



Hosted by:



Supported by:



Youth Statement for UNCCD COP17: Expectations and Recommendations

I. Introduction

Young people are at the forefront of tackling land degradation, food insecurity, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and climate change. As leaders, innovators, and stewards of natural resources, they are essential partners in restoring land, transforming food systems, and building resilient livelihoods and communities.

In preparation for UNCCD COP17, the Global Flagship Initiative for Food Security convened a global Youth Consultation to gather the views, perspectives, and recommendations of young leaders from across regions and sectors. This statement reflects their collective voice and that of their communities. It calls for greater youth engagement, increased investment in sustainable local solutions, and integrated action to restore land, strengthen food systems, and build climate resilience.

The consultation brought together young leaders from different regions, sectors, and professional backgrounds to identify priorities for UNCCD COP17 and beyond.

II. Key Messages by Thematic Area

Finance

Increase Accessible Investment in Youth-Led Solutions - Participants emphasized that young people have the ideas, expertise, and commitment to drive sustainable land restoration and food systems transformation, yet access to finance remains one of the greatest barriers. Youth-led organizations and community initiatives often face complex application procedures, strict eligibility criteria, limited institutional capacity, and short project cycles that prevent them from accessing and scaling funding.

Participants called for greater investment in youth-led and locally led initiatives through simplified, flexible, and accessible financing mechanisms, including small grants, seed funding, blended finance, concessional finance, innovation funds, and dedicated youth financing windows. These financing mechanisms should reflect the realities and



Hosted by:



Supported by:



capacities of youth-led organizations, with proportionate reporting requirements, technical support, and reduced administrative barriers.

Participants also emphasized the importance of supporting youth-owned enterprises, cooperatives, and other small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that create decent employment while advancing sustainable land restoration, resilient food systems, and local economic development.

Participants further emphasized that finance should reach youth-led organizations, smallholder farmers, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, women, and local communities directly while leveraging responsible private sector investment alongside public finance. Funding should support long-term implementation, capacity-building, monitoring, value-chain development, and locally owned solutions beyond short-term pilot projects. Lastly, participants called for greater transparency and tracking of funding to youth-led and community-led initiatives to ensure that commitments translate into measurable action.

Water

Water Insecurity Threatens Livelihoods and Food Systems - Increasing floods, droughts, and water scarcity are destroying farmland, reducing food production, displacing communities, and causing the loss of life. Flooding also damages homes and critical infrastructure, while freshwater pollution degrades aquatic ecosystems and fisheries. Participants highlighted that declining fish stocks pose a major threat to the food security and livelihoods of coastal communities that depend heavily on fishing.

Climate Impacts Along the Entire Food Value Chain - Food security depends not only on agricultural production but also on resilient markets and value chains. Participants noted that successful harvests do not always translate into income because farmers often face unreliable markets alongside challenges such as drought, flooding, and land scarcity. They emphasized strengthening the entire agricultural value chain - from production to storage, transport, and market access - to improve rural livelihoods and food security.

Local Knowledge is Critical for Resilience - Participants emphasized that local communities have developed valuable knowledge and adaptation strategies to cope with droughts, floods, and water scarcity often overlooked by certain stakeholders. They stressed that effective adaptation and freshwater ecosystem management should



Hosted by:



Supported by:



combine local knowledge with technical expertise and be tailored to local environmental and social conditions.

Move to Prevention > Crisis Response - Participants called for greater investment in preparedness rather than reactive responses to climate shocks. They emphasized integrating local knowledge into water governance, strengthening locally managed preparedness systems, and ensuring communities are meaningfully involved in planning and decision-making.

Nature-Based Solutions and Climate-Informed Water Management - Participants recognized that healthy watersheds, forests, wetlands, and rangelands are fundamental to long-term water security and should be integrated into landscape restoration and water management efforts. They emphasized that local communities should receive the resources and support needed to implement locally led adaptation and resilience initiatives.

Land and People

Youth in Land Ownership and Decision-Making - Land ownership and governance vary between communities and are often controlled by governments, traditional authorities, private landowners, or individuals. While youth recognition in local governance is more common, decision-making remains largely dominated by older generations, limiting meaningful youth participation. Participants called for youth to be recognized for their expertise rather than age and emphasized equitable access to land, resources, and decision-making by addressing inequalities related to age, gender, and social exclusion, including strengthening women's land rights and secure land tenure for young people.

