

## Communication by the Bureau of the 16th Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests

### Input to the 2021 meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>

#### **(a) Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of the UN Forum on Forests, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs**

The pandemic and ensuing global economic crisis are on course to reverse years of gains in the reduction and alleviation of poverty, severely undermining the global efforts to meet the SDGs' deadline of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030. At the current rate, the total number of people living in poverty is expected to have increased by 131 million in 2020<sup>2</sup> and 797 million in 2030, failing to meet the deadline by a large margin. The pandemic also unleashed the employment crisis, affecting approximately 2.7 billion workers by April 2020 due to full or partial lockdown measures, representing about 81 per cent of the world's workforce<sup>3</sup>.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to demonstrate that the current systems of achieving economic prosperity are not sustainable and pose a threat to the health of the planet. COVID-19, and the measures to control it, has significantly slowed economic growth, increased unemployment, and worsened inequalities and livelihood in many countries around the world<sup>4</sup>.

The wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also serve as a reminder that the SDGs are closely interlinked and progress on one goal, or lack thereof, affects other goals. In particular, the zoonotic nature of COVID-19 and other recent epidemics such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (SARS), the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS), Ebola and the bird flu demonstrates the importance of stewarding forests and other landscapes, biomes and ecosystems<sup>5</sup>.

Looking ahead, through the effective COVID-19 response and recovery measures, the world can build back better to realise sustainable development. In doing so, it is essential to make further progress towards eradicating deprivations; accelerating the universal provision of quality essential services; halting deforestation and reversing course on the degradation of forests and other nature, including greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, biodiversity loss, wildlife trafficking and the deterioration of coastal waters<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This input was prepared by the UNFF16 Bureau in response to the letter of the ECOSOC President dated 1 December 2020 inviting the UNFF to provide its substantive input to the 2021 session of HLPF for its thematic review. This input will be accompanied by the Chair's summary of discussions to be considered at UNFF16 (26-30 April 2021) for submission to ECOSOC and its President as the UNFF's input to the 2021 session of HLPF.

<sup>2</sup> UN, DESA (2021), World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021. Available online at [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021\\_FullReport.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021_FullReport.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> UN, DESA (2020), Sustainable Development Outlook 2020: Achieving SDGs in the wake of COVID-19: Scenarios for policymakers. Available online at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/sustainable-development-outlook-2020-achieving-sdgs-in-the-wake-of-covid-19-scenarios-for-policymakers/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> UN, DESA (2020), Policy brief on Achieving SDGs in the wake of COVID-19: Scenarios for policymakers. Available online at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-84-achieving-sdgs-in-the-wake-of-covid-19-scenarios-for-policymakers/>

**(b) Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of the UN Forum on Forests<sup>7</sup>**

The value of forests for harboring biodiversity, regulating climate and water, and supporting livelihoods is undeniable. A growing body of evidence from recent studies and best practices demonstrate how ecosystem services and functions inherent to forests offer solutions to the transformation required to build a path for the inclusive and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Despite the crucial contributions of forests to sustainable development, deforestation and forest degradation continue at an alarming rate in some regions, serving as primary pathways of transmission for emerging infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and threatening public health, economies and livelihoods.

While the progress has been made over the last decade in some regions where the rate of forest loss slowed down and a number of international commitments and initiatives have been launched in recent years to halt deforestation<sup>8</sup>, estimates indicate that 10 million hectares of forest continued to be lost annually from 2015 to 2020. The proportion of forest area globally declined from 31.9 per cent in 2000 to 31.2 per cent in 2020 owing chiefly to agricultural expansion, recording a net loss of approximately 100 million hectares<sup>9</sup>.

With the world's population projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 and 10.9 billion in 2100<sup>10</sup>, the global demand for and consumption of forest products and services is projected to continue to accelerate and put further pressure on forests, posing cross-sectoral challenges that require urgent actions at all levels to sustainably manage forests, including through their conservation, restoration and expansion.

**(c) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels, against a background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs within the area addressed by the UN Forum on Forests**

Globally, forests provide the source of livelihoods for millions of forest-dependent people, including indigenous peoples and local communities. Forests serve as the basis for employment, public health, and disaster risk reduction, providing livelihoods and an economic safety net.<sup>11</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to aggravate hardships among forest-dependent people and communities through job losses, reduced income, decreased remittances sent from migrant family

<sup>7</sup> A list of recommended actions and policy guidance in relation to forests and the UN Forum on Forests are contained in section (d) and (e) below.

