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Strategy for Engagement with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) by the EMG Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment

Desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) forms one of the greatest environmental challenges today, posing a major impediment to meeting basic human rights. The rights to food and water are especially at risk through loss of agricultural productivity and reduced water quantity and quality. DLDD is also having profound impacts on the rights to life, health, an adequate standard of living, development, and culture, among others. Unsustainable consumption and production in developed countries is a major cause of environmental degradation, while the most impacted are the poorest people in the poorest countries, deepening existing inequities. In the lead-up to the fifteenth meeting of the UNCCD’s Conference of the Parties (COP15) the EMG IMG on human rights and the environment and its members have agreed to work together to advocate for human rights-based action on DLDD within the framework of the UNCCD. This document includes strategic priorities, key resources, and potential joint activities in this regard.

The UN Human Rights Council has recently recognised the Right to A Clean, Healthy and Sustainable environment and the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment has identified healthy and sustainable food as a substantive element of this right, highlighting how DLDD impacts on it.¹ The UN Human Rights Council has also acknowledged the importance of engaging with efforts to implement multilateral environmental agreements, including the UNCCD, in advancing the protection of human rights.² As noted by the Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, land degradation undermines the ability of people to enjoy their human rights. The UN Secretary General’s Call to Action for Human Rights (Call to Action) urges strengthening of the synergies between human rights and all pillars of the work of the United Nations and highlights the needs for states to take urgent steps to prevent environmental degradation. The UN System Chief Executives Board’s Call to Action on building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future with indigenous peoples affirms the Executive Heads’ commitment to supporting Member States in the promotion, protection and realisation of the rights of indigenous peoples, including with respect to their traditional lands and territories.

The IMG will advocate for a rights-based approach that brings together the strength of international human rights and environmental law to better protect people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by DLDD. Under a rights-based approach, states are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights put at risk by DLDD. Further, all DLDD action must be informed by the principles of participation, access to information, transparency, non-discrimination, equality and equity amongst peoples and nations. Ensuring accountability and redress for abuse and violations is also a key component of such an

¹ <https://undocs.org/a/hrc/48/l.23/rev.1>
<http://srenvironment.org/sites/default/files/Reports/2021/Food%2C%20Environment%20and%20human%20rights%20A:76:179.pdf>

² A/HRC/46/L.6/Rev.1

approach, as is the duty of international cooperation to respect human rights, in order to combat DLDD. The IMG will develop a joint public briefing note on priorities for rights-based action on DLDD at COP15 and will coordinate to effectively integrate human rights in joint UN system activities, including through a joint UN system side event. It will promote policy coherence and peer learning, while exploring possibilities for engagement with UNCCD processes.

The IMG will focus on the following interlinked strategic priorities:

1. Land Tenure and Vulnerable Populations
2. Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
3. Gender Equality
4. Youth
5. Displacement and Migration

Potential Activities

- Develop a joint public briefing note on the integration of human rights into the activities of the UNCCD.
- Coordinate opportunities for joint advocacy to promote human rights within the UNCCD framework, including through a side event at COP15.
- Consider longer term goals for work in this area, including through exploring synergies with the work of the other Rio Conventions (see 'Strategic Opportunities beyond COP15' section below).

Key resources relevant for the whole strategy

- OHCHR, [Human Rights and Desertification \(2008\)](#)
- OHCHR, [The Slow Onset Effects of Climate Change and Human Rights Protection for Cross-Border Migrants \(2018\)](#)
- [UN Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights \(2020\)](#)
- Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment \(2017\)](#)
- Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, [Human Rights Obligations Relating to the Enjoyment of a Safe, Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment \(2020\)](#)
- IPCC, Desertification in [Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems \(2019\)](#)
- <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/28>
- UNECE, Aarhus Convention, [Maastricht Recommendations on Public Participation in Decision-making \(2015\)](#),
- UNECE, Aarhus Convention, [Almaty Guidelines on Promoting the Application of the Principles of the Aarhus Convention in International Forums \(2005\)](#)
- UNECE, Aarhus Convention, [Rapid Response Mechanism for the protection of environmental defenders](#)

- UNECE, Quick Guide to the Aarhus Convention: Protecting your environment, the power is in your hands (2014), available [here](#)
- UNECE, Aarhus Convention and the Protocol on PRTRs, [Geneva Declaration on Environmental Democracy for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Development](#) (2022)

1. Land Tenure

An estimated 2.5 billion rural people derive their livelihoods from agriculture and natural resources. Those without secure land access and tenure rights face greater risks of food insecurity, conflict and poverty, as well as increased barriers to the adoption of sustainable land management practices, which may force them to resort to unsustainable practices or migrate in times of distress. The access, use, and control of land also affects the enjoyment of many human rights including the rights to life, property, food, livelihood, adequate housing, water and sanitation, freedom of movement and residence, as well as the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional lands, territories and resources. The groups most affected by DLDD include those in vulnerable situations and/or dependent on nature for their livelihoods, including many women, youth, indigenous peoples, and local communities. DLDD exacerbates existing societal inequalities and forms of discrimination, leading to a higher risk of human rights harms particularly for people already in vulnerable situations. Conversely, strengthening equal access to land and land tenure security through prioritising action to support these groups in particular can improve food security and nutrition, poverty reduction and gender equality. Moreover, it can provide predictable sources of income, preventing forced migration and resource conflicts. As a result, the IMG will advocate for a rights-based approach to access to land and land tenure security through prioritising action to support the groups most vulnerable to DLDD.

UNCCD decision 26/COP.14 encourages parties to follow the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Tenure of Land, recognising customary land rights and the equal use and ownership of land for women. In this it emphasises the importance of rights of participation and access to justice, as well as fair and effective community-based conservation measures. The UNCCD has also recommended that drought vulnerability assessments should include the engagement of the most vulnerable groups. Additionally, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment has noted that a rights-based approach includes recognizing different customs and ownership models, such as collective ownership. In view of this, the IMG will support a rights-based approach to land access and land tenure within the UNCCD as set out below.

Potential Activity

- Develop 2-3 common talking points on land rights to include in joint public briefing note to be prepared by the IMG.

Key Resources

OHCHR, [Land and Human Rights](#)
 OHCHR, [Land and Human Rights, Standards and Applications](#) (2019)
 UNCCD, [Decision 26/COP.14](#) (2019)

UNCCD, [Drought Impact and Vulnerability Assessment: A Rapid Review of Practices and Policy Recommendations](#) (2019)

“Human Rights Depend on a Healthy Biosphere” A/75/ 161 para 72

<http://www.srenvironment.org/report/human-rights-depend-on-a-healthy-biosphere>

2. Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Indigenous peoples and local communities can contribute significantly to sustainable land management including through their traditional knowledge and sustainable customary land and resource use. Despite constituting only 5% of the global population, indigenous peoples’ traditional lands, resources and territories cover 22% of the Earth’s surface and 80% of its biodiversity. The combined use of traditional knowledge and new Sustainable Land Management can also contribute significantly to enhancing resilience to the challenges of desertification and climate change. However, in many countries, the land rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities are either insufficiently recognised, or not at all and barriers to land titling still exist. This in turn threatens their cultural rights and their ability to bestow traditional knowledge. The COVID 19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges faced by indigenous peoples in realizing their human rights, including land rights.³

The UNCCD has highlighted the centrality of the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in protecting intact landscapes and the importance of planning, engagement and safeguards for their rights. Its knowledge hub aims to share information and best practices to prevent DLDD, including traditional knowledge. The period 2022-2032 has been designated as the international decade of indigenous languages (coordinated by UNESCO), which are a key medium for the maintenance of indigenous knowledge, providing opportunities to consider cross-organisational linkages in this area. On this basis, the IMG will promote the meaningful and effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities within UNCCD processes, including in efforts to prevent DLDD. It will also highlight and seek to build upon linkages between the work of the UNCCD and other Rio Conventions in promoting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.

Potential Activities

- Support increased opportunities for indigenous peoples and local communities to engage with UNCCD processes, including through relevant COP decisions such as those related to civil society participation and land tenure.
- Explore specific opportunities for engagement in this area with UNCCD Secretariat.
- Develop 2-3 common talking points on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities to include in joint public briefing note on HRBA to be prepared by the IMG.

³Report of the UN High Commissioner on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including land rights (May ’20-’21)
<https://undocs.org/en/a/hrc/48/30>

Key Resources

UNCCD, [Indigenous Peoples Dialogue on Climate Change, Biodiversity, and Desertification](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/607649/report-indigenous-peoples-dialogue-on-climate-change-english.pdf) (2020)
<https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/607649/report-indigenous-peoples-dialogue-on-climate-change-english.pdf>

[Forest brochure - web.pdf \(unccd.int\)](https://www.unccd.int/forests/brochures)

UNCCD COP Decisions on traditional knowledge: [Decision 20/COP.12](#) (2015), [Decision 24/COP.11](#) (2013), [Decision 21/COP.10](#) (2011), [Decision 16/COP.7](#) (2005), [Decision 16/COP.6](#) (2003), [Decision 12/COP.5](#) (2001), [Decision 12/COP.4](#) (2000), [Decision 12/COP.3](#) (1999), [Decision 14/COP.2](#) (1998), [Decision 20/COP.1](#) (1997)

Report of the UN High Commissioner on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including land rights (May '20-'21) <https://undocs.org/en/a/hrc/48/30>

Human Rights Council Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, October 2021

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/48/11>

[About the Knowledge Hub | Knowledge Hub \(unccd.int\)](https://www.unccd.int/forests/knowledge-hub)

3. Gender Equality

The IPCC has noted that women will be more impacted by environmental degradation, including desertification, than men, particularly in areas where there is greater dependence on agricultural livelihoods. Conversely, it found that empowering women increases adaptation capacity. Women's heightened risks from the negative impacts of DLDD stem from the fact that they are often socio-economically marginalized and dependent on natural resources, alongside facing unequal access to decent employment. Despite the guarantee of equal rights to land and property in human rights law, women tend to have less access to rights and resources over the land. Gender inequalities, combined with other intersecting forms of discrimination, also lead to barriers to their participation in policymaking processes and exclusion from sustainable land management measures. This can leave women acutely vulnerable to human rights violations in times of environmental stress, particularly where their mobility is limited. At the same time, women play critical roles in the agricultural value chain, including in food-related matters. They also enhance resilience to DLDD through the contribution of effective agroecological approaches to water management, land conservation, and land rehabilitation.

Realising women's land rights is an integral part of the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. A number of UNCCD decisions, as well as its Gender Action Plan, acknowledge the importance of empowering women and girls, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, as well as the need for cross-institutional work to achieve this. Through the activities set out below, the IMG will support a rights-based, gender-responsive approach to DLDD within the UNCCD framework. This includes identifying and reflecting the diverse experiences of women in land use and management and supporting their participation in relevant decision-making processes, as well as changes to laws and social norms which limit women's land rights. In doing so the IMG will highlight that women's rights and gender equality enhance the success of DLDD action outcomes.

Potential Activities

- Through discussions with the UNCCD Secretariat, explore modalities for engagement with the Gender Caucus at COP15 with particular regard to the sessions on "The Gender Caucus: role and way forward" and "Open discussion on gender within the COP documents."

- Develop 2-3 common talking points on gender and women's empowerment to include in joint public briefing note to be prepared by the IMG.

Key Resources

OHCHR, UNEP and UN Women [Key Messages on human rights, the environment, and gender equality](#) (2021)

OHCHR and UN Women, [Realizing Women's Right to Land and Other Productive Resources](#) (2020)

UN Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination Against Women, [Insecure Land Rights for Women: a Threat to Progress on Gender Equality and Sustainable Development](#)

UN Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination Against Women, [Position Paper](#) (2017)

UN Commission on Human Rights Resolutions: [Resolution 2000/13](#), [Resolution 2002/49](#), [Resolution 2003/22](#), [Resolution 2005/25](#)

[CEDAW General Recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women](#)

UN Commission on the Status of Women, [Resolution 42/1](#) (1998)

UNCCD Decisions: [Decision 24/COP.14](#) (2019), [Decision 30/COP.13](#) (2017)

UNEA, [Resolution 4/17 Promoting Gender Equality and the Human Rights and Empowerment of Women and Girls in Environmental Governance](#) (2019)

UNCCD, [Gender Action Plan](#) (2018)

UN Women, [Towards a Gender-Responsive Implementation of the UNCCD \(2018\)](#)

IPCC, Desertification in Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems (2019)

pp251,257,286

CSW66 Agreed Conclusions, [Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes](#)

4. Children, Youth and Future Generations

Children have clearly defined rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the rights to life, health, development, an adequate standard of living, non-discrimination and rights of participation, alongside a requirement that the best interests of children must be a primary requirement in decision-making. Further, intergenerational equity has long been recognized as a fundamental principle of international environmental law and sustainable development. When children cannot enjoy their right to a healthy environment, many other rights are also seriously affected. The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment has noted that marginalized children, including those from low-income and indigenous backgrounds, are at higher risk of harm in this context. The Human Rights Council has recognised the important role played by children and youth-led movements that defend human rights relating to a healthy environment, alongside their particular risks from environmental harm. The Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights highlights the importance of youth participation in environmental protection, as well the rights of future generations and the necessity for education that prepares young people for the future they face. In June 2021, UN entities made a number of joint commitments in response, including supporting recognition of the rights of youth and children to a healthy environment as well as encouraging a cross-cutting focus on them in relevant environmental agreements.

The UNCCD has recognised that the current generation of young people is the largest and most educated yet and can play an important role in combatting desertification. It has highlighted that youth-oriented programmes need to include young farmers, indigenous peoples and youths in vulnerable situations. It

has also recognised the necessity of creating employment opportunities for rural youth, such as through agro eco-tourism, which can help create sustainable livelihoods. UNCCD COP14 established the Global Youth Caucus on Desertification and Land as a permanent mechanism for the meaningful engagement, participation, and access to decision-making of children and youth. In turn, youth are also keen to engage with UNCCD processes and have their voices heard. In view of this, and on the basis of the activities below, the IMG will support the meaningful engagement of children and youth in UNCCD processes such as the Global Youth Caucus. Members of the IMG, as appropriate within their respective mandates, will advocate for consideration of the long term/intergenerational impacts of the solutions being proposed to DLDD, as well as seeking specific references to the rights of future generations in UNCCD outcomes.

Potential Activities

- Develop 2-3 common talking points on the rights of youth and future generations to include in joint public briefing note to be prepared by the IMG.

Key Resources

UNCCD, [Land and Youth](#)

UNSG, [Our Common Agenda](#) (2021)

OHCHR, [Report on Realizing Children’s Rights Through a Healthy Environment](#) (2020)

UNCCD COP14, [Declaration of the Youth Forum](#) (2019)

UNCCD COP Decisions welcoming the Youth Forum: [Decision 31/COP.14](#) (2019), [Decision 34/COP.13](#) (2017), [Decision 33/COP.12](#) (2015)

Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment on the environment (forthcoming)

HRC resolution on “right of the child: realizing rights of the child through a healthy environment”

[A/HRC/RES/45/30](#)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session45/res-dec-stat>

2018 SR report on children and healthy environment <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/37/58>

2007 UNGA resolution reaffirming 2002 GA resolution “a world fit for children”

undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/45/30

[Joint Commitment by Heads of UN Entities](#) to promote the rights of children, youth and future generations to a healthy environment (2021)

UNESCO, [Framework for the Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development](#) (2019)

UNESCO, [Education for sustainable development: a roadmap](#) and [ESD for 2030 Toolbox](#) (2020)

UNESCO, [Berlin Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development](#) (2021)