Rural-Urban Migration - Rural-urban migration is increasing globally as many young people seek better economic opportunities in urban areas. This is creating labor shortages in agriculture, reducing opportunities for rural economic development, making it increasingly difficult for rural entrepreneurs, farmers, and Indigenous communities to retain workers.

Agriculture is an Unattractive Career Path for Youth - Agriculture is often perceived as an unattractive livelihood because youth associate it with lower returns, limited opportunities, and poor access to markets, technology, and support services.



Hosted by:



Supported by:



Participants emphasized the need to promote value-added agriculture, pastoralism, entrepreneurship, and stronger value chains to improve economic opportunities for young people. Participants also emphasized that youth engagement should extend beyond primary production to include entrepreneurship, circular economy solutions, ecosystem restoration, value addition, and green innovation.

Education and Mindset Shifts - Agricultural education should begin early and demonstrate that agriculture can be profitable, entrepreneurial, and innovative. Participants emphasized practical, hands-on learning such as profitable school gardens which build business skills, innovation, and community leadership.

Technology and Innovation - Technology such as AI, greenhouse systems, early warning systems, and digital platforms can improve agricultural productivity, access to finance, and resilience. However, high costs and limited access to finance and equipment remain significant barriers. Participants called for successful pilot initiatives to be scaled through partnerships with governments and the private sector.

Community-led Development - Participants noted that development interventions should be co-designed with local communities rather than externally imposed. They called for stronger trade infrastructure, market access, logistics, and financing models that create sustainable economic opportunities and deliver lasting local benefits.

Food Systems and Soil Health

Soil Health Must be Prioritized within Food Systems Governance - Participants emphasized that food systems often prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term soil health. Soil degradation threatens agricultural productivity, food security, and ecosystem resilience. They highlighted the One Health approach, recognizing the interdependence of healthy soils, ecosystems, livestock, and people.

Participants further emphasized that healthy landscapes, including forests, rangelands, croplands, and wetlands, are the foundation of resilient food systems and should be managed through integrated landscape approaches that strengthen food security, biodiversity, water security, and climate resilience.



Hosted by:



Supported by:



Urbanization Reducing Agricultural Land - Rapid urbanization is increasing competition for agricultural lands, particularly around cities as farmland is increasingly converted into infrastructure and housing. Participants also noted that urban expansion reduces vegetation cover, increases runoff, and limits water infiltration, undermining local food production and resilience.

Youth Facing Significant Challenges in Agriculture - Participants reiterated that limited access to land, finance, technology, and decision-making continues to constrain youth participation in agriculture. Institutional barriers and experience requirements further exclude youth from leadership and policy processes.

Bridging the Science–Practice Gap - Participants emphasized that existing agricultural research and technical knowledge must be translated into practical, culturally appropriate guidance in local languages. They highlighted AI and digital platforms as valuable tools for improving knowledge transfer and supporting farmer decision-making.

Local Solutions for Sustainable Agriculture - Participants stressed that sustainable agriculture should be locally designed rather than based on one-size-fits-all approaches. They highlighted agroforestry, diversified local food systems, Indigenous knowledge, and locally available materials as effective practices, emphasizing that community ownership strengthens long-term sustainability.

Funding and Policy Remain to be Major Barriers - Participants emphasized that limited access to finance, excessive bureaucracy, and weak policy support continue to hinder the scaling of sustainable agriculture. They called for better coordination across ministries and stronger (inter)national policy alignment.

Strengthen Farmer Organizations and Community Financing - Participants highlighted farmer associations and youth organizations as key platforms for advocacy, knowledge sharing, and policy engagement. Participants encouraged support for community financing mechanisms such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) to complement formal financial systems and strengthen local resilience.

III. Conclusions

Participants call on governments, international organizations, development partners, financial institutions, the private sector, and civil society to recognize young people as



equal partners in restoring land, transforming food systems, and building climate resilience.

UNCCD COP17 presents a unique opportunity to move beyond commitments and translate these recommendations into concrete action. Participants encourage the UNCCD leadership, governments, international organizations, development partners, financial institutions, the private sector, and civil society to actively respond to this Youth Statement and to work together with young people in implementing its recommendations.

The Global Flagship Initiative for Food Security stands ready to continue facilitating this dialogue, fostering partnerships, and supporting the meaningful participation of young people in implementing the outcomes of UNCCD COP17 and advancing sustainable, resilient food systems.

In collaboration with:

