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Contribution to the 2020 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Submission of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

1. From the UNCCD perspective, what are the critical gaps in implementation and the priority measures to accelerate action and support transformative pathways for achieving the 2030 Agenda

With only 10 years left to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the decisions and investments made today will determine the quality of Life on Land (SDG15) tomorrow. We have the knowledge and technology to shape a prosperous and more secure future based on rights, rewards and above all a sense of responsibility to future generation for the protection of our land resources, i.e., soil, water and biodiversity. The critical gap remains the political support for restorative action in both the public and private sectors. Without this support and new business models, investments, incentives and other enabling factors for sustainable land management and restoration will be inadequate to stimulate action on the ground at the scale required.

Several gaps need to be filled at the same time. All stakeholders need to be engaged to act with the appropriate urgency. Transformation will only take place in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including business leaders, sub-national actors, indigenous peoples, youth, women and other segments of civil society. Innovative partnerships among these diverse stakeholders will be essential to creating sustained action pathways for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Access to financial and land resources, often hindered by poor land governance and gender inequality, are critical for these pathways to function effectively.

In September 2019 in New Delhi, India, the 14th meeting of the UNCCD's Conference of the Parties (COP 14) agreed on 36 decisions to scale up and accelerate action on the ground to ensure that the Convention's goals in the framework of its 2018-2030 Strategic Framework are achieved. Implementing these decisions is challenging but also represents a tremendous opportunity for countries to create their own pathways for achieving the SDG targets. These decisions fully recognize that improving the health and productivity of our land resources and achieving Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN - SDG target 15.3) can act as an accelerator for progress to many of the other SDGs as well as play an integrative role in national development finance and planning.

At COP 14, countries agreed to address the insecurity of land tenure, including gender inequality, promote land restoration to reduce carbon emissions, and mobilize innovative sources of finance from public and private sources to support the implementation of these decisions at the country level. Reporting on these activities will be improved to ensure it captures key issues related to land health, such as gender responsiveness, drought preparedness and planning, and the impacts of consumption and production patterns and flows. Through the Delhi Declaration, ministers expressed support for new initiatives and coalitions aiming to improve human health and well-being, the functioning of ecosystems, and to advance peace and security through sustainable land management and restoration.

In terms of resource mobilization, while traditional partners, donors and funds still have an important role to play, the private sector (including foundations) can play an important and constructive role in financing a paradigm shift in the way land resources are managed. The private



sector is a key stakeholder in bringing coherence to efforts that address the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss, land degradation and climate change, especially if these issues are mainstreamed effectively into value chains. There is an urgent need for the private sector to be transformative partners in implementing the SDGs.

2. Contribution of the UNCCD to accelerated action and transformative pathways and realizing the decade of action and delivery for achieving the 2030 Agenda

Here is a sample of the UNCCD secretariat's efforts to support countries in promoting accelerated action and developing transformative pathways in accordance with their national circumstances.

Land Degradation Neutrality (SDG target 15.3)

As a globally agreed target, the LDN target is being used to galvanize action to address land degradation in terrestrial ecosystems across entire landscapes and create multiple direct and indirect co-benefits contributing to the other SDGs. In this context, the LDN Target Setting Programme (TSP) continues to support country Parties in defining their LDN vision in a relevant, time- and cost-efficient manner. The UNCCD's collaboration with 18 institutional, technical and financial partners facilitates the delivery of this programme at the country level. To date, 123 countries have engaged in setting their voluntary LDN targets, with a total of 90 having already successfully completed this process and 60 having adopted their LDN targets at a high political level.

In 2019, the LDN TSP was awarded the IUCN Impact Award, recognizing: (i) the ambitious vision of the participating countries and the collaborative efforts to foster stronger international engagement and commitment for achieving this vision; (ii) the number and the spectrum of countries, institutions and partner agencies actively involved in LDN target setting; (iii) the high-level political commitment and momentum created, which has helped to bring LDN into the mainstream sustainable development agenda; and (iv) the critical foundation that the LDN TSP created for achieving target 15.3 of the SDGs and developing operational synergies with related SDGs, Rio Conventions and other initiatives both globally and nationally.

