

DECLARATION

Civil society, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, pastoralists, smallholders, women, and youth reject the adoption of the COP17 agenda without items on gender, civil society and Indigenous Peoples' engagement, synergies across the three Rio Conventions, the Future Strategic Framework, and Science Policy Guidance.

Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 18 August 2026

This seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP17) is being promoted as one of action and implementation. That promise cannot be kept while the people who work the land every day are removed from the processes and opportunities to use scientific evidence and indigenous knowledge to advocate where decisions are made.

We - Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, pastoralists, smallholders, women and youth engaged in the UNCCD process, facilitated and represented by the Convention's Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Panel - are deeply concerned that the provisional agenda was confirmed with substantive items deferred, pending further consultation, following objections raised by the United States and the Russian Federation. Those items touch, among other things, gender-responsive approaches, the effective and meaningful engagement of civil society, synergies across the Rio Conventions, the future working of the UNCCD, and science-based advocacy and policymaking.

This is not a procedural footnote. Indigenous Peoples are rights-holders, knowledge-holders, and custodians of more than half of the world's land surface. They are not stakeholders to be consulted after the fact; they are the people already restoring degraded land, adapting food systems, and building resilience through generations of stewardship, mobility, traditional knowledge coupled with scientific research and collective action - the very outcomes COP17 says it wants to deliver. Deferring gender-responsive approaches and civil society engagement tells Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, pastoralists, and youth that their knowledge and leadership are optional to this Convention's implementation. They are not.

Fragmenting discussion of land and territories, biodiversity, and climate also works against the integrated response these crises demand. Soil health and scientific evidence act as a critical bridge across these agendas: healthy soils, backed by robust research and evidence, support land restoration, biodiversity, climate resilience, water security and food systems. Restoring soil health is essential to restoring degraded land, strengthening food systems, building drought resilience and achieving Land Degradation Neutrality targets. Stronger, better-resourced synergies among the UNCCD, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity are not a diplomatic luxury; they determine whether financing, data and implementation on the ground are coherent or wasted.

The UNCCD CSO Panel, representing accredited observer organizations from all five UNCCD regions, stated that no single organization, scientist, negotiator or nation can address the scale of land degradation, desertification and drought facing this generation; the response requires the whole community already doing this work. We stand with that position: sidelining that community at the opening of a COP built on the promise of action and implementation is not a technicality. It is a decision with consequences.

Under the Convention's own Rules of Procedure, deferral is not deletion. We, under these items, were deferred pending consultation, not struck from the agenda, and we insist that this distinction be honored in practice: it should be announced, without delay, the format, the convenor, and a firm date, before COP17 closes, for reporting back to plenary. Should consultations fail to resolve these items during this session, the Convention's own rules require that they be carried forward to COP18. They do not simply lapse, and no Party should later be allowed to claim otherwise.

We therefore call on the COP17 Presidency and on all Parties, including those such as the European Union and Brazil, who have already voiced support on the floor to:

- Set, without delay, a transparent and time-bound process to resolve the deferred items, with a public reporting date before COP17 closes;
- Publicly reaffirm that gender-responsive approaches and the meaningful engagement of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities are not negotiable preconditions for legitimate implementation of this Convention;
- Ensure that Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, pastoralists, smallholders, women and youth have real, resourced and continuous participation throughout COP17 in contact groups, drafting sessions and final decision-making, not only in side events; and
- Strengthen, rather than defer, synergies across the UNCCD, UNFCCC and CBD, recognizing that action on land, biodiversity and climate cannot be achieved in isolation.

Land degradation neutrality will not be achieved without the people who live and work on the land or without the adoption of science-based approaches in conjunction with Indigenous knowledge. We ask the Presidency and all Parties to prove, indeed and not only in name, that this is a COP of action, starting with restoring these items to the agenda.