

IUCN position paper for UNCCD COP16

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
Sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16)
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2 – 13 December 2024

IUCN's Key Messages

1. Place Nature-based Solutions (NbS) at the centre of efforts to enhance implementation of the Convention. (Agenda item 2)

- In considering the midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, include NbS among the key instruments to enhance the Convention's implementation (draft decision 1).

2. Accelerate the development of initiatives and partnerships that promote synergies between the Rio Conventions and other MEAs, with LDN as the entry point. (Agenda item 3)

- Commit to building concrete operational linkages across the Rio Conventions (draft decision 2), promoting and strengthening relationships with other conventions and international organisations, institutions and agencies.

3. Increase action for the restoration of rangelands, grasslands and agricultural lands for climate and biodiversity benefits. (Agenda items 4 and 5)

- Strengthen enabling policies and increase investments for rangeland and grassland restoration.
- Increase the identification and recognition of other effective areas-based conservation measures (OECMs) in grasslands that are managed by pastoralists.
- Adopt ecosystem-based approaches to restore agricultural lands to achieve healthy soils and improve soil biodiversity, supporting sustainable agrifood systems.

4. Enhance the resilience of vulnerable people and ecosystems to the impacts of drought. (Agenda items 4 and 5)

- Take action and increase political momentum to enhance drought management and governance under the Convention, including through adopting a decision on drought (draft decision 9), and establishing and further developing a Global Framework on Drought Resilience to advance proactive drought risk management that aligns with the principles of NbS and are developed in an inclusive and conflict-sensitive process.
- Strengthen drought management, including early warning systems, by adopting an impact-based approach, strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration and integrating metrics linking drought to land and ecosystem health.

5. Promote inclusive stakeholder engagement in land restoration. (Agenda item 7)

- Increase the capacity, participation and engagement of all stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth organisations, civil society organisations, and the private sector in UNCCD processes and LDN achievement (draft decisions 3 and 4).
- Adopt human rights-based, inclusive and gender-responsive land restoration approaches and promote the participation of marginalised groups such as Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth in decision making related to land restoration.

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Three quarters of the world's land surface is significantly altered, primarily for food production and forestry, and up to 40% of global lands are degraded. This adversely impacts biodiversity, land productivity, carbon storage, the hydrological cycle and broader ecosystem functioning, as well as the human populations and economic activities that depend on healthy land.

As the last of the three Rio Conventions to meet in late 2024, UNCCD COP16 takes place against the backdrop of an interlinked climate, biodiversity and land degradation crisis, with progress against societal goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), deeply insufficient ([UN, 2024](#)). There is a collective need to scale-up our actions and investments to prevent and restore degraded lands, address ever-worsening droughts, improve the health of our soils and ensure the inclusion of all – women, youth and Indigenous peoples – and to do so at speed and scale.

As the UNCCD celebrates its 30th anniversary, the need to accelerate action on land degradation, food security and drought resilience is more urgent than ever.

In this context, IUCN makes the following recommendations to the Parties:

1. Place Nature-based Solutions (NbS) at the centre of efforts to enhance implementation of the Convention. (Agenda item 2)

✓ *In considering the midterm evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework, include NbS among the key instruments to enhance the Convention's implementation (draft decision 1).*

Following the adoption of a multilaterally agreed definition of NbS in 2022 ([UNEP/EA.5/Res.5](#)), Parties to the Convention recognised NbS as a valuable approach to address the interlinked environmental crises of land degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change ([Decision 8/COP.15](#)). IUCN therefore encourages Parties elevate the importance of NbS to address key elements of the Convention's work, and to endorse NbS in their national plans and strategies to strengthen the enabling environment for LDN implementation.

Scaling-up the implementation of, and investment in, NbS as the preferred option for national LDN target achievement would generate multiple benefits across a range of targets, from sustainable land management and drought resilience to poverty reduction to climate adaptation. This approach, endorsed at the UN Environment Assembly ([UNEP/EA.6/Res.14](#)), provides a holistic and balanced response to address the aims of the Convention, and could include a range of interventions, such as forest

landscape restoration, area-based conservation measures and agroecology.

The *IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions* provides a concrete operational framework to support the high-integrity implementation of these important solutions on the ground, which Parties are encouraged to reflect in their LDN targets ([IUCN, 2020](#)). The Standard serves to inform the integration, design and scale of NbS interventions, and minimises the risk of unanticipated negative outcomes or misuse.

