

UNCCD CRIC 7 AND CST S-1: 3-4 NOVEMBER 2008

The seventh session of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC 7) and first special session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST S-1) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) opened in Istanbul, Turkey, on Monday, 3 November 2008. The joint opening plenary meeting of the two-week session heard opening statements from its Turkish hosts, UNCCD leaders, and some regional groups. Regional groups then convened on Monday afternoon and all day Tuesday, 4 November.

JOINT OPENING PLENARY

Hasan Sarikaya, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of Turkey, called the meeting to order and welcomed participants to the opening of the joint meetings of CRIC 7 and CST S-1. He introduced the short film, "Turkey, a Country Growing Greener," which presented Turkey's environmental challenges and responses. The film highlighted that this country faces erosion on 80% of its land, in various intensities, and indicated it will be among the countries that are most affected by global climate change. It described Turkey's efforts to improve its soil, including through afforestation projects on a catchment basis.

Sarikaya then presented a message from the President of Turkey. He highlighted the transboundary nature of the issues under consideration, and the resulting need to work together. Sarikaya also read a message of welcome from Recep Erdogan, Prime Minister of Turkey, and extended the welcome of Turkey's Ministers of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and of Culture.

Veysel Eroglu, Minister of Environment and Forestry of Turkey, said desertification is one of the most important environmental issues at present and emphasized that it causes poverty, migration, unemployment, and food and security threats. He highlighted the role that the ten-year strategic plan (the Strategy) can play in reducing poverty. Eroglu stressed the importance of cooperation at the regional as well as international levels. Arguing that "we cannot let the soil disappear in silence,"

he provided an overview of the challenges that Turkey faces with regard to desertification and the country's initiatives to combat it.

Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, noted that land degradation continues. Drawing attention to the relationship between global threats, such as food insecurity and climate change, and sustainable land management, he called for a new, integrative climate change regime that takes fully into account the interaction between climate and land degradation, and the action framework offered by sustainable land management. Gnacadja highlighted the organizational reforms carried out to implement the UNCCD COP 8 decisions and the expected outputs from CRIC 7 and CST S-1, noting that the Secretariat budget cannot remain at the level approved at COP 3 in Récife while its responsibilities expand. Emphasizing that the Secretariat also has high expectations of the parties, he suggested that the meeting outcomes indicate the roles that parties will need to carry out.

Christian Mersmann, Managing Director of the Global Mechanism (GM), noted that the Strategy develops a common framework to enhance the UNCCD's impact and gives impetus to increase the quantity and quality of GM services to the UNCCD's parties. He said the GM has adapted to the Strategy and restructured, and will continue to apply change in the course of its work, based on parties' guidance. He highlighted that the impact of the GM's work at country and sub-regional levels is already being felt. Mersmann noted that the development of the Joint Work Programme between the Secretariat and the GM constitutes a major success in the spirit of the Strategy and in overcoming the "old divide" between the Secretariat and the GM. He said it is a "living document" for enhanced cooperation that represents a first attempt to outline cooperation between the GM and the Secretariat. He applauded the Executive Secretary's efforts to position the Convention as a major player in global environmental governance. Mersmann said he looked forward to the results of the Joint Inspection Unit's (JIU) review of the GM, as it offers an opportunity to position the GM in the context of the Convention. He encouraged participants to reread the GM's mandate, as adopted in Article 21 of the Convention, and said the GM is operating within its mandate.

José Herranz, Directorate General of Natural Resources and Forestry Policy, on behalf of the COP President and Minister of Rural, Marine and Natural Environment of Spain Elena Espinosa, noted that the Strategy provides new instruments to improve the implementation of the Convention and its synergy with the other Rio conventions. He outlined progress achieved by the Secretariat over the last year, as well as the attention that the Convention gained at the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) meeting in May 2008. He emphasized that parties to the Convention must provide the energy to ensure the Convention's place on the global agenda, encouraged the flexible and practical implementation of the Strategy and highlighted the Government of Spain's support.

Noting that the complexity of the social and environmental problems of the current millennium have a special impact on the developing world and require a reassessment of what has been done to date, Israel Torres, Chair of CRIC 7, underlined the significance of the joint meeting as the start of a new chapter in the life of the UNCCD. He said this calls for re-engineering processes, learning from weaknesses and extending strengths in all aspects of the Convention, including in the UNCCD subsidiary bodies and parties.

