

IUCN position paper for UNCCD COP17

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Seventeenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP17)

Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 17–28 August 2026

IUCN's key messages

1. Increase ambition to deepen coordination and strengthen national integration of the Rio Conventions, without sacrificing dedicated financing (COP item 4)

- Ensure synergies do not come at the expense of dedicated financing for land restoration, drought resilience, and non-forest ecosystems
- Advance from institutional coordination to concrete operational linkages
- Make LDN an entry to integrated implementation of the Rio Conventions, as drylands are a key area where the agendas converge
- Nature-based Solutions, applied in line with the IUCN Global Standard, offer a coherent approach for national integration and delivery

2. Invest in rangelands and empower pastoralists as leaders in sustainable land management and biodiversity conservation (COP items 5 and 6b)

- Embed rangeland- and grassland-specific commitments into LDN targets
- Halt indiscriminate conversion and fragmentation of rangelands and grasslands
- Make the IYRP a turning point for pastoralist leadership in sustainable land management and conservation
- Mobilise the Rangelands Flagship Initiative and support fit for purpose innovative financing mechanisms noting restoration can return up to \$35 for every \$1 invested

3. Advance a proactive global drought process that integrates nature metrics, technology, and traditional knowledge (COP items 5 and 6b, CST item 3c)

- Mandate a process to negotiate a global drought instrument for adoption at COP18
- Integrate biodiversity, water, soil, and climate metrics, and embed Nature-based Solutions in drought planning and response to address societal challenges
- Champion a whole-of-society approach that bridges new technologies, early warning systems and Indigenous and traditional knowledge
- Foster water cooperation to ensure joint drought management actions at the transboundary and regional levels

4. Commit to mitigating sand and dust storms at the source through ecosystem restoration and manage risks through a One Health approach (COP items 5 and 6b)

- Increase investment in ecosystem restoration and landscape approaches
- Integrate a One Health approach into sand and dust storm risk management

5. Anchor farmers, soil health and security, and Nature-based Solutions for agriculture in LDN achievement (CST item 5)

- Ensure meaningful inclusion of farmers in UNCCD decision-making processes
- Implement policies and practices that promote soil health and recognise soil security
- Scale up Nature-based Solutions in agriculture as a solution to soil water conservation and soil and land degradation
- Align financial flows to support farmers in the transition to sustainable agriculture

6. Strengthen the structural participation of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and women across UNCCD processes and LDN implementation (COP items 5 and 8a)

- Strengthen inclusive participation and knowledge exchange of non-Parties
- Adopt gender-responsive approaches to LDN, drought resilience, and land management
- Align finance with national priorities and improve direct access for local stakeholders

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Land degradation now affects up to 40% of the Earth's surface ([UNCCD, 2022](#)), with cascading consequences for biodiversity, climate change, water security, food systems, and the stability of communities. Yet progress against our shared climate, biodiversity, land, and development goals remains deeply insufficient, and the gap between commitments and delivery continues to widen. Closing that gap will require transformative change and integrated approaches that address the financing gap and governance deficits for key stakeholder groups.

As the first of the three Rio Convention COPs to convene in 2026, UNCCD COP17 takes place at a moment when ambition must translate into measurable results on the ground. The conference also coincides with the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), placing an overdue spotlight on ecosystems that cover more than half of the Earth's land surface and sustain the livelihoods of around 500 million people ([UNCCD, 2024](#)). COP17 must be a turning point for implementation.

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

1. Increase ambition to deepen coordination and strengthen national integration of the Rio Conventions, without sacrificing dedicated financing (COP item 4)

✓ *Ensure synergies do not come at the expense of dedicated financing for land restoration, drought resilience, and non-forest ecosystems.*

IUCN's first concern on any synergy agenda is finance. IUCN emphasises that synergies must not become a rationale for consolidating or reducing funding streams, noting the significant climate, biodiversity, and land financing gaps. Rather, financing for land, climate, and biodiversity must be additional, coordinated, and fully respect existing commitments. Integrated delivery should reduce transaction costs and fragmentation, not substitute for the dedicated investment that each agenda requires. Increased finance for Nature-based Solutions can amplify climate-biodiversity-land impacts ([UNEP, 2026](#)), and alignment of Global Environment Facility (GEF) and Green Climate Fund (GCF) disbursement criteria with dryland Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets could ensure that non-forest ecosystems are not disadvantaged.

