



**Convention to Combat  
Desertification**

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**Conference of the Parties  
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Item 3 (b) of the provisional agenda

**Work programme of the Committee on Science and Technology for the next biennium**

**Options for improving the Committee on Science and Technology inputs to decision-making, including through synergies with other relevant scientific conferences**

**Improving the efficiency of the Committee on Science and  
Technology, including impacts from the previous conferences  
and recommendations for future institutional arrangements**

**Note by the secretariat**

*Summary*

At the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP), Parties took steps to strengthen the scientific basis underpinning the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Pursuant to decisions 13/COP.8 and 21/COP.11, the COP decided that each future intersessional session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) would be organized in a predominantly scientific and technical conference-style format. So far, three UNCCD Scientific Conferences have been held (2009, 2013 and 2015).

By its decision 21/COP.11, the COP requested its Science-Policy Interface (SPI) to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the outcomes of the three UNCCD Scientific Conferences in supporting the UNCCD decision-making process.

This document (a) summarizes the assessments of the three UNCCD Scientific Conferences as carried out by the SPI and detailed in document ICCD/COP(12)/CST/INF.2; and (b) offers concrete proposals on future institutional arrangements in response to these findings. The proposed institutional arrangements would allow for the cost-efficient and flexible provision of scientific advice to the decision-making processes of the UNCCD through, inter alia, decoupling scientific meetings from official sessions of the CST.



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## I. Background

1. At the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP), Parties took steps to strengthen the scientific basis underpinning the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Pursuant to the provisions contained in decision 13/COP.8, paragraph 1 (a), and decision 21/COP.11, paragraphs 19 and 20, the COP decided that each future intersessional session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) would be organized in a predominantly scientific and technical conference-style format by the Bureau of the CST in consultation with the lead institution/consortium, which is qualified in the relevant thematic topic selected by the COP. Since then, three UNCCD Scientific Conferences have been held (2009, 2013 and 2015).

2. By its decision 21/COP.11 paragraph 25, the COP requested its Science-Policy Interface (SPI)<sup>1</sup> to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the outcomes of the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences in supporting the UNCCD decision-making process and to report to the COP at its thirteenth session. The SPI took up this task as part of its 2014–2015 work programme and developed proposals for improving the efficiency of the CST. In the background of this request to the newly established SPI lies the concern of the Parties whether the benefits derived from these UNCCD-sponsored scientific conferences justify the resources invested.

3. This document provides a summary of the assessments of the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences as carried out by the SPI and detailed in document ICCD/COP(12)/CST/INF.2. It offers concrete proposals on future institutional arrangements in response to these findings.

## II. Methods

4. The primary themes of the three scientific conferences were:

(a) The UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference: “Bio-physical and socio-economic monitoring and assessment of desertification and land degradation, to support decision-making in land and water management” (decision 18/COP.8): 22 to 24 September 2009 in Buenos Aires, Argentina;

(b) The UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference: “Economic assessment of desertification, sustainable land management and resilience of arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas” (decision 16/COP.9): 9 to 12 April 2013 in Bonn, Germany;

(c) The UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference: “Combating desertification, land degradation and drought for poverty reduction and sustainable development: the contribution of science, technology, traditional knowledge and practices” (decision 18/COP.10): 9 to 12 March 2015 in Cancun, Mexico.

5. The SPI’s working hypothesis underlying the assessment of the impacts of the UNCCD scientific conferences is that the recommendations (outcomes) of the conferences

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<sup>1</sup> The membership of the SPI comprises: (a) members of the Bureau of the CST; (b) five scientists, one nominated by each Regional Implementation Annex regions; (c) ten scientists selected by the Bureau of the CST through an open call, taking into account regional and disciplinary balance; and (d) three observers: one from a civil society organization, one from an international organization and one from a relevant United Nations organization (decision 23/COP.11, paragraph 4).

can be both directly and indirectly beneficial, through the pursuit of direct and/or indirect pathways. Possible direct and indirect benefits include:

(a) UNCCD scientific conferences can contribute directly to decisions taken by the COP following the conference;

(b) Recommendations from scientific conferences, which receive an ‘encouragement’ or which are ‘noted’ by the COP, can lead to a concrete request to the Bureau of the CST, the CST itself or the secretariat for further review. This process can indirectly contribute to the needs of decision makers, often by providing an adaptation of the original wording and format of the recommendation;

(c) Recommendations from the scientific conferences may also be actively pursued in the scientific arena or in other stakeholder communities, where they are further developed. At a later stage they may re-enter into the UNCCD decision-making process, for instance via science-based initiatives on desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD) issues.

