

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION (UNCCD) AND THE UN COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY (CFS)

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Social participation in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

Impressum

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Background, objective, methodology

Social participation in public policymaking has become a key factor in promoting more democratic governance in many domains and at all levels. Social participation is a political and methodological response to social exclusion, structural discrimination and systemic marginalisation. Social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society groups affected by certain decisions and programmes have demanded participation in public policies based on the principle, “Nothing about us without us”. Social participation was one of the guiding principles for reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2009, which recognised smallholder and family farmers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk, women, youth, landless rural and food-insecure urban people, agricultural and food workers, consumers and NGOs as participants to the proceedings of the Committee. Due to strong participation by civil society groups at the very inception of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the terms civil society and local communities were included in the text of the binding Convention in 1994, which opened the way to civil society participation in its different processes.

Civil society and Indigenous Peoples’ organisations played outstanding roles in promoting and advocating major policy achievements in CFS and UNCCD on land tenure, based on the prioritisation of land issues by their communities and territories.

In 2012, the CFS adopted the FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Soil, Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT). The UNCCD took an important step in 2019 towards increased recognition of land and land use rights in the implementation of land degradation neutrality (LDN) measures. Decision 26/COP.14 on land tenure explicitly recognises the relevance of the VGGT for the implementation of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) measures. The decision calls on states parties to ensure that national legislation and programs on sustainable land use take into account the principles of the VGGT.

Social participation in both UN spaces was not only a key driver in the development of the policy outcomes but has been also a major factor in promoting their dissemination and implementation, and in monitoring of their use and application. In this sense, the question of how social participation in both UN spaces works can be approached cross-sectorally via the land issue: what have been the achievements and challenges, what could be the potentials for improvement and collaboration?

This study is part of a collaborative project between FIAN International and TMG which took place in the context of TMG’s Global Soil Week Project 2021–2024 through accompanying Research on the Implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision, as well as through supporting a national process of promoting the application of the UNCCD COP 14 Decision on land tenure and the CFS VGGT in Benin. For TMG, this is part of a broader effort to better understand multi-level governance where civil society organisations play a leading role. For FIAN, social participation in UN spaces, land tenure right, and cross-platform learning, and collaboration are key topics in advocating for the human right to food and nutrition.

The objective and specific focus of this study is a comparative analysis of the opportunities and challenges associated with social participation in CFS and UNCCD. A further objective was to propose

ways of strengthening social participation in both UN bodies, especially in relation to land tenure. It aims to identify common priorities and concerns in both bodies, as well as areas of potential collaboration and to consider ways to connect these global discussions at the territorial level through a case study in Benin.

Process and methodology: The study used mixed methods consisting of a) expert interviews and consultations, b) an online workshop to exchange views and experiences between civil society organisations and Indigenous Peoples involved in UNCCD and CFS processes, and c) experiences from the territorial process in Benin.

Between April and September 2023, interviews were conducted with experts from the UNCCD, including former and current members of the Civil Society Panel, members of the Drynet Network, the UNCCD secretariat and GIZ. The author of this part of the study also held conversations with members of the CSIPM Secretariat, the CSIPM Working Group on Global Food Governance, and its coordination group. These interviews and conversations were accompanied by desk research on the methods, achievements and analysis of the CSO Panel to the UNCCD and of the CSIPM to the CFS.

The purpose of the interviews and conversations between April and September was twofold: the experts from the UNCCD space helped the author to understand how civil society participates in the UNCCD, including the structure, actors, modes of coordination and involvement in negotiations, bodies and meetings, and how they perceived the achievements, limitations and challenges of their participation. There was no need to conduct this kind of interview for the CFS-CSIPM space, given the long-standing experience of the author of that space.

Secondly, these conversations helped in preparing the online workshop entitled “Inter-platform Dialogue between Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Organisations Engaged with UNCCD and CFS”, which was co-organised by the CSO Panel to the UNCCD, the Drynet network and the CSIPM, and held on 6 October.

One of the main commonalities between civil society and Indigenous Peoples’ organisations of both UN spaces was the topic of land, and the implementation of the VGGT and the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision. For that purpose, the study also connects to a territorial process in Benin which is building the conditions for applying these land tenure policy instruments at the national level and is also supported through the TMG-FIAN cooperation project.

As agreed in the Inter-platform Dialogue, a draft version of this study was shared by late November 2023 within TMG and with those people and organisations from both platforms who had prepared the online workshop. The comments and suggestions received in that phase were incorporated into this final version.

The Inter-platform Dialogue between Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' organisations involved with the UNCCD and CFS

The main objective of the event was formulated as follows in a joint preparation session: “The specific dialogue between interested organisations from the UNCCD CSO community and the CSIPM aims to contribute to a broader process of inter-platform learning and collaboration. It shall serve to exchange experiences among organisations engaged with UNCCD and CFS, to mutually learn from the analysis of others, and to identify common concerns and common priorities in both UN spaces.” (see Concept Note, Sept. 2023). The 3-hour-long online conversation addressed, in an open and inclusive exchange, three key areas of mutual interest: 1) Experiences of effective and meaningful participation in both UN spaces (history, achievements and challenges); 2) Exchange on common priorities (land tenure and other priorities); and 3) Proposals for improvements and future collaboration. Many ideas and lessons from the Inter-platform Dialogue have fed into this study.

It is worth highlighting that this inter-platform dialogue was the first of its kind and can be seen as a ground-breaking experiment that encourages further steps towards new forms of inter-platform collaboration with the UN system.

In his opening address to the Dialogue, Oyéoussi Charles Balogoun, Chairperson of the CSO Panel to UNCCD, underlined the vital importance of highlighting the nexus of desertification and food security. He pointed to the strong call made at UNCCD COP15 in Abidjan (2022) which underlined the fundamental link between the three Rio Conventions (on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification) and food security. Charles reminded the participants that when talking about these topics, we were talking about our conditions for survival. Hence, even when we differ in many aspects, we also have a lot in common and need to find synergies.

Hala Barakat, Co-Coordinator of the CSIPM Working Group on Global Food Governance, highlighted the close link between loss of biodiversity, loss of fertile land, and desertification, as well as their impact on the right to food. Noel Oettle, coordinator of Drynet, explained the motivation for this inter-platform dialogue: to unite efforts seeking sustainable food systems, overcoming fragmentation, and working together on transversal problems.

In the context of this and other inter-platform dialogues, it is important to mention that the Global Food Governance Working Group (GFG WG) of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) recognised that a systemic understanding of challenges faced by the international community is urgently needed, and that such systemic learning will in turn require cross-sectoral exchange and reflection. Longstanding multiple crises have made it clear that neither the global economic system nor the multilateral international system can systematically address the structural issues at the root of today's unjust and unsustainable global economic model, with food systems at its core.

Discussing this approach among people engaged in UNCCD and CFS, there emerged a shared view that existential elements like food, land and nutrition are intrinsically linked with others such as health, land, water, desertification, climate, biodiversity, and finance. In order to address the multiple and interrelated crises that beset the world, we need inter-sectoral dialogues and cooperation among

social movements, Indigenous Peoples, and civil society from all these fields, and to overcome the fragmentation that is often produced by UN bodies themselves. Therefore, CSIPM is planning to promote a sequence of inter-platform dialogues with other similar civil society and Indigenous Peoples' interface spaces with the United Nations on these common concerns.

Experiences with social participation in UNCCD and CFS: ways of working, achievements, challenges, and common concerns

The current and historical modes of social participation in the UNCCD and the CFS are different, as became apparent in the interviews and at the Inter-platform Dialogue. For the purposes of this study, the two social participation spaces are presented first in their ways of working, achievements and challenges, then described in a comparative table in terms of key aspects and differences, followed by an exercise of identifying common concerns and priorities.

