

# Desertification, Drought, and Planetary Health: UNCCD COP16 and the Future of Land

**Our land is our future but global negotiations to manage and sustain it are underrecognised. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification is the global voice for land and an important instrument for planetary health.**



In some countries, 10 per cent of national wealth or up to 20 per cent of GDP can be determined by one single drought. The stability and health of many communities depend on the management of land, including for avoiding degradation and desertification.

For the last 30 years, the Rio Convention processes have advanced the way we govern the global environment and shaped the way we think about sustainability. The so-called Rio Trio—the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)—originated in 1992. But in awareness, popularity, and funding the land convention has been secondary to the climate and biodiversity governance processes. This article shines a spotlight on the UNCCD, the highest international agreement on land and an important instrument for planetary health governance.

In December 2024, the 16th conference of the parties to the UNCCD (COP16) marked the beginning of the final 5 years of Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land). While COP16 talks on a new drought instrument unexpectedly stalled, other landmark decisions positioned the convention to have a central role in the future of food systems and determining the health and wellbeing of people and planet worldwide.

## Planetary Health for whom?

The narrative among delegations attending UNCCD COP16 in Riyadh reflected a significant conceptual change on land management from

that three decades before: social impacts are expanding and becoming more complex.

In the 1990s Ibrahim Thiaw, now head of UNCCD, sat in the first rows of negotiations to establish the UNCCD. “Health issues were not prominent at all. And we had less science” he recalls.

Now, environmental determinants of health weave into government interventions. COP16 plenary statements encompassed air quality, water availability and sanitation, nutrition deficits, soil contamination, scarcity-related conflicts, forced migration and deaths, and infectious disease.

Geographic participation in UNCCD is also growing. Historically, significant engagement stemmed from the African region and countries with large dry ecosystems. In recent years, politics and increasing environmental challenges lead more countries in other regions to strengthen their involvement. COP16 delegates from the Middle East to the Caribbean underscored public health trends in respiratory, eye, skin, and allergic conditions arising from transboundary and trans-ocean impacts of airborne topsoil particulates caused by erosion and sand and dust storms.

Strategies to manage the complexities of drylands are needed at the national and sub-national levels worldwide. Thiaw points to gaps in early warning systems for slow-onset land conditions, like drought. “A month later, by the time you realize the drought is here it is too late to put in place all the preparedness and response” he says. Mounting

competition for land, increasing land and water grabs, and tensions in ownership contribute to the challenge. Vulnerable communities, especially half a billion nomadic pastoralists “will be crushed” by the lack of policies or planning, he says.

Neglected communities are a central focus of the UNCCD, but its mandate relates to planetary health for everyone.

## Land security and health equity

Durable and sustainable policy approaches to land hinge on responsible land ownership and distribution. Yet, until UNCCD COP16, no intergovernmental stand-alone decision on land tenure existed under the Rio Conventions, and related voluntary guidelines of the UN Committee on World Food Security were more than a decade old. UNCCD Decision 16/28 on Land Tenure commits countries to strengthening national land tenure policy implementation, which is a key moment for environmental governance.

Land tenure is an underrecognised determinant of health, but it is a major factor in securing local, culturally-appropriate nutrition, and sustainable resource stewardship. Land tenure, or the local or customary ownership or control of land, defines an individual or community relationship to land.

For young people, land tenure is part of identity. Juliet Grace Luwedde, Global Focal Point for the UNCCD Youth Caucus, explains that secure land rights “...mean we are able to invest ourselves. This is where I live, this is where I am building my future,

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For more on the UNCCD see <https://www.unccd.int/our-work/overview>

For more on Decision 16/28 Land Tenure see <https://www.unccd.int/official-documents/cop-16-riyadh-saudi-arabia-2024/documents/28cop16>

For UNCCD Youth Caucus see <https://unccdyouthcaucus.org/>

For Decision 19/COP.16, Avoiding, reducing and reversing land and soil degradation of agricultural lands see <https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2025-03/19-cop16.pdf>

For the UNCCD Youth Engagement Strategy see <https://www.unccd.int/resources/other/unccd-youth-engagement-strategy>

and this is where my innovation is thriving”.