6. The assessment of the impacts of the recommendations of the scientific conferences in supporting the UNCCD decision-making process considered the following:

(a) Impacts of the recommendations from the UNCCD 1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences (as the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference took place in March 2015, it is too early to assess the impacts of its conclusions on the UNCCD decision-making process);

(b) Perceptions of the different stakeholders as to what the UNCCD scientific conferences are intended to achieve;

(c) Efficiency of the structures governing the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences.

7. To assess the impacts of the first two UNCCD Scientific Conferences, the 11 recommendations by the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference and the 26 recommendations by the UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference were analysed relative to the decisions taken at COP 9, COP 10, and COP 11 and the activities that followed in the intersessional phases. To assess the efficiency of the structure governing the UNCCD 1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences, similar analyses were conducted of relevant UNCCD documents and of the external reviews requested by the COP since 2009. The UNCCD secretariat, in consultation with regional groups, undertook an assessment of the organization of the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference.<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of the CST undertook a similar assessment of the organization of the UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference.<sup>3</sup> The structures governing the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference were analysed on-site by 22 SPI members attending the conference in Cancun in March 2015. The SPI also used surveys and interviews to seek the perspectives of key stakeholders from the broader scientific community as well as governmental and non-governmental officials, who were informed about or linked to UNCCD processes, or who were involved in implementing activities (including organizational aspects) linked to the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and/or 3rd Scientific Conferences.

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<sup>2</sup> ICCD/CST(S-2)/2.

<sup>3</sup> ICCD/COP(11)/CST/4.

### III. Summary of the main scientific findings of the impacts of and the structures governing previous UNCCD Scientific Conferences

8. The history and current impact status of each of the 11 recommendations by the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference and the 26 recommendations by the UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference are documented in detail in document ICCD/COP(12)/CST/INF.2. This detailed assessment shows that the recommendations by the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference and to a lesser degree those by the UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference have had impacts on the policy decisions taken by the COP since 2009 as well as on other DLDD-related activities in the domains of research, implementation and policy development outside the UNCCD decision-making process. In summary, these impacts include:

- (a) The direct adoption of recommendations in policy decisions;
- (b) The indirect and/or gradual adoption of a recommendation that contributes to policy decisions;
- (c) Recommendations to initiate or support activities (e.g. as an instrument for advocacy) on DLDD issues within the UNCCD arena, or within the scientific and other relevant stakeholder communities;
- (d) Policy decisions based on knowledge on themes and organizational issues acquired during a previous conference that affect the following conferences;
- (e) Recommendations that benefit science-based activities outside the UNCCD arena. This strengthens the visibility of the UNCCD as an authority on DLDD issues.

9. Despite the notable impacts of the recommendations from the UNCCD 1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences on the UNCCD decision-making process, it is evident that numerous challenges were encountered, including the varied perceptions of the different stakeholders as to what the UNCCD scientific conference is intended to achieve (see para. 10) and perceived deficiencies in the organization of the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences (see para. 12). This assessment revealed that these challenges markedly lowered the benefits derived from the UNCCD scientific conferences, as they impacted the quality of the recommendations and their timely availability.

10. Scientific knowledge on DLDD is necessary to advance the implementation of the UNCCD. The CST is expected to provide the COP with “information and advice on scientific and technological matters relating to combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought” (article 24, para. 1, of the Convention). However, the CST obtains the required scientific input from the UNCCD scientific conferences both in the formal sense (a UNCCD decision to organize each conference under a specific theme) and the informal sense (the ongoing conduct of science influenced to some degree by the selection of topics for these policy-relevant conferences), and the outcomes of these conferences have contributed to policy decisions (see ICCD/COP(12)/CST/INF.2). These conferences were linked to political meetings of the UNCCD and are in turn impacted by the agendas of these political meetings. Based on the organizational setting of the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences, the SPI members observed and recorded a mismatch in the needs and expectations of scientists and political decision makers attending these conferences, which led to misunderstandings about what to expect and limited the effectiveness of the conferences in delivering relevant scientific input to the UNCCD. These mismatches include the following aspects:

- (a) The conferences were organized in a format that also includes elements of the political processes (such as the formulation of recommendations to the CST). The UNCCD

1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences were particularly strongly impacted by political processes and procedures (including negotiations and sessions of the CST). Many scientists are not familiar with these political processes, their context and negotiation protocols. This restricts their ability to understand proceedings and contribute usefully; their scientific skills are thus not optimally engaged. As a result, the political sessions hold little interest for them and they may not be motivated to attend future conferences. Many scientists were also not aware of the format in which science needs to be delivered in order to be relevant to policy. This led to the development of inadequately formulated recommendations by scientists, which may have hampered a stronger impact on the UNCCD decision-making process. Questions and comments raised by decision-makers were largely politically-driven (e.g. focusing on issues such as economics, law and procedural matters); rarely did these interventions promote scientific discussions, limiting the potential for synthesizing scientific findings. While the scientific community understood the need for succinct summaries intended to synthesize findings in a way that could lead to policy decisions, they were concerned about the omission of some details in the process and were frustrated when the negotiation of text weakened or obfuscated the intention of a scientific recommendation in order to achieve agreement among Parties;

(b) Political decision makers attending a UNCCD scientific conference were not fully aware of the organizational needs of the scientists to discuss and analyse scientific findings relevant to address DLDD issues in full depth. Both in terms of session design and in practice, decision makers did not fully account for the importance of allowing for discussion following presentations in order for scientists to develop a deeper understanding of each other's research findings and thus jointly discern the fundamental learning necessary to ensure a scientific basis for policy recommendations. Decision makers were critical of time spent on academic discourses that they did not perceive to be policy-relevant and goal-oriented. Decision makers felt that scientific processes may not be able to provide concrete information in the timeframe required for policy development and in a policy-relevant format. This perception by decision-makers was reinforced by statements from scientists that "more research is required" in response to some questions posed by decision makers. Decision makers were largely unaware that the open call for voluntary contributions, the usual method by which a scientific conference programme is generated (rather than being limited to research contracted for a specific purpose), may not be the most efficient or precise way of identifying key scientific developments, emerging issues and policy implications.

11. Based on these identified disparities in the needs and processes existing in the scientific and policy-making communities, the SPI concludes that it would be more effective to separate the processes that generate relevant scientific findings on DLDD and those that formulate policy based on these findings, while maintaining clear and robust pathways to interface science with policy.

12. Although some lessons learned on the structures governing the UNCCD scientific conferences were passed on from the previous conference(s), fundamental structural difficulties remain. Major structural difficulties identified by the SPI include the following aspects:

(a) The topic and title of each UNCCD scientific conference has been a negotiated, politically driven process, which has not provided well-focused guidance to which the scientific community could respond. This may influence the interest of scientists in attending the conference, and therefore the quality and scope of the science presented;

(b) The UNCCD scientific conferences do not provide a sufficient basis to capture all emerging policy issues relevant for the UNCCD to become an authority on DLDD;

(c) The UNCCD scientific conferences do not fully capitalize on national and regional processes as a precursor to an international scientific conference;

(d) Though there were notable improvements in the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference (which were based on lessons learned and recommendations resulting from the independent assessment carried out by the secretariat upon request by the COP), the allocation of responsibilities between the scientific lead institution/consortium selected to organize the scientific conference and the UNCCD secretariat was in some cases unclear, which led to misunderstandings and poor coordination of activities between the scientific lead institutions/consortium and the UNCCD secretariat;

(e) Burdening the scientific lead institution/consortium selected for the preparation of a UNCCD scientific conference with organizational and fund-raising issues tied up energy and resources, which limited the focus on the primary goals of the conference itself;

(f) Budgetary uncertainties throughout the planning phases of the conferences and the rather staggered receipt of funds led to uncertainties and necessitated the regular adjustment of the ongoing scientific organization of the conferences by the lead institutions/consortium (e.g. postponement and/or the modification or abandonment of certain scientific preparations). Budgetary uncertainties could also influence the post-conference outcomes through the delayed or slimmed down provision of the recommendations of a conference in the format(s) requested by the COP;