Continued commitments for dedicated financing mechanisms help scale action at different levels and building evidence-based biodiversity-land-climate linkages in funding proposals plays a critical role in supporting synergies in a practical manner. IUCN invites donors to make firm commitments at COP17, and stands ready to facilitate access to finance as an accredited entity under the GEF and GCF, and through grants mechanisms targeted at non-state

actors, such as the [Global EbA Fund](#) and the [GEF SGP CSO Challenge Program](#).

✓ *Advance from institutional coordination to concrete operational linkages.*

IUCN welcomes the progress in implementing decision [8/COP.16](#), including the development of the Joint Liaison Group cooperation plan for 2025–2026, the launch of the Rio Conventions online platform, and the deepening of operational ties through the LDN Target Setting Programme 2.0. IUCN encourages Parties at the national level to expand upon these activities with concrete measures to strengthen operational linkages that deliver measurable outcomes on the ground. IUCN encourages Parties to integrate the three agendas into their national plans, and harmonisation of monitoring and reporting should be pursued at the national level, where Parties align their own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and LDN processes. Additional cross-convention reporting requirements should be avoided as they present an extra burden on developing countries. Parties may also wish to explore joint work programmes or other coordination mechanisms to further strengthen operational synergies across the Conventions.

✓ *Make LDN an entry to integrated implementation of the Rio Conventions, as drylands are a key area where the agendas converge*

The second edition of the Global Land Outlook described land as the operative link between biodiversity loss and climate change ([UNCCD, 2022](#)). Indeed, drylands, including rangelands, dryland forests, and woodlands, are multifunctional landscapes that store significant carbon stocks ([Plaza et al., 2018](#)), and can act as tractable sites for delivering simultaneously across the three Rio Conventions. IUCN encourages Parties to consider LDN as a primary national planning entry point, through which to align their NDCs, NBSAPs, and LDN targets domestically.

Further, with the 2026 UN Water Conference approaching, COP17 offers a timely opportunity to anchor dryland water security within the intergovernmental water agenda.

✓ *Nature-based Solutions, applied in line with the IUCN Global Standard, offer a coherent approach for national integration and delivery.*

Ecological integrity is a common thread across the Rio Conventions. At the national level, Nature-based Solutions (as defined in UN Environment Assembly [Resolution 5/5](#)) offer a practical framework through which Parties can operationalise ecological integrity across their land, climate, and biodiversity plans. Protecting and restoring high-integrity dryland and grassland ecosystems, including those affected by wildfires, enhances outcomes for land, climate, and biodiversity, while boosting the resilience of

communities and economies to exogenous shocks and their indirect impacts ([Young et al., 2025](#)).

IUCN has long called on governments to deploy Nature-based Solutions to reinforce such synergies (Resolution [7.114](#)). They offer a practical, measurable framework through which Parties can align their LDN targets, NBSAPs, and NDCs into a coherent whole-of-government approach. Decisions [7/COP.16](#) and [8/COP.16](#) acknowledged this, inviting “Parties to prioritize holistic and integrated action to tackle desertification, land degradation and drought, and their interlinkages with climate change and biodiversity loss, especially through accelerating and scaling up the implementation of nature-based solutions and/or ecosystem-based approaches.”

With recent observed increases in the amplitude and frequency of climate impacts, IUCN urges Parties to scale-up the use of Nature-based Solutions and other ecosystem approaches in a complementary manner with other measures, stressing that any application should protect and restore ecosystem integrity, include all necessary social and environmental safeguards, and adhere to the [IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions](#), the use of which is promoted by the Presidency’s Nature-based Solutions for Sustainable Infrastructure Initiative. Such approaches can address drought management, food and agricultural systems (Resolution [8.002](#)), and grassland ecosystems (Resolution [8.005](#)).

