



**United Nations**  
Convention to Combat  
Desertification

**Evaluation on the effectiveness of the CSO  
participation in the UNCCD**

**FINAL REPORT**

**July 2017**

This independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the CSO participation in the UNCCD aimed to assess changes in CSO involvement (the extent of achieving results) since the establishment of the CSO panel, and to clarify how the evolving facilities for CSO involvement contribute to the changes in CSO involvement. The evaluation was limited to the role and activities of the CSOs in the context of the intergovernmental UNCCD process, focusing primarily on the involvement/influence concerning the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies.

*This evaluation was commissioned by the UNCCD Evaluation Office and authored by Wayne Bacale in February-July 2017. The views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the UNCCD secretariat or the Global Mechanism.*

## Executive Summary

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a key role at major United Nations (UN) conferences. They are indispensable partners for UN efforts at the country level and often consulted on policy and programme matters. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) promotes the active involvement of CSOs in the implementation of the Convention at all levels. Representatives from CSOs that are accredited to the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) may directly participate in its sessions.

The overall objective of supporting the active participation of CSOs in the UNCCD process and in the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies derives from the articles of the Convention – civil society is the eventual key beneficiary and also the key agent of the Convention implementation.

In the past years, significant progress has been made in supporting the CSO participation in the UNCCD, particularly through the creation of a CSO panel by the UNCCD COP in 2009. This panel was originally established to select CSO representatives that will be financially sponsored to attend the official UNCCD meetings, but over time its mandate expanded to include matters such as facilitating consultations among the CSOs, monitoring the participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings, and reporting to the COP on its activities.

In 2011, the UNCCD COP decided that in its 2017 meeting, the COP will undertake an overall review of the results achieved with the revised procedures for accreditation of CSOs in terms of the increased effectiveness of their involvement in the implementation of the Convention. In 2015, as the CSO panel had functioned in its expanded composition and mandate for several years, COP 12 recognized its work in facilitating CSO involvement and stressed the importance of its continuation. It requested the secretariat and the CSO panel to make proposals to the COP Bureau on ways to support the work of the panel and expand its membership, and invited Parties and other key stakeholders to contribute to ensuring wider participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings and processes, and to support the work of the CSO panel.

COP 13 that will be held in September 2017 will look at the CSO involvement from various perspectives: the performance of the CSO panel in implementing its tasks, possible ways to support the work of the panel and expand its membership, and an overall review of the results achieved with the revised procedures for CSO accreditation in terms of the increased effectiveness of their involvement in the implementation of the Convention. This evaluation is mostly supporting the last topic on the results achieved, with focus on CSO involvement in the intergovernmental UNCCD process and close linkages to the other two topics.

This evaluation aimed to:

- (1) Assess changes in CSO involvement (the extent of achieving results) since the establishment of the first version of the CSO panel after COP 9; and
- (2) Clarify how the evolving “facilities” for CSO involvement (particularly the CSO panel) contribute to the changes in CSO involvement.

The evaluation was limited to the role and activities of the CSOs in the context of the intergovernmental UNCCD process, focusing primarily on the involvement/influence concerning the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies, but covering also events and processes that directly

derive from COP decisions, such as various working groups or inputs to particular conferences. CSO involvement in national/local level processes and implementation concerning the UNCCD was touched upon very little, only as an aspect of the intergovernmental process.

### **Summary of the findings**

More than 300 CSOs have been accredited to the UNCCD and together, they represent a rich and diverse experience relevant to UNCCD mandates. The information that was collected during this evaluation shows that the CSO participation in the UNCCD has evolved and is leading to increasing achievements. The CSO priorities and perspectives are now more visible in the UNCCD process than earlier, there are new means for information-sharing among the accredited CSOs, and communication between the UNCCD CSO community and other stakeholders has improved. This is reflected also in the feedback received from those national delegates that were contacted for this evaluation: they recognised and acknowledged the importance of the CSOs participation in and inputs to the UNCCD process. The CSO panel has played a vital role in coordinating and monitoring CSO collaboration under the UNCCD, and the stakeholders that were consulted for this evaluation largely agreed that the work of the CSO Panel has been relevant, timely and appropriate.

### **Key conclusions and recommendations**

*CSO participation in the UNCCD remains relevant, providing valuable inputs to UNCCD processes, and the CSO Panel has improved the visibility of the priorities of the civil society in this context.* Ensuring that the CSO expertise as well as their needs and proposals, particularly of those CSOs that work directly on land use matters, are brought into the attention of the COP continues to be vitally important for the UNCCD decision-making process, for targeting policies and actions in an effective manner. Similarly important is to deliver information about the decisions and exchanges under the UNCCD to CSOs. The CSO Panel has improved the visibility of the priorities of the civil society and the inclusion of these priorities in the UNCCD decision-making at the COP level. It has been instrumental also in advocating for CSO priorities in other UNCCD processes, such as the SPI.

*Inputs of the accredited CSOs to the UNCCD process tend to focus on the global level, with only limited reflection in their work at national/local levels.* The participation of accredited CSOs tends to be limited to providing inputs to the COP, the CRIC and the CST. It seems that many, even most, accredited CSOs do not yet actively promote and use at national/local level approaches and information deriving from the UNCCD process. Similarly, while national focal points and other “political” stakeholders acknowledge the importance of CSO participation in the UNCCD process, their collaboration with the accredited CSOs seems to remain low at the national level.

*Communication is vital to ensure that relevant information is timely disseminated and knowledge is properly managed.* Several social media platforms are used to ensure proper dissemination of information to the accredited CSOs of UNCCD matters and particularly the work of the CSO panel. However, the evaluation findings point toward a need to improve communication. Pre-COP meetings among accredited CSOs can be used to streamline CSO approaches and agree on joint positioning for promoting CSO priorities and defending their shared interests at the COP. Furthermore, a mechanism to improve communication between the national constituents and the accredited CSOs, as well as facilitation of dialogue with other civil society players such as the scientific community, is called for.

*The role of the CSOs in the UNCCD, including that of the CSO Panel, is evolving. Better clarity on the CSO Panel roles and responsibilities, possibly in the form of operational guidelines or terms of reference, would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of CSO participation in the UNCCD. The functioning of the Panel, fast start of each new composition of the Panel, its cooperation with the accredited CSOs and other key stakeholders as well as its communication could be greatly facilitated by operational guidelines, which would clarify the working modalities of the Panel and procedural matters for CSO participation in the UNCCD process. A (time-bound) strategic plan outlining the CSO priorities and possibly also the need for external support could be prepared as part of the guidelines.*

The following actions are recommended for further improving the effectiveness of CSO participation in the UNCCD:

*Recommendation 1: An operational guideline or terms of reference, including a time-bound strategic plan, for CSO participation in the UNCCD and the functioning of the CSO Panel should be developed.*

This guideline should: 1) clarify the role of the CSOs in the UNCCD; 2) present detailed terms of reference for the CSO Panel; 3) include a time-bound strategic plan that describes the priorities of CSO participation; and 4) indicate the modalities of financing CSO activities.