This inclusive framework increases accountability, fosters cross-sectoral collaboration and ensures that NbS interventions are more resilient, sustainable and responsive to both human and environmental needs. Further, integrating NbS to achieve LDN in policies will contribute to stronger partnerships between the public and private sectors, and Parties are encouraged to utilise innovative and inclusive financing mechanisms, including payments for ecosystem services and blended approaches, to overcome barriers like limited access to finance, as well as policy gaps when promoting and scaling NbS.

2. Accelerate the development of initiatives and partnerships that promote synergies between the Rio Conventions and other MEAs, with LDN as the entry point. (Agenda item 3)

✓ *Commit to building concrete operational linkages across the Rio Conventions (draft decision 2), promoting and strengthening relationships with other conventions and international organisations, institutions and agencies.*

LDN implementation is the entry point to address several societal challenges and can generate multiple benefits that go beyond the restoration of hectares of land. By connecting the different but related sectors on water, agriculture and conservation, LDN, including through integrated approaches to addressing land health, has the potential to address the interlinked goals of the three Conventions.

Noting [Decision 8/COP.15](#), such linkages, including at the regional and national level, Parties can harness synergies and ensure coordination and alignment in the preparation of the key national instruments under these policy processes, i.e. between their LDN targets, National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of the Paris Agreement. This will require a whole-of-government approach to ensure policy coherence.

Where necessary, Parties could mandate joint work programmes, common reporting frameworks, shared databases or information systems and/or other practical initiatives and activities to improve cross-Convention collaboration and minimise

potential duplication of work. For example, outcomes from restoration interventions that address the inter-related goals of the Conventions should be clearly recognised and embedded in country reports and accounted for in global progress reports. IUCN urges Parties to consider NbS as the framework for national coordinated action and joint programmes, as an operational framework recognised by all three Conventions. Importantly, synergies and joint delivery among MEAs must not come at the expense of dedicated financing for land restoration and drought management.

Noting that the last quarter of 2024 will successively host CBD COP16 in Cali, UNFCCC COP29 in Baku, and UNCCD COP16 in Riyadh, IUCN urges the respective COP Presidencies and the Convention secretariats to further explore these opportunities for collaboration.

3. Increase action for the restoration of rangelands, grasslands and agricultural lands for climate and biodiversity benefits. (Agenda items 4 and 5)

✓ *Strengthen enabling policies and increase investments for rangeland and grassland restoration.*

In 2022, the UN General Assembly declared 2026 the *International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists* ([A/Res/76/253](#)). IUCN has supported this process through several collaborative engagements, including with WWF and UNCCD on the first interactive dialogue on rangeland restoration, as well as subsequent Regional Rangeland dialogues supported by Parties between 2020 and 2022. Further, IUCN's Resolution on *Protecting and Restoring Endangered Grassland and Savannah Ecosystems* ([Resolution 7.009](#)), as well as the active engagement of the IYRP Global Coordinating Group to the UNCCD, recognise the urgency to restore grasslands as they are currently under severe threats. IUCN emphasises that grassland ecosystems support essential ecosystem services including carbon storage, soil protection and biodiversity conservation. Therefore, IUCN calls on Parties to strengthen the enabling environment to increase rangeland knowledge, enhance the monitoring of the grassland-related LDN targets, strengthen collaboration between stakeholders and increase innovative investment for rangeland restoration.

✓ *Increase the identification and recognition of other effective areas-based conservation measures (OECMs) in grasslands that are managed by pastoralists.*

Grasslands harbour rich biodiversity that includes large grazing mammals and associated predators, burrowing mammals, numerous bird species and

microorganisms, including diverse insects, invertebrates and soil biodiversity, and many endemic species. Grasslands are also home to two billion pastoralists. Recognised as mobile Indigenous peoples, pastoralists effectively manage grasslands through the grazing of animals, and they play a key role in protecting biodiversity outside of protected areas. Grassland biodiversity can only be maintained by ensuring that those ecosystem interactions are kept in balance, and grazing and fire are important processes that contribute to grassland dynamics. Improving the management effectiveness of these areas (including the management of invasive species) requires valuing and recognising the importance of traditional land management and governance by local land users. IUCN therefore calls on Parties to establish a legal framework that recognises those areas as contributing to biodiversity conservation in grasslands.

✓ *Adopt ecosystem-based approaches to restore agricultural lands to achieve healthy soils and improve soil biodiversity, supporting sustainable agrifood systems.*

NbS are essential to balance agricultural and pastoral demands with natural support services, and implementing well-designed NbS in agriculture can effectively contribute to mitigating climate change, enhancing resilience, conserving biodiversity, improving soil fertility and securing water resources. Parties are strongly encouraged to adopt sustainable practices and help farmers, especially smallholders, address the upfront costs of deploying NbS and other ecosystem-based approaches. Further, governments should prioritise land health within agricultural policies and use soil and landscape biodiversity as key indicators of success. The interconnectedness of below- and above-ground biodiversity should also be a key consideration when developing policies and interventions addressing desertification.

