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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	AOB for the meeting of the Council (Environment) on 17 December 2024 16th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 16) (2-13 December 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia) - Information from the Presidency and the Commission

Delegations will find for information a note on the outcomes of the above meeting.

**16th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification
(UNCCD COP 16) (2-13 December 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)**

- Information from the Presidency and the Commission

The 16th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) took place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from 2 to 13 December 2024, together with the 22th session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 22) and the 16th session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST 16).

The COP16 highlighted its mission with the motto: "Our Land. Our Future." Coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the UNCCD, COP16 was the largest UN land conference to date. COP16 was convened with the aim to renew global commitment to accelerate investment and action to restore land and boost drought resilience for the benefit of people and planet. This resolve was driven by alarming evidence of increasing land degradation and its severe social and economic impacts.

For the first time in the history of UNCCD, COP16 has introduced a dual approach with a Negotiation Track and an Action Agenda, both interlinked to achieve bold outcomes in formal negotiations and facilitate the implementation of COP decisions. Negotiation Track focused on critical COP decisions and political declarations essential for advancing global land and drought resilience. Action Agenda highlighted voluntary commitments and actions on land, resilience and people across the thematic days during COP16.

Over 20,000 participants were registered for the event, including government officials from 174 countries, as well as representatives from 37 UN agencies and international organizations, 62 intergovernmental organizations, and 205 non-governmental organizations. Indigenous Peoples, local community organizations, scientific institutions, business representatives and Youth also participated. Most of the EU Member States were represented, as well as the European Commission. The delegates from the Member States provided effective professional support, helping the Presidency in its work during and facilitation of negotiations, ensuring the successful representation of the EU's objectives.

The high-level segment of the COP16 took place on 2 and 3 December, with the participation of 141 ministers and vice ministers. Ministerial dialogues were held on three topics: drought resilience, finance and migration. The European Commission and the President of the Council of the European Union were represented at a high level by Ms. Jessika Roswall, Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy and Ms. Florika Fink-Hooijer, Director-General of the Environment Department of the European Commission, and by Dr. Oszkár Ökrös, Deputy State Secretary of International Affairs of the Ministry of Agriculture. During the concluding segment of the high-level dialogue it was announced that the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership has already pledged over 3 billion USD.

Prior to the COP16 official agenda regional preparatory meetings were taken place, with Hungary chairing the Northern Mediterranean region's meetings.

Work of the subsidiary bodies of the Convention:

1. Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC)

The CRIC adopted decisions in the following key topics: collaboration with the Global Environment Facility; assessment of financial flows; progress made in the mobilization of resources for the implementation of the Convention and Sustainable Development Goal 15.3 matters; improving the procedures for the communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the COP; assessment of implementation of the Convention against strategic objectives 1–4 of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the UNCCD, promotion of capacity-building to further the implementation of the Convention; review of the Implementation of the Convention date, venue and programme of work for the twenty-third session of the CRIC.

The EU reinforced the need to engage technical partners, strengthen monitoring and reporting mechanisms, including gender-responsive indicators, and making financial flows visible. The Global Mechanism (GM) was invited to provide the sources and methodology for domestic and private sector flows. Strengthening of the GM should be done with voluntary funds and noted the potential for national financing strategies on land-related objectives to develop and expand work with international development banks and financial institutions. The EU highlighted the need to phase out and repurpose environmentally harmful subsidies.

2. Committee on Science and Technology (CST)

The most important decision was establish the SPI as a permanent body of the Convention The following items were also agreed at the CST: Science-policy recommendations on aridity trends, projections and impacts; Science-policy recommendations emanating from the SPI (Science-Policy Interface) analysis of the IPCC on 6th Assessment Report; science-policy recommendations on Sustainable Land Use Systems, knowledge sharing, technology transfer and innovation; the work programme of the SPI for the biennium 2025-2026 and programme of work for the 17th session of the CST.

The decision titled Avoiding, reducing and reversing land and soil degradation of agricultural land (proposed by the U.S.) marks the first time when a UNCCD decision made on agricultural lands.

The COP established the "Committee of the Whole" (COW) to which it allocated all general agenda items. The Italian Science and Technology Correspondent was elected to the chair of the COW. The COW dealt with the items related to the followings: the mid-term evaluation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the Convention, strengthening synergies, policy frameworks and thematic issues: drought, sand and dust storms, migration, gender, land tenure and new and emerging issues such as grassland, rangeland and pastoralism and the Convention's budget..

The most intense debate concentrated around the topic of drought. After lengthy negotiations Parties could not reach consensus on the nature and name of the instrument for proactive drought management. The decision adopted reflects the progress made during COP16 with a view to continue discussions at COP17.

Negotiations around the programme and budget became particularly challenging with heated debates. Parties agreed on 8% increase of the core budget of the UNCCD for the next biennium. This result ensures the operation of the UNCCD only for the biennium 2025-2026, and hence cannot be considered as sustainable in the medium or long term.

Overall, there was broad support for synergies, where the EU and its MS had an active role in enhancing collaboration between the three major environmental conventions (the "Rio Trio") to better support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. After lengthy discussions, parties agreed to encourage the integration of secure land tenure in line with the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. The EU expressed appreciation for the Business for Land Initiative,

noting the emergence of a vibrant land restoration industry. Advancing engagement with the private sector should include strengthening the business case for UNCCD initiatives and its attractiveness to the private sector, and encouraging business and industry to become involved in the meetings and processes of the UNCCD.

Throughout the negotiations, the EU and its Member States consistently aimed to include references to vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and displaced persons. New text was introduced on women's access to land and natural resources and also on those in vulnerable situations, and in relation to halting biodiversity loss and achieving land restoration targets. The EU and its MS emphasized their commitment to sustainable land use and nature-based solutions, which support green recovery and bring social and economic benefits. Regarding drought management, the EU and its MS focused on addressing systemic causes, developing early warning systems, and enhancing the resilience of communities and ecosystems. Additionally, the EU and its MS reaffirmed their dedication to promoting gender equality, measures to address the main drivers of migration and forced displacement, and secure land tenure. The EU and its MS expressed its willingness to cooperate with global partners to support the most affected communities. Discussions on the involvement of Civil Society Organisations in the decision making process of UNCCD did not yield the results sought by the EU. Issues like transparency and democratic accountability proved difficult in negotiations and finally it was agreed to move the discussion to the next COP, supported by an assessment by the Secretariat on the current involvement of CSOs in MEA and UN bodies at large.

At the initiative of Saudi Arabia as the host country, the Riyadh Political Declaration was adopted at the end of the conference. The declaration aims to restore 1.5 billion hectares of degraded land by 2030. The declaration outlines several other key measures in the field of land degradation, ecosystem restoration and droughts.

The 17th session of the COP will be hosted by Mongolia, which has preliminarily indicated that gender equality will be their priority. A decision has been made to hold CRIC23 in Panama in 2025 Q4. Germany's membership in the COP Bureau and France's role as President of the CRIC for the next biennium will allow the EU to continue representing its interests in the work of the UNCCD.