning that helps stakeholders deal with uncertainties, obstacles and change;
- g) Disseminate experience and local knowledge to encourage the scaling up of initiatives and promote land degradation neutrality at national level.

→ Local authorities should be clearly identified as stakeholders to be consulted on issues of land governance and the implementation of the LDN.

→ Local authorities can be the ones to set up inclusive and participative consultation frameworks, and relay information to governments at national level.

b. Land governance day

During COP16, a day dedicated to land governance will be held on 6 December 2024, organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNEP) and the FAO. This day will focus on the importance of responsible land governance based on human rights, the fight against land degradation and inclusive development promoting equitable access to land.

The agenda will cover 3 topics:

- Land tenure ;
- Integrated land-use planning and links between urban and rural areas;
- Ensuring security of tenure can improve food security, reduce poverty and support sustainable land management.

The main objectives of the day devoted to land governance will be to:

- Promoting dialogue, tools and awareness-raising for sustainable land management and inclusive land tenure;
- Strengthening governance for secure land tenure and urban-rural links, with a focus on capacity building;

- Encouraging partnerships and mobilising resources for land restoration and security of tenure initiatives.
- ➔ Local authorities have a great interest in taking part in this special day and making their recommendations heard. They have a real added value in identifying the measures to be taken to facilitate understanding of the issues surrounding land use and natural resource management and are important allies in helping governments to achieve the LDN.

c. Capacity building and community involvement

In the COP16 document dedicated to the "Participation and contribution of civil society organisations"¹⁶, local authorities are among the actors that should be supported by the Secretariat's actions, in particular through the implementation of a project on strengthening the role of civil society in achieving Land Degradation Neutrality (LND).

- ➔ This project will be presented to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) at COP16¹⁷. Local authorities can submit their needs for technical and financial support to strengthen and facilitate their involvement, particularly in achieving the LDN.

In conclusion

Local authorities play a key role in implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. Their participation is essential, as they are directly involved in the management of land and natural resources at local level. In view of the actions recommended by the Convention, particularly in terms of sustainable land management and resilient development in the face of crises caused by drought, the role and mobilisation of local authorities are crucial to the implementation of local strategies that contribute to global efforts to combat desertification, land degradation and drought.

Until now, local authorities have had little involvement in the UNCCD and have not made their voice heard in the land negotiation processes.

- ➔ **It is imperative that local authorities get together and bring their recommendations to the Desertification Convention to ensure that actions to combat desertification, land degradation and drought are rooted in local realities and that they benefit from concrete implementation at local level.**

¹⁶ ICCD/COP(16)/12 : <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2416449F.pdf>

¹⁷ ICCD/COP(16)/12, paragraphs 13 and 14 pp.4-5: <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/2416449F.pdf>



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