*Recommendation 2: A UNCCD CSO communication plan should be developed.*

The CSO Panel, with assistance from the UNCCD secretariat, should develop a communication plan involving the accredited CSOs. This plan should define why CSO communication is needed, what to communicate, how to communicate and who the target audiences are. It could also identify who should be involved in communication and when/how often specific CSO communication activities should be carried out.

*Recommendation 3: The UNCCD secretariat should continue to support effective participation of accredited CSOs in the UNCCD process at the global, regional and national levels, paying particular attention on: 1) actively engaging new CSOs to become involved in the UNCCD, so as to broaden the substantive basis and influence of the UNCCD CSO community; and, 2) facilitating follow-up of CSO activities to deepen the impact.*

In terms of engaging new CSOs, the secretariat could in particular support the involvement of bigger, politically more influential international CSOs. On the follow-up, the secretariat could assist the CSO Panel in providing guidance and technical support to the accredited CSOs for operationalising COP decisions in their national and local level activities.

## Background

Established in 1994, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is the sole legally binding international agreement linking the environment and development to sustainable land management. Its 10-Year Strategy states as the vision "to forge a global partnership to reverse and prevent desertification/land degradation and to mitigate the effects of drought in affected areas in order to support poverty reduction and environmental sustainability". The Convention's 196 Parties work together to improve the living conditions for people in areas affected by land degradation, maintain and restore the land and soil productivity, and to mitigate the effects of drought. The UNCCD is particularly committed to a bottom-up approach, encouraging the participation of local people in combating desertification and land degradation (UNCCD, 2017).

### Role of the civil society organizations

All through the United Nations system, an increasingly global civil society participates in proactive and engaged ways to the work of UN offices, programmes and agencies, making the UN both a counterpart and a witness to its contribution. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) are more and more UN system partners and constitute a valuable link for the UN to civil society and "people out there". CSOs play a key role at major United Nations conferences, they are indispensable partners for UN efforts at the country level, and they are consulted on UN policy and programme matters.

UNCCD promotes the active involvement of CSOs in the implementation of the Convention at all levels, and representatives from CSOs that are accredited to the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) may directly participate in its sessions. More specifically, the CSO has a prominent role in the text of the UNCCD, both as beneficiaries and as active agents of implementation. Article 2 ('Objective') highlights the improvement of living conditions in particular at the community level, article 3 ('Principles') calls for the development of cooperation involving, among others, communities, non-governmental organizations and landholders, and article 10 ('National action programmes') underlines the importance of effective participation of non-governmental organizations and local populations, particularly resource users including farmers, pastoralists and their representative organizations, in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation; to mention just a few examples.

In 2009, COP 9 decided on the establishment of a panel to select CSO representatives that will be financially sponsored to attend the official UNCCD meetings. The following COP 10, held in 2011, decided to expand the CSO membership, modified its operational modalities and entrusted the selection panel with the additional tasks of (a) facilitating consultations among civil society organizations between COP sessions; (b) monitoring the participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings in close consultation with the Bureau of the CRIC; and (c) reporting to the COP through the secretariat at the conclusion of the term of its mandate.

This COP further decided that COP 13 in 2017 will undertake an overall review of the results achieved with the revised procedures for accreditation of civil society organizations in terms of the increased effectiveness of their involvement in the implementation of the Convention.

In 2015, as the CSO panel had functioned in its expanded composition and mandate for several years, COP 12 recognized its work in facilitating CSO involvement and stressed the importance of its

continuation. It requested the secretariat and the CSO panel to make proposals to the COP Bureau on ways to support the work of the panel and expand its membership, and invited Parties and other key stakeholders to contribute to ensuring wider participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings and processes, and to support the work of the CSO panel. The panel was requested, through the secretariat, to report to COP 13 on the implementation of its tasks during the biennium 2016-2017. The Convention secretariat was also requested to report to the same COP, with focus on the action taken to implement the COP 12 decision.

COP 13 on September 2017 will look at the CSO involvement from various perspectives: the performance of the CSO panel in implementing its tasks, possible ways to support the work of the panel and expand its membership, and the results achieved in terms of increased effectiveness of the CSO involvement in the implementation of the Convention.

## Evaluation objectives

Of the different perspectives presented above, this evaluation aims to support the consideration of the last item, with focus on the results achieved by CSO involvement in the intergovernmental UNCCD process and close linkages to the other two topics. More specifically, the evaluation aims to

- (1) assess changes in CSO involvement (the extent of achieving results) since the establishment of the first version of the CSO panel after COP 9; and
- (2) clarify how the evolving “facilities” for CSO involvement (particularly the CSO panel) contribute to the changes in CSO involvement.

The evaluation is loosely built around the following evaluation questions:

1. What is the profile of accredited CSO?
2. How has the CSO work under the UNCCD been communicated among the accredited CSOs?
3. How clear are the goals and objectives for CSO involvement, and is there any indication of achieving them?
4. How relevant have the CSO outputs been vis-à-vis the UNCCD aims and priorities? How relevant have these outputs been vis-à-vis the aims and priorities of the participating CSOs? How about beyond these CSOs?
5. How well have the CSO panel and other facilities for CSO cooperation under the UNCCD supported the delivery of outputs and their use? What has been the influence of recent changes to these facilities?

## Methods and tools

This evaluation on the effectiveness of CSO involvement in the UNCCD process was limited to the role and activities of the CSOs in the context of the intergovernmental UNCCD process. The focus was primarily on the involvement/influence of the accredited CSOs concerning the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies, but the evaluation also took into account some events and processes that derive directly from the COP decisions, most notably the Science-Policy Interface. CSO involvement in national/local level processes and implementation concerning the UNCCD was touched upon only as an aspect on the intergovernmental process.

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The evaluation used mostly qualitative data, with a purposive selection of key informants and a convenience sampling of accredited CSO members. 65 people were consulted in the course of the evaluation, including the former and current CSO Panel members, members of other accredited CSOs, national focal points and staff of the UNCCD secretariat. Data was collected through interviews and an online survey (in English, French and Spanish) targeting the accredited CSOs. The evaluation involved also study of relevant reports and other available documents, including those of the profiles of the accredited CSO members. The attribution of change and basis for assessing the achievement of results of CSO participation relied on the establishment of a “theory of change” (presented in the next section), and triangulation of data collected during the evaluation.

Before the completion of the evaluation, a summary of main findings and preliminary conclusions/recommendations was sent for the consideration of the CSO Panel and discussed with the secretariat and Global Mechanism staff working on the issues covered in the evaluation. The purpose of this consultation was to have a ‘quality check’ of the findings, and to generate initial feedback on the main content of the evaluation. The feedback received was used to further specify the findings, and it also contributed to the completion of the conclusions and recommendations.