(g) Short notice alterations to the time and location of a UNCCD scientific conference, which was related to policy/political issues rather than scientific concerns, impacted the availability of scientists to attend the conference;

(h) Limited the number of actual participants whose scientific contribution had been accepted, for example due to insufficient time to secure travel funding and associated travel approvals;

(i) Constraints on scheduling to accommodate sessions of a COP or CST meeting reduced the time available for scientific discussions;

(j) Criteria and processes to select experts for working groups in preparation of the scientific conference were partially but nevertheless significantly policy-driven;

(k) The outputs of preparatory workshops and meetings strongly depended on the facilitation capacities of the chair leading a workshop and the abilities of the rapporteurs to capture the science and policy-relevant outcomes;

(l) There was insufficient time to prepare the conference white papers;

(m) There was limited time available to compile the conference outcomes and recommendations in a structure and format compatible with the needs of the UNCCD decision-making process.

13. Despite the above-mentioned mismatches in the perception of what a UNCCD scientific conference is intended to achieve and the critical organizational constraints governing the previous conferences, there have already been outcomes that emerged from the UNCCD 1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences that have already benefited UNCCD decision-making. This suggests that the concept of using a conference approach to bridge the science-policy gap has value.

14. The review of the critical organizational aspects governing the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences, however, needs to be given serious consideration in order to support a UNCCD science-based decision-making process. The SPI concludes that, as a result of the fundamental difficulties described in paragraphs 10 and 12, the UNCCD

scientific conferences should not provide the sole basis for scientific input to UNCCD decision-making.

#### **IV. Proposed institutional arrangements for future United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification scientific meetings**

15. The SPI's detailed assessments of the structures governing the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences show that cost-efficient institutional arrangements, which are decoupled from the UNCCD's official CST sessions and which have a more stable funding basis, are required to improve the scientific input to the UNCCD process. Such a decoupling model was also suggested during the independent evaluation of UNCCD 2nd Scientific Conference in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Decoupling scientific meetings or any other mechanism for scientific discourse on DLDD from a formal political UNCCD meeting will support the development of well-considered scientific and technical recommendations on DLDD issues and avoid distractions created by unstable funding mechanisms and other organizational issues and meetings that are directed more towards fulfilling political needs. The SPI believes that a decoupled model, supported by the effective translation of scientific findings into policy-relevant recommendations by the SPI, would provide an important incentive to independent scientists to effectively recognize and respond to the UNCCD's scientific needs.

16. The SPI's proposal of a decoupled model mirrors the meetings of the assessment teams of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which are neither linked to the plenaries of IPCC and IPBES nor to the sessions of the UNFCCC or CBD, and are therefore not platforms for the negotiations of the Rio conventions. The IPCC and the IPBES produce outputs which have an impact on decision-making in the UNFCCC and the CBD, respectively, and beyond. However, unlike the IPCC and the IPBES, the SPI is not an intergovernmental mechanism independent of the UNCCD (see the member composition of the SPI<sup>5</sup>). The COP decision to establish the SPI reflects its concern about the scientific conferences mechanism not being sufficient to strengthen the scientific basis of the Convention. In order to complement the SPI in improving the delivery of scientific advice to the UNCCD, the SPI now proposes adopting the decoupled approach outlined in paragraph 17 for effectively conveying policy-relevant scientific information through the CST to the COP. This would also require a mechanism for facilitating dialogue between the SPI and the UNCCD, in which the SPI would interact with the UNCCD's decision-making bodies at CST meetings held in conjunction with the COP. Such science-policy interfacing will ensure that the syntheses of any thematic assessments and recommendations are fully policy-relevant and provided in the required policy-relevant language for the negotiations of the COP.

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<sup>4</sup> ICCD/COP(11)/CST/4.

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.unccd.int/en/programmes/Science/International-Scientific-Advice/Pages/SPI-members.aspx>>.

