

Communication by the Bureau of the 18th Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests

Input to the 2023 meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development¹

The United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) serves as the responsible intergovernmental body for follow-up and review of the implementation of the UNSPF and achievement of its GFGs, thereby supporting the acceleration of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The UNFF addresses issues relating to forests in a holistic and integrated manner with the engagement of all partners and stakeholders at all levels in advancing the implementation of the UNSPF.

The vision, principles, and commitments of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF, A/RES/71/285) align with the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs. Like the SDGs, the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) of the UNSPF are interconnected and integrate the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable forest management. Achievement of the GFGs can foster and accelerate progress towards the SDGs, as well as other international forest-related instruments, processes, commitments, and objectives such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Paris Agreement.

The forthcoming eighteenth session of the UNFF (UNFF18, 8-12 May 2023) will hold technical discussions on the implementation of the UNSPF, including interlinkages between the GFGs and targets and the SDGs under in-depth review by the HLPF in 2023. UNFF18 will also consider update on the preparations for the 2024 midterm review of the effectiveness of the International Arrangement on Forests in achieving its objectives. Further information on UNFF18 is available on the UNFF website at: <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/forum/index.html>.

(a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17 from the vantage point of the UNFF, bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the SDGs and targets, including policy implications of their synergies and trade-offs

In order to address current challenges and accelerate progress towards SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17, it is important to tap into the potential of forests and forest-based actions. Healthy forests sustain human well-being, as well as livelihoods in both rural and urban communities. Forests and trees provide clean water (SDG 6), renewable energy (SDG 7), and sustain industries (SDG 9) and communities (SDG 11) as well as the majority of terrestrial biological diversity (SDG 15) and climate regulation (SDG 13).

¹ This input was prepared by the UNFF18 Bureau in response to the letter of the ECOSOC President dated 10 November 2022 inviting the UNFF18 Chair to provide substantive inputs to the 2023 session of HLPF for its review of the SDGs and the theme. This input will be accompanied by the Chair's summary of discussions to be considered at UNFF18 (8-12 May 2023) for submission to ECOSOC as the UNFF's input to the 2023 session of HLPF.

Halting and reversing deforestation provide livelihood, protect culture and safeguard the health of people around forests, and could also reduce to some extent the risks that lead to possible outbreak of zoonotic diseases. At the same time, scaling up efforts to eradicate poverty by fostering forest-based social and economic benefits and forest-based activities, including the development of non-timber forest products, is essential to address the social and economic challenges often underlying forest degradation.

(b) Three key areas where transformative actions for accelerated progress have been successful, and three key areas where support is most urgently needed, with regard to the cluster of SDGs under review in July 2023

i. Three key areas where transformative actions for accelerated progress have been successful

Forests and water (SDG 6)

Three-quarters of the world's accessible freshwater comes from forested watersheds. Forests managed for the protection of soil and water increased worldwide from 271.5 million hectares in 1990 to 390.5 million hectares in 2020, an increase of 43.8% in a span of thirty years. For instance, many countries established shelterbelts over the last decade to enhance freshwater management, and took actions to protect land from soil erosion and freshwater resources from deterioration. Other countries used taxes to protect forests to ensure sustained water flows, supported forest conservation and biodiversity initiatives, and funded alternative livelihood programmes for forest communities. Payments for ecosystem/environmental services schemes have been gaining traction to foster the restoration of riparian forests, with important benefits for improving the management of water resources. The 2023 Conference for the Midterm Comprehensive Review of Implementation of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation will emphasize the need for UN-Water members and partners to support countries in developing capacities to accelerate the implementation of water-related SDGs. The Initiative will respond to specific country's capacity development needs, building on their current strengths.

