

An unprecedented opportunity for forests

In the wake of the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, many decision-makers in the forest sector expressed their disappointment at the absence of a much-anticipated global agreement on forests. Since then, however, forests have not been off the global political agenda – far from it. Two decades later, there are good reasons to be optimistic

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I. Forests since 1992

In the years following the 1992 Rio Convention, considerable efforts were made at the intergovernmental level to maintain forests high on the international political agenda. In 1995, the International Panel on Forests (IPF) was established and in its two-year existence put forward a number of proposals for action which were taken up by its successor, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF). When the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) was set up to replace the IFF in 2000, forests rose substantially on the agenda of the United Nations.

For the first time, an intergovernmental body with universal membership – all 193 Member States of the United Nations are members of the UNFF – was created with a focus on sustainable forest management. The importance of the UNFF was further bolstered with the 2002 establishment of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, bringing together 14 international organisations¹ with substantive work on forests, to support the UNFF in the implementation of sustainable forest management.

However, many actors and observers of global forest policies alike expressed disappointment at the discrepancy between political efforts undertaken and continuing rates of deforestation. Since 1992, forests

have continued to disappear at an alarming rate.

Figures compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, paint a bleak picture of the world's forests since 1990.² In particular, these show that deforestation rates have decreased in the past decade (2000-2010) in comparison to the previous decade (1990-2000), down from 16 million to 13 million hectares per year. Yet this figure remains high and shows no sign of abating.

According to this same source, the world's forests have “only” decreased in cover by 0.14% annually between 2005 and 2010 – a figure which appears to pale into insignificance when compared with some national deforestation rates. However, behind this world average lie major discrepancies, notably between temperate and boreal forests on the one hand, and tropical forests on the other. Whilst forests of North America, Europe and northern and northeast Asia have mostly grown in size, spearheaded by China's impressive increase in forest cover, a majority of tropical countries have seen large swathes of their forests disappear during the same period. Hence the low figure at the global level which mostly results from trends from different latitudes cancelling each other out.

II. A New Impetus

Observers are justifiably pessimistic when faced with such figures. However, global forest policies have

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made a number of major steps forward in the past half decade that could prove to be crucial in reversing deforestation rates over the long run. Several factors have boosted the visibility of forests in the international policy agenda beyond to levels exceeding those of 1992, providing an unprecedented opportunity for commitment to sustainable forest management.

II.1. The Forest Instrument

The adoption of the UNFF Non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests, also known as the Forest Instrument, is one of the major breakthroughs of the past few years. The Forest Instrument emerged as a compromise between Member States opposed to a legally binding convention, and those in favour, and was perceived as a platform which could include a legally binding arrangement in the future.

Before 2007, global agreements on forests had taken place on a piecemeal basis. Forests are taken into consideration in the three Rio Conventions (on biological diversity, combating desertification and climate change) as well as older environmental agreements, including the Ramsar Convention on wetlands and the Convention on the illegal trade of endangered species (CITES).

Yet until 2007, no global agreement had ever focused specifically on forests. In this regard, the Forests Instrument represents a major landmark in that it sets sustainable forest management as the primary and universally-recognised solution to the deforestation crisis.

Furthermore, the Forests Instrument provides a simple but effective operationalisation of sustainable forest management by translating it into four Global Objectives on Forests (see box below). But above all, it lays the basis for a truly holistic, 360-degree approach to forests. In its scope, The Forests Instrument emphasises its relevance to “all types of forests” and defines sustainable forest management in the most encompassing way as “a dynamic and evolving concept

[which] aims to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations”. Both elements of the scope thus embrace the diversity of forests as well as the multiplicity of their functions and values to humanity.

Last but not least, the Forests Instrument places sustainable forest management in the broader development context by stating among its purposes the enhancement of “the contribution of forests to the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, in particular with respect to poverty eradication and environmental sustainability”. In other words, it brings forests out of the traditional sectoral vision, thus recognising them as an integral part of the development agenda of the international community. This sets forth the basis for a promising paradigm shift, as is further illustrated below.

