

UNFF16 CHAIR'S SUMMARY

III. INPUT TO THE HLPF 2021

This input to the 2021 High-Level Political Forum is based on Chair's summary of the technical discussions during UNFF16 on agenda item 3(d), and the input provided earlier by the UNFF16 Bureau to the ECOSOC President. This input is not a consensus negotiated outcome of the Forum.

(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

The wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic 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 ecosystems¹.

Through the effective COVID-19 response and recovery measures, the world can build forward 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 ecosystems, greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, biodiversity loss, wildlife trafficking and the deterioration of coastal waters².

(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 Forests³

Despite the crucial contributions of forests to sustainable development, deforestation and forest degradation continue at an alarming rate in some regions. Biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are considered as drivers of zoonotic diseases, threatening public health, economies and livelihoods, and must be addressed in an integrated, effective, targeted and sustainable manner.

While progress has been made over the last decade in some regions where the rate of forest loss slowed and a number of international commitments and initiatives have been launched in recent years to halt deforestation⁴, 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

¹ 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/>

² 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/>

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

in 2020 owing chiefly to unsustainable agricultural expansion, recording a net loss of approximately 100 million hectares⁵.

(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

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 members, reduced access to markets and information, increased physical isolation, lack of health services, and disruption to government-assisted programmes⁶. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities pushed many indigenous and local 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, 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, resulting in income declines and increased risk of illegal activities such as poaching and illegal timber harvesting⁷.

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 regular and 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-19⁸.

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

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

The sixteenth session of the UNFF held technical discussions on the implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030 (UNSPF), including interlinkages between the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) and targets and the SDGs under in-depth review by the HLPF in 2021. The UNFF16 also considered emerging

⁵ 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>.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ 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>.

⁸ 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/about/meetings/cofo/covid-19-forestry-webinar-week/chairperson-summary-report/en/>

issues on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector to identify means to address these challenges, including through a high-level round table on major forest-related developments with the participation of senior officials of Members of the Forum and the UN system.

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' plans to accelerate the progress on the GFGs, while contributing to other globally-agreed forest-related commitments and processes, including, as appropriate, the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement, the CDB and the outcome of the ongoing consultations on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, among others.

(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 UNFF at UNFF16 identified the following responses and measures, as well as policy recommendations for the sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and enhanced contribution of forests to inclusive sustainable development:

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, including 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, urban forestry, research, conservation and sustainable use.

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 the "One-Health approach" to address global challenges, including, as appropriate, climate change, biodiversity loss and the risk of emergence of zoonotic diseases. 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 illegal and unsustainable forest practices. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to accelerate actions to tackle the drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. It is important to build momentum to halt illegal and unsustainable forest practices to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and reduce the risk of future zoonotic diseases, minimize impacts on global trade and supply chains, leverage action to build more sustainable production and resilient supply chains, and provide more diverse livelihoods.

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 sustainable and integrated 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 advance sustainable land-use planning and management.

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 highlights the need for 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.