William Dar, Chair of the CST, highlighted the role that the CST will play in the reform of the UNCCD. He noted that the Strategy indicates that the CST must produce sound scientific outputs and policy-oriented recommendations, and that the CST will reform its meeting style. He reported that a consortium of five leading institutions has been selected to help organize CST 9, and invited participants to visit the European DesertNet booth at this meeting to obtain more information on CST 9. He said CST 9 should make a decision to institutionalize scientific advice from experts, looking at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a model.

Sarikaya then invited four speakers to make statements.

Antigua and Barbuda, on behalf of the G-77/CHINA, emphasized the G-77/China's support of the Strategy but noted its concern regarding the attainment of the Strategy's fourth objective on the mobilization of resources. She called for: an informal policy dialogue with developed country parties on financing prior to COP 9; the GEF to strengthen its focal point on land degradation, desertification and deforestation; the donor community to scale up the allocation of financial resources to the focal point under the GEF's fifth replenishment; and a review of the GM, including its relationship with its host, the International Fund for Agricultural Development. She said the G-77/China looks forward to the JIU's assessment of the GM and that it would seek clarification regarding the assessment's delay.

France, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION (EU), stressed the need for party compliance with the Strategy and that the key outcome of CRIC 7 is to move forward on the future working modalities of the Convention bodies, including: their collaborative arrangements, knowledge management and reporting systems, and the key indicators for assessing effects and impacts. He urged the UNCCD to promote the message on land degradation forcefully before the 2009 UNFCCC COP in Copenhagen, and suggested that the UNCCD also provide input to the fifth World Water Forum and obtain inputs from the seventeenth session of the CSD, both scheduled for 2009.

Ukraine, on behalf of the CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN countries, stressed the importance of the work programmes to be reviewed at this meeting. He highlighted the importance of taking into account the interests of all regions, and called attention to the regional initiative on financial resource mobilization for strengthening the implementation of the UNCCD in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Ecologic Youth of Angola, on behalf of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), lamented the lack of financial resources for the Convention, including the reduction of funds to finance participation of CSOs and delegates from developing countries. She reiterated CSOs' commitment to participate and offer capacities to the CST in the areas of knowledge, experience and technology, and emphasized the need to improve communication procedures and the formats of national reporting to the UNCCD. She said participation of CSOs in this regard must be assured through verifiable mechanisms.

Participants then watched a live video feed of Turkish officials and students at Ali Diza Özderici High School in Kemerburgaz, near Istanbul, planting trees in honor of CST S-1 and CRIC 7, including 193 trees to represent the 193 parties to the Convention and ten trees per delegate.

IN THE CORRIDORS I

Many participants left the opening ceremony feeling positive about the two weeks to come. They had just learned that the Turkish Government was planting ten trees for each delegate at the meeting, and many commented on the good organization of the meeting by the Turkish Government. Others thought that Executive Secretary Gnacadja had planted solid roots for the further development of the Strategy over the course of the next two weeks in his opening presentation. A few parties were surprised, however, that the floor was not opened for remarks by other parties, even though the joint opening plenary finished ahead of schedule. As parties headed to their one-and-a-half days of regional meetings, some expected that a few contact groups might be created during the second week, to advance the meeting's discussions on the work programme, monitoring and indicators, and the future format of the CRIC.

IN THE CORRIDORS II

As the world waited to see the "change" that Americans would usher in through their national election on Tuesday, participants at CRIC 7 and CST S-1 grappled with change of their own. Following their one-and-a-half days of regional group consultations, which focused on the Secretariat's and the GM's individual and joint work programmes, and indicators to measure impact, some participants suggested that it will take more time to adapt to the change envisioned in the ten-year strategic plan adopted by parties at COP 8. Participants indicated that the greatest challenge during the next two weeks could be in embracing the reforms that have taken place over the last year under the Convention, including: a shift in paradigm to a results-based implementation approach; repairing institutional relations; and eliciting party compliance with the measurement indicators. While Americans have waited two years to vote for change in their country, parties to the UNCCD will get a better sense, over the next two weeks, of what change might mean for the Convention.