



Strengthening social participation in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

Recommendations for more inclusive global processes and national level implementation of UNCCD decisions

Social participation for inclusive, people-centred land restoration

To fulfil these crucial roles, civil society needs to have the space to articulate its positions in policy processes and programme design and implementation. However, despite the importance of civil society, the space for its participation is under unprecedented pressure. According to CIVICUS, over 87% of the global population now lives in countries where civic freedoms are constrained, threatening the ability of CSOs to meaningfully contribute to sustainable land management and responsible land governance.

Ways to strengthen social participation in UNCCD processes

UNCCD acknowledges the value of civil society and local communities in combating desertification and land degradation. The UNCCD Secretariat supports the inclusion of civil society through its support to the Civil Society Organizations Panel.

But the shrinking democratic space also threatens the achievement of UNCCD's strategic objectives.

In view of this, TMG Research and FIAN International have explored ways to further strengthen social participation in UNCCD processes, both at global and national level.

Our analysis followed a two-pronged approach:

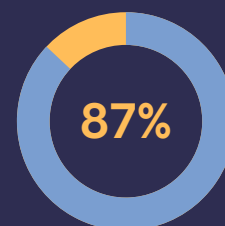
- **Comparative analysis:** A detailed examination of the participation mechanisms in the UNCCD and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), highlighting shared challenges, priorities, and lessons. The CFS serves as a reference point in this comparison as it is widely considered to be the most inclusive UN body with the strongest mechanisms for systematic participation by civil society.
- **In-depth national case study Benin:** The case study analyses civil society's role in implementing the UNCCD's land tenure decision in Benin. It explores how to which extent CSOs can participate in national level processes to implement UNCCD decisions and suggests ways to strengthen civil society participation further.

Between 2015 and 2019, the world lost at least

100

million hectares of healthy and productive land.

According to CIVICUS, over



of the global population now lives in countries where civic freedoms are constrained.

UNCCD currently has more than

600

CSOs accredited with observer status

Civil Society

needs to have a stronger place in the negotiations and other UNCCD processes to contribute their diverse experience in restoration and drought resilience efforts.

Comparative analysis between the UNCFCS and UNCCD

UNCCD and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) share a commitment to addressing critical global challenges but differ significantly in their mandates and approaches to civil society engagement. The UNCCD, established in 1994 as a legally binding convention with 197 member states, focuses on combating land degradation and protecting land as a foundation for life and livelihoods. The CFS, founded in 1974 and reformed in 2009, operates as a voluntary committee with 138 members. It serves as a leading platform for addressing global food security and nutrition, striving for a world free from hunger and upholding the right to adequate food.

Key Finding 1: The CFS sets a benchmark for effective and equitable civil society engagement. To fulfil its inclusivity mandate, the UNCCD must enable CSOs to inform negotiations and decision-making processes directly.

Within the CFS, through the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM), civil society organizations play a formal role as participants, ensuring their contributions inform policy outcomes. Their participation in UN CFS processes does not depend on individual decisions by Chairs and Co-Chairs of these processes. Within the UNCCD, the mechanisms for civil society participation remain limited. CSOs are formally included as observers, participating in COPs and CRIC meetings, but do not have the right to participate in negotiation spaces such as contact groups, which restricts their ability to influence negotiations meaningfully.

Key Finding 2: To ensure meaningful participation, the UNCCD must address its structural and operational barriers, adopting mechanisms that enhance autonomy, secure long-term governance continuity, and provide sufficient resources for civil society.

The CFS provides a model for robust and autonomous civil society participation, safeguarded through the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM). This self-organized mechanism, supported by a dedicated secretariat and sustainable funding, ensures consistent and impactful engagement. Members of the secretariat rotate in a way to allow for institutional memory to be built and maintained.

In contrast, the UNCCD's civil society engagement faces challenges of autonomy, capacity, and governance. The CSO Panel, though democratically elected, relies heavily on support from the UNCCD Secretariat and external networks, limiting its independence. Two-year term limits undermine possibilities to build an institutional memory. New CSO Panel members have to learn the "rules of the game" anew after every Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UNCCD. These structural weaknesses hinder the ability of civil society to play a sustainable and influential role in shaping UNCCD processes.

Key Finding 3: To align with international best practices, the UNCCD must prioritize the leadership of rights-holder organizations and strengthen governance structures to ensure continuity and meaningful participation.

The UNCCD recognizes rights-holder constituencies (such as women or Indigenous Peoples), but their leadership in decision-making of the CSO Panel is not prioritized. In contrast, through the CSIPM, the CFS positions rights-holder groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, women, and smallholder farmers, in negotiations and other decision-making processes. Supported by the CSIPM Secretariat and its strong institutional memory, rights-holder constituencies can assume an active role in UN CFS processes.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS OF THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

	UNCCD	CFS
Institutional recognition and status of social participation	Formal status: Observers, this means: COPs and CRIC meetings are open to civil society observers, dedicated sessions are organized by CSOs. Contact groups, where the actual negotiations are taking place, are closed to CSOs. This limits the possibilities of civil society to inform the negotiations.	Formal status: Participants
Autonomy and self-organisation	Operational capacities depend on support from the UNCCD secretariat and actively supporting CSO networks. Funding is through UNCCD and NGOs	CSIPM Coordination Committee and CSIPM Advisory Group Members to CFS elected by participants of their global constituencies and subregion. Fully autonomous and self-organised CSIPM secretariat and Working Groups
Operational capacities and funding	Operational capacities depend on support from the UNCCD secretariat and actively supporting CSO networks. Funding is through UNCCD and NGOs	Operational capacities through a 4-person CSIPM secretariat and actively supporting CSOs. Funding mostly through Member States, as well as participating NGOs.
Constituencies: role of rights holders	Constituencies of the space: organisations of pastoralists, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, NGOs and academics. No specific indications that social movements, Indigenous Peoples or other rights holder organisations should be in the lead.	A distinction is made between the 10 rights holder constituencies (smallholder and family farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, agricultural and food workers, consumers, landless rural and food-insecure urban people) and NGOs. The politically leading role is preferably held by rights holder organisations with NGOs providing support.
Governance and institutional memory	CSO panel elected every 2 years, maximum term is 2 years. Problem of continuity and institutional memory. Institutional memory is ensured through long-term participating CSOs and their networks.	Coordination Committee elected every 2 years, maximum term is 4 years. Approx. 50% of each CC are new, but the others ensure, together with the Secretariat, continuity and carry the institutional memory