17. The SPI therefore proposes the following steps to implement a cost-efficient decoupled model to provide scientific advice on DLDD to the UNCCD decision-making process, which has similarities with the way the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) works to obtain and deliver scientific advice.<sup>6</sup> The steps are (see also the annex):

(a) The COP decides on one or several scientific themes to be assessed, including suggestions received from the SPI (e.g. pressing issues/needs potentially originating from analysing the policy arena, practitioners (on-the-ground realities), and/or the scientific community (compelling research));

(b) The COP requests the SPI, under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST and with the administrative and logistical support of the UNCCD secretariat, to identify the optimal way forward (hereinafter referred to as “mechanism”) for the development of a requested thematic assessment(s) or user guide(s),<sup>7</sup> the facilitation of a scientific peer review, or the synthesis of the current scientific basis for any relevant assigned task (hereinafter collectively referred to as “task”);

(c) The SPI selects the most appropriate mechanism to carry out the identified task and requests the UNCCD secretariat to commission the implementation of the mechanism identified by the SPI following the rules and regulations of the United Nations. This includes the SPI supporting that commissioning effort by identifying the scope of the work, the required expertise, the terms of reference, timelines and deliverables. The identified mechanism overseen by the SPI could take a number of different forms, including:

(i) An individual or group of experts engaged to carry out the assigned task in close collaboration with the SPI team overseeing the relevant objective. The SPI team will review the drafts and prepare recommendations for the CST based on the findings of the assessment (see para. 17 (g) below);

(ii) One or more international expert meetings with an appropriate structure for the task (e.g. design thinking, write shop, world café) as a stand-alone meeting or in conjunction with an existing international scientific conference<sup>8</sup> that is able to host a scientific meeting upon request or in collaboration with the UNCCD. If the task requires gathering input from the scientific community, the meeting could be led by high-level experts guided by the SPI who would have an opportunity, if needed, to engage participants of the larger conference. If the task is more at the initial production stage, these expert meetings would be limited to a few high-level experts who will address part or all of what is required. This would include developing

<sup>6</sup> STAP has had success with commissioned reviews by experts, and expert workshops to review commissioned work, or experts commissioned to undertake projects, e.g. the development of data sets or software tools. STAP is closely involved in developing the terms of reference with the GEF Secretariat and then steering the project (regular meetings with consultants, reviewing drafts, intense review of the final draft, development of briefing papers summarizing the review and presenting recommendations for the GEF). While STAP members present on behalf of STAP at conferences and STAP has been closely involved in some important conferences, STAP does not use conferences to develop or review documents.

<sup>7</sup> For example, a user guide on achieving land degradation neutrality at the country level, or guides and policy options for addressing degraded lands subject to different degrees of degradation severity.

<sup>8</sup> These expert meetings, while thematically relevant, would be on the margins of the official programme of the hosting conference. The hosting conference would, however, provide the organizers of the expert meeting the opportunity to provide input into the official conference programme.

preparatory documents for initializing an assessment process or the development of a user guide as requested by the COP (e.g. developing the chapter outline and a draft of contents at the meeting of the expert group for an assessment report or for a user guide as requested by the COP). This process will ensure that right from the start, the work carried out by an expert group to develop an assessment or a user guide will be based on a common understanding of the needs emerging from the request of the UNCCD. Furthermore, it provides an agreed way forward on how to address a scientific or technical topic that is based on the most up-to-date scientific knowledge. The final products would be thematic assessment reports or user guides which the experts would deliver to the SPI in a given timeframe.

Although expert meetings could also be stand-alone meetings, linking them with an existing scientific conference may provide mutual benefits for the UNCCD and for any hosting conference. Such linking would allow for discussions between the expert group and the broader scientific community on any critical issue by securing input from scientists attending the hosting conference. The hosting conference would benefit by gaining insight into international science-policy interfaces as well as the needs of decision makers, not only in terms of what science is needed, but also how that science must be delivered, including the processes and formats specifically required to effectively support decision-making. The discussions on a UNCCD-relevant scientific topic within the scientific community would also enhance the visibility of the UNCCD-relevant scientific work carried out during the expert meeting, thereby raising the awareness for and interest in such processes, and encouraging scientists attending the conference to contribute to subsequent reviews of the thematic assessment or user guide evolving from such meetings. The hosting conference would benefit from meaningful scientific exchange with the UNCCD scientific community and increased visibility at the science-policy interface on DLDD issues. The possibility of linking with existing scientific conferences also provides an opportunity to leverage the UNCCD's global network of national scientific correspondents;

(iii) One or several regional meetings organized by regional scientific institutions or networks to assess specific regional needs. If required, such regional meetings could also provide access to other forms of knowledge required to address a topic requested by the COP (including local and traditional knowledge). These regional meetings could be stand-alone meetings embedded in a context specified by the region, or could complement the work of international expert meetings, which are overseen by the SPI.