IUCN stands ready to support countries in piloting integrated national initiatives that demonstrate synergies in practice, drawing on proven vehicles including the [ENACT Partnership](#), [Bonn Challenge](#), [Freshwater Challenge](#), and [Regen10](#), and invites Parties to join these initiatives and further enhance international cooperation and ambition on them.

2. Invest in rangelands and empower pastoralists as leaders in sustainable land management and biodiversity conservation (COP items 5 and 6b)

✓ *Embed rangeland- and grassland-specific commitments into LDN targets.*

Decision [29/COP.16](#) invited Parties to prioritise policies and investments for the sustainable management and restoration of rangelands and to foster an enabling environment for responsible and inclusive governance as part of their LDN efforts. IUCN calls on Parties to build on this foundation to embed rangeland- and grassland-specific commitments within their LDN targets, including to avoid, reduce, and reverse degradation of rangelands, and to promote sustainable pastoralism and management approaches ([IYRP Rangelands & LDN WG, 2024](#)).

IUCN likewise urges Parties to recognise the value of rangeland and grassland restoration towards national progress under Target 2 of the Kunming-

Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), ensuring stronger synergistic efforts across Rio Conventions. The [IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology](#) can support Parties as the reference framework for consistent mapping of grasslands extent (Resolution [8.005](#)). The [IUCN Red List of Ecosystems](#) can support LDN baseline setting, and IUCN guidelines for assessing rangeland state and health, including the Participatory Rangeland and Grassland Assessment (PRAGA) methodology ([FAO and IUCN, 2022](#)), can support Parties to identify national and subnational priorities.

✓ *Halt indiscriminate conversion and fragmentation of rangelands and grasslands.*

Noting similar commitments to halt deforestation, IUCN urges Parties to commit to halting indiscriminate or commodity-driven rangeland conversion as an explicit LDN objective (Resolution [8.009](#)). Further, as they are among the most degraded and least protected biomes ([Jacobson et al., 2019](#)), IUCN invites Parties to conserve mostly intact temperate grasslands, including through development of ecologically representative, well-connected, and equitably governed protected areas, other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), and privately managed lands, consistent with Target 3 of the KMGBF (Resolution [8.005](#)). Further, IUCN invites Parties to recognise and integrate sustainable land management to address drivers of grasslands and rangelands degradation, including poorly planned plantations, renewable energy projects, and the spread of invasive alien species into LDN planning.

✓ *Make the IYRP a turning point for pastoralist leadership in sustainable land management and conservation.*

Grasslands, savannas, and rangelands are ecosystems vital to confronting the biodiversity, climate, and desertification crises. Rangelands are widespread globally in biodiversity hotspots and Key Biodiversity Areas, and sustainable pastoralism can play a key role in conserving and restoring them, functioning as a mitigation strategy to simultaneously conserve biodiversity and enhance the livelihoods of rural communities (Resolution [8.008](#); [Briske et al., 2026](#)). IUCN urges Parties to support pastoralists’ well-defined legal and customary tenure and access rights, and to treat traditional agropastoral and oasis water systems, as well as pastoralist mobility as Nature-based Solutions for sustainable rangeland management.

Improving rangeland management effectiveness requires valuing the importance of traditional land management, pastoral knowledge, and inclusive governance. IUCN therefore calls on Parties to establish a legal framework that recognises these areas as contributing to biodiversity conservation, potentially as OECMs (see examples in [Jonas et al., 2024](#); [Mwamidi et al., 2018](#)).

- ✓ *Mobilise the Rangelands Flagship Initiative and support fit for purpose innovative financing mechanisms noting restoration can return up to \$35 for every \$1 invested.*

The [Rangelands Flagship Initiative](#) aims to significantly increase investments to conserve, sustainably manage, and restore rangelands in support of LDN, through integrated knowledge, investment, and institutional components. IUCN supports its full capitalisation and calls on Parties, multilateral development banks, and donors to make concrete financial commitments at COP17, including long-term investments to restore and sustainably manage rangelands, which can return up to \$35 for every \$1 invested ([Davies et al., 2025](#)). IUCN is also supportive of the Coalition of Rangeland States as a vehicle for regional and global collaboration.