Forests and energy (SDG7)

More than 2.5 billion people, approximately one third of the world's population, rely on the traditional use of biomass from forests for their daily energy needs, particularly cooking and heating. In addition, 40% of the world's renewable energy comes from forests, equivalent to solar, hydroelectric and wind power combined. Many countries, both developing and developed, use forests for energy production, including biomass for bio-energy production, and support research and projects that promote the efficient management of wood as both a material and energy source. Furthermore, wood energy plays an important role in sustaining heating needs during the aftermath of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, to ensure energy security for the affected communities.

At the same time, the controversies over the relations between forest protection and forest biomass-based bio-energy production have been rising, leading to more thoughts and actions on high efficient and rational use of forest for energy. Limited electricity access causes many populations to rely on charcoal for cooking energy leading to unsustainable forest management. Tropical deforestation associated with

unsustainable charcoal production threatens the broader socioeconomic benefits of intact forests and sustainable criteria for the use of bioenergy must be strengthened and more sustainable energy sources would help reduce demand for charcoal.

Forests and industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG9) and Forests and sustainable cities and communities (SDG11)

Sustainable forest management plays an important role in sustainable industries, innovation and infrastructure. Countries undertook a range of initiatives with a view to increasing volume and value of their forest products. Many countries adopted legislations, policies, strategies, and plans to promote the marketing of forest products, both timber and non-timber forest products, whereas other countries promoted sustainable forest production certificates. For instance, use of wood materials in buildings is encouraged to foster innovation, store carbon and reduce carbon footprints, and build resilience against natural disasters such as earthquakes. Many countries have also been promoting bioeconomy value chains to support the sustainable production of wood and non-wood forest products, contributing to improved livelihoods, including through building capacities of women, youth, indigenous peoples and local communities.

As the global population continues to grow, particularly in urban areas, safeguarding the water-providing capacity and other contributions of forests has become more important to meet demands for urban populations. Many of the world's largest cities and communities rely on forested areas for a significant portion of their drinking water, and reducing risks and building resilience against natural disasters. For instance, the creation of peri urban social forest has increased tree cover, raised the quality of local life, enhanced social activities, created a gene bank, reduced land degradation, and protected riparian and water catchment areas. In addition, urban trees and parks are an important element of sustainable cities.

ii. Three key areas where support is most urgently needed

Finance and investments on forests

Increased finance and investments from all sources and at all levels are necessary to meet the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) of the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF), thereby enhancing sustainable forest management, conservation, resilience and ecosystem restoration. The Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network (GFFFN) plays an important role in fostering collaboration and supporting countries in the design and redesign of forest financing strategies. In particular, afforestation and forest restoration require increased financial support during the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, including through high integrity voluntary carbon markets with robust payments for ecosystem/environmental services schemes, and social and environmental safeguards that can complement the deep and immediate decarbonization efforts needed under the Paris Agreement.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, there is an urgent need to strengthen international cooperation and solidarity to support developing countries, in particular by generating new and additional resources to support forest conservation, restoration, sustainable use and management and enhance multilateral flows and channels, such as the REDD-plus mechanism. It is also

essential to build capacities for project development and management and facilitate access to international public funding for developing countries.

For instance, recognizing the significant challenges that Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face given their economic, environmental and social vulnerabilities, fixed and insular natural resource base and limited institutional capacity, actions around finance and investments on forest could speak to targeted interventions to support SIDS in removing barriers to access and increasing support for the mobilization of financing. Work to identify new, non-traditional and innovative financing modalities in particular are an urgent need.

Forest governance

Strengthened forest governance at the global, regional and national levels, strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration and approaches, the engagement of philanthropic organizations and the private sector and stakeholder engagement are essential to respond to countries' needs, bridge the gap from global to local implementation of sustainable forest management and deliver an ambitious agenda to turn the tide on deforestation.

Capacity development activities promote the integration of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF) and its Global Forest Goals (GFGs) and the SDGs under review into national sustainable development planning frameworks, sharing lessons learned and good practices through workshops and related events would be necessary.

