Naming the Gap, Missing the Mandate

A joint IUCN–TMG reading of the Governance and Financing Dialogue on Land Restoration during UNCCD COP17, and of the UNCCD land tenure decision that followed it

Three dimensions of delivery

COP17 was billed as the implementation COP, the moment decisions turn into action. That translation rests largely on National Focal Points (NFPs), who sit at the frontline of national delivery, and converting decisions into action means strengthening the environment they operate in, not just understanding it. This session examined that environment across three dimensions. **Institutionally**: does the NFP have real authority to convene across ministries, or are they managing this alongside a full agenda with no dedicated backing? Are civil society and community actors brought in at the beginning, or only consulted after decisions are effectively made? **On policy**: is land tenure reflected in national restoration and climate strategies, or does it sit in a separate silo? **And financially**: do resources reach the work itself, and the coordination behind it, the convening, trust-building, follow-up between meetings, not only the visible projects built on top?

Sitting at the centre of all three dimensions is the National Focal Point, and this session argued for thinking about that role differently: not the one actor responsible for solving all of this alone, but a hub, the connector between international commitments, national ministries, civil society, and local knowledge. **Land degradation neutrality will not be achieved through government or CSO-led efforts alone: strong alliances between NFPs and CSOs are what make this ecosystem work in practice, and strengthening it is essential to meeting LDN targets.**

Since 2019, COP decisions have made clear that land tenure is not a side issue for the UNCCD; it is a condition for turning commitments into action, and **a clear case of both a safeguard and an enabler for LDN measures**. The dialogue used the Land Tenure Decision as a running example throughout, precisely because it falls between mandates rather than inside one.

The session opened with remarks from **Dr. Tabea Lissner, Director for Climate Change at the Robert Bosch Stiftung**, the language she used carried through the rest of the discussion:

> *"That is why we support an ecosystem rather than a series of isolated projects, and why we work at multiple levels, including a long-term engagement with the UNCCD negotiations."*

Many voices, one message

This was the first time IUCN and TMG had organized an event together, built on a shared view that land rights are a connector, and the basis for the kind of alliance conservation and governance work need.

The session ran as an open dialogue: a moderator, six practitioners and experts, and a room of delegates invited to weigh in. What came back, from a Botswana ministry official, a Benin government delegate, a Beninese civil-society coalition, a Kenyan civil-society representative, IUCN and the World Bank Group, was strikingly consistent.

Nobody on this panel argued that governments lack ambition or that communities lack solutions. **What they described, again and again was:**

- **mandate without authority:** Can this person, such as the National Focal Point, actually require other ministries to act, or can they only ask? How far does their power go to implement, for instance, the land tenure decision?

- **coordination without resources:** Is there a budget line and staff time set aside for this work, or is it squeezed in on top of an already full job?

- **rights that exist on paper but not in the systems meant to enforce them:** If a community's land right were challenged tomorrow, is there a working system to enforce it, or just a policy document that says the right exists?

IUCN calls this a gap in-effective governance and in finance reaching where it's needed; TMG calls it the governance gap in implementation. Same finding, two vocabularies.

Stewart Maginnis, Deputy Director General of IUCN, challenged the panel's shared language directly:

> "We often hear 'governance gap' or 'financing gap', I'm not sure that's quite right. There may be a gap in effective governance, or a gap in getting finance to where it's needed."

He also pushed back on treating "planning" as a reason to delay:

> *"We mustn't let 'planning' become an excuse to kick the can down the road for ten or fifteen years, solutions exist and can be applied now."*

What the room said

Mandate without authority

Maurille Elegbédé, National Focal Point Benin

The gap: New coordination structures aren't the answer if trusted ones already exist.

Benin offered a different answer to the same problem: work through the institutions that already have community trust, rather than building new ones. Maurille Elegbédé elaborated on the necessity to mainstream restoration across national policy, not confined to an environment ministry, and routing implementation through CSOs who remain in communities long after a project's funding cycle ends. The workaround itself is the evidence: without top-down authority to compel other ministries, the National Focal Point's actual leverage runs through community trust built by others.

Coordination without resources

Oudou Charbel Chabi Yaba, ViSA Africa

The gap: Good collaboration still isn't enough without data capacity, resourcing, and time.

Oudou Charbel Chabi Yaba, working alongside the National Focal Point, confirmed the collaboration from the other side of the table:

> *"We have a perfect collaboration with the national government: the CSOs, the National Focal Point, and other ministerial institutions involved in the sector. But it needs long-term trust building." (translated from French)*

What limits that coalition isn't political access. It's the less visible but essential work behind credible indicator reporting: generating reliable data consistently and at scale, mobilising the resources to sustain it, and coordinating across actors and institutions.

Coordination without resources

Jamie Fergusson, Director for Climate, World Bank

The gap: Tenure and finance aren't sequential. Each can unlock the other.

> *"It's a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Clarity of land tenure can be an enabler of finance, but finance can also be an enabler of land tenure."*

Two field examples backed the point. In Mongolia, IFC financing for 10,000 hectares of no-till arable land was framed explicitly as reducing pressure on surrounding rangelands. In Senegal, a World Bank-supported programme has combined national reform with strengthened municipal land administration, including land information systems, trained staff and equipped local land offices. More than half a million parcels have gone through municipal processes to record and secure existing land rights. Importantly, the programme's framework recognises existing individual and collective rights, while strengthening local institutions responsible for land governance.