Based on the results and recommendations of the international and/or regional expert meetings, the SPI, in consultation with the Bureau of the CST, will recommend whether a UNCCD-commissioned scientific conference is warranted to complement the process. The round-table format used at the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference at the fourth special session of the CST in March 2015 could be a format for future multi-stakeholder-driven UNCCD scientific conferences to discuss thematic assessments or user guides, which are to be produced by a commissioned expert or small expert group, whose work is overseen by the SPI;

(d) After selecting the most appropriate mechanism (see the example options detailed in paragraph 17 (c)), the SPI will identify experts, thereby also seeking recommendations on experts from networks and bodies known for their expertise in DLDD relevant to the topic, including the existing pool of scientific societies, science and knowledge organizations, academies and other networks. These experts would be invited to undertake the task(s) needed to help bridge the science-policy gap within the framework of the mechanism selected;

(e) Once the SPI receives the results produced by the experts, the SPI will ensure, with the administrative support of the UNCCD secretariat that the products (e.g. the thematic assessment report or user guide) are subject to an international, independent review process. Such a review process, overseen by the SPI, can be organized, for example, through: (i) an open international, electronic review process (similar to the IPCC and IPBES review processes); and (ii) an invitation to experts, institutions or networks known for their expertise in the required domain.<sup>9</sup>The innovative approach taken by the organizers of the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference to have the impulse report<sup>10</sup> developed for the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference reviewed by members of the SPI, the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) of the conference and external experts identified by the SAC may be regarded as a successful forerunner model for the implementation of such an international, independent review process in future through the SPI;

(f) The SPI requests the author(s) of the report of the thematic assessment or the user guide to respond to the outcomes of the review process and to submit a final report in a specified time;

(g) The SPI is tasked by the CST to develop a synthesis report and proposals in policy-relevant format based on the final report of the thematic assessment or user guide. Such synthesis reports would outline the potential to make an impact on the ground through the implementation of the proposed policy options. The synthesis report and proposals developed by the SPI could be categorized according to the intended audience (e.g. separate recommendations for practitioners and for scientists, and policy options for the Parties), thus improving their focus and practical application across all scales;

(h) The Bureau of the CST would submit the synthesis report including the policy options to the CST at its meetings held in conjunction with the COP, whereby a dialogue between the Parties and the SPI regarding the policy implications of the scientific findings and user guides would take place. This process underlines the mandate of the SPI to interface science with policymaking in order to promote a tangible impact of science on UNCCD decision-making through the development of focused recommendations that help the Parties develop policy options with scientific input;

(i) The CST delivers the synthesis report and recommendations to the COP.

18. The steps to implement a cost-efficient decoupled model to provide science on DLDD to the UNCCD decision-making process, as described in paragraph 17, would decouple the generation of scientific advice from political meetings, but not decouple the process of inputting policy-relevant scientific findings from the political process. There is a precedent as this process was used in the modular approach of the Ad Hoc Working Group to Further Discuss the Options for the Provision of Scientific Advice Focusing on Desertification/Land Degradation and Drought Issues.<sup>11</sup> The SPI therefore believes that future expert work on scientific issues relevant to the UNCCD can be decoupled from official sessions of the UNCCD and the intersessional CST meetings, provided that the steps as described in paragraph 17 are in place and that the assessment process is overseen

<sup>9</sup> For example, STAP commissions reviews (i.e. pays for 2–5 workdays for recognized experts to do peer reviews).

<sup>10</sup> M.S. Reed and L.C. Stringer, *Impulse Report for the Third UNCCD Scientific Conference on: “Combating Desertification/Land Degradation and Drought for Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development: the Contribution of Science, Technology, Traditional Knowledge and Practices”* (Montpellier, France, Agropolis International, 2015). Available at: <<http://3sc.unccd.int/documents-outputs/preparatory-documents>>.

