

Contributions to the HLPF 2016 from the Committee on Forestry (COFO)

Mandate and Work of the Committee on Forestry

The Committee on Forestry (COFO) is the highest FAO Forestry statutory body. As a global Technical Committee and one of FAO's governing bodies, it reports to the FAO Council on programme and budget matters and to the FAO Conference on policy and regulatory matters. The biennial sessions of COFO bring together heads of forest services and other senior government officials to identify emerging policy and technical issues, to seek solutions and to advise FAO and others on appropriate action. Other international organizations and, increasingly, non-governmental groups participate in COFO. Participation in COFO is open to all FAO Member Nations.

The Committee's tasks include:

- a) periodic reviews of forestry problems of an international character and appraise such problems with a view to concerted action which could be undertaken by Member Nations and the Organization in order to resolve such problems;
- b) reviewing the programmes of work of the Organization in the field of forestry and their implementation;
- c) advising to the Director-General on the future programmes of work of the Organization in the field of forestry and on their implementation;
- d) reviewing of specific matters relating to forestry referred to the Committee by the Council or the Director-General, or placed by the Committee on its agenda at the request of a Member Nation in accordance with the Rules of Procedure of the Committee, and make recommendations as may be appropriate;
- e) reporting to the Council and Conference and tender advice to the Director-General, as appropriate, on matters considered by the Committee.

The 23rd Session of COFO will be held on 18-22 July 2016. The Session will have particular focus on the 2030 Agenda and the new climate change agreement, as well as forests' and sustainable forest management's contribution to them. The Committee will also consider how forests full potential could best be unlocked, including contributions to livelihoods, food security, jobs, gender equality and many others, noting that there is a growing consensus that forests are directly relevant for at least 14 of the 17 SDGs. The 23rd Session of COFO will have a unique opportunity to review relevant developments and contribute to a truly coordinated and cross-sectoral response through FAO's reviewed Strategic Framework to making progress towards achieving the SDGs.

I. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "ensuring that no one is left behind" at the global level:

Forests cover about 4 billion ha or just fewer than 31% of the globe's land area, approximately the same area of agricultural land. Forests and trees outside forests contribute to food security, nutrition and livelihoods in several ways, including as a direct source of food, fuel, employment and cash income. Forests provide fundamental ecosystem services, including: maintaining or restoring soil fertility; protecting watersheds and water courses; providing fodder to livestock; conserving biodiversity; and helping mitigate climate change.

Forests are a home and shelter for millions of people, including several indigenous and local communities, often most in need and for who forests are the only source of subsistence. Forests are relevant not only for these communities; they provide major contributions to the whole mankind. Forests provide employment: the formal forest sector employs some 13.2 million people across the world and at least another 41 million are employed in the informal sector. It is also estimated that some 840 million people, or 12 percent of the world's population, collect woodfuel and charcoal for their own use. Wood energy is often the only energy source in rural areas of less developed countries, particularly important for the poor. It accounts for 27 percent of total primary energy supply in Africa, 13 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean and 5 percent in Asia and Oceania. It is estimated that about 2.4 billion people cook with woodfuel. In addition, 764 million of these people may also boil their water with wood. Forest products make a significant contribution to the shelter of at least 1.3 billion people, 18 percent of the world's population.

These are quantifiable contributions but ecosystem services, such as preservation of biodiversity, regulation of global climatic and water cycles, protection against disasters, pollination and many others are invaluable, constituting basic pillars of human life on Earth. These contributions make forests relevant for achieving most of the SDGs, not only 6 and 15, where forests are explicitly recognized. Forest-relevant SDGs include poverty eradication (SDG1), food security and nutrition (SDG2), health (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5), sustainable energy (SDG7), sustainable economic growth (SDG8), infrastructure and innovation (SDG9), sustainable consumption and production (SDG12), climate change (SDG13), peaceful and inclusive societies, justice, accountable institutions (SDG16), and means of implementation (SDG17).

The forthcoming session of COFO will have an opportunity to discuss how forests and forestry, in collaboration with other land-based sectors, could contribute to achieving sustainable development and the SDGs.

II. The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges:

COFO has a unique machinery to guarantee that its session agendas are responsive to emerging challenges and needs of its member countries. The Committee works closely with six Regional Forestry Commissions, who advise on the formulation of forest policies and review and coordinate their implementation at the regional level. They also advise on suitable practices and actions with regard to technical and economic problems and make recommendations on issues of global relevance for the consideration of COFO. In this way, COFO agenda is always developed in coordination with the regional bodies, and member countries have a mechanism to guarantee that the Committee's work is responsive to global, regional and national challenges.

The Committee also benefits from the work of various statutory bodies and programmes and receives inputs from:

- the Advisory committee on Sustainable Forest-based Industries, which also provides an institutional link to the private sector;
- the Mountain Partnership which is a United Nations voluntary alliance of more than 250 governments, intergovernmental organizations, major groups (e.g. civil society, NGOs and the private sector) and subnational authorities, dedicated to improving the lives of mountain peoples and protecting mountain environments around the world;

- the Forest and Farm Facility, a partnership launched in September 2012 between FAO, IIED, IUCN, and AgriCord, to promote sustainable forest and farm management by supporting local, national, regional and international organizations and platforms for effective engagement in policies and investments that meet the needs of local people.

At present around 150 international governmental and non-governmental organizations participate as observers; their contribution to the sessions is of high relevance and the Committee is constantly seeking ways to enhance dialogue with the broadest range of stakeholders. Such dialogues are key to any inclusive policy and programme development aimed at sustainable management of forests.

