



Advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach to Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought

Key messages of the UN Environment Management Group Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment

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Integrate human rights across the outcomes of the 17th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

Desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) threaten a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, livelihoods, culture, and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Driven by climate change and unsustainable production and consumption patterns, DLDD disproportionately affects people in vulnerable situations, including Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, pastoralists, and rural communities. Gender inequality and discrimination in access to land, natural resources, finance, technology and decision-making exacerbate these impacts and constrain resilience.

In its Advisory Opinion on Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change, the International Court of Justice affirmed that States have obligations to prevent significant harm to the environment and to cooperate in doing so. It affirmed the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment and emphasized that it is a precondition for the enjoyment of other human rights.

States have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights in responding to DLDD. In this context, human rights should be integrated throughout efforts to implement the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), including in outcomes and follow-up of the 17th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (COP17). It is particularly important that measures to address land degradation, including States' Land Degradation

Neutrality targets, be rights-based, non-discriminatory, and participatory.

Effective action on DLDD depends on inclusive and meaningful participation of civil society and those affected, as well as access to information, justice and remedies. UNCCD COP17 should strengthen rights-holders' engagement throughout negotiations, implementation and monitoring processes, including the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation and leadership of women and girls in all their diversity. Advancing gender equality is both a human rights imperative and essential for effective responses to DLDD. Greater transparency and participation will make outcomes more legitimate, effective and sustainable.

As the first of the three Rio Conventions' Conference of the Parties taking place this year, UNCCD COP17 will set the tone on the level of ambition and action for addressing the interconnected challenges of DLDD, biodiversity loss, and climate change. In this context, it is crucial to strengthen human rights integration across the Rio Conventions and environmental governance frameworks, advancing the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in a coherent manner.

Anchor the emerging drought framework in human rights

Drought is a growing global threat that undermines the rights to life, food, water, health and an adequate standard of living, and gender equality, among others. It can destroy or damage livelihoods and ecosystems that communities depend on, and in severe cases can contribute to situations of famine, forced displacement and heightened risk of conflict. Women

and girls are often disproportionately affected due to existing gender inequalities and unequal access to resources, services and decision-making.

UNCCD COP17 discussions on a new drought framework or protocol should be firmly grounded in international human rights law, including human rights principles of transparency, equity, accountability, equality, non-discrimination and participation. Integrating human rights in the outcome of discussions on the drought framework will help ensure that drought governance addresses inequalities, prioritizes those in vulnerable situations and strengthens resilience.

Advance land restoration through secure land rights

Land degradation affects more than 3 billion people worldwide and disproportionately impacts rural communities, small-scale farmers, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth. Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality requires a human rights-based approach that places affected people and communities at the centre of planning and implementation.

At UNCCD COP17, States should recognize and strengthen land tenure rights of Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, women, people of African descent and youth, ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making, and address discrimination in access to and control over land. They should advance women's land rights, including equal rights to own, inherit, access, use and control land. Secure and equitable land tenure is essential for sustainable restoration and livelihoods, food security, gender equality, and the equitable sharing of restoration benefits, ensuring lasting positive outcomes for present and future generations.

Promote human rights-based agrifood systems transformation

We urgently need to transform agrifood systems, which are major drivers of land degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change. These in turn are undermining agricultural productivity, reducing harvests, and threatening food security and livelihoods. Transforming agrifood systems requires integrated land and water management, and human rights-based governance, supported by coherent policies, effective institutions, and responsible investment.

Discussions at UNCCD COP17, particularly during Food Systems and Soil Health Day, should promote food systems that restore ecosystems, protect land rights and strengthen community resilience, while recognizing and supporting the contributions, rights and leadership of women food producers, pastoralists and Indigenous women. They should support agroecology and sustainable pastoralism while advancing sustainable land management.

Protect the rights and leadership of Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, women and youth

Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, women and youth are among those most affected by DLDD and are also essential partners in sustainable land management

and restoration. Relevant UNCCD COP17 decisions should recognize and protect Indigenous Peoples' rights to their traditional knowledge, lands, territories and resources, ensure their meaningful participation, and uphold their free, prior and informed consent.

A UNCCD COP17 decision on rangelands and pastoralists should support pastoralists' rights to land, resources and mobility, as well as their right to meaningful and informed participation in rangeland restoration, including free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples.

Women's equal rights to own, inherit, access, use and control land should be advanced through UNCCD COP17's gender decision, and implementation of the UNCCD Gender Action Plan should be accelerated. UNCCD COP17 outcomes should also recognize the need to invest in youth leadership, participation and innovation while ensuring equitable access to land, finance, technology and decision-making.

UNCCD COP17 outcomes should also recognize the important role of environmental human rights defenders, including women, youth, Indigenous and pastoralist defenders, and support measures that enable them to participate safely and effectively in environmental decision-making processes. Human rights-based approaches must address intersecting forms of discrimination and ensure fair and inclusive benefit-sharing, so that those most affected by environmental degradation are able to participate in and benefit from restoration efforts.

Address migration through human rights-based land restoration

DLDD can contribute to displacement and migration by, inter alia, undermining livelihoods, food security and access to water and energy. UNCCD COP17 should promote a people-centred approach that protects the rights of migrants and displaced persons affected by DLDD, in line with international norms and standards, while tackling the root causes of land degradation through sustainable land restoration and resilience-building.

Strengthen corporate accountability for land degradation

Business activities, including mining, infrastructure development, industrial agriculture and other water-intensive industries, can contribute significantly to land degradation and human rights harms. Businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights, including by preventing and remedying their contributions to DLDD. Effectively regulating business enterprises involved in land-degrading activities, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, is crucial. Human rights due diligence should incorporate gender-responsive approaches and assess differentiated impacts on women and girls, including impacts on women's land rights, livelihoods and access to natural resources.

UNCCD COP17 discussions on Business4Land and the decision on private sector engagement should explicitly reference the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, promote robust human rights due diligence, including its environmental

dimension, as well as environmental and social safeguards, grievance mechanisms and responsible business conduct to prevent and address DLDD-related harms. Human rights considerations should be included in land-related targets across business operations and relevant governance.

Increase international cooperation and human rights-based finance

International cooperation, including South-South and triangular cooperation, as well as finance are essential to address the interconnected challenges of DLDD, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Equitable and accessible climate finance is essential to strengthen the resilience of the communities most affected by climate change. As called for by the Human Rights Council in its resolution 59/25 (2025), developed countries should lead efforts to deliver on climate finance commitments and support loss and damage mechanisms, in line with the principles of equity, climate justice, and the right to development.

Broader efforts to advance environmental justice and strengthen land and biodiversity finance are equally important. In this context, UNCCD COP17 discussions, particularly during Finance Day, should promote increased public finance, including both domestic and international flows, debt relief and restructuring, and equitable access to funding for affected people and communities. Private and blended finance must respect human rights in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. All financing mechanisms should be aligned with human rights, gender-responsive, and designed to enable direct access by Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, pastoralists, and other groups most affected by DLDD.

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