Multistakeholder Partnerships, science, technology and innovation

Rural and small-scale producers, as well as indigenous peoples, are the custodians of best practices in sustainable forest management. Rural and small-scale producers, as well as indigenous peoples, also hold important knowledge on sustainable food systems that could leverage efforts to scale up forest conservation, restoration and sustainable management.

Efforts by regional and subregional entities need to be enhanced to advance the sustainable management of all types of forests, including by promoting the role of science, technology and innovation for the forestry sector and related sectors, facilitating capacity building and technical assistance, as well as multi-stakeholder initiatives and actions by indigenous peoples and local communities, women and young people in community-based sustainable forest management.

(c) Examples of specific actions taken to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic that also accelerate progress towards multiple SDG targets, including actions identified by the UNFF, building on interlinkages and transformative pathways for achieving SDGs

The designation of the forest sector as an essential service has been common to all regions during the COVID-19 pandemic. That designation helped keep most forest industries open and contributed to minimizing the negative impacts of measures to curb the spread of the disease. In some regions, such as Europe and Latin America, some companies actually recorded increased demand for their products such as packaging, building and hygiene materials as a result of the pandemic.

Another common practice in all regions was the use of digital technology and information and communications technology for communication, surveillance and monitoring, the provision of online services and e-commerce. In some areas, virtual forest tours were created to raise awareness of the importance of forests and to build interest in post-pandemic ecotourism activities.

The integration of sustainable forest management and forest industries in recovery and build-back-better strategies from the pandemic also contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation and combating loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Countries in Europe, North America and Latin America appear to offer an efficient and effective integration approach for enhancing the role and contribution of forests in sustainable development.

(d) Assessment of the situation in the mid-point of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and within the respective areas addressed by the UNFF, and policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Despite their potential to contribute to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs, forests are increasingly under threat. Deforestation, land degradation, unsustainable consumption and production practices, and the ongoing climate crisis all threaten the essential economic, social, environmental and cultural values of forests. Enhancing awareness on the social, economic and environmental benefits of forests is important to leverage efforts to address deforestation and land degradation as well as to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs.

In this regard, the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) should effectively engage in global policy discussions, including through the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, and raise awareness of the critical role of forests, providing a coherent, open, transparent and participatory global platform for policy development, dialogue, cooperation and coordination on issues related to all types of forest and major forest-related initiatives, and facilitating the need to support countries in strengthening their national policy frameworks on forests.

In doing so, the UNFF should strengthen its work to promote and catalyse better science-policy interface regarding forests and their related issues, as well as increased financial resources and investment for sustainable forest management that can effectively support the acceleration of the implementation of global commitments on forests.

(e) Key messages for inclusion into the Political Declaration of the September 2023 SDG Summit

We recognize the critical importance of tapping into the potential of forests and forest-based actions to accelerate progress towards the SDGs and to build back better from COVID-19. As such, we reaffirm our

commitment to the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF) and its associated Global Forest Goals (GFGs) as highly relevant to the success of the 2030 Agenda.

In this regard, we welcome ongoing preparations for the midterm review of the UNSPF and the larger role of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) in advocating a key role for forests and sustainable forest management in addressing multiple environmental objectives, including through increased efforts towards forest and ecosystem restoration actions, and to mainstream and scale up forest-related actions in national development programmes. In particular,

- We note that the UN Strategic Plan for Forests is a holistic tool to promote the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable forest management;
- We recall the need to ensure synergies between the UN Strategic Plans for Forests and other international forest-related instruments, processes, commitments and objectives such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Paris Agreement;
- We encourage Member States, organizations and stakeholders to continue to actively engage in the UN Forum on Forests, and reaffirm the need for forest-related international organizations and instruments to continue to work with the UN Forum on Forests, including through the Collaborative Partnership on Forests; and
- We stress the need to better integrate the UN Strategic Plan for Forests and its Global Forest Goals to foster the full potential of forests and forest-based action, in order to accelerate progress on all the SDGs.