It is widely recognized that most of the challenges affecting forests are coming from outside the sector and appropriate responses require coordinated approaches across sectors. The SDGs can act as an overarching umbrella, under which actions by different sectors and stakeholders from different levels can be aligned. Achieving the closely inter-dependent SDGs will require looking at sustainability issues within and across agriculture, forestry and fisheries in an integrated way, taking trade-offs and synergies across sectors and sustainability dimensions into account. New governance arrangements will be required to promote and facilitate actions that are coherent and effective in inducing changes in practices. This includes finding new ways of dialogue, collaboration across sectors and with different stakeholders, and strengthening related institutional mechanisms and capacities.

Driven by this recognition COFO has been actively promoting closer collaboration among the various sectors including through the Technical Committees of FAO and pursue multi-stakeholder approaches to guarantee that voices of the most remote communities could also be heard.

III. Valuable lessons learned on ensuring that no one is left behind:

The most important lesson is that forests although appearing as relatively modest contributors to human well-being in several global statistics, this is not true for those most in need, to whom forests are overwhelmingly important, even the only resource able to ensure that no one is left behind. It is also a major lesson that forests are only able to deliver multiple benefits if managed sustainably, in an integrated manner. Other key lessons are:

- Forests are more than trees, fundamental for food security and improved livelihoods, contributing to increasing resilience of communities.
- Integrated approaches to land use provide a way forward for improving policies and practices to: address the drivers of deforestation; address conflicts over land use; capitalize on the full range of economic, social and environmental benefits of integrating forests with agriculture; and maintain multiple forest services in the landscape context.
- Forests are an essential solution to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Sustainably managed forests will increase the resilience of ecosystems and societies and optimize the role of forests and trees in absorbing and storing carbon while also providing other environmental services.
- New partnerships among the forest, agriculture, finance, energy, water and other sectors, and engagement with indigenous peoples and local communities are needed.
- Further investments are needed in forest education; communication; capacity building; research, including climate change's impact on forest health and diseases; and the creation of jobs, especially for young people.

- Secure tenure rights, the rule of law, effective governance mechanisms, stakeholder involvement, gender equality and full participation of women as well as the engagement of youth are key to any successful solutions.

IV. Emerging issues likely to affect the realization of this principle:

Forests are affected by several external and internal factors. In particular population growth, increasing demand for land for food production and infrastructure, growing urbanization, growing demand for energy, impacts of environmental deterioration including climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity and desertification, human induced calamities such as wildfires, unsustainable and illegal management practices, civil unrest and armed conflicts, unsecure ownership and tenure rights, weak legal and governance systems as well as lack of stakeholder involvement may generate considerable impacts on forests. These actors often appear together, creating synergistic effects, vicious cycles or downward spirals with severe impacts first on forests then on communities depending closely on forests for livelihoods. Some of these impacts can escalate to whole societies and finally to mankind as a whole. Deforestation and forest degradation have a turning point beyond which the changes in the global ecosystem become irreversible with devastating consequences for life on earth.

COFO's agenda over the last years have been increasingly driven by the recognition that no isolated solutions exist and major developmental challenges, including those affecting forests, can be solved only through integrated approaches and cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration. Such collaboration is seen as one of the pre-requisites of achieving true and lasting progress. The forthcoming session will discuss land use challenges and opportunities as well as needed actions for promoting progress towards the SDGs and in implementing the Paris Agreement from this perspective.

Efficiency and effectiveness of cross sectoral approaches as well as the commitment to their implementation are seen as major success criteria for achieving the agreed global goals and objectives and will largely define the pace of progress.

V. Areas where political guidance by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development is required:

In the spirit of the arguments above, a political guidance from the HLPF for strengthening the recognition of the close linkages among the SDGs and their associated targets could enhance cross-sectoral collaboration at all levels. The recognition that environmental, social and economic functions of forests are inextricably linked is crucial. Even though these functions, products and services gained through forests could contribute to varying degrees to the different SDGs they should be always be considered in their integrity and policies and actions should aim at maintaining the appropriate balance among them.

The guidance from the HLPF could be very instrumental in strengthening the uptake of recommendations from related policy fora, like COFO, and help achieve the needed level of recognition and collaboration in this regard.

The HLPF could also recognize the existing achievements, in particular the work of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, which is a voluntary partnership of 14 major UN and non-UN organizations, chaired by FAO, pursuing its main mandate of promoting the sustainable management of all forest types and strengthening long-term political commitment to that end.

VI. Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress for those at risk of being left behind:

Over the years COFO has made several policy recommendations for its members to accelerate progress. At its next session the Committee will be invited to continue its proactive approach and consider further recommendations for:

- strengthening dialogue with other relevant sectors including agriculture and fisheries on joining efforts for transformative change towards the achievement of the SDGs, in particular on actions to eradicate hunger and eliminate poverty while conserving and sustainably managing natural resources;
- promoting the development of a common approach to sustainability for agriculture, forestry and fisheries, based on a balancing the different dimensions of sustainability across sectors and along value chains;
- improving coordination between policies on forests, agriculture, food, land use and rural development for more effective regulation of land use change;
- reviewing and adapting existing mechanisms and tools to make them more effective in governing transformation towards sustainability across sectors;
- promote integrated land use planning as a strategic framework for balancing land uses at national, subnational and landscape scales.