Box I. — The Four Global Objectives on Forests of the Forests Instrument

1. Reverse the loss of forest cover worldwide through sustainable forest management (SFM), including protection, restoration, afforestation and reforestation, and increase efforts to prevent forest degradation;
2. Enhance forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits, including by improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent people;
3. Increase significantly the area of sustainably managed forests, including protected forests, and increase the proportion of forest products derived from sustainably managed forests; and
4. Reverse the decline in official development assistance for sustainable forest management and mobilize significantly-increased new and additional financial resources from all sources for the implementation of SFM.

<http://www.un.org/esa/forests/about.html>

II.2. Forest Financing

Following the adoption of the Forest Instrument, discussions within the UNFF on implementing sustainable forest management rapidly came to focus on the issue of forest financing. Since 1992, the issue of associating financial flows to combating deforestation had marred intergovernmental discussions.

From 2005, REDD+ (Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) partly addressed this issue as it proposes to remunerate developing countries for progress made in reducing deforestation rates and forest degradation. The principle immediately sparked interest and enthusiasm, especially as it builds a conceptual bridge between global forest policies and climate change. The concept was given further impetus when it was presented by the Stern Review,³ a 700-page report on the economics of climate change for the British Government, as being one of the most cost-effective solutions to mitigating climate change.

In the past few years, some have voiced their reservations about the feasibility of REDD+ as a mechanism and its focus on carbon storage. For instance, it has been pointed out that in its current state, REDD+ runs the risk of undermining tenure rights of local communities. In a 2010 article in the journal *Science*, Jacob Phelps, Edward Webb and Arun Agrawal⁴ warned that the funding and monitoring requirements for REDD+ might undermine decentralisation. In addition, the prospect of large amounts of funds from REDD+ could encourage policy-makers to recentralise certain decision-making powers away from the local level, thus reversing the advances made in land tenure rights in recent years.

In spite of this, REDD+ has provided a tremendous impetus to global commitment to forests worldwide. Yet until 2009 the issue remained of broader forest financing, *i.e.*, the landscape of finance flows to maintain and enhance all aspects of sustainable forest management – carbon storage, but also all of the other ecological, economic and social functions of forests.

A historic resolution⁵ was finally adopted in 2009, known as the Resolution on the Means of Implementation of Sustainable Forest Management, setting forth a two-pronged approach to forest financing. On the one hand, the Facilitative Process was set up with the aim, among others, of assisting in the mobilisation of forest financing for developing countries. The Facilitative Process recognises the availability of existing funds, many of which are underused, as well as the need to raise new and additional funding for sustainable forest management. One of its primary functions is therefore to bridge the gap between donors and recipients so as to ensure that all opportunities are harnessed to overcome current gaps and obstacles to forest financing.

The Facilitative Process has attracted considerable donor enthusiasm and has witnessed the implementation of three projects so far, including on the identification of gaps, obstacles and opportunities for forest financing in small island developing states, low forest cover countries, Africa and least developed countries, and an initiative to assess the impact of REDD+ on the broader forest financing landscape.

On the other hand, an Ad Hoc Expert Group was set up to meet twice before 2013 – once in 2010 in Nairobi, and once in 2012. Whilst the Facilitative Process works using a bottom-up approach by scaling up field experiences and sharing them across different categories of countries, the Ad Hoc Expert Group operates in a complementary top-down fashion by providing strategic guidance and recommendations on forest financing discussions within the UNFF.

The strategic work plan on forest financing, which combines this two-pronged approach, applies the perspective laid forth in the Forest Instrument by adopting a cross-sectoral approach to sustainable forest management. At every step of its implementation, specific measures are established to address the relationship between forests and other sectors so as to break down the narrow silos that sectors constitute, and which impede the identification of innovative solutions to forest financing.

II.3. Forests 2011

Raising awareness is a crucial step to promoting the importance of forests and addressing deforestation. Most global awareness campaigns are either targeted at key decision-makers or, when they are targeted at the general public, deliver specific messages on the urgency of deforestation.

Forests 2011 clearly departs from this pattern. Through the UNFF which acts as its coordination platform, the International Year of Forests targets not only the 193 Member States of the United Nations, but the world's population as a whole. Through a great diversity of celebrations of all things forests at international and national levels, it delivers a positive message – how forests contribute to the well-being of all humanity in a myriad ways. Both the motto of Forests 2011 – “Forests for People” – and the logo designed by the United Nations (Figure 1) reflect this crucial relationship between forests and humans.



FIGURE 1 Logo of the International Year of Forests

As 2011 draws to an end, the International Year of Forests has shown to be a great success. The logo, translated into over 50 languages, was projected onto the Secretariat Building of the United Nations Headquarters on the launch of the Year in February 2011. Since then, requests to use the logo have been pouring in, with over 800 organisations – governments, companies and civil society organisations alike – who now use the logo around the world.

The launch of the International Year of Forests, which received global media coverage, took place in the iconic General Assembly Hall of the United Nations and brought together a wide range of senior government officials and high-level keynote speakers, including Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, who tragically passed away in September 2011. As part of the celebrations, an international forest film festival and forest heroes programme and awards were held, drawing interest from across the world. In particular, the sheer diversity and originality of competing films was such that many were shown at the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival, which brings together the world's most acclaimed nature film and documentary producers.

This global awareness-raising exercise is also aimed at providing a grassroots, bottom-up approach to increasing the importance of forests in the global development agenda. By enabling the world's population to know more about how useful forests are in their daily lives and to sustainable development generally, the objective of the International Year of Forests is to boost existing policies to combat deforestation by building a strong ground of public support.

The past five years have spelled major changes in world forest policies. By (i) laying down a solid set of principles through the Forests Instrument, (ii) achieving a broad consensus on forest financing (including REDD+), and (iii) promoting the visibility of forests to a new level through the International Year of Forests, we have created a unique opportunity to take action to reduce both deforestation and forest degradation on a global scale.

III. Promising Initiatives

In particular, the basis laid by these recent initiatives reveals two promising trends which may hold the key to solving the deforestation crisis, namely a cross-sectoral approach and a focus on people.

III.1. Beyond the Forest Sector

Over the years, global discussions have widened to embrace the diversity, multiplicity and complexity of forests. Within this trend is the gradual recognition that the solution to deforestation does not necessarily lie only within the forest sector. For over a decade, academics have shown that many – if not most – of the causes of deforestation are outside of the forest sector (e.g., Angelsen & Kaimowitz 1999).⁶ The timber sector has been blamed excessively for being the primary cause of deforestation, although it is now widely known that other sectors such as agriculture, transport and energy often have a greater impact on forest cover than does the forest sector itself.

Yet this reality has yet to be internalised by global forest policies. In spite of numerous calls for a cross-sectoral approach, most policies continue to be elaborated and implemented within the narrow silos of traditional sectors, with little to no communication, let alone collaboration, between them. Along with the 360-degree perspective adopted by the UNFF, however, a handful of promising initiatives break down sectoral barriers in a bid to implement sustainable forest management more efficiently.

Forest landscape restoration is one such activity. The Global Partnership on Forest Landscape Restoration is an ambitious initiative based on the recognition that over half of the world's forest cover has been cleared by humans in the space of a few centuries. By acknowledging the potential benefits of restoring these degraded landscapes – not only for forests themselves, but also to hundreds of millions of livelihoods, this initiative integrates forests into the broader landscape – which includes agriculture, transport and other land uses essential to human well-being.

Over two billion hectares around the world stand to benefit from forest landscape restoration. The first projects launched, which reflect the sheer scale of this potential, have already produced astounding results. Within a decade of introducing landscape restoration measures, the dry, dusty Loess plateau north of Xi'an, China, has been turned into a mixed green landscape of forests and fields, where trees and terracing fixed the soil, increasing fertility and producing clean water for communities and livestock alike. But the most impressive aspect of this feat is its size: this US\$ 500 million project enabled the incredible recovery of an area the size of Belgium – no less than 35,000 square kilometres.