As a next step, 73 countries have already mapped ideas for transformative LDN projects and programmes in line with broader SDG implementation efforts. An LDN implementation support programme has been established to support action at country level, including assistance in the development of transformative LDN projects and programmes. Creating and strengthening synergies among the three Rio Conventions and other relevant agreements will lower the transaction cost while simultaneously supporting results-based land management and restoration practices on the ground.

Drought Initiative

Reducing the vulnerability of ecosystems and livelihoods to drought is one of the core mandates of the UNCCD. This was reinforced in the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework with countries striving to "mitigate, adapt to, and manage the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems". The UNCCD's focus on proactive drought risk management features 'prevention' and 'preparedness' rather than 'recovery' measures.

As part of the UNCCD Drought Initiative adopted at COP 13, the secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM) of the UNCCD are building national capacity by supporting the development and



further strengthening of National Drought Plans. To date, 73 countries are engaged in preparing national drought plans based on three pillars of implementation: (i) drought monitoring and early warning systems, (ii) vulnerability and risk assessment, and (iii) drought risk mitigation measures. To date, 33 countries have completed their plans. A vital component of the Drought Initiative is the drought toolbox and associated trainings on the three pillars mentioned above. Launched at COP 14, it will help countries to take the first steps in the implementation of their national drought plans by providing access to context-specific technical and policy options with the aim of boosting the resilience of people and ecosystems.

Finally, COP 14 established an intergovernmental working group (IWG) on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought under the UNCCD, with a view to presenting its findings and recommendations to COP 15. The IWG will consider options for appropriate policy, advocacy and implementation measures at all levels for addressing drought effectively under the Convention and to carry out the task in the context of a wider holistic and integrated approach to disaster risk reduction and enhancing resilience.

The Great Green Wall Initiative

The UNCCD supports the Great Green Wall Initiative: an African-led movement with an epic ambition to grow an 8,000km natural wonder of the world across the width of Africa. By 2030, the Great Green Wall aims to restore 100 million hectares of land, sequester 250 million tons of carbon and create 10 million jobs in rural areas. The Great Green Wall strikes right at the heart of the fight against poverty and contributes directly to 15 of the 17 SDGs. With the aim to secure investments from private and public actors, the GM of the UNCCD has supported the initiative through three main pillars: (i) pilot projects (ii) impact assessment, and (iii) public awareness campaign.

- (i) With financing from the European Commission, Italy and Turkey, the GM has supported 'proofing of concepts' through pilot projects in six countries - strengthening the capacities of local communities to help boost investments in land restoration and creating employment opportunities or green jobs. Micro-investment projects in six countries are being driven by local people to strengthen community resilience to land degradation, drought and climate variability. This involves supporting the development of sustainable value chains and working with the private sector who guarantee the purchase of dryland products in the Sahel, which has led to the creation of land-based jobs for thousands of rural women. These projects are complemented by regional-level activities on capacity building and the dissemination of good practices on sustainable land management and innovative financing.
- (ii) With financing from Ireland, the GM is leading the elaboration of a "State of the Great Green Wall" Landmark Report, which will provide a big picture overview and authoritative analysis to assess the state of the Great Green Wall, a decade after it was launched. Following the launch of the report in April 2020, the assessment will serve as a baseline for the design of a portfolio of transformative projects and programmes along the Great Green Wall for future donor funding.
- (iii) The UNCCD has launched a public awareness campaign on the Great Green Wall, called "Growing a World Wonder". The campaign aims to boost global awareness of the initiative in public spheres and policy debates as well as media and cultural sectors with a clear view towards inspiring long-term public and private investment in the initiative. The campaign aims to inspire a global popular movement to deliver this African-led dream by 2030. It focuses on the core narrative that the Great Green Wall is an urgent symbol of hope in the face of the greatest challenges faced by mankind this century, from climate change to food



security, migration and resource-driven conflict. It is a compelling example of humans and nature working together to create a unique legacy – a new world wonder for the next generation. The campaign has already reached millions of people through mass media outreach, virtual reality, high-level events and civil society involvement. Among the future highlights is the release of the Great Green Wall documentary produced in collaboration with an Oscar nominated filmmaker Fernando Meirelles and Malian singer Inna Modja.