Photo: UNCCD COP17 Media Library

Rights that exist on paper but not in the systems meant to enforce them

Tshepi Hill, National Focal Point Botswana

The gap: Without clarity on who owns the land, neither enforcement nor investment can follow. Botswana came with numbers: a 2025–2060 restoration strategy targeting 25 million hectares, built with FAO support to identify where restoration is needed most. But Tshepi Hill pointed straight at the obstacle underneath the strategy:

> *"In Botswana, much of the land is held under customary or communal tenure. The challenge is not communal tenure itself, but that in some grazing areas rights, responsibilities and mechanisms for managing common resources are insufficiently clear or effectively enforced. This can make it difficult to determine who can commit to, implement and be accountable for long-term restoration measures and therefore also complicate investment."*

More than 70% of Botswana's land is under traditional or tribal tenure, much of it encompassing communal grazing areas. This makes strengthening the institutions, rules and accountability mechanisms governing these shared resources particularly important for restoration at scale.

Photo: UNCCD COP17 Media Library

Rights that exist on paper but not in the systems meant to enforce them

Kenya: Alais Lenana Momoi, Matonyok

The gap: Formalising land rights can backfire if it's done without consent.

Alais Lenana Momoi described "blueprint subdivision" in Kajiado, where communal group ranches are broken into individual parcels in the name of formalisation, and the unintended effect:

> *"Once land is subdivided into small parcels, it introduces individual/personal claims, which makes it harder to manage collectively."*

Titling, in other words, is not automatically a safeguard. Done without consent, it can dismantle the very collective management restoration efforts depend on.

Then came the decision

Ten days after this panel, COP17 adopted its land tenure decision. What's striking, reading it against what this room said, is how much of the room's language made it into the text and how consistently it arrived softened.

Land tenure focal points appear (para. 6), but only as something Parties are "encouraged… to consider nominating," explicitly "without prejudice to existing focal point frameworks." The UNCCD is the one Rio Convention where the National Focal Point has a limited support structure. That is exactly why a land tenure focal point matters in this context and can address the gaps mentioned above: i) someone with whom to act on the mandate, ii) resourced time to coordinate, and iii) a mechanism to make tenure rights enforceable. Women's and youth's tenure rights appear in nearly every operative paragraph, but always as something to be "given consideration," never as a precondition or a requirement.

Disaggregated data, indicators, the VGGT, the Land Tenure Toolbox, an "ecosystem" of Secretariat–FAO–civil-society engagement are all named. Almost nothing mandated, and everything asked of the Secretariat explicitly "subject to the availability of resources." The decision's preamble also recognizes the land governance targets and indicators of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, it carries no obligations but can be used to foster synergies. Gender, meanwhile, never made it onto the COP17 agenda at all; the item was pushed whole to COP18. In addition, synergies with the other Rio Conventions, and engagement with civil society and Indigenous Peoples and local communities, were also contested for removal from the COP17 agenda.

It would be easy to read this as the room's diagnosis proven right and left unaddressed. It is more useful, and more accurate, to read it the other way: the negotiators named almost every mechanism this panel called for. What is missing is the mandate and the resources, which is precisely the part that doesn't have to wait for a COP.

What can be used

None of what follows creates something new. Each is a way of building out what surrounds the National Focal Point, the ecosystem this session's opening argued for, so the NFP can actually function as a hub rather than carry the mandate alone. A decision that names a mechanism without mandating it is not a dead end, it can be an opening for whoever moves first with a working model.

- **Focal points, made concrete.** Para. 6 puts the idea of a land tenure focal point on every Party's own table, not just as an external ask. Benin already has a version that works: a focal point routed through existing CSO relationships rather than around them. That is the offer to bring into the next round of country conversations, not a blank invitation to "consider nominating." Thailand also sets the example of having appointed a land tenure focal point.

- **CSO dialogue, formalised rather than described.** Para. 2 backs exactly what Benin's CSO coalition already built with its NFP, a standing collaboration roadmap spanning before, during, and after COP. Other NFPs don't need to invent this; it can be offered as the reference structure. The Strengthening Civil Society Role in Achieving LDN (CS4LDN) offers an existing platform through which this model could be adapted and strengthened, working with the UNCCD CSO Panel and Secretariat to support sustained NFP–CSO dialogue across countries. This could help move participation beyond attendance at COPs towards continuous engagement in national LDN planning, implementation and reporting, with community evidence feeding into decisions throughout the Convention cycle.

- **Capacity-building, funded rather than requested in the abstract.** Para. 7(a) authorises Secretariat and FAO support for tenure focal points and reporting officers, contingent on resources. That's a specific, decision-backed line for donors already in this conversation to fund.

- **The Toolbox, as a live channel.** Its update (para. 7(f)) is an open door for field case studies, for instance with Benin's coordination model, Kenya's subdivision caution, Senegal's financing results to become part of an official UNCCD product, with women's and youth's rights explicitly named as content it should cover.

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