<sup>8</sup> These international commitments and initiatives include: Sustainable Development Goal 15, Global Forest Goal 1, Article V of the Paris Agreement, Aichi Biodiversity Target 5 and 7, GEF objectives 1 and 3 for its cross-cutting SFM Strategy 2014-2018, New York Declaration on Forests, Bonn Challenge.

<sup>9</sup> UN, DESA (2020), Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020. Available online at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> UN, DESA, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/423).

<sup>11</sup> UN, DESA, UNFF Secretariat (2020). Forests: at the heart of a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (policy brief No. 80). Available online at [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB\\_80.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_80.pdf).

members, reduced access to markets and information, increased physical isolation, lack of health services, and disruption to government-assisted programmes<sup>12</sup>. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities pushed many indigenous communities, including returning migrant workers, to retreating deeper into forests for food, fuel, and shelter in response to the risk of COVID-19 infection.

In several regions, especially Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, lack of access to information and information technology has exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic on the livelihoods and income of forest-based communities. This was further aggravated by the failure to consider forestry activities as essential in some countries during the pandemic. For instance, communities dependent on forest-based tourism for jobs and livelihoods experienced declines in their incomes and increased risk of illegal activities such as poaching and illegal timber harvesting<sup>13</sup>.

The pandemic has also dramatically deepened inequalities and vulnerabilities of forest-dependent populations in some regions as many people, particularly women and youth, have lost seasonal employment. Furthermore, communities lacking secure rights and access to forests faced serious livelihood-related distress and were less able to prevent the spread of COVID-19<sup>14</sup>.

#### **(d) Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**

The UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), as the responsible intergovernmental body for follow-up and review of the implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030 (UNSPF)<sup>15</sup>, plays a pivotal role in addressing issues relating to forests in a holistic and integrated manner. The Collaborative Partnership on Forests also plays an important role in supporting the UNFF and its Members in advancing implementation of the UNSPF and its Global Forest Goals.

For the biennium 2021-2022, the thematic priorities for the sixteenth and the seventeenth sessions of the UNFF<sup>16</sup> are: (i) reversing the loss of forest cover (GFG 1); (ii) enhancing forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits (GFG 2); and (iii) mobilizing financial resources and strengthening scientific and technical cooperation; promoting governance frameworks to advance implementation; and enhancing cooperation, coordination and coherence, for sustainable forest management (GFG 4, 5 and 6).

The forthcoming sixteenth session of the UNFF (UNFF16, 26-30 April 2021) will hold technical discussions on the implementation of the UNSPF, including interlinkages between the GFGs and targets and the SDGs

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<sup>12</sup> Linhares-Juvenal, Thaís (2020). Social protection for forest dependent communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. FAO Forestry Technical Network Webinar (22 July 2020). Available online at <http://www.fao.org/forestry/49810-0e3cf49a1603cf7fc3ecb119381623888.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> UN, DESA, UNFF Secretariat (2020). Background Papers on the Initial Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Forest Management. Available online at <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/events/egm-covid-jan-2021/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> FAO (2020), COVID-19 Forestry Webinar Week “Building back better: COVID-19 pandemic recovery contributions from the forest sector” (22-25 June 2020), Chairperson’s summary report. Available online at [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/idf/COFO25/COVID\\_Forestry\\_Webinar\\_Week\\_Chairs\\_summary\\_dfclan.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/idf/COFO25/COVID_Forestry_Webinar_Week_Chairs_summary_dfclan.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> A/RES/71/285

<sup>16</sup> Thematic priorities of the UNFF for each biennium is based on the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) and targets, taking into account the programme of the HLPF and relevant international forest-related developments.

under in-depth review by the HLPF in 2021. The UNFF16 will also consider emerging issues: impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector to identify means to address these challenges.

The UNFF16 will convene a high-level round table on major forest-related developments to provide a platform to highlight roles of forests in addressing current global challenges, and the interlinkages of forests and other issues in the agenda of major international fora. The UNFF16 is also expected to set the UNFF's Programme of Work (POW) for the period 2022-2024 to accelerate the achievement of the GFGs and their associated targets in harmonization with other major global policy frameworks and initiatives, particularly the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

**(e) Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development**

The pandemic has generated opportunities to build back better towards more inclusive and sustainable economies, including through forest restoration and sustainable use. The pandemic has highlighted the need to exchange best practices among countries, to enhance scientific research on the role of forests in addressing zoonotic diseases; make better use traditional knowledge of local communities and indigenous people; enhance forest education; and expand use of information and communication technologies.