This initiative was reproduced in Ethiopia with similar results and more recently still, the Government of Rwanda declared the creation of a border-to-border Forest Landscape Restoration project across the entire country. This is the first time that such a project has taken national proportions. For such an ambitious project of integrating landscape restoration into its national development plans, the Government of Rwanda has given itself 25 years to reach its objectives of turning the degraded landscapes of the “Country of a Thousand Hills” into a green and productive landscape. By using a cross-sectoral, landscape approach to addressing deforestation, an innovative solution has thus been found for forests and people.

III.2. Forests for People

Decision-makers and the wider public alike are often aware of the ecological functions of forests, such as the contribution of forests to maintaining biodiversity and storing carbon. Likewise, the timber sector, which produces an income of some US\$ 3.4 billion annually⁷ epitomises the significant cash contribution of forests to the world economy.

However, among the multiple values of forests, social functions have almost systematically been underrated. Two main factors account for this. First, rural villagers – 1.6 billion of whom depend on forests for their livelihoods – are frequently underrepresented in



the policy arena, and their voices remain all too often unheard. Secondly, because these livelihoods are generally informal and non-monetarised, they appear invisible in national and international statistics, despite their huge importance in reducing poverty.

This is even more the case for the cultural and spiritual values that forests represent in the eyes of countless local and indigenous communities around the world. Forests have always fascinated humanity, and humans have always woven them into their cultures, mythologies and cosmologies and often given them a very special place. Yet because these values are the least tangible, because they are the most difficult to quantify, they are virtually always left out.

Recognising the full social value of forests is not only of immense benefit to local communities. It is key to adding value to forests in the eyes of decision-makers who have all the more reason to implement sustainable forest management. Likewise, local communities – as custodians of forests – are generally more inclined to manage forest sustainably when they tenure systems and rights of access are clearly recognised.

In order to restore the importance of the social functions of forests, the UNFF dedicated the International Year of Forests to people. The day following its launch, the UNFF also adopted a ministerial declaration recognising that “nearly one quarter of the world’s population depend on forests for subsistence, livelihood, employment and income generation.” It also stressed “the crucial role of local people, including women, and local and indigenous communities in achieving sustainable forest management”.⁸

Emphasising the role of forests for people not only helps alleviate poverty *per se*, but it also places forests in the broader development context. Far from

“drowning” forests among more pressing development issues which are often seen to have greater priority in the eyes of decision-makers, underlining the link with poverty reduction actually increases the political visibility of forests by making sustainable forest management an essential building block of the global development agenda.

Such initiatives might not be sufficient in reversing the tide of deforestation on their own, but they illustrate a trend towards greater integration of forests within economic and social development at the global scale. Moreover, this trend appears at a time when forests are higher on the global policy agenda than they ever have been. Together, these form both a unique and highly promising window of opportunity for the international community to take action and promote sustainable forest management on a widespread scale – for the benefit of both forests and humanity.

Notes

- 1 CIFOR, FAO, ITTO, IUFRO, CBD Secretariat, GEF Secretariat, UNCCD Secretariat, UNFF Secretariat, UNFCCC Secretariat, UNDP, UNEP, ICRAF, World Bank, IUCN.
- 2 FAO (2010). *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010*. FAO Forestry Paper 163. Rome: FAO, 378 pp.
- 3 Stern, N. (2007). *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 712 pp.
- 4 Phelps, J., Webb, E.L. & Agrawal, A. (2010). Does REDD+ Threaten to Recentralize Forest Governance? *Science* 328(5976):312-3.
- 5 Resolution of the Special Session of the 9th Session of the UNFF on the Means of Implementation of Sustainable Forest Management, available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/608/38/PDF/N0960838.pdf?OpenElement>
- 6 Angelsen, A. & Kaimowitz, D. (1999). *Rethinking the causes of deforestation: lessons from economic models*, *World Bank Research Observer* 14(1):73-98.
- 7 FAO (2010). *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010*. FAO Forestry Paper 163. Rome: FAO, 378 pp.
- 8 The full text of the Ministerial Declaration is available at the following website: <http://www.un.org/esa/forests/documents-unff.html#10>