Ways of social participation, achievements, and challenges in the CFS

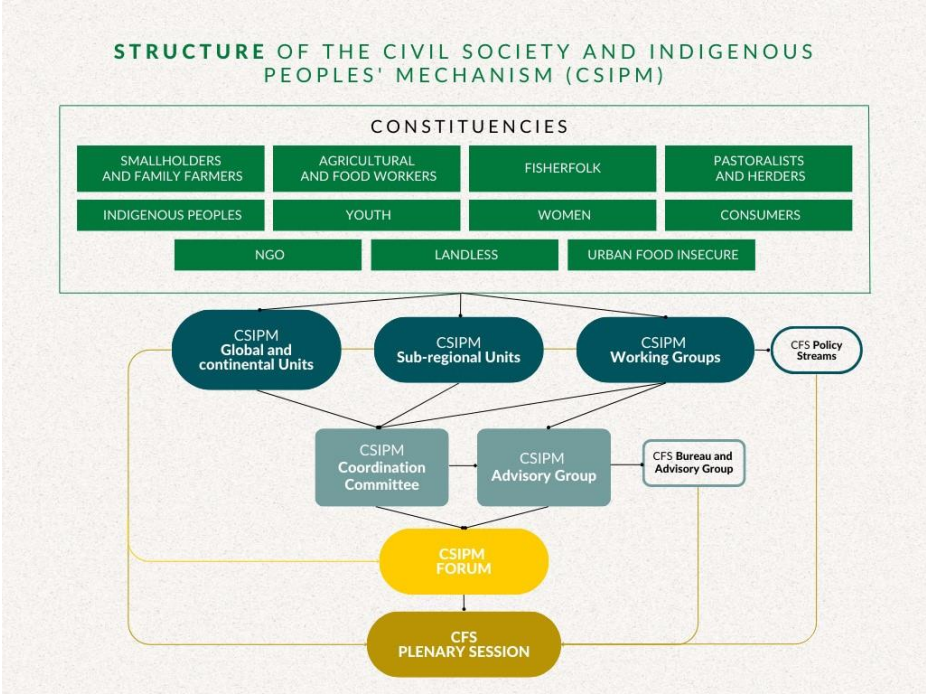
The CSIPM for CFS: structure and ways of working

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) was created in 2010 in response to the decision of the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to offer a particular voice and space to those who are most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition and at the same time the most important contributors to food security and nutrition worldwide. CSIPM is an autonomous and essential part of the reformed CFS, which was explicitly acknowledged by the Member States of this UN body. Its role is to facilitate civil society, social movements and Indigenous Peoples' engagement and participation in the policy work of the CFS.

The CSIPM provides a forum where organisations of smallholder and peasant farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, agricultural and food workers, consumers, landless rural communities and food-insecure urban ones, and NGOs form 11 constituencies. They convene in order to interface with governments, UN agencies and other relevant actors of the food system to promote policies aimed to eliminate hunger and malnutrition and for the progressive realisation of the right to food. Any civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organisation can join the CSIPM and its Working Groups at any time, since the CSIPM is an open space to interface with CFS processes.

The participation of civil society organisations is articulated through global and sub-regional units. The global units (constituencies) bring together the global and continental organisations and networks of each sector, while the sub-regional units bring together civil society organisations that work on food security in the specific sub-region. This articulation aims to ensure inclusiveness and the active involvement of all national, regional and global levels.

Figure 1 Structure of the CSIPM



Source: <https://www.csm4cfs.org/>

The 17 CSIPM sub-regions are North America, Central America and the Caribbean, the Andean Region, the Southern Cone, West Europe, East Europe, North Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, Australasia, and the Pacific. The CSIPM is the largest international forum of civil society and Indigenous Peoples’ organisations working to eradicate food insecurity and malnutrition.¹

The CFS Reform of 2009, with its explicit objective to support the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food, seeks to foster the active participation of rights holders and their representatives. **For the CSIPM, the principle of autonomy and self-organisation is fundamental.** This was formally acknowledged by the CFS Plenary when establishing the Mechanism in 2010. The CSIPM has been a leading voice in the CFS and has consistently defended the mandate of the CFS as the foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international platform on food security.²

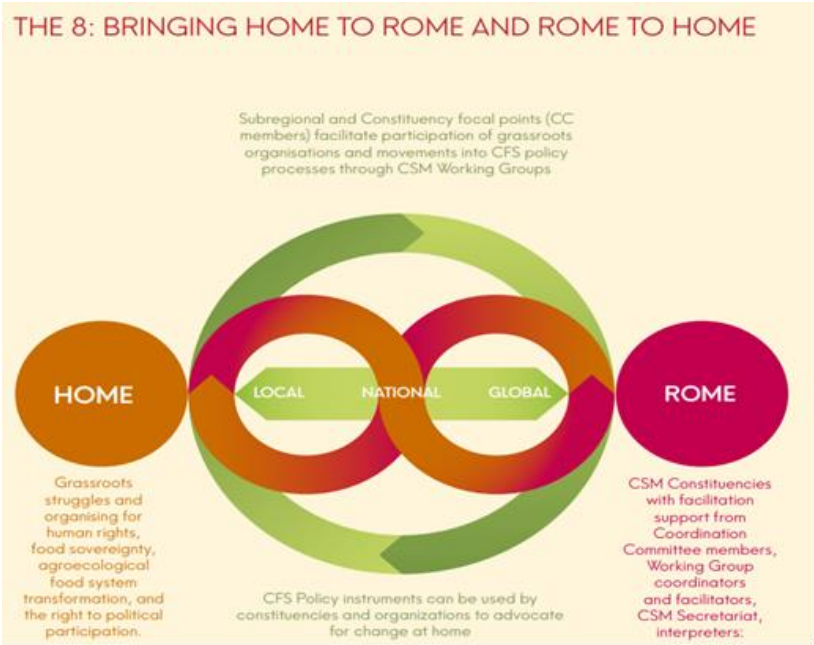
As an autonomous and self-organised space, the CSIPM has its own secretariat which operates under the supervision of the CSIPM Coordination Committee. The secretariat supports the CSIPM Advisory Group, the Working Groups and their facilitation teams, liaises with CFS members, participants and secretariat, and is responsible for day-to-day support work, organizing regular bilateral meetings with diplomats and UN representatives, conducting internal meetings and public events, both in Rome and online, conducting internal and external communication, as well as fundraising. It has four full-time staff covering coordination and programme work, communication, finance, logistics and administration.

Methodologically, the CSIPM has applied a [facilitation approach](#) towards its highly diverse space with 11 global constituencies and 17 subregions, to open debates to all participating organisations. The aim of this approach is to develop collective positions that reflect the priorities expressed in internal consultations. A [facilitation guide](#) has been produced which also explains how the CSIPM works.

Interaction between the CSIPM with the CFS occurs at several levels: at each of the policy negotiation processes in the CFS, a [policy working group of the CSIPM](#) is formed, open to all participating organisations, and articulating the positions of the CSIPM before and during negotiations in which the Mechanism participates, which means that the CSIPM delegates can intervene and make comments and suggestions at any stage of the negotiation process, though the final decision-making power rests with Member States alone.

The CSIPM also participates in the annual CFS Plenary Sessions and in all substantive debates that occur between Plenaries with representatives in the Joint Meeting of the CFS [Advisory Group with the CFS Bureau](#). A permanent flow of information and bilateral exchanges is organised by the CSIPM Secretariat with the CFS Chair, representatives of Member states, other CFS participants, such as the Rome-based UN Agencies (the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Food Programme, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development) or the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and accompanied by continued communication work. Ensuring the inclusive functioning of these multiple interactions requires considerable funding for interpretation services, which is managed by the CSIPM Secretariat.

Figure 2 How to frame the interrelation between the struggles in the territories, the work on the national level, and advocacy at the UN level? An illustration of the CSIPM approach



Source: CSIPM Facilitation Guide, 2020, p.17

Achievements and challenges

As André Luzzi from Habitat International Coalition explained during the Dialogue, the **CSIPM has made substantial contributions to a paradigmatic change in global food governance and politics.** The

very active involvement of its constituencies in all CFS processes, based on the conditions of participation stipulated by the reform, have enabled small-scale food producers, peasants, family farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, organisations of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, workers, consumers and food-insecure urban communities to significantly shape the agenda, processes and outcomes of the CFS.

The **facilitated articulation of common priorities** has allowed the CSIPM to **push key topics into the political agenda of the CFS**. These include human rights and the right to food, land tenure, women's empowerment and gender equality, smallholders' investment in agriculture and territorial markets, social protection, small-scale fisheries, water, conflicts and protracted crises, livestock, agroecology and youth (see all [CFS policy outcomes](#)). The CFS negotiation process in 2024 is focusing on reducing inequalities in relation to food security and nutrition.

One major achievement of the last three years has certainly been the **reaffirmation of the CFS global policy coordination role in responding to food crises**. This was approved by the CFS Plenary in October 2023 and is now included in the next Multi-Year Work Plan for 2024–2027. This recognises that more effective coordination is needed among different UN platforms in relation to food security and nutrition. In 2017, a similar major achievement was the reaffirmation and operationalisation of the CFS role on monitoring and accountability that has been in place since, with major attention given to the use and application of CFS policy outcomes.

On these and other topics, policy discussions were held during the intersessional period concluding with a decision of the CFS Plenary. Policy negotiations were typically informed by a report of the High-Level Panel of Experts (the SPI of the CFS) and yielded either voluntary guidelines or policy recommendations. **Many of the demands from CSIPM were included in the policy outcomes of the CFS**. The CSIPM endorsed the respective instrument, but in some cases the final outcomes was not satisfactory or crossed red lines, which led the CSIPM to not recommend endorsement or registering reservations on certain aspects.