In-depth national case study, Benin:

Implementing the UNCCD land tenure decision on a local level - experiences from CSOs work in Benin



The adoption of the VGGT in 2012, the UNCCD Decision 26/COP14 in 2019, and the Technical Guide (TG) on the Integration of VGGT into the implementation of the UNCCD and LDN (2022) provide new opportunities to address implementation issues more systematically at national level. Together with local civil society organisations, FIAN International and TMG Research explored how CSOs and communities can effectively use the VGGT and Decision 26/COP14 to strengthen the accountability of local, national and regional authorities to forest-dependent communities, especially the most vulnerable, marginalised and excluded, in relation to LDN programs.

Since the adoption of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decisions, the Government of Benin is working closely with TMG Research to implement the decisions. Yet, the current LDN Target Setting Document of Benin – that is currently under revision - foresees measures that would be implemented at the expense of effective participation of forest-dependent communities. The legitimate tenure rights of forest dependent communities in LDN priority areas are not yet sufficiently recognized and protected.

Strengthening CSO engagement in LDN implementation in Benin needs to overcome several challenges. Most of the CSOs working on the field of human rights not even aware that Benin was one of the countries that had committed to specific LDN targets. Moreover, there is no official space for CSO engagement with national UNCCD focal points. The space for civil society engagement continues to shrink, raising concerns on their capacities to support communities in upholding and claiming their land rights.

This shows that even when international policy frameworks are progressive, their meaningful implementation requires political will to implement well-designed processes at national level or between the global and national levels that foster inclusion, consultation and effective participation. For this, necessary resources need to be put in the hands of those most affected. Beyond financial resources, increasing knowledge about the CSO panel and how to gain accreditation with the UNCCD, as well as ensuring functional and autonomous spaces for civil society organisations at the UN level are important to facilitate the meaningful participation of communities, pastoralists, women and other marginalised groups in decision-making processes to ensure that their interests are integrated into national LDN commitments.

Use COP16 to build a common understanding towards strengthened civil society participation in UNCCD processes

COP16 is a vital opportunity to achieve consensus on the next steps to strengthen civil society participation in UNCCD processes. It also serves as a platform to both build consensus and establish a shared understanding, but it will be critical to carry that momentum forward into tangible reforms at COP17. Structural change to strengthen civil society participation is likely to take some time. Given the pivotal role of civil society, it is a worthwhile investment, as it will lead to more inclusive and democratic governance within the UNCCD framework and enhanced restoration outcomes on the ground.

We propose the following four steps to be taken during and after UNCCD COP 16:

1. Establish a roadmap for enhanced participation by COP17

COP16 should prioritize discussions that foster a collective commitment to strengthening civil society participation. This includes identifying barriers and opportunities to effective civil society participation and establishing timelines to develop proposals for strengthened participation. Negotiations on strengthened civil society participation should be held at UNCCD COP 17 and prepared at the upcoming meeting of the Committee on the Review of the Implementation of the Convention.

2. Strengthen the CSO Panel

Initiate dialogue at COP16 to address governance gaps, including institutional memory and continuity challenges, ensuring robust proposals for reform are ready for COP17. Develop proposals to transition civil society participation from a peripheral observer role to a central, permanent feature in UNCCD decision-making and implementation processes, ensuring this becomes a key agenda item at COP17

3. Create momentum for rights-holder

Use COP16 to generate broad agreement on the importance of rights-holder organizations, such as Indigenous Peoples, women, and smallholder farmers, in decision-making processes. These discussions should aim to formalize a more prominent role by them within the CSO Panel. At COP16, these discussions have to be documented as foundational steps toward institutionalizing civil society participation, particularly in monitoring key issues like land tenure.

4. Structural efforts are needed to support CSOs

The case in Benin highlights significant capacity constraints among various stakeholder groups. To achieve LDN targets and implement the tenure decisions at the national level, structural efforts to support Civil Society in assuming their critical roles are needed. The initial support provided by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through IUCN to Drynet / Both ENDS for building CSO capacities is a commendable step in this direction. However, sustained efforts and broader structural support are essential to empower CSOs and ensure their effective contribution to LDN implementation at the national level.

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ABOUT

This brief is based on collaboration between FIAN International and TMG Research.

“Social participation in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)”, Lead author: Martin Wolpold-Bosien accessible [here](#).

WHO WE ARE

TMG Research gGmbH is dedicated to driving just and sustainable transitions through action research and policy dialogue. Committed to a rights-based approach, our programmes focus on responsible land governance, food systems transformation in rural and urban settings, and adaptation to climate change. Our work spans the European Union and Africa, with key initiatives in countries such as Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, and South Africa.

We explore how local innovations and global policies intersect to drive systemic change, ensuring that international frameworks are both inspired by and responsive to community-led transformations. And we co-develop our research projects and advocacy with civil society, policymakers, scientists and the private sector to ensure international sustainability efforts are informed by emergent innovations and forge real-world solutions.

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