5. Displacement and Migration

The International Organization of Migration predicts that by 2050 there will be 200 million environmentally displaced people, including as a result of DLDD. The UNCCD was the first multilateral environmental agreement to explicitly address migration and displacement issues in the context of sustainable development. The relationship between DLDD and the internal and cross-border movement of people is complex and context-specific. However, studies indicate that land degradation and desertification contribute to migration, worsening living conditions both for those who leave and those who are left behind. Slow onset events such as droughts and desertification act as a driver for movement, impacting human rights such as the rights to food, water, health and housing, participation and information, with the greatest impact felt by those who are already in vulnerable situations. DLDD can

also fuel conflict and exacerbate the social, economic, and political tensions that drive migration. Rural populations are particularly vulnerable, as income decline and poverty are key determinants of migration in rural areas. The IPCC has also noted evidence showing that rural households respond to desertification and drought through all forms of migration.⁴ The pull effect of urban centers in particular has led to negative over-urbanization and increased pressure on surrounding natural resources, further accelerating DLDD processes. Evidence indicates that population movement is an adaptation strategy of last resort and OHCHR has found risks to human rights throughout the process of movement, resettlement and/or return.

Given the limited resources of many impacted communities, the majority of migration related to DLDD is internal and the guiding principles on internal displacement offer important guidance for respecting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of those so affected. In 2021 the UN Human Rights Council reaffirmed the duty of all states to respect the human rights of migrants and to prevent the exacerbation of their vulnerability, as well as to cooperate at the international level on the basis of shared responsibility. The Global Compact on Migration calls for the development of “adaptation and resilience strategies to sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation, such as desertification, land degradation, drought and sea level rise, taking into account the potential implications on migration, while recognizing that adaptation in the country of origin is a priority”, as well as cooperation to identify solutions for migrants affected by climate change. Research conducted by the UNCCD and IOM shows that sustainable land management and land rehabilitation strategies can play a role in reducing compelled migration, particularly when tackling existing inequalities, adopting participatory approaches to restore ecosystems and creating dignified livelihood opportunities. Through the activities set out below, the IMG will advocate for a rights-based approach to land management and rehabilitation that focuses on the risks that DLDD poses to human rights. Such an approach involves promoting proactive measures to support improved conditions for people living in areas exposed to DLDD, with the meaningful participation of those affected in order to support their freedom of choice and movement within conditions that protect human rights.

Potential Activities

- Develop 2-3 common talking points on migration and displacement to include in joint public briefing note to be prepared by the IMG.

Key Resources

UNCCD, [Migration and Desertification](#)

IOM and UNCCD, [Addressing the Land Degradation-Migration Nexus: The Role of the UNCCD](#) (2019)

OHCHR, [The Slow Onset Effects of Climate Change and Human Rights Protection for Cross-Border Migrants](#) (2018)

UNEP, [Displacement and Environment in Africa: What is the Relationship?](#) (2016)

OHCHR, [Human Rights and Desertification](#) (2008)

Human Right Council Resolution [47/12](#) “the human rights of migrants”

[The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#)

[UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)

⁴ IPCC, Desertification in Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems (2019) p285

[Knowledge products](#) of the taskforce on displacement of the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage under the UNFCCC

Strategic Opportunities beyond COP 15

As COP15 is imminent, the activities proposed within this strategy are necessarily limited. However, there is scope for considering longer-term avenues of engagement by IMG members with the UNCCD framework. These include:

- Co-leading or supporting the organization of a joint event on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in collaboration with the other Rio Conventions.
- Exploring and build upon synergies between the UNCCD's Gender Action Plan and those of the other Rio Conventions, through, for example, joint events, joint communication or outreach strategies or alignment of indicators.
- Developing modalities for engagement with the Youth Forum and UNCCD youth engagement strategy.
- Exploring and building upon synergies with the youth components in the implementation strategies of the other Rio Conventions and UN Decades, such as the UN Decade on Ecosystems Restoration, the UN Decade of Ocean Sciences and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.
- Considering ways of taking intergenerational equity into account in decision-making, including through engagement with the other Rio Conventions.
- Supporting inter-agency cooperation in relation to human rights-based and sustainable land management under the Convention to address DLDD as a driver of o displacement and migration, including through engagement with the other Rio Conventions.