The last comprehensive CFS negotiations were on the [Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment](#) in the context of food security and nutrition which took place between 2020 and 2023. The text of the Guidelines was finalised in June 2023 and approved by Member States during the [CFS51 plenary](#) in October 2023. The [CSIPM Working Group on women and gender diversities](#) intensively participated and contributed to this very heavy and controversial process in each step of regional consultations and negotiations in Rome, and made a [profound assessment](#) of the process and final outcome that precisely reflects the struggles, constraints, achievements and shortcomings of this process.

The CSIPM has regularly commissioned independent evaluations which were held in 2013/14, [2017/18](#), and in [2021/22](#) as part of a project commitment. The executive summary of the latest evaluation points to some of the key challenges of the most recent period: "The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) is continuing its vital role in bringing key voices of rights holders to the Committee on World Food Security. **The rapidly changing nature of food governance and the embrace of multistakeholderism in fora such as the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) have forced CSM into continual adaptation**. External shifts in power have destabilised the role and internal

structures of CFS, and created barriers to CSM as it strives to achieve its goals. In addition, the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unwillingness of many CFS participants to give it top priority (in formulating policies as well as adapting processes), have posed extreme challenges for civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organisations and their participation in the CFS."

The **main recommendations to the CSIPM for addressing the external constraints and internal weaknesses** identified in this [evaluation](#) are to: "set a priority on forming stronger and wider alliances; devising a more flexible negotiation strategy; working more at national and regional levels to build support for CFS outcomes and monitor their implementation; continuing to enhance facilitation within the CSM space; and investing more in communications and outreach."

Among the internal challenges, and despite the existing rules of procedure and decisions on the facilitation approach, there is a continued **need to define more precisely the principles, safeguards and mechanisms to ensure the common space remains open, inclusive and safe**. In highly diverse and open platforms like the CSIPM that do not require formalised membership but allow any civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organisation that works on food security and nutrition to participate, tensions and conflicts may arise, and more precise instruments and procedures are needed to prevent, process and solve situations that constrain the openness, inclusiveness or safety of the space.

Another challenge continues to be the **financial support to the functioning of the Mechanism** through public funding and the collaborative support from the Rome-based agencies. A decided and practical commitment to supporting the role of the CSIPM in the CFS processes is particularly needed from the Rome-based agencies and Member States, as well as more flexibility of public funding modalities adjusted to the realities of autonomous social participation mechanisms.

Ways of social participation, achievements and challenges in the UNCCD

The UNCCD CSO panel: structure and ways of working

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was established in 1994 and is the only legally binding international framework to address desertification and the effects of drought. There are currently 197 parties to the Convention (196 Member States plus the European Union) which entails a binding commitment to mitigating the impact of land degradation and protecting land as a source of food, water, shelter and economic opportunity to all people.

Reflecting the strong participation of civil society groups in the UNCCD from its inception, the terms civil society and local communities were included in the text of the Convention. This opened the way to civil society participation and remains a benchmark for strengthening spaces and mechanisms for civil society participation.

Thus, CSOs have thus long played a significant role at the UNCCD through its different organs and processes. Currently, more than [600 CSOs are accredited](#) and enjoy observer status with the UNCCD through a formal [process](#). The space for interaction given to them in the different areas of UNCCD is quite large, according to several interviewees; through their participation in different formal bodies, processes, and events, they contribute to most of the work done under the convention.

This contribution is coordinated by the Civil Society Panel ([CSO Panel](#)), which was established by the COP in 2011. The [five members of the CSO Panel](#) represent each of the five regions (Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean) and are elected by the organisations

of each region for a two-year term. The CSO panel is mandated to liaise with regional constituencies and bring the perspectives of civil society to the negotiations of the convention, to facilitate coordination among the accredited CSOs, and to ensure efficient communication on issues related to desertification, land degradation and drought. The members to the CSO panel serve for the two-year period between the COPs. Their mandate during this period includes participation in meetings of the [Committee for the Review of Implementation of the Conventions \(CRIC\)](#) and concludes with contributions to the decisions of the next COP. The most recent COP was held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire in 2022, while the next (COP 16) is due to be held in December 2024 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The CSO Panel is hosted and supported by the UNCCD Secretariat.

Supporting greater participation by civil society is an essential task of the CSO panel. The [work programme of the previous CSO panel](#) (2020–2022) listed as a key priority strengthening the involvement of civil society in the achievement of land degradation neutrality (LDN) and securing CSO participation and representation in UNCCD, with a collective review of procedures when necessary. This includes encouraging accreditation of more CSOs, and promoting CSO preparation and involvement in the different bodies of the Convention, particularly the [Committee for the Review of Implementation of the Conventions \(CRIC\)](#), the [Science Policy Interface \(SPI\)](#), to which civil society nominates a delegate as observer, the [International Working Groups](#), and the [COPs](#) themselves.

According to several interviewees, the general setting, procedures and attitudes in UNCCD provide a space to civil society actors which they have used to present key concerns and demands. Key topics included in the [closing statement of civil society](#) to the last COP 15 in Abidjan included the implementation of the Gender Action Plan; the promotion and financial support of agroecological approaches and regenerative practices; “humanizing drought” to better understand its impacts on the lives of children, women, men, farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, and local communities; strengthening land rights and tenure; and fostering civil society participation in the UNCCD.

Key achievements and challenges

Pushing the land tenure agenda: As Nathalie van Haren from Both Ends/Drynet and former member of the CSO Panel reported to the Dialogue, a major achievement within the context of the UNCCD has been the long-standing work of civil society to push the land tenure agenda. This process began following the approval of the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Governance of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) in 2012. Given the importance land and land tenure have for the CSOs involved in the Convention and in the struggles against desertification, this measure won broad support from civil society but also opposition of some Member States. Crucially, the UNCCD Science-Policy Interface (SPI) underlined the close link between land tenure and land degradation neutrality (LDN) which acted as a vehicle to push for VGGT implementation in UNCCD. It is important to note that the Land Tenure Decision of the UNCCD COP14 is unique among the Rio Conventions.

In 2019, the COP 14 agreed to promote the VGGT. This represented a major victory for civil society. The [UNCCD COP14/ 26 decision](#) encourages parties to use the VGGT in their measures to combat desertification, land degradation, and to mitigate the effects of drought to achieve land degradation neutrality. This decision represented an important step in advancing the rights-based approach to achieve SDG 15.3 on land degradation neutrality (LDN) while also meeting international targets on poverty reduction, food security and gender equality. The landmark decision specifically requested the UNCCD secretariat, in collaboration with FAO and other partners, to produce a technical guide on integrating the VGGT into the implementation of the UNCCD and LDN. The launch in 2022 of that [Guide](#), to which various CSOs and scientists contributed, was another step towards linking human

rights (and in particular the right to food) to policies and programmes for land conservation, sustainable land use and restoration.

Advancing the agenda on women's rights: Another major priority of civil society organisations within UNCCD has been the agenda on women's land rights and gender equality. The [Gender Action Plan](#) adopted in 2017 was an important milestone. The [Gender Caucus](#) monitors the implementation of the Gender Action plan and the Road map adopted in 2022 in Abidjan. The 2023 UNCCD campaign entitled "[Her Land. Her Rights: Advancing gender equality to restore land and build resilience](#)" forms part of these efforts.

At the closing of the last COP in Abidjan, civil society presented its [key demands](#) for enhanced implementation. These were as follows:

- ▶ Ensure that the Gender Action Plan and its road map are not stand-alone documents within the COP discussions, and add gender experts to SPI and other subsidiary bodies.
- ▶ Ensure that the four priorities of the Gender Action Plan are implemented by the parties to COP16: 1) women's participation in decision-making processes; 2) women's economic empowerment; 3) women's equal land rights and access to resources; and 4) women's access to knowledge and technologies.
- ▶ Invite the Gender Caucus and Youth caucus to reflect on the documents and to monitor policy impacts on vulnerable populations.

In terms of formal participation in UNCCD processes, important achievements include the mobilisation of CSOs for the COPs (since COP11 in Windhoek in 2013), the right of CSO representatives to participate as active observers in the UNCCD Science Policy Interface (since COP11 in Windhoek in 2013), and the involvement of CSO observers in the regular CRIC proceedings and Intersessional Working Groups, such as those on drought and the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD strategic programme 2018–2030 (since COP14 in New Delhi in 2019).

Generally, the UNCCD space is described as friendly and open to civil society participation, allowing for the limitations of observer status and the fact that on many issues the ambitious proposals from civil society face opposition from some Member States, and the technical support from the UNCCD Secretariat is highly appreciated.