UNCCD’s Land Tenure Decision aims to mobilize coordination, knowledge, data, legal frameworks, the business case, and policy tools. It will also serve to support synergistic national reporting requirements for land under SDG 1 (no poverty) and the Global Biodiversity Framework. Luwedde calls the decision “a step in the right direction”. She pauses to explain that she can legally own land in Uganda but not as a woman in her local community. Implementation needs to be “rethought” when it comes to differences between national laws and cultural norms, she says.

Women’s land ownership is a critical topic of debate. Thiaw puts it into numbers: “Less than 20% of women are landholders despite comprising nearly 50% of the global agricultural workforce and producing up to 80% of food in developing countries” he says. A way forward, Luwedde suggests, is “making sure governments and community groups are speaking to each other”.

Pointing to COP17, Thiaw suggests a common agenda among the three UNCCD stakeholder caucuses (Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, and Women) on access to land and land ownership could be instrumental.

### A breakthrough for food systems

Ownership of land is an important issue when it comes to food. “There is no food security in the world if you continue to degrade land” Thiaw says.

Multilateral environmental agreements shape the vision and direction of food systems, usually through incremental progress under climate or biodiversity law. A novel decision on food systems at COP16 strengthens UNCCD’s role in food system governance.

In Decision 16/19 on Agricultural Lands, 197 parties agreed that going forward “any future approaches to

land degradation monitoring and assessment will consider how to more effectively reflect changes in the health of agricultural lands and soils.” This decision, which is broader than those under the UNFCCC on food production or those under the CBD on agrobiodiversity, is a “breakthrough” according to Luwedde.

Soil health is an important focal point. “Soil health is not just a biophysical issue to be left to sectoral ministries and departments” says Thiaw, “It is the foundation of our economy, our health, and of human security. Ministries in charge of health should be fully integrated into this.”

New policy approaches to agricultural land are in motion. Luwedde discusses how youth caucuses are working together on synergies. The first joint statement from the UNCCD Youth Caucus, UNFCCC YOUNGO, CBD Global Youth Biodiversity Network, and the World Food Forum Youth Assembly will be issued for the 2025 UN Food System Summit.

Thiaw draws attention to shifting land responsibilities for degradation and drought from forestry and ecology to the agriculture sector. The move invites ministries of agriculture to engage in the UNCCD. Thiaw emphasizes that “the UNCCD comes to the conversation not as a food producer, but as the ones helping governments have a better approach to their natural capital and how they can better protect their essential capital.”

A balanced risk perspective will be key. “How do we make sure that the food we are producing is good for our health and safe and sustainable?” Luwedde asks. She stresses the need to invest in ensuring young farmers have access to markets. She adds, “we have to stop looking at the Global South as a dumping ground for banned chemicals. There has to be a mechanism for this.”

Regions also face extremes – rural famines, spiking food prices, and urban riots. Thiaw points to the inverse relationship between land restoration

investments and outcomes for food insecurity and forced migration. “We advocate and advise for people to invest in land restoration in countries of origin so people can stay home” he says.

### Our land, our future

UNCCD reports that 3.2 billion people are affected by land degradation. “We are not in a safe operating space” stresses Thiaw. This point underlies the UNCCD COP16 theme: *Our Land. Our Future*. “UNCCD’s role is to protect the land that sustains us” says Luwedde.

Compared to the other Rio Conventions, the two-week negotiations at UNCCD feel more close-knit. Faces from delegations and stakeholder groups are familiar across different discussions and momentum carries between rooms. Scientists have a grounded presence within UNCCD’s Science-Policy Interface body. A driving energy and work ethic underlie the meeting.

For COP16, a central focus was steadfast commitment among participants to realize a policy instrument on drought after 6 years of effort. Despite a high-level opening on planetary boundary risks and three ministerial dialogues demonstrating strong political will from the Saudi Arabian hosts, governments in all regions, and Secretariats of the Rio Conventions, COP16 concluded without an actionable instrument on drought.

Still, opportunities abound to build national capacity over the next 2 years. “Investing in land restoration is a possible response to multiple crises” Thiaw states. “Synergies are easier to have at the national level where ministries can be brought together to discuss common issues.”

Luwedde flags a COP17 goal of the UNCCD Youth Caucus: for parties to agree to national implementation of the UNCCD Youth Engagement Strategy. “How many young people out there know what their national land policy is?”, asks Luwedde, “We need more buy in.”

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UNCCD's next biannual COP (17) will take place in Mongolia in 2026. Public health and health equity will, again, be on the land agenda.

*Liz Willetts*

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