In line with Resolution [8.009](#), IUCN calls on international environmental funds to improve access to funding for non-forest ecosystems within their respective mandates, including to consider additional financing options and modalities that reward sustainable pastoralism and community-led stewardship, including through sustainable value chains, incentives to maintain native vegetation, and high value outcomes, especially through direct-to-producer mechanisms ([WWF, 2025](#)).

3. Advance a proactive global drought process that integrates nature metrics, technology, and traditional knowledge (COP items 5 and 6b, CST item 3c)

- ✓ *Mandate a process to negotiate a global drought instrument for adoption at COP18.*

IUCN commends Parties on the progress made at COP16 towards a future global drought regime, and on the shared recognition of the need to transition to a proactive management approach. It further commends the Saudi COP16 Presidency for its efforts to advance the discussions on the structure and scope of the instrument through the *Tafa'ul Process*, and for its support for drought management more broadly through the [Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership](#).

In this context, IUCN urges Parties to use COP17 to finalise and adopt a decision to mandate an ad hoc open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group (IWG) to develop the instrument with a view towards its adoption at COP18. The instrument should embed proactive, risk-based drought management to deliver benefits to ecosystems and communities, and break from the reactive, crisis management approach that characterises the way that drought has historically been addressed.

- ✓ *Integrate biodiversity, water, soil, and climate metrics, and embed Nature-based Solutions in drought planning and response to address societal challenges.*

Healthy, biodiverse ecosystems, including rivers and wetlands, are among the most effective buffers against drought (Resolutions [8.018](#) and [8.023](#)). Noting the linkages to the implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the IWG should address this land-water nexus by incorporating cross-sectoral indicators that capture the interconnectedness of biodiversity loss, soil degradation, freshwater depletion, and climate change, prioritising ecosystem health and endemic species alongside hydrometeorological data. Parties should further adopt integrated landscape approaches and ensure that Nature-based Solutions and other ecosystem approaches are mainstreamed into national drought plans, consistent with the three pillars of integrated drought management ([Magero et al., 2024](#)).

- ✓ *Champion a whole-of-society approach that bridges new technologies, early warning systems, and Indigenous and traditional knowledge.*

The annex to decision [24/COP.16](#) encourages Parties to adopt whole-of-society approaches inclusive of Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. IUCN underscores that legitimate and effective drought governance rests on Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, complemented by cutting-edge tools such as AI-driven platforms including the International Drought Resilience Observatory. Further, Parties should ensure that the meaningful participation of women, youth, and local communities is structurally embedded in drought planning and implementation processes.

- ✓ *Foster water cooperation to ensure joint drought management actions at the transboundary and regional levels.*

The annex also highlights that the IWG may consider international cooperative measures. Given that water cooperation serves as a framework to align policies, laws, and agreements at the transboundary and regional levels to address drought and promote resilience, while promoting institutional coordination across sectors and governance levels ([Resolution 7.015](#)), IUCN invites Parties to request the IWG to consider transboundary cooperation as it advances the prospective instrument.

4. Commit to mitigating sand and dust storms at the source through ecosystem restoration and manage risks through a One Health approach (COP items 5 and 6b)

- ✓ *Increase investment in ecosystem restoration and landscape approaches.*

IUCN encourages Parties to integrate sand and dust storm source prevention explicitly into national LDN targets and financing frameworks, and to mobilise dedicated funding for ecosystem restoration and Nature-based Solutions in affected and source areas. Guided by its work on [The Restoration Initiative](#), the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

2021–2030, and its broader ecosystem restoration portfolio, IUCN has seen that a landscape approach, which considers ecological connections, socioeconomic factors, and stakeholder alignment, can be a key strategy for effective and durable interventions.

Decision [27/COP.16](#) highlighted the importance of addressing natural and anthropogenic sources in an integrated manner. Sustainable grazing management, water harvesting, vegetation recovery, and integrated landscape governance can do just that. IUCN calls on Parties to promote these approaches as core preventive measures within national and regional sand and dust storm action plans, alongside investments in early warning and community-level response systems.