### **Theory of change for CSO participation in the UNCCD process**

The overall objective of supporting the active participation of CSOs in the UNCCD process and in the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies derives from the articles of the Convention – civil society is the eventual key beneficiary and also the key agent of the Convention implementation. Ensuring that civil society needs and proposals, particularly those of land resource users, are brought into the attention of the COP is of vital importance for UNCCD decision-making processes, for targeting policies and actions in an effective manner. Similarly important is to deliver information about the decisions and exchanges under the UNCCD to CSOs, for advancing the implementation of these decisions and promoting the use of available knowledge.

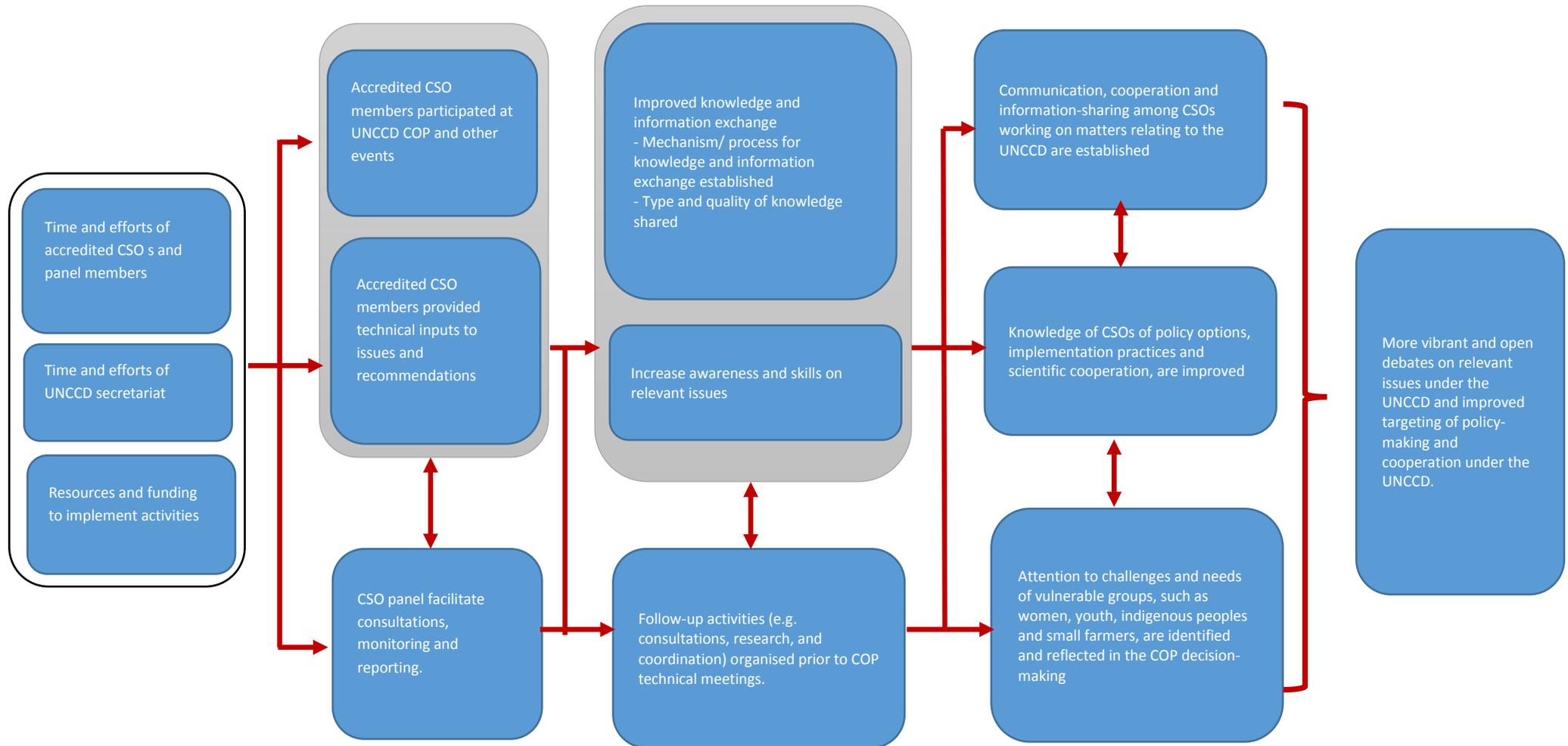
Most COP decisions mentioning CSOs do not specify the expected results of supporting CSO involvement beyond generally stating “to ensure effectiveness of its input in the deliberations of the COP”. However, various exchanges during the COP and its subsidiary body meetings have clarified what are, or could be, among the results of improved CSO involvement in the UNCCD process. They include the following:

- Improved knowledge of CSOs of policy options, implementation practices and scientific cooperation, which can increase their effectiveness at the national/local levels with regard to influencing decision-making as well as designing and implementing field projects;
- Increased communication, cooperation and information-sharing among CSOs working on matters relating to the UNCCD;
- Improved availability of data and best practices in the UNCCD process deriving from CSO inputs;
- Increased attention to challenges and needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples and small farmers, in the COP decision-making; and
- Improved targeting of policy-making and cooperation under the UNCCD.

A suggestion for causal relationships between the mentioned results in the form of a ‘theory of change’ is presented in figure 1. This theory of change served this evaluation as the basis for assessing the extent of results delivery for the CSO participation in the UNCCD process.

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**Theory of change for the CSO participation in the UNCCD process**



# Key findings

Accreditation of CSOs to the UNCCD process brings these organisations, and through them also the constituencies that they represent, together around a shared interest – sustainable land management. This evaluation investigated the extent to which the accredited CSOs work towards a common goal by looking at their profile and the reasoning behind their interest in the UNCCD.

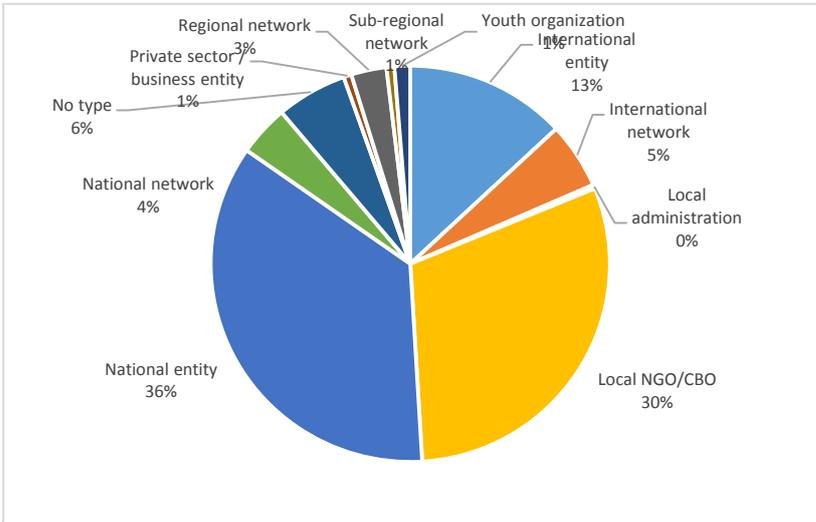
## Profile of accredited CSOs

CSOs play many and varied roles in development cooperation. They influence and monitor development policies and practices, provide basic services to poor and marginalised communities, respond to humanitarian emergencies, promote the recognition of specific groups and their rights, and contribute to public awareness of development issues. Development organisations and the donor community tend to value CSOs as partners for their grass-root local knowledge, technical expertise and political/governmental independence that often materializes in advocacy on important but sensitive matters.

UNCCD promotes the active involvement of CSOs in the implementation of the Convention at all levels, and representatives from CSOs that are accredited to the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) may directly participate in its sessions. As of March 2017, 314 CSOs were recorded as either accredited to the COP or in the process of doing so, to be confirmed at COP 13 in September 2017.

According to the UNCCD CSO database, two-thirds of the CSOs in the UNCCD records are either local (30%) or national (36%) non-governmental or community-based organisations. In other words, large majority of the CSOs involved in the UNCCD process operates primarily at the national or local levels, where the concrete implementation of the UNCCD is supposed to take place. Such CSO basis represents a high potential for successful delivery of the UNCCD global agenda priorities and experiences to the national and grassroots level. It also points to a significant reserve of national/local knowledge of approaches, policies and experiences on UNCCD matters, which can enrich and influence decision-making and debates under the UNCCD. The case studies on the UNCCD website<sup>1</sup> provide good examples of such knowledge.

## Type of CSOs

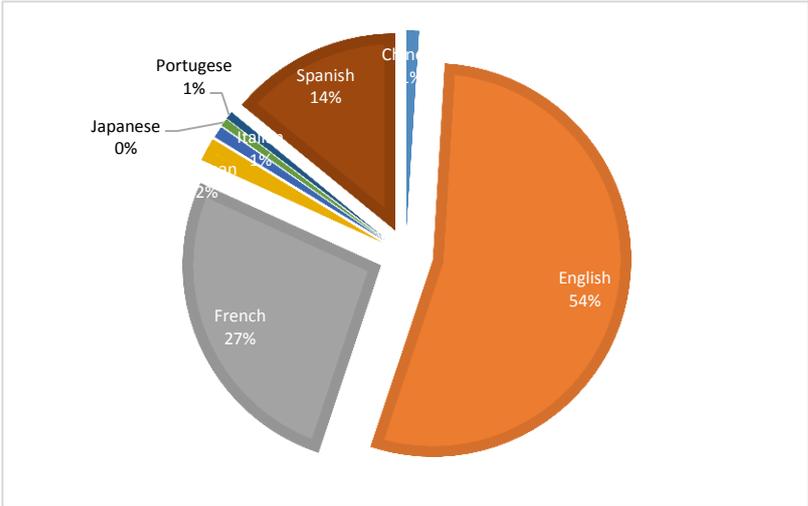


<sup>1</sup> <http://www2.unccd.int/convention/civil-society-organizations>

Majority of the accredited CSO members are directly involved on advocacy, gender, grassroots level implementation of project activities, fundraising, research, training, public awareness, and capacity building. They work on activities related to UNCCD in the areas of adaptation & vulnerability, forestry, public health, agriculture & pastoralism, food security, migration & overpopulation, science & technology, mitigation, trade, soil degradation, prevention, land use change, UN Convention synergy, sustainable land management and water & sanitation, among others.

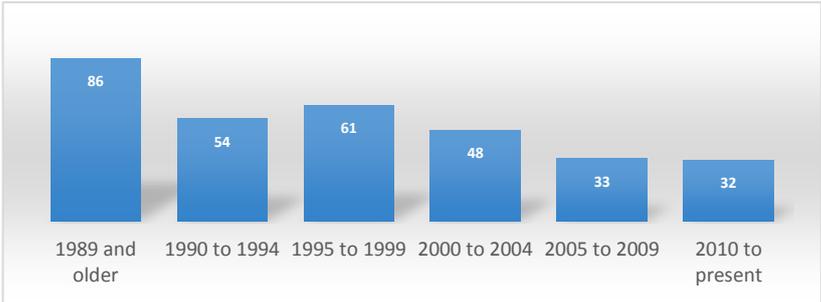
More than half (54%) of the accredited CSOs uses English; while 36% uses French and 14%<sup>2</sup> uses Spanish as the working language. This implies that English-only communication may not reach all CSOs.

**Language of accredited CSOs**



It is also worth noting that two-thirds of the accredited CSOs were established more than two decades ago. It is likely that many of them have acquired extensive expertise, contacts and experiences in their respective areas of work.

**Year established**



This evaluation did not investigate the financial aspects of the CSOs participating in the UNCCD processes beyond looking at the support provided through the secretariat. This support is mainly for ensuring a minimum CSO representation at the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies, and for the functioning of the CSO panel. It is covered entirely by voluntary contributions, and has been in the last years secured largely by one donor (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation)

<sup>2</sup> To be noted: some CSOs work in more than one language.

through multi-year agreements with the secretariat. These longer-term commitments have enabled the CSO panel to plan and organise its work without having to constantly look for new funding.

**Motivation**

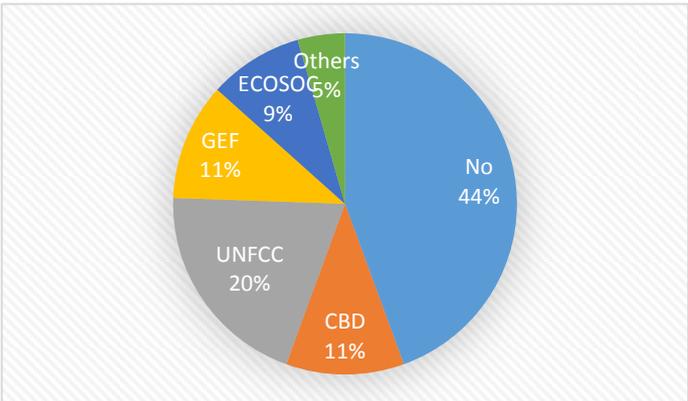
Half of the CSOs responding to the online survey under this evaluation stated a better understanding of activities and policies concerning desertification, land degradation and drought as the main motivator for participation in the UNCCD process. Nearly one-third named better capacity to influence national and regional policies concerning desertification, land degradation and drought as an important reason, while less than 20% had applied for accreditation in order to access funding. It seems that many CSOs see the UNCCD as a platform to access information, experiences and skills that are directly relevant to their work at national/local levels. Relatively few of the responding CSOs considered the opportunities for new cooperation partners or other contacts as important reasons for participation in the UNCCD process, and hardly any of them applied for accreditation in order to influence the UNCCD agenda.