Some of the challenges and limitations to participation in the UNCCD processes were addressed by the CSO demands at COP15 in Abidjan in their final statement. They asked the COP to:

- ▶ "Support and facilitate participation of civil society throughout the decision-making processes regarding LDN target and National Drought Plans;
- ▶ Continue ensuring the active participation of CSO observers in the Science-Policy Interface;
- ▶ Ensure effective engagement and strong partnership between national governments and government agencies, communities, local authorities and the CSOs, in preparation and organisation of COP16, and allow the CSO panel to observe the meetings of the Friends of the Chair;

- ▶ Encourage the current and next COP presidents and the group Friends of the Chair to take action to ensure that the next COP agenda will facilitate the active participation of parties in the Open Dialogue Sessions.”

Lack of continuity: Among the more internal limitations, a key issue is the fact that its members serve only a two-year term without the option of re-election, which can lead to a loss of institutional memory. While this rule is good for rotation, experience sharing and participation by a large number of organisations over time, it ensures a lack of continuity in the transition between two panel periods. Members of Drynet have served on all of the panels and have pro-actively sought to ameliorate the problem of loss of institutional memory.

Institutional support/back-up: The CSO Panel is supported by the UNCCD Secretariat and by the active engagement of the participants but does not have its own independent secretariat. Drynet has been effectively supporting the work of CSO delegates in the different spaces, including the Panel, the SPI and IWG, and during the major meetings. Finally, financial constraints are certainly among the most important limitations hindering broader and more intense participation of CSOs in the different spheres of interaction with UNCCD proceedings.

Comparative analysis of social participation in both UN bodies

How similar or different are the mandates and structures of the UN bodies?		
	UNCCD	CFS
Constitution	UN Convention	UN Committee
Mandate	Convention which constitutes a multilateral commitment to mitigate the impact of land degradation, and protect land as a basis of life, providing food, water, shelter and economic opportunity to all people.	Foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international platform on food security and nutrition, striving for a world without hunger and for the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food.
Member States	197	138
Legal status	Convention in legally binding on its Parties	The Committee is a voluntary commitment by its Members
Year of establishment	1994	1974/Reformed in 2009

How are the social participation mechanisms reflected in the set-up of the UN bodies?		
	Social participation in UNCCD	Social participation in CFS
Institutional recognition and status of social participation	Civil society and local communities included in the text of the Convention.	11 CSIPM constituencies (smallholder and family farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, agricultural and food workers,

	Formal status: Observers	consumers, rural landless and urban food-insecure people, and NGOs) included in CFS Reform document. Formal status: Participants
Autonomy and self-organisation	CSO Panel at UNCCD is democratically elected by 600 accredited organisations. CSO panel assisted by UNCCD Secretariat and informally by CSO networks	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
Interactions with Member States and UN organs	Openness of the UNCCD space and its organs for participation of CSOs as active observers. Regular exchanges between CSO delegates and delegates from Member States.	Participant status enables participation in all CFS deliberation and negotiation processes; permanent bilateral exchanges between CSIPM and Member States and other participants.
Safeguards against conflict of interest and corporate capture	So far, the UNCCD space has not seen much interest by the corporate sector, but some case of undue corporate influence. Establishing robust safeguards against conflicts of interest is important.	The Private Sector Mechanism is a participant in the reformed CFS; its active members and positions predominantly reflect corporate interests. Establishing robust safeguards against conflicts of interest is important.
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.
Access to the space	CSO need to go through an accreditation procedure with the UNCCD secretariat in order to participate in the CSO processes at UNCCD.	Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' organisations only need to communicate to the CSIPM Secretariat if they want to participate to the space or one of its Working Groups. In case of doubt, they can be asked for evidence that they are from civil society or Indigenous Peoples, and that they work on food security and nutrition issues.
Year of establishment	CSO Panel was established in 2011	CSIPM was established in 2010

How are the voices of social movements and Indigenous Peoples reflected in social participation mechanisms within the UN bodies?		
	Social participation in UNCCD	Social participation in CFS
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 & 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 (especially Drynet).	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
Process facilitation, strategy building	CSO panel is supported by the UNCCD Secretariat, active CSOs and strong CSO networks like Drynet, to facilitate internal communication, process facilitation and strategy-building among participating CSOs.	CSIPM secretariat ensures permanent internal communication; open policy working groups are established for each CFS Policy process, facilitated by CC members and supporting CSOs; regular strategy-building discussions with other Working Groups and the Coordination Committee.
Instruments for ensuring an inclusive and safe space	The fact that CSOs need to be accredited to UNCCD in order to participate in proceedings allows the CSO panel to take action in case of non-compliance of a CSO participant with the principles of the space. However, more effective instruments to protect the space are needed.	Despite the internal rules of procedure and decisions on the facilitation approach, there is a continued need to more precisely define, in an entirely open space like the CSIPM, the principles, safeguards and mechanisms to ensure the common space remain open, inclusive and safe.

Common concerns, common priorities

During the Dialogue, Claudio Schuftan from the People's Health Movement (PHM) explained the key issue to be addressed by the Inter-platform Dialogue using the metaphor of a skewer that pierces several pieces of paper. Each piece represents one of our platforms, whether on health, food, climate or desertification. We usually move and debate on each of these platforms, while many of the structural problems we deal with on our platform are actually transversal “skewers” that affect different platforms in similar ways. They are common concerns, even before they perceived as such.

Figure 3 Transversal skewers



Source: Author's own presentation

Of course, the message is to pay more attention to these transversal structural problems which are best understood and addressed through enhanced inter-platform learning and collaboration. In this sense, the skewer metaphor is not only useful for analytical but also for strategy development purposes. Several of the common concerns and priorities brought up in the interviews and the Inter-platform Dialogue can be linked to this “skewer framing”.

The conversations prior and during the Inter-platform Dialogue on priorities and concerns highlighted land tenure as this complex issue has been fundamental to constituencies in both spaces. In addition, the interviews and the Dialogue asked participating organisations from both spaces about other priorities being discussed currently in the two UN platforms.

Land tenure

All proceedings confirmed that for participating organisations in both spaces, issues around land tenure are central. In many ways, reports from India, Peru, Ecuador, South Africa, Benin, Senegal, Iran and the Amazon region during the Inter-platform Dialogue reflected this focus of land as the basis of life, but very often with discrimination or disadvantage in relation to access and control over land and natural resources, especially for women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, pastoralists, fisherfolk, peasants and forest peoples.

Thus, the approval of the VGGT by CFS and the Land Tenure decision of UNCCD are seen as a major achievement by organisations from both spaces, and the further work of implementing it is seen as a

priority for land restoration, sustainable ecological, social and economic landscape management, and all efforts against land degradation and desertification, as well as for securing land and territorial rights. The following chapter on how CFS and UNCCD promoted major policy outcomes on land tenure and the process of building a national agenda around it in Benin, demonstrate the relevance and potential of these global normative decisions for local and national communities and territories.

The discussion in the working groups also pointed to the mixed outcomes of efforts on land tenure: while several policies and programmes have been adopted at national and international levels to support the implementation of the VGGT, the overarching trends on land tenure are negative in many places: widespread grabbing of land and natural resources, land concentration, land degradation, increase in droughts due to accelerated climate change, new waves of financialisation through soil carbon market schemes, and extractivism in its many forms, including mining consolidating rather than diminishing.

Hence the proposals to accompany the work on land tenure with a more holistic strategic approach that underlines the need for a redistribution agenda, agroecological agrarian reforms, effective and sustainable land restoration, ecosystems protection, food and water sovereignty, support for the implementation of the UN Declaration of Peasants' Rights, more effective policies and regulations at national and international level to stop land and resource grabbing and corporate capture of food systems, and the defence of Indigenous territories against extractivist and touristic megaprojects.

There are signs that the VGGT and the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision are serving as models for positive change. In 2017, for example, the CFS established, following years of intense advocacy from CSIPM and committed Member States, an innovative monitoring and accountability framework for the use and application of CFS policy outcomes. In essence, this means that the use and application of each CFS policy outcome is assessed during a dedicated session in the CFS Plenary. In addition, the CFS is currently discussing a Plan of Action for enhanced uptake of its policy outcomes, as part of its Multi-Year Plan of Work (MYPoW) 2024–2027.

Agroecology

Regarding other priorities for organisations and constituencies in both spaces, the outcomes from the Working Groups pointed to a wide range of topics, including power asymmetries and inequalities, gender and women's rights, human rights, ecological and climate crises, food security, corporate accountability, and the national implementation of international commitments. Yet by far the most supported theme was agroecology. We asked the Dialogue participants, using a Mentimeter survey, which were their common concerns. The result was the following:

analysis of inequalities and a re-distribution agenda. At the same time, we need to find a common agenda with climate justice groups.

Many Dialogue participants spoke out on the topic of agroecology. One said: “[It] is an important topic which comes up all the time when we consult CSIPM constituencies: it has proved to be the most resilient way to ensure food security and even food sovereignty in the context of crises, whether climate, food or health crises. But in CSIPM we talk about peasant agroecology, in order to describe a process that is human rights-compliant, that questions economic and trade assumptions and challenges historic power asymmetries.”