Effective prevention and management of sand and dust storms require the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, pastoralists, farmers, women, and youth, whose knowledge and stewardship of drylands, rangelands, and fragile watersheds and agricultural systems are critical for sustainable land management and restoration. Parties should ensure that sand and dust storm strategies and investments are developed through inclusive and gender-responsive processes that recognise local knowledge systems and strengthen community ownership of solutions.

✓ *Integrate a One Health approach into sand and dust storm risk management.*

Sand and dust storms generate compounding impacts across human health, livestock productivity, wildlife, agricultural systems, transport infrastructure, and community well-being. IUCN urges Parties to integrate a One Health approach into UNCCD sand and dust storm policy and programming. In support of this, IUCN invites Parties to establish or strengthen interministerial coordination mechanisms for sand and dust storm management to promote research, monitoring, and policy development that reflect their interconnected ecosystem, animal, and human health dimensions (Resolution [8.098](#)).

5. Anchor farmers, soil health and security, and Nature-based Solutions for agriculture in LDN achievement (CST item 5)

✓ *Ensure meaningful inclusion of farmers in UNCCD decision-making processes.*

Family farmers and agricultural producers are on the front lines of land degradation and drought, managing a large share of the world's land, and producing 70–80% of its food ([Lowder et al., 2021](#)). Meanwhile, rangelands generate 16% of global food production and 70% of feed for domestic herbivores ([Herrera Calvo and Alexander, 2024](#)). Nevertheless, the voices of farmers, including smallholders and pastoralists, remain insufficiently represented in decision making that affects them.

Aligned with decision [19/COP.16](#), which recognised smallholders as key agents of change and the need to place them at the centre of decision-making and financing flows, IUCN invites Parties to strengthen structured engagement of farmers, including smallholders and pastoralists, within existing UNCCD stakeholder mechanisms, including the CSO Panel and relevant caucuses, in the short term, and to explore a dedicated coordination mechanism as a longer-term option to ensure land-use decisions are informed by those managing land daily and translated into concrete action.

✓ *Implement policies and practices that promote soil health and recognise soil security.*

Healthy soils, which are fundamental to ecosystem functioning, food security, nutrition, and resilience, are under threat. A recent assessment found that over 40% of soil-dependent species are at risk of extinction or data deficient on [The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™](#) ([Cox et al., 2026](#)). And yet, soils remain insufficiently reflected in legal and policy frameworks. IUCN therefore invites Parties to recognise and put in place policies, legislation, and land management practices that promote soil health and restore or promote soil biodiversity.

IUCN also encourages Parties to recognise the concept of soil security, linking the biophysical dimensions of capacity and condition of soil to social, economic, and legal frameworks. Soil security is integral to the right to a healthy environment, supporting sustainable ecosystems, food systems, human health, and non-toxic environments. In line with Resolution [8.007](#), IUCN is working on evaluating and developing concepts of national, regional, and international laws and policies and welcomes collaboration with all interested Parties in this endeavour.

Alongside policies, legislation, and land management practices, increasing public understanding of the value of healthy soils can support long-term stewardship. IUCN encourages Parties to include soil literacy as a pillar of biodiversity education, and to recognise nature-based education as an enabler of locally grounded implementation, knowledge integration, and long-term land stewardship.

✓ *Scale up Nature-based Solutions in agriculture as a solution to soil water conservation and soil and land degradation.*

Nature-based Solutions for agriculture, including agroecological and regenerative approaches, provide a proven, systemic and science-based pathway to address land degradation while strengthening resilience and ecosystem functions.

IUCN calls on Parties to scale up Nature-based Solutions in agriculture as key implementation tools to fulfil their LDN commitments, in line with decision [7/COP.16](#). This includes integrated landscape

approaches and ensuring long-term, predictable finance.

IUCN also stresses that secure land tenure and governance are essential enablers and calls for strengthening tenure frameworks in line with the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure. This is critical to incentivise long-term investments in soil restoration and support locally led approaches.

