

Integrating Forests in the Sustainable Development Goals

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Key messages

Proposed targets:

- A. Increased global forest and tree cover.
- B. Increased climate change mitigation benefits from forests.
- C. Enhanced contribution of forest and trees to food security, nutrition and human health.
- D. Increased contribution of forests to a green economy, including renewable energy.
- E. Forest-related biodiversity conserved and enhanced.

Why forests matter

Forests have always played a key role in conceptualizing sustainable development. The concept of sustainability was first coined in forestry science 300 years ago, initially referring to the renewal and growth of trees and then has expanded to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of forest management.

Globally, forests cover 30% of global land area and contain over 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity. Forests and forested landscapes are recognized for their critical role in providing many ecosystems services such as water conservation, soil protection and carbon storage. Three quarters of the world's freshwater are provided through forested catchments. Forests store more carbon than the atmosphere. The value of non-monetary benefits from forests, including through provision of energy, food, shelter and medicine, is estimated to be on the scale of two to three times the contribution to GDP.

1.6 billion people depend on forests for their livelihoods, 3 billion people depend on wood for cooking and heating, and forests bring a major contribution to food security in general. Forest foods and tree products, such as leaves, seeds, nuts, honey, fruits, mushrooms, insects and game animals, have been important components of rural diets for millennia. Forests and trees outside forests are important sources of fodder for livestock, especially in dryland ecosystems. The genetic diversity in natural forests offers huge potential for the discovery, development and improvement of new sources of food and medicines, among others. There is a high and measurable relevance of forests for human health and wellbeing. Between 65% and 80% of the global population rely on medicines derived from forests as its primary form of health care. In urban areas, with the metropolis as an increasing trend worldwide, forests play a major role for the quality of life.

All in all, forests make positive contribution to a wide array of priority issues to sustainable development.

Challenges and opportunities

Forests and the products they provide can play a critical role in the future welfare of the world's population. Demand for forest products is high and increasing, as is also the demand for the ecosystem services provided by forests.

Yet, climate change, urbanization, globalization, demographic changes and changing consumption patterns impact forests and their social, cultural, ecological and economic functions. These changes affect society globally but their impacts are more acutely felt in regions where people are more directly dependent on the environmental services provided by forests.

Most of the adverse developments are related to deforestation and forest degradation, in particular in the tropics and sub-tropics. In the 1990s, around 16 million ha, and in the last decade, around 13 million ha of natural forests were annually converted to other land uses. Yet, in the last decade, afforestation and natural expansion of forests in some countries and regions have reduced the net loss of forest area significantly at the global level. In this context, highly visible global policy initiatives such as the Bonn Challenge Target to restore 150 million ha of degraded forest landscapes by 2020 are important to increase forest cover worldwide (Target A).

Declining natural forest cover and reduced quality of the remaining forests have diminished global biodiversity, weakened the capacity to provide watershed management and soil conservation services, threatened important forest areas used for cultural and spiritual purposes, endangered people's forest-based livelihoods and subsistence due to the loss of critical ecosystem resources and services, reducing overall resilience of human and natural systems. Innovative economic instruments such as payment for environmental services and natural resources accounting need to be promoted in order to reverse forest decline and degradation (Targets C and E).

Forests, trees outside forests and the sustainable management of these resources are crucial for ensuring the resilience of food-production systems in the face of climate change and economic, social and political instability. Investments into trees in industrial plantations and on-farm require increased attention and efforts, as to increase forests contributions to a greener economy (Target D).

Climate change over the past half-century has already affected forest ecosystems and will have increasing effects on them in the future. The impact of climate change on forest goods and services will have far-reaching social and economic consequences for forest-dependant people, particularly the forest dependent poor. The carbon-regulating services of forests are at risk of being lost entirely unless current greenhouse gases emissions are reduced substantially (Target B).

Forests and the United Nations Development Agenda

Forests making significant contributions to sustainable development while facing major challenges, it is crucial to capture their multiple benefits and to mitigate risks in the post-2015 Development Agenda. Millennium Development Goal number 7 (2000–2015) focuses on ensuring environmental sustainability, with Target 7B to reduce biodiversity loss, achieving by 2010 a significant reduction in the rate of loss. The Goal included a set of indicators, among them, on the proportion of land area covered by forests (7.1). Yet, this set of Millennium Development Goals approached forests mainly from an environmental point of view. The manifold other dimensions of forests were not sufficiently emphasized.

Forests should be fully integrated as a priority area in the post-2015 UN development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Options include: 1. A stand-alone goal on forests; 2. Integrating forests under a broader goal such as renewable natural resources or land use; 3. Setting targets on forests under other goals. Under each option, crucial inputs (implementation of Sustainable Forest Management), outputs (increase of forest resources) and outcomes (increase of environmental, social and economic benefits) should be captured.