Noel Oettle, Dryland Coordinator from South Africa, spoke about the [Avaclim project](#) which assesses the impacts of agroecology on drylands and where farmers and scientists are studying agroecological initiatives in seven countries (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Morocco, Ethiopia, South Africa, Brazil and India) to promote agroecology to the political authorities of these countries and to intergovernmental bodies.

Advocating for agroecology in the CFS is a long endeavour. The first proposal for an agroecology workstream was made by CSIPM in 2012 but for several years without success. Only in 2017, after long discussions and negotiations, did the CFS agree to request an [HLPE report](#), which was released in 2019, and subsequent policy negotiation process on “Agroecological and other innovative approaches”, which ended after controversial negotiations in 2021 with the adoption of the [CFS Policy Recommendations](#). The [CSIPM Working Group on Agroecology](#) strongly engaged with the process but, after a [thorough assessment](#) of the process and outcome, could not endorse this CFS policy outcome. CSOs in UNCCD continue to include agroecological approaches and regenerative practices as an advocacy priority in their main demands and proposals, as can be seen in the [Key Messages document](#) prepared for the UNCCD CRIC meeting in Samarkand, 13–17 November 2023.

Within the CFS MYPoW 2024–2025, it is foreseen that a high-level event will be organised on “The Right to Food and the three Rio Conventions.” This event and the process that leads to it is certainly an opportunity to foster collaboration between the social participation spaces to CFS, UNCCD, UNFCCC and UNCBD. It also can offer a platform to build a joint strategy to promote agroecology as a means of connecting the climate, desertification, biodiversity and food agendas from a civil society perspective.

Case study: Strengthening CSO engagement in the implementation of the Tenure Guidelines and the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision 26/COP14 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 and exciting opportunities to address implementation issues more systematically at national level. This also raises interesting questions about 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. How can a space of reflection be created for national CSOs to understand how the VGGT and Decision 26/COP14 interact with alternative and competing governance frameworks, while at the same time assessing existing accountability strategies by social movements, especially when it comes to understanding how local, national and international levels of governance interact with each other?

This case study focuses on the social participation of CSOs in the implementation of two global policy instruments, namely the Tenure Guidelines and the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision 26/COP14, at national level. This is an area of common interest to the two global platforms discussed in this study, namely the CSIPM and the UNCCD CSO Panel. In this case study we will show how effective social participation by CSOs in global policy negotiation may influence implementation and monitoring at the national level. This case study is guided by an understanding of the need for local agency, reflected in the African proverb, "those who claim to do things for us without us are working against us".

Country case study: Benin

Benin's national context of resource use and governance revolves mostly around the management and regulation of forests, which are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment, and more specifically the Directorate General of Forests, Water Resources and Hunting, known in French as the Direction Générale des Eaux, Forêts et Chasse (DGEFC). The laws and policies governing the management of these resources are subject to Benin's Law No. 93-009 of 2 July 1993 and its subsequent implementing decree (No. 96-271) of July 1996.

Other laws and policies have been introduced to promote decentralised participatory management of the country's forest resources. One such is the Participatory Forest Management Plans (PFMPs), a tool that facilitates the involvement of forest-dependent communities and local authorities. This approach ensures that the experiences and needs of these communities are taken into account when designing initiatives that could affect their access to and use of forest land and associated resources.

Benin has made commitments to numerous regional and global environmental and biodiversity agreements and conventions, including LDN targets. However, in its efforts to meet its obligations under some of these commitments, it appears to be focusing heavily on coercive management of forest resources through forest conservation and rehabilitation, at the expense of effective participation of forest-dependent communities and recognition and protection of their legitimate tenure rights, as provided for in UNCCD Land Tenure Decision 26/COP.14, which explicitly recommends that the legitimate tenure rights of vulnerable communities should be recognised and protected in LDN initiatives.

Coercive top-down strategies for the management of forest lands and associated resources, primarily aimed at meeting national commitments to land restoration, biodiversity conservation and other objectives, without the effective and informed participation of those who are most affected by these actions and are their supposed beneficiaries, may lead to conflicts over access to and control of these resources, which will deepen poverty, inequality and hunger, and may in the long run undermine social cohesion and the functioning of the state. Such coercive approaches also deepen inequalities and the marginalisation of women, most of whom tend to be more dependent on forest land (community commons/public land) due to cultural and patriarchal discrimination.

In collaboration to implement the Global Soil Week project, FIAN and TMG are working to strengthen CSO engagement, policy advocacy and institutional stakeholder engagement for the implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision in Benin.

Strengthening CSO advocacy for the implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision in Benin

At national level in Benin, strengthening CSO engagement and policy advocacy, as well as institutional stakeholder engagement for the implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision, involved overcoming several challenges. In Benin, as in many other African countries, the space for civil society engagement continues to shrink, with increasing tendencies towards criminalisation of human rights defenders, in particular CSOs defending the rights of communities and people to participate in the responsible management of land, fisheries and forest tenure, as well as CSOs advocating for the recognition of legitimate tenure rights, including customary rights, in accordance with the national legal framework. Benin is one of the countries that has committed to achieving specific LDN targets, but our mapping and engagement with over 30 national CSOs and networks representing peasant, pastoralists, forest-dependent communities, women, youth, environmental justice movements, and others revealed that fewer than 20% of national CSOs and networks were aware of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision, and only about 10% had attended a meeting at the national level where the decision was discussed.

These meetings, they said, were TMG-supported meetings related to ongoing research work in the country. Forty percent of the participants had heard of the VGGTs and 25% had received active training in implementing the VGGTs through FAO-funded programmes, with all of those trained currently actively involved in using the VGGTs to inform their programmes. When asked if any of the CSOs had been involved in negotiations at the international level leading to the adoption of any of the policy instruments, most of the CSOs present admitted that they were not even aware that CSO engagement spaces existed at the UN.

Based on feedback received from CSOs in Benin, there is no official space for CSO engagement with national UNCCD focal points. Generally, CSO engagements with national UNCCD focal points in the country are minimal, and many CSO members we spoke to stated that there were only occasional meetings to provide inputs to the focal point's annual report. We learned that mostly CSOs based in the capital, Cotonou, were invited to these meetings while frontline CSOs working directly with communities were barely informed. Based on our engagement with most CSOs working on land and forest governance, there appeared to be little publicly available information about Benin's LDN target setting process and commitments. Most of the CSOs we engaged with were not even aware that Benin was one of the countries that had committed to specific LDN targets.

Mapping and engaging CSOs to understand their position, interests, and the land tenure-related challenges involved in implementing LDN initiatives/restoration activities.

In order to identify CSOs that engage in policy advocacy for the rights of forest communities to land and forest resources in the context of UNCCD Decision 26/COP 14 on land tenure and in line with Benin's laws and the principles of land degradation neutrality, 10 national CSO networks working on land tenure and environmental protection were invited to participate in a CSO mapping exercise. During this exercise, each of the participating CSOs was asked to identify a maximum of four other

national CSOs and networks that could be invited to form a CSO coalition to develop a common position on the future implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision at the national level. Ultimately, 36 CSOs were mapped, covering various regions in the country and different expertise. This mapping exercise was followed by a learning needs assessment of the 10 CSOs (or all that were mapped) on the VGGTs, UNCCD Decision 26/COP 14, the Technical Guide on the Integration of VGGT into the Implementation of the UNCCD and LDN, and others. Participants recommended specific areas for capacity strengthening and an agenda was agreed for a meeting on capacity strengthening. Through this process, participating CSOs agreed to work together as a collective referred to as the “Benin national CSO platform for the implementation of the UNCCD land tenure decision” or simply the Benin national CSO coalition.

Capacity strengthening, coalition building and agreement on the advocacy theme for the implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision in Benin

Capacity strengthening and mutual co-learning: In May 2023 26 CSO participants from different national and regional CSO networks came together to learn and share experiences on the VGGTs, Decision 26/COP14, and the Technical Guide, among other topics. This meeting was a unique gathering of CSOs within Benin working on UNCCD-related matters in that it attempted to build bridges between CSOs that otherwise work in silos (land rights, environmental protection, climate justice, etc.). In an attempt to link national CSO participation and the implementation of international instruments with a focus on UNCCD Decision 26/COP14, the UNCCD CSO Panel representative from Africa³ participated in the process. In the context of Benin, this was a first step towards linking the global (UNCCD CSO Panel representative) and the national (participating CSOs).

The UNCCD CSO Panel representative reported on the ongoing processes in the UNCCD, but his report raised some concerns. For example, some participants questioned how learning and feedback from the implementation of global policy instruments, such as Decision 26/COP14, was being fed back into the UNCCD space when only larger CSOs have observer status and most of these lack financial autonomy. Other participants raised challenges such as shrinking civil society space and lack of meaningful engagement by CSOs with the UNCCD National Focal Points, resulting in a lack of public information on international instruments such as UNCCD Decision 26/COP 14.

In general, the process of capacity strengthening, and mutual co-learning was carefully structured with a variety of sessions including presentations, collaborative group activities and plenary discussions. Capacity building was provided on VGGT, UNCCD Decision 26/COP.14, the Technical Guide on integrating VGGT into UNCCD and LDN implementation, with a focus on both international and Beninese contexts. In addition, empirical results of research conducted by TMG-APIC on the implementation of programmes to achieve national LDN targets were presented. The TMG research findings highlighted problems arising from the failure to respect and protect the legitimate tenure rights of forest-dependent communities. Other cases of violations of legitimate tenure rights of communities across the country were also presented. Participants reflected on existing forest management regulations and instruments, focusing on gaps, challenges and opportunities. Having gained a more complete picture of the content of the VGGT and Decision 26/COP14 and the challenges faced by communities on the ground, the CSO representatives identified a need to plan and implement advocacy for the effective and participatory implementation of UNCCD Decision 26/COP 14 in the context of LDN.

Towards joint policy advocacy: Planning and implementing a robust and successful advocacy strategy requires a clear understanding of how to proceed in a systematic way. The participating CSOs engaged in capacity building using an experiential learning approach based on a presentation and subsequent exchange of experiences on developing and implementing an advocacy plan and strategy. Following this process, the CSOs initiated discussions on the theme of policy advocacy towards a collective agreement. The theme unanimously agreed by all participants was "Plaidoyer pour la sécurisation des droits légitimes des communautés dans les politiques foncières de gestion durable des ressources naturelle et aménagement du territoire" [*Advocacy for securing the legitimate rights of communities in land tenure policies for the sustainable management of natural resources and land use planning*]. After agreeing on the advocacy theme and developing a clear understanding of the steps needed to plan an advocacy campaign and develop implementation strategies, the participants unanimously agreed that there was an urgent need to carry out an analysis of laws/policies in order to define a firm starting point.

Cross-analysis of Benin's land tenure and associated legal provisions with the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure Governance and Decision 26/COP14 of the UNCCD as part of co-developing an advocacy strategy for securing the recognition of communities' legitimate land rights.

The overall objective of this analysis was to examine national legal frameworks and policies related to land tenure, and more specifically frameworks that regulate the governance of land and forest resources, through the lens of soft international legal instruments on land governance, such as the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure Governance and UNCCD Decision 26/COP14. The aim was to identify gaps or inconsistencies in the recognition and protection of communities' legitimate tenure rights. Based on the results of the analysis, proposals were made on how to reorganise and align these policies to better protect and uphold the legitimate land rights of communities.

In line with the above-mentioned objectives, a legal analysis was conducted and presented to a selected audience of Beninese legal experts, senior government officials involved in land and forest administration, and some members of Benin's national CSO coalition. The aim of this presentation was to get feedback from different experts. While Beninese law recognises customary land rights with some legal protection through what is known as the '*Attestation de Détention Coutumière*' (ADC), legitimate tenure rights, which are broader but include customary tenure rights, are not fully protected. A clear example of this are the legitimate tenure rights of pastoralists, who are often not considered to be part of the community, regardless of how long they have lived there.

Moreover, even if there is some form of legal protection of customary tenure rights through ADC, the cross-analysis of the national legal framework in Benin for the implementation of UNCCD Decision 26/COP14 pointed to gaps in national land law, including violations of property rights and possible abuses. An example of this was the violation of property rights necessary for the public good through expropriation for the public good. According to Beninese law, the declaration of public interest triggers an expropriation procedure at the sole discretion of the administration (Article 216). This has potential for abuse and injustice, unfairly affecting those with customary rights who may not be adequately compensated. Based on the findings of this analysis, the following recommendations were made:

- ▶ Consider pastoralists' rights in participatory forest management plans for protected forests,

- ▶ Formalise delegated land use rights for the benefit of forest-dependent communities,
- ▶ Submit any intentions to declare land for public benefit to public scrutiny to ensure that it is indeed a public benefit in the interest of the population.

Co-developing a policy advocacy strategy for the implementation of the UNCCD Tenure Decision in Benin

Based on lessons learned from the processes described so far, the Benin National CSO Coalition reconvened to develop and validate a roadmap for a policy advocacy strategy to implement the UNCCD Decision on Land Degradation with all CSOs of the 'Benin Coalition' for COP16. The coalition was supported by high-level traditional authorities from both the northern and southern regions of Benin, who are administratively considered to be the custodians of customary land rights. The advocacy strategy is based on four specific objectives:

- ▶ SO 1. Create a framework for consultation and multi-actor dialogue for the peaceful co-management of natural resources.
- ▶ SO 2. Strengthen the capacity of communities and local land management bodies in relation to tools and mechanisms for land tenure security.
- ▶ SO 3. Support the formalisation of delegated land use rights for the benefit of forest-dependent communities.
- ▶ SO 4. Establish a mechanism to monitor, evaluate and capitalise on the implementation of advocacy activities.

Emerging lessons from CSO engagement in the implementation of the UNCCD land tenure decision in Benin

The implementation of global policy instruments such as the VGGTs and Decision 26/COP 14 at national level requires the active social participation of civil society organisations and communities to ensure successful outcomes. So far, we have looked at social participation processes at national level and attempted to link such efforts to the global level. In the next section, we will share some emerging lessons on the importance and potential benefits of social participation in the implementation process.

A key lesson learned from the implementation of this project is that even when international policy frameworks are progressive, their meaningful implementation on the ground in ways that do not further violate the rights of the already most marginalised and excluded in society **requires well-designed processes at national level or between the global and national levels that foster inclusion, consultation, effective participation, and the political will to achieve social justice goals**. There is also a need for civil society actors to monitor this implementation, but most importantly, there is a need for spaces where open, constructive exchanges and learning about the outcomes and impacts of such policy implementation can be discussed between local communities and local authorities as well as between the CSOs and national government actors.

Early lessons from this ongoing process of strengthening CSO engagement and policy advocacy and institutional stakeholder engagement for the implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure Decision in Benin suggest that inclusive and effective CSO and community participation can significantly contribute to sustainable actions that address community needs while protecting nature, thereby maintaining social cohesion in a context vulnerable to hostilities, as is the case in countries in and around the Sahel.

An inclusive national CSO coalition, the Benin National CSO Coalition, which includes national networks of peasant organisations, pastoralist organisations, women’s land rights organisations, youth movements for environmental protection, an association of environmental lawyers and legal anthropologists, the national peace coalition, traditional authorities and the traditional justice system, has helped to bring to light nuances in the understanding and implementation of the concept of legitimate tenure that would otherwise be overlooked, leading to exclusion and frustration which contribute over time to conflicts that further undermine the restoration goals.

Based on these lessons, this report recommends that the 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. This is because CSOs can play a critical role in facilitating the meaningful participation of forest-dependent communities, pastoralists, women and other marginalised groups in decision-making processes, while seeking to address power imbalances and ensure that the interests and perspectives of these groups are integrated into national LDN commitments.

Key lessons for strengthening civil society participation within UNCCD and fostering the implementation of UNCCD decisions

Strengthening Civil Society Participation within UNCCD: Recommendations for global processes and national level implementation of UNCCD decisions

Background

Social participation in public policy making is a key factor in promoting more democratic governance. In the implementation of land management and restoration programmes, civil society often assumes a key role as a technical partner of Governments. To fulfil these crucial roles, civil society needs to have the space to articulate its positions in policy processes and programme design and implementation.

Objective

One of this study’s objectives is to propose avenues to further strengthen civil society participation within United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) processes. To that end, two complementary research approaches were pursued:

- ▶ a comparative analysis of opportunities and challenges of social participation in two different UN bodies, the UNCCD and the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (UNCFS).
- ▶ an in-depth analysis of civil society participation in the implementation of the UNCCD land tenure decisions at the national level in Benin.

Results

The UNCCD and the UNCFS both foresee an active role by civil society organizations in their respective processes; however, there are key differences between the two UN bodies regarding the precise nature of civil society participation.

More than 600 civil society organizations (CSOs) are accredited *observers* within the UNCCD. The Civil Society Panel (CSO Panel) coordinates the contributions by civil society to the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) and the Committee on the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). 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.

Within the UNCFS, civil society is organized through the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM). 11 CSIPM constituencies are *participants* in deliberation and negotiation processes of the UNCFS.

The CSO Panel is democratically elected by 600 accredited organizations, its functioning is supported by the UNCCD Secretariat and through CSO networks. The operational capacities of the CSO Panel depend strongly on the active support by the UNCCD Secretariat. The CSO Panel is elected every two years. The maximum duration of the term is two years, which creates problems of continuity and undermines the institutional memory of the CSO Panel.

The CSIPM Coordination Committee and the CSIPM Advisory Group Members to the UNCFS are elected by participants of their global constituencies and subregion. A fully autonomous and self-organized CSIPM secretariat ensures the operational capacities of the CSIPM. Members of the CSIPM Coordination Committee are elected every two years, the maximum duration of the term is four years. In practice, about half of the members are new members.

To achieve its Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) Targets, Benin focuses on its National Forests. The management regime is predominantly top-down, effective participation of legitimate tenure rights holders (as per UNCCD Decision 26/COP.14) is limited. As a result, violations of legitimate tenure rights occur. According to feedback by national CSOs, there is no formal space for CSO engagement with the UNCCD National Focal Point. Knowledge about UNCCD Decisions among CSOs is limited, systematic information is not provided by the relevant Ministry.

Selected recommendations

- ▶ Develop balanced rules to ensure continuity and rotation with the civil society spaces themselves. Continuity is key to ensure the institutional memory, rotation is key to ensure broad participation. The CSO Panel would benefit from a redesign to strengthen continuity.
- ▶ Establish an autonomous mechanism for social participation that is self-organized by civil society. This autonomous mechanism should have an independent secretariat to facilitate the necessary processes of self-organisation and participation in negotiations and deliberations, be it as active participants or observers.
- ▶ Defend and take care of the UN as a multilateral and democratic space. One specific recommendation is to open UNCCD COP contact groups to civil society observers.

- ▶ Foster the monitoring of decisions and guidelines, proposals in this regard should be developed through multi-actor processes.
- ▶ For the national level in Benin, CSO deliberations concluded by proposing the establishment of a framework for consultation and multi-actor dialogue on the peaceful co-management of natural resources within LDN programmes to inform national and global level processes.

Conclusion

We have shown that the adoption of the VGGTs, and subsequently of UNCCD Decision 26/COP14 and the Technical Guide (2022) provides new and exciting opportunities to address implementation issues more systematically at the national level. We also showed that the adoption of such progressive soft legal instruments, anchored in international human rights instruments, provides new tools for civil society organisations and communities to hold local, national and regional authorities accountable to forest-dependent communities, especially the most vulnerable, marginalised and excluded, in relation to LDN. The main question we raised was how to create a space for reflection and learning for national CSOs to understand how the VGGT and Decision 26/COP14 interact with alternative and competing governance frameworks; while at the same time monitoring the implementation of global policy instruments at the national level to report on best practices and context-specific challenges that can further inform global policy negotiations in UN policy forums. This space for reflection and learning at the national level is particularly important to understand how local, national and international levels of governance interact.

As a concrete recommendation emerging from the work in Benin, national CSOs and community representatives working on the land-environment nexus propose **the establishment of a framework for consultation and multi-actor dialogue on the peaceful co-management of natural resources** within LDN programmes, bringing together community representatives, CSOs (including those active in UN-level policy-making spaces such as the CSIPM and the UNCCD CSO Panel), representatives of various government ministries, the National Focal Point for the UNCCD, FAO country representatives, and any other relevant actors working on land rights and forest management. Lessons learned from the platform can be fed into national and international policy-making processes. Documented examples exist of such platforms supporting VGGT implementation exist for countries such as Sierra Leone and Mali.

Beyond inclusive platforms at the national level to strengthen the implementation of global policy instruments such as Decision 26/COP14 **our experience in Benin strongly suggests that CSOs at the national level should be supported to participate directly in the CSO processes at the UNCCD**. For CSOs and community representatives who are invited to watch the powerful decide their fate, talk of inclusion and broad social participation is often seen as misleading and only serves to reinforce structural inequalities in the governance of critical resources.

The Benin case study shows that CSOs, especially those that are constituency-based and constituency-led, have the potential to act as watchdogs and advocates for the rights and interests of marginalised communities, including forest-dependent communities. The engagement of CSOs and community representatives plays an important role in ensuring that decision-making processes related to the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets are transparent, participatory and inclusive. In this regard, the

continued engagement of CSOs could help bridge the gap between governments, local communities and other stakeholders to ensure that the voices of all relevant parties are heard, as CSOs could play a critical role in facilitating meaningful participation of forest-dependent communities, pastoralists, women and other marginalised groups in decision-making processes, while seeking to address power imbalances and ensure that the needs and perspectives of these groups are integrated into LDN commitments.

In conclusion, it can be said that, by actively involving CSOs and communities, the Government of Benin could benefit from their expertise, knowledge and experience on the ground, leading to more inclusive, effective and sustainable policies that protect the interests of the most marginalised. In their monitoring role, CSOs have the capacity to carry out independent assessments, collect data and monitor progress towards the effective implementation of the VGGTs and the UNCCD land tenure decision. In doing so, they provide objective information to policymakers and the public, highlighting areas that need attention, improvement, or corrective action. Through such engagement, CSOs help to ensure that LDN commitments are consistent with the principles of social justice and equity.

Recommendations for thematic collaboration on common priorities

These final sections aim to process the findings of the analysis into suggestions for two different domains: a) collaboration in the two different spaces on common thematic priorities; and b) ways to strengthen social participation in UNCCD and CFS. They also consider the relationships between the global and the national level in both domains.

A question for collaboration on common thematic priorities is: which priorities are key to constituencies of the two platforms, and could – according to the skewer metaphor – be more effectively addressed through strategic collaboration? The second Mentimeter survey during the Interplatform Dialogue asked participants the question on potential common priorities for collaboration:

Figure 5 Common priorities

capture of peasant, indigenous and feminist narratives, and the co-option of organisations through funding. A specific proposal could be to use the upcoming quadri-logue between the CFS and the three Rio Conventions to develop a joint strategy to advance agroecology in all four UN spaces, with a strong anchoring in the human right to food.

- ▶ **Governance:** advance democratic multilateralism grounded in human rights, with clear roles assigned to Member States as decision-makers and duty bearers, and effective and meaningful participation of rights holders' and their support organisations, safeguard against conflicts of interest, apply rules for corporate accountability, and address "skewers" such as multistakeholderism and the increasing corporate capture of governance in UN bodies. An initiative to establish robust safeguards against conflict of interest, as part of a broader corporate accountability strategy towards the UN, could involve specific collaboration between social participation spaces at the UNCCD and CFS.
- ▶ **Foster collaboration of participating organisations** in both UN spaces on topics of common interest, including land degradation and land restoration, the right to food, agroecology and food sovereignty, biodiversity, climate, gender and social justice, finance, and their connections to the global agendas in UNCCD and CFS, to address the "skewer" of fragmentation within civil society at all levels. A specific example could be joint work on the UNCCD Gender Action plan and the application of the recently adopted CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment.

Recommendations to strengthen social participation in the CFS and UNCCD

Based on the previous analysis, we present the following recommendation to enhance social participation in UNCCD and CFS. They embrace the more internal part on **how to strengthen civil society and Indigenous Peoples' spaces**, and the more external part on **how to create more space for civil society and Indigenous Peoples' voices within both UN bodies**.

How to strengthen the civil society and Indigenous Peoples' spaces?

- ▶ **Ensure broad participation by rights holders' organisations:** promote and support the active and leading participation of rights holders organisations from all constituencies connected to the mandate of the UN spaces, especially small-scale food producers, social movements, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, women's organisations, youth, local communities, and other historically discriminated social groups;
- ▶ **Establish safeguards for inclusive, open, diverse and safe space** through effective mechanisms to ensure that common principles and values are upheld in internal communications and processes, and through precise instruments and procedures to prevent, process and resolve situations that constrain the openness, inclusiveness or safety of the space.
- ▶ **Develop balanced rules on continuity and rotation** to ensure participation and Institutional memory. While rotation rules are important to ensure broad participation, they can also present a continuity problem when the persons in charge have to leave after two years. A system of alternates appointed in one period to take over in the next period and/or other

forms of assisted transition can be helpful. A key feature is the responsibility of the outgoing representatives to provide a thorough handover to the successor.

- ▶ **Conduct capacity building on process facilitation among participating organisations, active representatives and future leadership.** Acting in open, inclusive and highly diverse global civil society and Indigenous Peoples' spaces as a facilitator, participant or speaker is a highly complex task. Specific training is recommended, not only for youth and newcomers but to gain awareness and skills in active listening, self-reflection and self-limitation, facilitation of participative spaces and synthesizing the priorities and key concepts of a collective discussion into a summary or statement.