In advancing the implementation of the UNSPF and achievement of the GFG and targets, it is imperative to unlock the potential of the voluntary national contributions (VNCs) to the UNSPF to serve as the countries' plan to accelerate the progress on the GFGs, while contributing to other globally-agreed forest-related commitments and processes, including the Paris Agreement , the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, among others.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to address the present challenges, potential responses and measures and policy recommendations for the sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and enhanced contribution of forests to inclusive sustainable development include<sup>17</sup>:

**Integrate sustainable forest management into COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans.** Sustainable forest management can make significant contributions to offset many of the social, economic and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for forest-dependent people and communities due to their vulnerabilities to crises such as pandemics. Integration of forest-based action in national programmes related to land use, including energy, mining and agriculture, will contribute to an inclusive and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Renew commitment to internationally agreed forest-related goals and targets.** Sustainable forest management practices may reduce the risk of future pandemics and must be prioritized through renewed commitment to the internationally agreed forest-related goals and targets. Healthy forests are vital to addressing many pandemic-induced challenges, including through creating new jobs in afforestation, reforestation, agroforestry, research, conservation and sustainable use.

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<sup>17</sup> UN, DESA, UNFF Secretariat (2021), UNFF Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Forest Management (19-21 January 2021), Co-Chairs' summary of key points and suggestions on the way forward, Available online at <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/events/egm-covid-jan-2021/index.html>.

**Promote the One-Health approach and include the value of ecosystem services in recovery plans.** The current pandemic has highlighted the close interrelationship between the health of ecosystems, people, animals, including livestock and wildlife, and ecosystems. There is growing recognition of the need to work towards a new norm incorporating the “One-Health approach” to address global challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss and the risk of pandemics. The contribution of ecosystem services provided by forests should be assessed and included in the COVID-19 recovery plans and measures to enhance these values in the short, medium and long term.

**Build momentum to halt deforestation and unsustainable forest practices.** The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to accelerate actions to tackle the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and reduce the risk of future zoonotic diseases, minimize their impacts on global trade and supply chains, leverage action to build more sustainable production and resilient supply chains, and provide more diverse livelihoods, it is important to build momentum to halt deforestation and unsustainable forest practices.

**Integrate investment in forests in the recovery plans.** Countries should integrate investment in forests and forest management into their national recovery strategies, taking into account their national conditions and priorities. Integrating disaster-risk reduction, adaptive planning within forest sector and integrating national forest financing strategies as parts of the recovery plans are also useful to proactively plan for and manage future crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Strengthen institutions and policies.** In the long-term, countries, depending on their national conditions and priorities, may consider taking additional steps to adopt optimal land-use planning and other measures to utilize the full potential of forests; address policy barriers; promote sustainable forest management; improve tenure security; promote community engagement and secure their tenure rights to forests and forest resources; and embed social protection and inclusive measures within forest sector policies and planning.

**Strengthening forest governance.** Governance and support mechanisms to combat forest-related illegal activities, integrate disaster and risk mitigation approaches in planning, policies, and response mechanisms, and promote cross-sectoral collaboration, e.g. between forest, mining and agricultural sectors, are important steps to ensure optimal and efficient land-use planning.

**Strengthening science and technology.** There is a need for a better science-policy-society interface to inform policy and decision-making, in order to ensure the best science and technology is available in crisis response and recovery, as well as public awareness.

**Strengthening data collection, analysis and exchange.** The fast spread and pervasive impact of COVID-19 requires governments to provide effective, timely, and inclusive responses in addition to traditional data sources and data analytics tools.

**Mobilize resources from all sources for forests.** It is important to mobilize resources, by all stakeholders and from all sources, for forests at all levels in the post-pandemic era. At the international level, official financial flows to forests, including ODA, are more important than ever, along with technological cooperation and assistance, multi-stakeholder partnerships and capacity development. The UNFF Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network could also assist countries in addressing the adverse impacts of the pandemic on forests through development of national forest financing strategies.

In this context, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development may wish to:

- renew its commitment to accelerate the achievement of the Global Forest Goals of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 and other internationally agreed forest-related goals and targets;
- invite intergovernmental fora and bodies, governments , relevant stakeholders, and the private sector to develop potential solutions and recovery measures from the COVID-19 crises for all types of forests and trees outside forests, taking into account the work of the UNFF on assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on sustainable forest management<sup>18</sup> ; and
- invite countries and relevant stakeholders to integrate sustainable forest management into COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans.

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<sup>18</sup> Please see additional information at: <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/forum/index.html>