

Strengthening female voices at UNCCD COP 16: Gender Change Agents in the global action against desertification and climate change

By: Global Project Women's Empowerment for Resilient Rural Areas (WE4R)



Group of Gender Change Agents at COP 16. Source: Personal archive/Stand 4 Her Land

Gender Change Agents from Africa, Asia and the Americas have made their voices heard on themes of desertification, sustainable management of land resources and climate change at the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which took place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from 02 to 13 December 2024. Gathered at the 4th edition of the Gender Caucus, these women and men championed for female land tenure and leadership and worked to accelerate women's inclusive participation in negotiations and their access to knowledge and technology.

The Gender Caucus is a multi-stakeholder forum set up to strengthen the gender responsiveness of the policy and programs of the UNCCD and boost the implementation of the [Gender Action Plan](#), with which the Convention seeks to strengthen the participation and leadership of women in its decision-making processes. In three sessions, the event highlighted women's unique contributions to land restoration and sustainable management of land and food systems and showcased examples of adaptation from women in contexts as diverse as India, Guatemala, Nigeria and Morocco. These are featured in the new UNCCD study "Innovative and effective women-led solutions for drought resilience and adaptation", whose Summary for Policymakers can be accessed fully [here](#).

One of these Change Agents is Rita Otu, an agricultural scientist from Nigeria with experience on facilitating community-led initiatives and trainings for women farmers on climate change and land rights. “The atmosphere was charged with a sense of urgency and purpose”, she says of her first COP. “It was both humbling and motivating to be part of such a significant global conversation, knowing the decisions made there could shape the future of our planet”. For her, participating in forums like COP is crucial for sharing best practices, building support networks to advance gender equality in various contexts and influencing policymaking.

Ms. Otu also had a key role during COP, speaking on the radio show she created to educate farmers on sustainable land management practices and peacebuilding, Radio FANTASEE (Food and Nutrition on the Air for Social and Economic Empowerment). Weekly, the project broadcasts local communities’ experiences with climate change and ecologically sound adaptations during evening prime time, supplying listeners with crucial information systems. Nearly 40% of women listeners reported trying at least one adaptative practice learnt on the show.

Also at her first COP was Hannah Longole, a communications expert from Uganda and Executive Director of the [Ateker Cultural Center](#), which is dedicated to enhancing land rights for women and youth in pastoralist communities. Ms. Longole found in the Convention a relevant platform to voice critical concerns and meet participants from similar contexts across the globe.

“At UNCCD COP 16, we recognize that women’s land rights are essential for effective restoration,” she states. “Together, as indigenous and pastoralist women in Uganda, we honor our local experiences, build connections and catalyze meaningful action towards a sustainable future”.

GIZ’s support

Twenty-one of the Gender Change Agents were supported by GIZ’s Global Project Women’s Empowerment for Resilient Rural Areas (WE4R) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. WE4R, together with UNCCD Secretariat, the global campaign [Stand for Her Land](#), the [Agroecology Coalition](#) and [CARI](#), aimed to strengthen the representation of rural women in relevant regional and global decision-making bodies on land governance.

A key moment for this was the Gender Change Agents networking event hosted by WE4R, Stand for Her Land and UNCCD. WE4R also supported increased youth involvement in the conference, facilitating a meet-up between the Change Agents and the participants of the [Land Youth Negotiators Programme](#), which empowers young professionals to act as negotiators for their countries. Through all these efforts, the Change Agents underlined the critical role of gender equity in land governance, advocating for women’s empowerment, leadership, and equal opportunities in the global action against desertification and climate change.

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