<sup>11</sup> ICCD/COP(11)/CST/3.

by the SPI under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST and with the administrative support of the UNCCD secretariat. This decoupled institutional setup would provide planning certainty for organizers and participants involved in the work of each expert meeting. It would ensure that changes at short notice due to political needs would (a) not interfere in the organization or format of expert meetings; (b) be efficient in terms of cost and organization because it provides for smaller meetings of scientists (see paragraph 17 (c)); and (c) provide scientifically robust, timely and focused policy-relevant reports and strong recommendations through:

- (a) Identification of science-based UNCCD-relevant topics, which also capture emerging policy issues;
- (b) Clear allocation of responsibilities on how to organize thematic assessments and user guides as requested by the COP. This will lead to time and cost-efficiency in UNCCD scientific activities;
- (c) Creation of budgetary certainties for the organization of scientific mechanisms by the SPI under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST, which will enhance the effectiveness of the process of developing policy-relevant thematic assessments or user guides;
- (d) Lower organizational costs of the scientific mechanism for developing thematic assessments or user guides on DLDD issues by taking full advantage of the organization and logistics of any existing hosting conference mechanism at international or regional level;
- (e) Production of strong thematic assessment reports and user guides through the commissioning of individual experts or a small expert group;
- (f) Stronger motivation for scientists to participate in and contribute to science-based activities under the UNCCD umbrella due to certainties in the pathways of their contributions (e.g. expert groups working on focused topics, review processes and international scientific conferences);
- (g) Involvement of relevant stakeholders from existing scientific societies, science and knowledge organizations, or networks renowned for their expertise;
- (h) Provision of sufficient time for scientific presentations and discussions capturing the expertise of a broad range of experts on any DLDD-relevant issue;
- (i) Development of policy-relevant synthesis reports and focused recommendations for the UNCCD decision-making process via the SPI and the CST;
- (j) Increased visibility of the UNCCD's efforts to produce policy that is based on the latest available science.

## V. Conclusions and proposals

**19. The investments in the UNCCD 1st and 2nd Scientific Conferences have had direct and indirect influences on UNCCD policymaking (see document ICCD/COP(12)/CST/INF.2).<sup>12</sup> This positive trend has the potential to be enhanced. Issues associated with the structure and funding of the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences have therefore led the SPI to develop a model that would**

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<sup>12</sup> As the UNCCD 3rd Scientific Conference took place in March 2015, it is too early to assess the impacts of its conclusions on the UNCCD decision making process.

decouple future expert meetings from official sessions of the CST to enhance the quality and timely provision of scientific advice and advice on emerging DLDD policy issues to the UNCCD decision-making process. To ensure that the work of individual experts or of decoupled expert meetings taking place outside official sessions of the UNCCD fully consider the needs of the UNCCD, the work would be overseen by the SPI under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST and with the administrative support of the UNCCD secretariat.

20. The CST may therefore wish to consider the following proposals for a cost-efficient, decoupled model developed by the SPI, which emerged from the assessment of the structures governing the UNCCD 1st, 2nd and 3rd Scientific Conferences, to enhance the provision of scientific advice on DLDD in supporting the UNCCD decision-making process:

*Proposal 1:* Future scientific meetings shall be decoupled from official sessions of the CST. These scientific meetings can take the form of stand-alone expert meetings or expert meetings held in conjunction with existing international scientific conferences;

*Proposal 2:* The SPI mandate, as contained in decision 23/COP.11, paragraph 3, should be extended to enable the SPI, under the leadership of the Bureau of the CST, to: (i) provide the CST with clear and well defined thematic guidance on scientific knowledge requirements (e.g. thematic assessments, scientific studies, user guides) for implementing the UNCCD; (ii) identify the most optimal way forward (e.g. commissioning an individual or group of experts, organizing expert meetings, encouraging the organization of regional meetings by regional scientific institutions or networks) to address these knowledge requirements; and (iii) select experts, including from scientific societies, science and knowledge organizations, and networks known for their expertise in DLDD.

*Proposal 3:* Any scientific output prepared under the supervision of the SPI shall undergo an international, independent review process.

*Proposal 4:* Future sessions of the CST will be organized in such a way to facilitate a dialogue between the Parties and the SPI regarding the policy implications of the scientific outputs and to enable the formulation of policy-relevant recommendations.

*Proposal 5:* The Bureau of the CST, with the support of the SPI, should regularly monitor the short, medium and long-term impacts of the scientific work carried out for the UNCCD.

## Annex

### Proposed model for the provision of scientific advice to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification decision-making process