4. Enhance the resilience of vulnerable people and ecosystems to the impacts of drought. (Agenda items 4 and 5)

✓ *Take action and increase political momentum to enhance drought management and governance under the Convention, including through adopting a decision on drought (draft decision 9), and establishing and further developing a Global Framework on Drought Resilience to advance proactive drought risk management that aligns with the principles of NbS and are developed in an inclusive and conflict sensitive process.*

Given that drought is a major driver of ecosystem degradation, and that over 75% of the world's population is likely to be impacted by water shortages by 2050 ([UNCCD, 2022](#)), drought will be become an ever more critical aspect of our social and environmental agenda. While many countries

rely on emergency responses to drought, the benefits of more proactive, pre-planned and cooperative approaches are significant ([Magero et al., 2024](#)). The Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought outlines clear recommendations for ways forward to strengthen cooperation on drought ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/20](#)). IUCN considers it essential that a Global Framework on Drought Resilience is established and sees the UNCCD COP16 as an opportune moment to advance this issue. In addition, Parties should take steps to create a legally binding instrument for effectively addressing drought either through an amendment to the Convention or an optional protocol. The process for developing the Framework should be participatory, human rights-based and gender-responsive. Given that drought management cuts across several sectoral policies, Parties should include provisions for strengthening national mechanisms for integrated drought management and early warning alongside cross sectoral management of land resources in the Framework. Work to enhance regional coordination mechanisms for early warning and response should also be advanced.

✓ *Strengthen drought management, including early warning systems, by adopting an impact-based approach, strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration and integrating metrics linking drought to land and ecosystem health.*

Drought is a naturally occurring phenomenon in many parts of the world, yet early warning and response has generally been overly focused on rainfall monitoring and short-term responses aimed at supporting communities to manage livelihoods and food insecurity due to drought. Parties should work to ensure that drought management systems at all levels are based on cross-sectoral collaboration, fostering longer term, nature-based and conflict-sensitive approaches to drought management to reduce structural vulnerability to drought both at the ecosystem and community level. Drought early warning should be developed using an impact-based approach, based on data and metrics from a variety of sources, including data related to water use, soil health and forest cover, as well as social and economic data, which affects the scale and severity of drought. Such a model should enable periodic monitoring of drought interventions to determine impact, as well as stimulate continuous improvement, as countries move up the learning curve.

5. Promote inclusive stakeholder engagement in land restoration. (Agenda item 7)

✓ *Increase the capacity, participation and engagement of all stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth organisations, civil society*

organisations, and the private sector in UNCCD processes and LDN achievement (draft decisions 3 and 4).

Land restoration cannot be achieved without the effective involvement of all relevant stakeholders. IUCN calls on Parties to ensure the effective participation and engagement of Indigenous peoples, women and youth organisations, civil society organisations, and the private sector in UNCCD meetings and processes. In addition, IUCN calls on Parties to recognise the value of the role of civil society as an essential actor in defining, planning, implementing and disseminating sustainable land management good practices, and acting as the voice of the voiceless. Parties are therefore equally encouraged, in close collaboration with the Civil Society Organizations Panel of the UNCCD, to increase the capacities and commitment of civil society organisations, including Indigenous peoples, women and youth organisations and the private sector, to be more visible, to communicate and deliver on LDN principles and speak during negotiations. Parties and other stakeholders are further encouraged to work together collaboratively, for example through programmes such as the [Saudi Green Initiative](#) and the [Middle East Green Initiative](#), and with private investors to develop incentives and an enabling environment for sustainable innovative investment in land restoration.

✓ *Adopt human rights-based, inclusive and gender-responsive land restoration approaches and promote the participation of marginalised groups such as Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth in decision making related to land restoration.*

The impact of land degradation and desertification is disproportionately carried by women ([UNCCD, 2022](#)). Parties should ensure that, in line with the [Abidjan Declaration on Achieving Gender Equality for Successful Land Restoration \(ICCD/COP\(15\)/23\)](#), LDN achievement is accompanied by equal opportunities for both men and women and marginalised groups to own, access, use and control land, without discriminatory practices. IUCN therefore urges Parties to implement and scale up LDN interventions and policies that are gender responsive to address disparities and reduce gender biases by promoting equality, human rights and gender inclusion in decision-making. IUCN welcomes and further recommends Parties to support the campaign [#HerLand](#) that seeks to promote successful examples of women's contributions to sustainable land management, and is prepared to continue supporting Parties in developing and strengthening gender-responsive plans and programmes, including LDN interventions.