Sustainability, Stability and Security Initiative

The UNCCD is entrusted as the secretariat of the Initiative on Sustainability, Stability and Security (3S), an African-led Initiative with 14 countries from the continent: Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Under the leadership of Morocco and Senegal significant preparatory work has been undertaken by African governments including the development of coordination frameworks, national roadmaps and proof-of-concept projects.

The 3S Initiative aims to restore 10 million hectares of degraded land and safeguard or create 2 million rural jobs in climate-stressed areas of Africa. It will generate new economic opportunities and secure the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, including women and youth who may otherwise be compelled to migrate away by climate change and land degradation. The Initiative will be implemented through a multi-donor trust fund to be established at one of the multilateral development banks. UNCCD is coordinating the launch of the Fund based on a development partnership involving African countries, ODA donors and multilateral lenders. In response to a COP 14 request to the secretariat, talks are now underway with implementing partners to scale up the 3S Initiative in Central America and Central Asia.

Sand and Dust Storms

Sand and Dust Storms (SDS) have multiple impacts on human health, environment and society. It is a critical challenge to achieving SDGs and targets on health, water, food, clean air, disaster risk, resilience, habitat and land degradation. Impact mitigation of SDS can be achieved through a proactive and precautionary approach, including policy development and implementation, such as early warning, resilience and preparedness measures, and the mitigation of new SDS sources.

The UNCCD plays a key role in the consortium of UN agencies and international organizations that are advancing global policy and action for the mitigation of SDS impacts. Decisions at COP 14 requested actions to mitigate anthropogenic source in the context of LDN targets. In response, the UNCCD developed the Policy Advocacy Framework for SDS in collaboration with UNEP, WMO and others as well as an “SDS Compendium: Information and Guidance on Assessing and Addressing the Risks Posed by SDS” which includes a SDS Source Base-map. An SDS Toolbox is currently under development and several pilot projects are now being undertaken in Central Asia to build national capacities for addressing SDS sources and impacts.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender equality and women’s empowerment is recognized as a cross-cutting priority in all aspects of UNCCD’s work. The UNCCD Gender Action Plan (GAP) set an ambitious gender equality agenda that accompanies the gender-responsive implementation of the Convention. The GAP consists of four priority areas with clear goals for country Parties in the implementation of the Convention, namely



(i) gender responsive participation in decisions taken during the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of initiatives; (ii) integrating women's economic empowerment in order to eradicate their extreme poverty; (iii) strengthening women's land rights and access to resources; and (iv) enhancing women's access to improved knowledge and technologies. All four priority areas are connected to specific SDG goals, targets and indicators.

To support parties in implementing the GAP, the secretariat and GM of the UNCCD, together with UN Women and the IUCN, are providing technical advice and policy guidance on integrating gender issues into LDN targets and the Drought Initiative. Most UNCCD national focal points, including civil society organizations and women's groups, have already received training and capacity building on how to integrate gender into their LDN, drought, and SDS-related projects and/or policies.

Monitoring and Reporting using Earth Observations

The UNCCD's 2017-2018 reporting exercise led to the first-ever country-generated global reporting on land degradation and an estimate that twenty per cent of the Earth's total land area was degraded between 2000 and 2015. On account of the high reporting rate, SDG indicator 15.3.1 "proportion of land that is degraded over total land area" achieved Tier One status in the SDG indicator framework in October 2019.

This result could not have been achieved without the collaboration of numerous technical partners that provided data and helped develop guidance documents and tools to enable broader access to Earth observation (EO) data and its utilization for SDG and UNCCD monitoring and reporting. The Good Practice Guidance for SDG Indicator 15.3.1 produced by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Trends.Earth platform developed by Conservation International both won the Group on Earth Observations (GEO) SDG Award at GEO Week in Canberra, Australia in November 2019.