In order to create more space for social participation in CFS and UNCCD, the following elements could be considered:

- ▶ **Strengthening the principle of autonomous and self-organised participation** of civil society and Indigenous Peoples: Since many UN bodies either only partially accept this principle, or try to limit it where it is established, its defence poses a challenge for the entire UN system. The importance of respecting the principle of autonomy and self-organisation as pre-conditions for a meaningful and democratic social participation should be explained and underlined in discussions at the UN level, including in UNCCD and CFS, but also at the national and local levels. A first task is to defend the achievements that are already in place. A second is to build on what is already there, identify mechanism for improvements or new breakthroughs. This will depend on a realistic analysis of feasibility, risks and power relations, the existence of potential allies among Member States, and the strategies for incremental change that are being discussed as part of the priorities of the participating civil society and Indigenous Peoples organisations.
- ▶ **Strategy development, advocacy, and alliance building:** While it is easy to say that long-term strategies are needed, the day-to-day dynamics of UN spaces, continued uncertainties, unforeseen changes and major geopolitical tensions make it difficult to balance a short-term reactive and more visionary proactive agendas. However, events like the joint CFS High-Level Forum on the Right to Food and the three Rio Conventions can be used to platform strategies that promote agroecology. Processes on joint priorities, such as on the implementation of the Gender Action Plan/Gender Guidelines or the Land Tenure Decision/Land Tenure Guidelines, can offer new modes of strategic cooperation at the national level and develop more cohesive strategies that bridge the national and global levels.
- ▶ **Promoting the implementation and monitoring of decisions and guidelines:** an effective system to promote the implementation of decisions taken, and to monitor their application to assess impact and learn from successes and shortcomings, is key for both the CFS and UNCCD. There is broad consensus that existing processes on uptake and monitoring within both bodies require significant improvements. The CFS VGGT and the UNCCD Land Decision offer outstanding examples for learning about and strengthening the mechanisms in both UN bodies. Both social participation platforms, with the involvement of Member States and the Secretariats of the CFS and the UNCCD could help to develop new proposals that could be brought to the attention of the respective decision-making bodies.
- ▶ **Operational capacity and financial security:** whatever the setting in a specific UN space, it is vital to have independent secretarial capacities to facilitate internal processes and interface activities. These operational capacities include a secretariat linked to an autonomous mechanism and require stable and sustainable financial support from public sources for

staff, interpreting services, translation, and travel to ensure the physical participation of delegates in meetings.

- ▶ The recommendation here is to establish an **autonomous mechanism for social participation** that is self-organised by constituencies, and acknowledged by the UN body, as is the case with the CFS. The provision of public funding for its functioning should be regarded as an integral duty of the respective UN body and an indicator of seriousness about social participation. It is also important that donors to such participation mechanisms fully understand and recognise these spaces as autonomous and self-organised. An inter-platform discussion on principles for funding civil society and Indigenous Peoples' participation in UN spaces could be a concrete follow-up idea.
- ▶ **Defending the UN as a multilateral and democratic space:** the fragility, ineffectiveness and failures of the UN and its institutions is evident to anybody who has been working in this environment, considering the huge, multilayered and intertwined crises humanity faces. However, abandoning the UN system might not lead to better realities. To effectively defend and, at some point profoundly reform and rebuild the UN towards more democratic multilateralism, a deep and collectively shared understanding is needed among interested organisations that care about the UN and its responsiveness to global, national and local realities. The Inter-platform dialogue format may serve as a practical methodology to learn and strengthen collaboration on common concerns.

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Annex: Concept Note of the Inter-platform Dialogue

Proposal for Inter-platform Dialogue between Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' organizations engaged with the UNCCD and the CFS

Jointly Organised by the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security and the CSO Panel of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and Drynet

Context:

Longstanding multiple crises have made clear that neither the current economic system nor the multilateral system are able to systematically address the structural issues at the root of today's unjust and unsustainable global economic model, with food systems at its core.

The Global Food Governance Working Group (GFG WG) of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has recognised that a systemic understanding of challenges faced by the international community is urgently needed, and that such systemic learning will need cross-sectoral exchange and reflection.

In the case of the food domain, it is obvious that it is intrinsically linked to other domains such as health, land, water, desertification, climate, biodiversity, finance, corporate capture, trade, etc. The multiple and interrelated crises we face remind us that we need inter-sectoral dialogues and cooperation among social movements, Indigenous Peoples and civil society from all these fields, and to overcome the fragmentation reproduced by the UN bodies themselves.

Therefore, the CSIPM has initiated a **sequence of inter-platform dialogues** with other similar civil society and Indigenous' peoples interface spaces with the United Nations. The proposed dialogues will include moments of mutual reflection between the CSIPM and the platforms on finance for development, health, desertification, climate, biodiversity, social solidarity economy, and corporate accountability.

The objective of these inter-platform dialogues is to exchange experiences and mutually learn from the analysis of others, to identify common features of concerns and challenges, but also common priorities and areas of possible collaboration across platforms and UN spaces. This exercise could feed into the reflection on the changes needed to ensure that the UN system is better aligned in the context of human-rights based global governance.

Proposed dialogue between the CSOs engaged in the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the CSIPM

The specific dialogue between interested organizations from the UNCCD CSO community and the CSIPM aims to contribute to this broader process of inter-platform learning and collaboration. It shall serve to exchange experiences among organizations engaged with UNCCD and CFS, to mutually learn from the analysis of others, and to identify common concerns and common priorities in both UN spaces.

It is suggested that the format of the dialogue will be a 3-hour online conversation in three languages (EN-FR-ES), co-facilitated by one member of the UNCCD CSO community and one member of the CSIPM, and will address, within an open and inclusive exchange several key questions of mutual interest in three areas.

The three proposed areas for this specific dialogue between the UNCCD CSOs and CSIPM are: 1) Experiences with effective and meaningful participation; 2) Land tenure and other priorities; 3) Proposals for improvements and collaboration.

Area 1: Exchange on history, achievements and challenges in effective and meaningful participation

- a. What have been the key achievements of civil society within the context of the UNCCD and CFS?
- b. What do you see as the main problems and challenges regarding your area of engagement, especially in the way you are able to participate in the policy processes?
- c. How do you organise participation and facilitate the articulation of a diversity of actors from different territories into your positioning towards the UNCCD and CFS? Do you privilege the voice of most affected constituencies and, if so, how?'
- d. How to you promote the uptake and application of positive policy outcomes by actors on the ground?

Area 2: Exchange on common priorities

- a. Land and natural resources: both in CFS and UNCCD, the issue of land tenure has been central. How do we assess the processes of engagement, the achievements of the community, the challenges and experiences with policy making regarding land tenure and their implementation?
- b. What have been the main collective political priorities of your agenda? How important are topics like agroecology, human rights, gender, inequalities, ecological and climate crises, or corporate accountability in your space?

Area 3: Proposals for improvements towards the future

- a. What needs to be strengthened or changed towards ensuring the effective and meaningful participation and impact of your constituencies in the context of the UNCCD and CFS? Which are your proposals for the future?
- b. Where do you see a need and opportunities for further exchange and collaboration with other platforms, on which topics?

Methodology and schedule:

The methodological approach is that the first and the third area will be discussed in the online plenary, while the second area will be explored in working groups.

On Area 1, there would be an initial input from a delegate from the UNCCD CSO community and CSIPM/CFS (around 7 minutes each), which should include proposals for improving collective understanding of the issues and challenges and how to address these more effectively. These initial presentations will be followed by 35 minutes of collective reflection.

Area 2 will start with 3-4 parallel Working Groups. Since many participants can contribute to these discussions from their own experiences, it will be sufficient that previously appointed facilitators will give a very short introduction to the topic and the questions to be addressed by each working group (within 35minutes). Following the group work and a a 10 minutes break, the rapporteurs appointed by each of the Working Groups will share a 3 minutes summary of each group’s discussion in plenary.

Area 3 would then follow, in a format similar to Area 1, with an initial input from a delegate from the UNCCD CSO community and CSIPM (around 7 minutes each), followed by an interactive brainstorming of key words from participants (using the WordCloud Tool) on the two questions of Area 3. An open exchange among participants can deepen this discussion in different directions, and proposals for future engagement will be invited and tabled.

A Wrap-up at the end by the co-facilitators will provide a preliminary summary of important aspects of the discussion and close the event.

In order to make the dialogue as accessible as possible to different time zones, it is suggested to be held between 2:30 and 5:30pm Rome/Bonn time. It will also be recorded.

2:30 pm	Welcome by Facilitators – One delegate from CSO panel, one delegate from CSIPM
2:40 pm	Area 1: Inputs from delegates with experience from both platforms (2x7 minutes), open exchange among participants (35min).
3:30 pm	Area 2: Working group sessions on the two questions (35min). 10 Minutes break (between 3:05 and 3:15pm), before coming back to Plenary where rapporteurs will report from Working groups (15 minutes)
4:30 pm	Area 3: Inputs from delegates with experience from both platforms (2x7 minutes), interactive WordCloud exercise on key concepts, followed by an open exchange among participants (35min)
5:20-5:30 pm	Wrap-up and Closing



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