**Reasons for participation in the UNCCD process (max two choices per responding CSO)**

Better understanding of activities and policies concerning desertification, land degradation and drought	<b>51%</b>
Access to funding and projects concerning desertification, land degradation and drought	<b>18%</b>
Better capacity to influence national or regional policies and activities concerning desertification, land degradation and drought	<b>31%</b>
Relationships and cooperation with other CSOs that are accredited to the UNCCD	<b>10%</b>
Networking with other UNCCD meeting participants	<b>15%</b>
Influence in the UNCCD policy agenda	<b>3%</b>
Other	<b>3%</b>

More than half (56%) of the responding CSOs were affiliated with other similar networks, particularly those under the other two Rio Conventions, which implies that many CSOs accredited to the UNCCD work on sustainable development in a broader setting, using different processes and mechanisms. Equally interesting is the finding that 44% of the responding CSOs were involved only in the UNCCD - this indicates strong substantive focus on the UNCCD issues, but may be translated also as a limited experience in contributing to intergovernmental processes .

**Membership with other networks**



## Coordination and communication

A critical factor for an effective input of the CSO community to the UNCCD process is the continued enthusiasm and commitment of independent CSOs and their ability to work as a network to achieve shared goals. This evaluation assessed the mechanisms under the UNCCD to encourage CSO collaboration and coordination and to support learning and sharing.

According to the online survey under this evaluation, practically all CSOs that responded stated to have clear objectives for their participation in the UNCCD process. The survey results concerning the reasons behind CSO participation (see the section above on motivation) imply that often these objectives are about the development of the expertise of the participating CSOs on desertification, land degradation and drought, either as better understanding of related activities and policies and/or better capacity to influence related national or regional policies and activities.

The responding CSOs largely confirmed that they coordinate with other accredited CSOs and participate in the preparation of joint CSO inputs. Their replies were more diverse when asked whether the accredited CSOs share similar aims for their participation; and whether their priority concerns were easily included in the CSO inputs to the UNCCD process. It seems that there is still work to be done in making the CSO collaboration for the UNCCD process more inclusive and in enabling a broader range of CSO views to be heard at the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies.

### *Survey results concerning CSO coordination and joint inputs*

<b>Accredited CSOs' perspectives</b>	<b>Av Score</b> <i>(5 points as 'fully agree')</i>
The CSO [that is responding to the survey] has clear objectives for its participation in the UNCCD process.	4.525
The CSO coordinates with other accredited CSOs in preparing for and participating in the UNCCD process	4
The CSO participates in the preparation of CSO inputs to the COP, CRIC or CST meetings, work of the SPI, or other UNCCD meetings or processes	3.95
Most accredited CSOs share similar aims for their participation in the UNCCD process, which makes it easy to prepare joint CSO inputs	3.6
Priority concerns of the CSO are easily included in the CSO inputs to the UNCCD process	3.675

## The role of the CSO panel

In 2009, COP 9 decided on the establishment of a panel to select CSO representatives that will be financially sponsored to attend the official UNCCD meetings, following criteria that would improve the geographical, gender and expertise balance as well as representativeness and turnover of CSO participation in these meetings. The panel consisted of two members of civil society networks and two members of the Convention secretariat.

The following COP 10, held in 2011, decided to expand the CSO membership in the selection panel to five (one from each Regional Implementation Annexes of the Convention), modified its operational modalities and entrusted the selection panel with the additional tasks of (a) facilitating consultations among civil society organizations between COP sessions; (b) monitoring the participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings in close consultation with the Bureau of the CRIC; and (c) reporting to the COP through the secretariat at the conclusion of the term of its mandate.

From thereon, the CSO panel has coordinated technical inputs and conversation among the accredited CSOs within the region of each CSO panel member and provided them with updates on the UNCCD developments and follow-up activities. It has developed a work plan to ensure follow-up to relevant COP decisions and to coordinate CSO preparatory activities for the COPs.

The panel works either online or face-to-face; for example, from February 2016 to May 2017 the panel held three meetings and had eight telephone conferences, in addition to continuous online exchanges among the members. It also consulted with the Executive Secretary, country Parties representatives and other relevant stakeholders.

One of the focus areas of the panel has been communication. So far, it has issued five CSO panel E-Newsletters and nine issues of land degradation neutrality newsletters, and participated in or supported various UNCCD communication activities such as the World Day to Combat Desertification. The panel members have been in constant contact with their constituencies in order to ensure that various civil society perspectives are reflected in its work, and it has also consulted with national focal points.

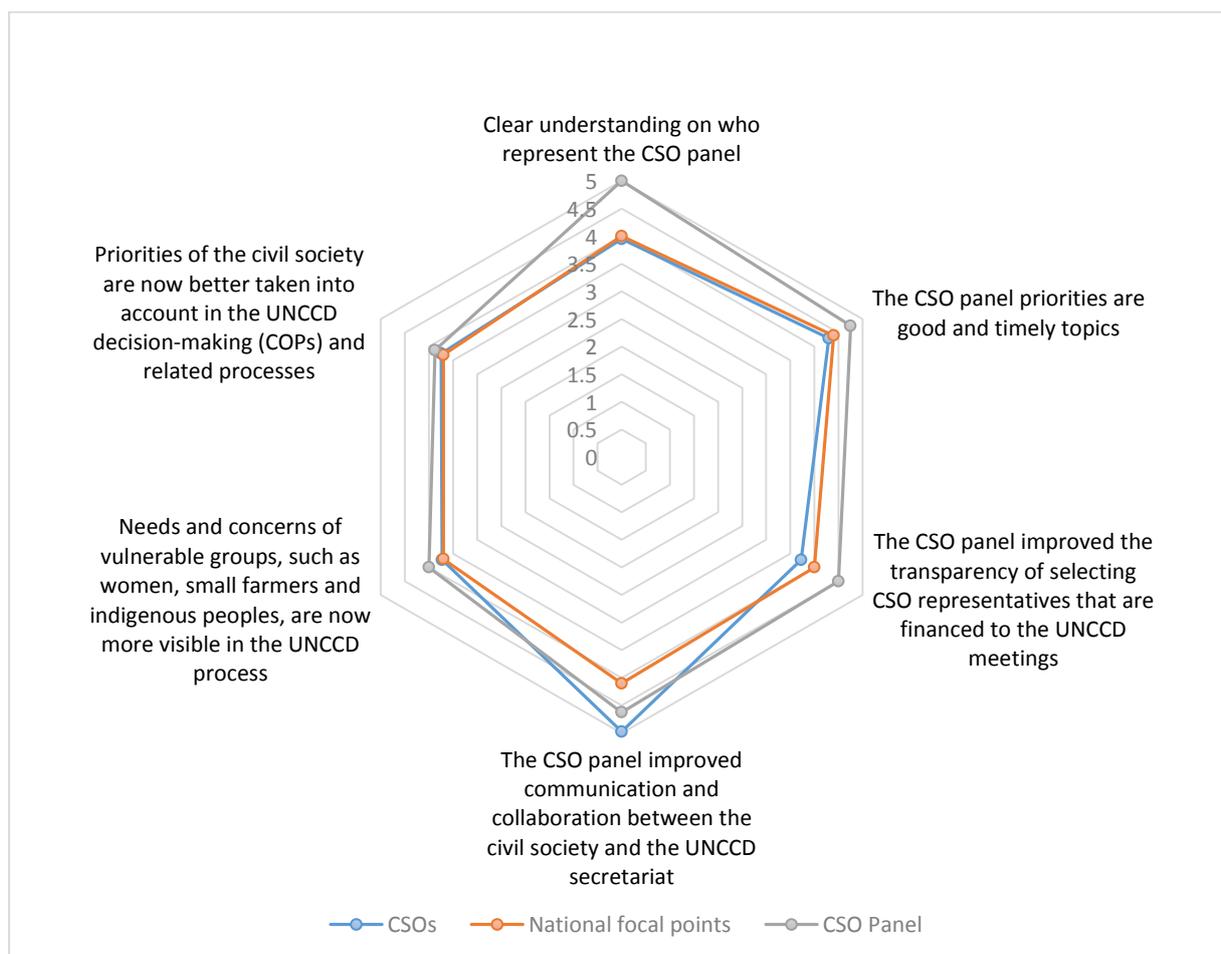
The role of the CSO panel in supporting and coordinating CSO representation in the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary has increased from session to session. The panel has, for example, coordinated the participation of CSOs in the sessions, ensured that at least one consolidated CSO intervention is presented at each agenda item, and delivered joint CSO statements. For the 2017 COP, the panel is preparing to support the organization of the CSO preparatory meeting, organize dialogues with ministers and national delegates, publish a conference newsletter and organize daily CSO coordination meetings.