These approaches must be underpinned by robust, science- and evidence-based frameworks, in line with the [Regen10 Framework](#) and the Land Health Monitoring Framework ([Dussán López, 2023](#)). IUCN calls for the development and application of clear standards and metrics to ensure measurable outcomes for soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services.

✓ *Align financial flows to support farmers in the transition to sustainable agriculture.*

Transforming food and agricultural systems requires a fundamental shift in how financial flows support farmers. Current investments remain largely misaligned with land and soil restoration and sustainable agriculture objectives. This includes supporting farmers to transition, and recognising and financing farmers, pastoralists, and producer organisations that already practise sustainable agriculture, agroecology, and land stewardship, so they can sustain and scale existing initiatives.

IUCN calls for aligning financial flows to support farmers in the transition towards sustainable agriculture approaches. This includes repurposing agricultural support and subsidies towards practices that restore land and soils ([Vergez et al., 2025](#)); leveraging public procurement to create stable demand for sustainably produced food; and strengthening private sector commitments and investments, aligned with sustainability objectives.

6. Strengthen the structural participation of civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and women across UNCCD processes and LDN implementation (COP items 5 and 8a)

✓ *Strengthen inclusive participation and knowledge exchange of non-Parties.*

Land degradation cannot be reversed without the full and meaningful participation of those most affected by it. IUCN urges Parties to ensure that civil society organisations, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, pastoralists, farmers, women, and youth actively shape decisions, priorities, and investments across UNCCD processes and LDN implementation frameworks. This imperative is grounded in IUCN's institutional commitments, and the consistent decisions of its Members (Resolutions [7.118](#), [8.008](#), and [8.122](#)).

Through the GEF-funded [CS4LDN project](#), this approach is being put into practice by strengthening civil society organisations' capacity to influence

UNCCD processes, engage in national LDN implementation, contribute community-based evidence, and mobilise financing for locally grounded restoration initiatives.

IUCN welcomes the recognition, at COP16, of Indigenous Peoples' distinctive relationship with land through the *Sacred Lands Indigenous Peoples Declaration* ([ICCD/COP\(16\)/24](#)), and applauds the progress made towards operationalising the Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities Caucuses. IUCN urges Parties to ensure both Caucuses are adequately resourced, that their inputs are reflected in negotiated outcomes, and that Indigenous Peoples' rights over ancestral lands and territories are respected in LDN-related policies and finance mechanisms.

A procedural barrier to meaningful civil society engagement in the UNCCD remains the exclusion of civil society organisations from contact groups, where much of the substantive negotiations take place. IUCN encourages Parties to clarify that accredited civil society organisations, or at least those representing UNCCD stakeholder mechanisms, may attend contact groups as observers, in alignment with UNFCCC and CBD practices. This would bring UNCCD procedural norms into line with the practices of other multilateral environmental agreements and strengthen civil society's ability to contribute to and hold accountable the negotiation process.

✓ *Adopt gender-responsive approaches to LDN, drought resilience, and land management.*

The impact of land degradation is disproportionately borne by women, whose tenure is directly at stake. IUCN urges Parties to adopt gender-responsive LDN approaches in line with the *Abidjan Declaration on Achieving Gender Equality for Successful Land Restoration* ([ICCD/COP\(15\)/23](#)), ensuring equal access to land, resources and decision-making for women and girls, including through support for women-led restoration initiatives.

✓ *Align finance with national priorities and improve direct access for local stakeholders.*

IUCN calls on Parties to take steps to align private and finance sector engagement with LDN with nationally defined priorities, such that it respects land tenure and community governance rights (Resolution [8.079](#)).

Further, IUCN encourages Parties to ensure significantly increased, and directly accessible, climate funding to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including smallholder farmers, noting their vital role as custodians and stewards of the world's most intact ecosystems. To that end, IUCN invites Parties to support the [Podong Indigenous Peoples Initiative](#) and the [Forest and Farm Facility](#) as concrete direct access vehicles for climate and nature finance.