Communications

During its 25th anniversary, the UNCCD highlighted its positive impact on land, people, communities and society in various ways. The World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (WDCD) in 2019 celebrated the 25 years of progress made by countries in sustainable land management under the slogan, "Let's grow the future together." The 2019 Land for Life Award was organized under the theme "Decades of Impact," which highlighted outstanding projects implementing best practices over the last 25 years. The first Land for Life Award went to the MERET project of the Ministry of Agriculture of Ethiopia, which was created to respond to the food crises in the 1970's. Since then, it has enabled the restoration of more than 2.5 million hectares of degraded watersheds in more than 72 districts, reducing food shortages by 50% and lifting millions of people out of poverty.

The UNCCD Executive Secretary named six Land Ambassadors in 2019 who now support delivering the vision to achieve LDN and beyond to avoid further degradation while recovering degraded land and building on the global momentum for change and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The "Land Anthem" composed by one of the Land Ambassadors Rickey Kej, was first introduced during at COP 14 and since then, its music video has been viewed over 360,000 people.

The Global Land Outlook, the UNCCD's flagship publication, produced 4 regional thematic reports in 2019 to highlight the efforts to combat desertification, land degradation and drought at the regional and national levels. One of the reports on "Partnerships to Achieve Land Degradation Neutrality"



looks at the Northeast Asia sub-region and demonstrates how collaborations are effectively addressing the challenges of environmental pollution, transboundary sand and dust storms, agricultural expansion, deforestation, and overgrazing that are being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

Finally, to stimulate global participation in UNCCD capacity building activities, the secretariat undertook a massive outreach programme targeting schools, universities, other learning institutions, civil society and the public at large. This programme involved inter alia lectures, expositions and exhibitions as well as photo, essay and video competitions. The secretariat uses e-learning as a major tool of and for capacity-building: in 2019, there were six new e-learning courses to further facilitate the capacity building process as well as an exclusive e-learning platform which offers training courses on land and sustainable development hosted by the UNCCD and other UN agencies.

3. Selected recommendations for accelerating progress and moving on transformative pathways for realizing the decade of action, for possible use in drafting the HLPF declaration.

a. Women are strategic agents of change and play a central role in the protection and restoration of land resources in order to provide for household needs, including food, water and energy. Secure land and property rights are a critical factor for women's empowerment that will help combat desertification, land degradation and drought. Yet most women neither own nor have control over these land resources; globally, less than 20% of land holders are women and only 13% of the land users who make the major decisions on agricultural land are women. Member States are thus encouraged to ramp up their efforts to address the absence of clear laws to address fairness in land ownership which directly affects women's economic and social opportunities. This includes the norms and practices that, in effect, exclude women from owning, inheriting and controlling land which make women dependent on men and highly vulnerable to their demands.

b. The multi-dimensional scale and aspects of land use and management call for more coordination and better cooperation in planning and decision-making. Government agencies need to work together with a common vision promoting multi-functional landscapes, especially those responsible for agriculture, livestock, forestry, land and water resources, environment, science and technology, finance, planning, legislation and tourism. This vision needs to be mainstreamed within national budgets, poverty reduction, rural development and internal migration strategies as well as development plans and frameworks. Member States are thus encouraged to develop spatial planning solutions to encourage multi-sector collaboration, more equitable benefit sharing in rural areas, and foster healthy rural-urban dynamics. Long-term spatial planning, which must address the perverse incentives that harm local communities and their land resources, would help to reduce a growing population's impact on land resources and the associated social and economic costs.

c. Investing in Earth observations (EO) data for SDG indicator reporting, by developing data quality standards to ensure consistency, coherence and comparability of data sets supplied by various data providers, supporting the development of open-source data analytics platforms to easily access, process and analyse large EO datasets, and strengthening country capacities to integrate EO into national monitoring frameworks, through initiatives, such as the Land Degradation Neutrality Initiative of the Group on Earth Observation (GEO LDN), would allow countries to provide high-quality, timely, reliable, disaggregated and harmonized data for SDG reporting. Member States are thus encouraged, where appropriate, to consider EO data and tools to provide more accurate land health assessments and better inform decision-makers at all levels for prioritizing sustainable land management and restoration projects and programmes.