The CSO panel has represented the accredited CSOs in various meetings and processes, most notably through inputs to the UNCCD Science–Policy Interface, and as a member of the Advisory Panel of the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund. It has promoted the participation of CSOs in the land degradation neutrality process at national level and facilitated resource mobilisation for CSO work under the UNCCD.

Recently, the panel has become active in specific substantive topics: it has commissioned a policy report on land rights, which will provide a basis for promoting a progressive policy agenda on land rights at the 2017 COP; and also worked on synergies among the Rio conventions.

During this evaluation, feedback on the role of the CSO panel was sought from the accredited CSOs, national focal points as well as the panel members through online surveys. The overall assessment from all respondent groups was very positive: they consistently believed that because of the CSO panel, the priorities of the civil society are now better taken into account in the UNCCD decision-making (COPs) and related processes such as the SPI than before the panel (average of 4.5 points, where 5 is the highest). The figure below summarises some other key elements of how the CSO panel was seen to contribute to the UNCCD process, and it also has one point on the awareness concerning the CSO panel (whether the respondent knows who the CSO Panel member from his/her region is). 5 was the highest rating for each question.

## Assessment on the role of CSO panel



Both the accredited CSO and the national focal point respondents claimed relatively good knowledge of the CSO panel. They also agreed on the quality and timeliness of the CSO panel priorities. The panel was seen to have improved the visibility of the needs and concerns of vulnerable groups, such as women, small farmers and indigenous peoples, in the UNCCD process. It was also considered to have improved the transparency of selecting CSO representatives that are financed to the meetings of the COP and its subsidiary bodies, and the communication and collaboration between the CSOs and the UNCCD secretariat. Many CSO respondents believed that there is a need for further effort in the following:

- To maximise the CSO panel role in making more visible the needs and concerns of vulnerable groups, such as women, small farmers and indigenous peoples in the UNCCD process (particularly the COPs)
- Build the capacity of the CSO panel to ensure that the priorities of the civil society are better taken into account in the UNCCD decision-making (COPs) and related processes such as the SPI.

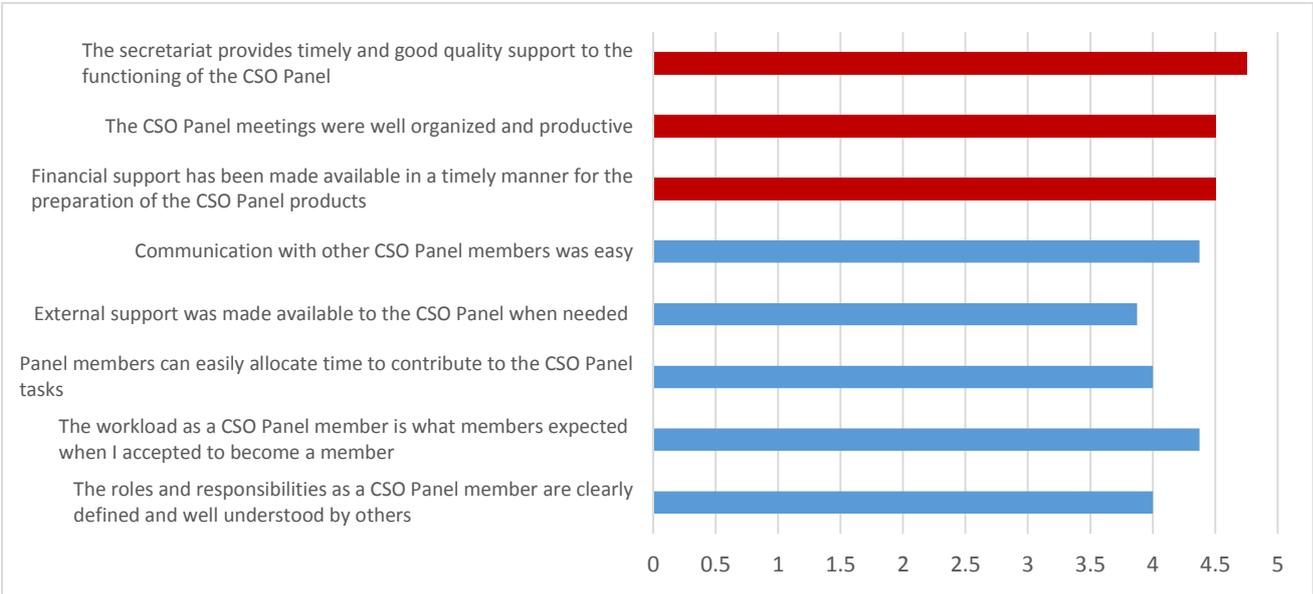
In addition, the CSO panel members suggested a more intensive orientation programme for newly elected panel members in order to reduce the adjustment time. Such programme could include a detailed documentation from previous CSO panel compositions and a meeting between the previous and the new CSO panel members.

When asked about the functioning of and arrangements for the CSO panel, the panel members rated high the service provision of the secretariat, including the organisation of the panel meetings,

financial assistance as well as support to the functioning of the panel (average of 4.8 points, where 5 is the highest). Availability of external support such as technical assistance was rated lower.

With regard to organisation of work within the CSO panel, the panel members considered that communication among the members was easy, and that the workload deriving from the panel membership was as they had expected it to be. The panel members agreed that they were able to allocate time for the panel tasks and that the roles and responsibilities of being a panel member are defined and understood; but they nevertheless felt that there is yet room for improvement in these areas. It seems that a relatively detailed operational guideline for the working modalities of the panel and the CSO participation in the UNCCD in more general sense could be useful. In addition, a (time-bound) strategic approach describing the CSO priorities for UNCCD participation could facilitate effective work and clarify resource needs, and facilitate monitoring and reporting on progress.

**CSO Panel members' assessment on the functioning of the Panel**



**Communication and information flow**

Several communication channels were being used to ensure information flow to the CSOs accredited to the UNCCD. The UNCCD website has a site for civil society including news update and case studies / success stories, and there is also a Facebook account for UNCCD CSOs. The CSO panel published plenty of information, such as the periodic land degradation neutrality newsletters and its E-Newsletters. These communication channels highlighted the key activities and discussions of priority topics of the accredited CSOs and the CSO panel.

The respondents to the online survey made a number of recommendations to improve communication and knowledge management for the CSO participation in the UNCCD, as follows:

- Further development of the CSO site on the UNCCD website: Respondents acknowledged the efforts of the UNCCD secretariat on highlighting at the UNCCD website the work and contribution of CSOs. However, more effort was called for supporting the accredited CSOs to access information on key activities under the UNCCD, particularly the outcomes of various workshops and conferences. Several respondents also stated a need to strengthen the visibility of CSO panel

activities and related updates on the UNCCD website, with the view to increase transparency and to engage more CSOs to participate.

- Maximising the use of social media, starting with an update of the CSO Facebook account to link it with the work and information-sharing of the CSO panel. Some respondents proposed to use social media for creating regional platforms for accredited CSOs (e.g. East Africa, LAC and West Africa). Such regional platforms were considered to respond to the language challenges for effective and meaningful collaboration and ensure that regional and national issues are discussed.
- Strengthening of communication between CSOs and national constituents. Potential tools for this purpose could be regular meetings, shared social media platforms or other online communication and information-sharing channels. The organisation of pre-COP meetings for the accredited CSOs was considered crucial. Some respondents suggested having CSO coordination meetings also at the regional or national level, with the aim to identify shared interests and to clarify how best the civil society will defend these interests (particularly on land degradation neutrality matters). More exchanges and collaboration with other civil society players, notably the scientific community, was called for.

## Effectiveness of the CSO participation

In the past decade, CSO participation in the UNCCD has evolved, and the information that was collected during this evaluation clearly points to increasing achievements. The CSO priorities and perspectives are now more visible in the UNCCD process than earlier, there are new means for information-sharing among the accredited CSOs, and communication between the UNCCD CSO community and other stakeholders has improved. This is reflected also in the feedback received from those national delegates that were contacted for this evaluation: they recognised and acknowledged the importance of the CSOs participation in and inputs to the UNCCD process, as may be noted from the table below.

### *Importance of CSO participation in the UNCCD*

<b>National delegates' perspective</b>	<b>Av Score</b> <i>(5 points as 'fully agree')</i>
CSO participation plays an important role in the UNCCD agenda	4.5
Clear understanding on the importance of CSO participation in the UNCCD process.	4.8
Inputs from CSO to the COP, CST or CRIC meetings, work of the SPI or other UNCCD meetings or processes have been valuable and useful	4.2
Average Total	4.5

Reflected against the theory of change that was presented at the beginning of this report, the accredited CSOs have reached many milestones. Yet plenty remains to be done.

The “status” of the effectiveness of the CSO participation in the UNCCD can be assessed in a more structured manner by looking at the accredited CSOs as a loose network. This network consists of

numerous different CSOs, many of which have only recently entered, and which have, at least to some extent, a shared purpose. The accredited CSOs network is a decentralized member-driven platform of relationships that, over time, evolves in terms of member capabilities and the structures for connectivity. It has potential to impact (a) its members, (b) the members' impacts on their local environments, and (c) the members' combined impact on their broader environment – be that the intergovernmental UNCCD process or a national/regional setting.

As networks evolve, they tend to move through stages of development and at each stage, they tackle different concerns. Five such stages can be defined as follows<sup>3</sup>:

1. **Catalyzing:** Capabilities and expectations to work together are explored by potential members of the network.
2. **Launching:** Organizers identify the network's initial vision and purpose and develop an initial plan. Initial network membership is recruited and connections are cultivated.
3. **Organizing:** The network has secured resources and is piloting strategies and beginning to adapt these based on feedback.
4. **Performing and adapting:** The network is fully operational with key activities underway. Goals, strategies and membership often diversify as members seek and find different kinds of value from the network.
5. **Transitioning or transforming:** The network is effective and sustainable or the network has lost momentum. The network as originally conceived terminates or capacities are redeployed.

At the time of the evaluation, the accredited CSOs network can be seen as on the transition between stages 3 and 4. Below is a summary of how the accredited CSOs network stands in the above-defined stages of network development and what could be the opportunities for growth:

### ***Stages of network development***

<b>Stages</b>	<b>Current status</b>	<b>Opportunities for growth</b>
Catalyze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear understanding of the key issues/problems that the network will address</li> <li>• Key stakeholders are known</li> <li>• Clear understanding of the importance and purpose of CSO participation in the UNCCD</li> </ul>	
Launch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear criteria and mechanism on selecting members through the accreditation process</li> <li>• A mechanism is in place to connect with members</li> <li>• Several CSOs have started participation in the UNCCD activities, e.g. COPs</li> <li>• Technical and financial support is provided for CSO coordination and communication</li> </ul>	
Organize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An infrastructure is in place to support the work, e.g. CSO Panel, communication channels and regular meetings</li> <li>• CSO inputs to the COP agenda items are regular and often their content is coordinated among the accredited CSOs</li> <li>• CSO inputs are becoming recognized and they are invited to contribute to new matters and forums such as the SPI</li> </ul>	

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.networkimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NetworkEvalGuidePt1\\_FramingPaper.pdf](http://www.networkimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NetworkEvalGuidePt1_FramingPaper.pdf)

Stages	Current status	Opportunities for growth
Perform/ Adapt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accredited CSOs have defined shared priorities that they aim to bring forth in the UNCCD process</li> <li>They have started substantive work and research on their priorities, so as to provide more detailed inputs to the UNCCD process and key stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring that a significant number of accredited CSOs are involved /aware of the strategic planning and priorities</li> <li>Improving the structure to become more inclusive</li> <li>Improving the communications to reach a broader audience</li> <li>Providing for diverse priorities/ topics and establishing 'value propositions'</li> <li>Creating a sustainability plan</li> </ul>
Transition or Transform		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening the value propositions and sustaining the CSO influence</li> </ul>

The accredited CSOs have made good progress, particularly since the introduction of the CSO panel, in making their views heard in the UNCCD process. Opportunities for future growth entail a more strategic/substantive approach to building the CSO messages, either as one group/network or as more than one group, each specialized to a certain topic. More effort is needed in ensuring that all accredited CSOs stay informed of the plans and activities concerning CSOs under the UNCCD, and that they can become involved in the CSO coordination activities. Better linking the activities under the UNCCD to the daily work of individual accredited CSOs at national and regional levels, and communication targeting a broader audience, particularly national UNCCD authorities, also have good potential to improve the accredited CSOs effectiveness in UNCCD participation.

## Conclusion and recommendations

**Conclusion 1: CSO participation in the UNCCD remains relevant, providing valuable inputs to UNCCD processes, and the CSO panel has improved the visibility of the priorities of the civil society in this context.**

At the time of the evaluation, 314 CSOs were accredited or in the “pipeline” towards accreditation to the COP. The variety of accredited CSOs (e.g. from local NGOs to international entities) has resulted in rich, valuable and strategic inputs to the UNCCD process. Ensuring that the CSO expertise as well as their needs and proposals, particularly of those CSOs that work directly on land use matters, are brought into the attention of the COP continues to be vitally important for the UNCCD decision-making process, for targeting policies and actions in an effective manner. These CSOs are also supposed to be among the eventual key beneficiaries of the Convention implementation.

Similarly important is to deliver information about the decisions and exchanges under the UNCCD to CSOs. CSOs are often key agents for the implementation of the Convention, and in this regard they bring the COP decisions into reality. They are important users of knowledge that is transferred and generated through the UNCCD.

The CSO panel has improved the visibility of the priorities of the civil society and the inclusion of these priorities in the UNCCD decision-making at the COP level. It has been instrumental also in advocating for CSO priorities in other UNCCD processes, such as the SPI.

**Conclusion 2: Inputs of the accredited CSOs to the UNCCD process tend to focus on the global level, with only limited reflection in their work at national/local levels.**

While the value of the participation of accredited CSOs in the UNCCD is recognized, it is also noted that their UNCCD involvement tends to be limited to providing inputs to the international agenda – the COP, the CRIC and the CST. On the basis of the data collected during the evaluation, it seems that many, even most, accredited CSOs do not yet actively promote and use at national/local level approaches and information deriving from the UNCCD process. Similarly, while national focal points and other “political” stakeholders acknowledge the importance of CSO participation in the UNCCD process, their collaboration with the accredited CSOs seems to remain low at the national level.

**Conclusion 3: Communication is vital to ensure that relevant information is timely disseminated and knowledge is properly managed.**

Several communication tools and platforms are used to ensure proper dissemination of information to the accredited CSOs of UNCCD matters and particularly the work of the CSO panel. However, the evaluation findings point toward a need to improve communication: to fully use the potential of social media, strengthen the visibility of CSO activities and updates on the UNCCD website and to provide more information about the work of the CSO panel. Pre-COP meetings among accredited CSOs can be used to streamline CSO approaches and agree on joint positioning for promoting CSO priorities and defending their shared interests at the COP. Furthermore, a mechanism to improve communication between the national constituents and the accredited CSOs, as well as facilitation of dialogue with other civil society players such as the scientific community, is called for.

**Conclusion 4: The role of the CSOs in at the UNCCD, including that of the CSO panel, is evolving. Better clarity on the CSO panel roles and responsibilities, possibly in the form of operational guidelines or terms of reference, would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of CSO participation in the UNCCD.**

The CSO panel plays a vital role in coordinating, monitoring and following-up the CSO inputs in the UNCCD process, which involves various substantive and procedural tasks and expectations set for the panel. The functioning of the panel, fast start of each new composition of the panel, its cooperation with the accredited CSOs and other key stakeholders as well as its communication could be greatly facilitated by operational guidelines, which would clarify the working modalities of the panel and procedural matters for CSO participation in the UNCCD process. A (time-bound) strategic plan outlining the CSO priorities and possibly also the need for external support could be prepared as part of the guidelines.

## **Recommendations**

The following actions are recommended for further improving the effectiveness of CSO participation in the UNCCD:

**Recommendation 1: An operational guideline or terms of reference, including a time-bound strategic plan, for CSO participation in the UNCCD and the functioning of the CSO panel should be developed.**

This guideline should: 1) clarify the role of the CSOs in the UNCCD; 2) present detailed terms of reference for the CSO panel; 3) include a time-bound strategic plan that describes the priorities of CSO participation; and 4) indicate the modalities of financing CSO activities.

**Recommendation 2: A UNCCD CSO communication plan should be developed.**

The CSO panel, with assistance from the UNCCD secretariat, should develop a communication plan involving the accredited CSOs. This plan should define why CSO communication is needed, what to communicate, how to communicate and who are the target audiences. It could also identify who should be involved in communication and when or how often specific CSO communication activities should be carried out.

The communication plan could be built on three main aims:

- Communicate for Action. “Action” refers to a change of practice resulting from the adoption of new methods, materials or approaches deriving from the UNCCD process or work done by the CSO Panel. This type of communication would involve target groups/audiences that are in a position to influence and bring about change within relevant organizations, agencies, sectors or networks.
- Communicate for Understanding. This type of communication would target audiences that can benefit from learning about the experiences, lessons and good practices resulting from CSO Panel’s interventions.
- Communicate for Awareness. This type of communication focuses on “packaging” the UNCCD CSO information and priorities for selected, specific audiences and purposes (e.g., global, regional, national, sectorial).

**Recommendation 3: The UNCCD secretariat should continue to support effective participation of accredited CSOs in the UNCCD process at the global, regional and national levels, paying particular attention on: 1) actively engaging new CSOs to become involved in the UNCCD, so as to broaden the substantive basis and influence of the UNCCD CSO community; and, 2) facilitating follow-up of CSO activities to deepen the impact.**

The evaluation noticed that of the currently accredited CSO, two-thirds are national and local NGOs. While their inputs are valuable for ensuring that the UNCCD decision-making and implementation builds on realities at the grassroots level, the Convention process could benefit also from bigger, politically more influential international CSOs. Such organisations often have advanced policy research and networking capacities that can considerably facilitate further development of CSO positions and advocacy work in the context of the UNCCD events and beyond.

Accredited CSOs can serve as advocates to operationalise COP recommendations by aligning the COP recommendations to their organisation’s strategic priorities and programmes. The CSO panel, with support from the UNCCD secretariat (including, for example, linking the work of the Science-Policy Interface with that of the panel), may provide guidance and technical support on how to operationalise the COP recommendations. This practical service will facilitate better involvement of the accredited CSOs in national and local level activities on UNCCD implementation, and it will also guide the CSOs in identifying, preparing and implementing their own projects in a manner that is supportive to the UNCCD objectives.

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