

Summary of the Eighteenth Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests: 8-12 May 2023

Forests mitigate climate change and clean the air. Forests protect watersheds, combat soil erosion, and protect biodiversity and key ecosystems, all of which in turn are critical for food security. The forest products sector is often a significant source of jobs, fuel, and income.

Bearing these relationships in mind, the eighteenth meeting of the United Nations' key body for policy discussions on this important resource, the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), held technical discussions on the implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 (UNSPF), highlighting synergies with other global efforts on forests, land degradation, biodiversity, climate change and many other aspects of sustainable development. Under the current format for the Forum's two-year thematic cycles, UNFF18 comprised technical discussions on implementation and UNFF19 will focus on policy dialogue, development and decision-making.

UNFF18's technical work included discussion on the interlinkages between the Global Forest Goals (GFGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under review by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) at its July 2023 session, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and other international forest-related developments. Panels of speakers informed the UNFF on: regenerative agriculture; the role of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), Adaptation Fund, and regional development banks; and the forests-energy-livelihoods nexus. The Forum also heard and discussed a special presentation on the potential of carbon markets for forest finance.

UNFF18 also reviewed preparations for the Midterm Review (MTR) in 2024 of the effectiveness of the International Arrangement on Forests (IAF), and received progress reports and updates on:

- the UNSPF communications and outreach strategy;
• the global core set of forest-related indicators;
• the pilot phase for the use of the refined format for voluntary national reporting to the Forum;
• preparations for the Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) 2025 of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO); and
• operations and resources of the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network (GFFFN).

UNFF18 convened from 8-12 May 2023 at UN Headquarters in New York. About 400 participants from Member States, international organizations, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), and Major Groups attended the session.

A Brief History of UNFF

The UNFF was established in 2000, following a five-year period of forest policy dialogue within the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF). In October 2000, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), in its resolution 2000/35, established the IAF, including the UNFF as a subsidiary body of ECOSOC, with the main objective of promoting the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests.

The UNFF's principal functions are to:

- facilitate the implementation of forest-related agreements and foster a common understanding on sustainable forest management (SFM);
• provide for continued policy development and dialogue among governments, international organizations, and Major Groups, as well as address forest issues and emerging areas of concern in a holistic, comprehensive, and integrated manner;
• enhance policy and programme coordination on forest-related issues;

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- foster international cooperation and monitor, assess, and report on progress; and
- strengthen political commitment to the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests.

The UNFF organizational session, held in February 2001 at UN Headquarters in New York, agreed that the UNFF Secretariat would be located in New York. Except for the third and fourth sessions, all sessions of the UNFF have been held at UN Headquarters in New York. The CPF, a partnership of 16 major forest-related international organizations, institutions, and convention secretariats, was also established.

Key Turning Points

UNFF5: UNFF5 (May 2005) agreed to four GFGs on:

- significantly increasing the area of protected forests and sustainably managed forests worldwide;
- reversing the decline in official development assistance (ODA) for SFM;
- reversing the loss of forest cover; and
- enhancing forest-based economic, social, and environmental benefits.

They also agreed in principle to negotiate, at some future date, the terms of reference for a voluntary code or international understanding on forests, as well as on means of implementation.

UNFF6: UNFF6 (February 2006) generated a negotiating text containing new language on the function of the IAF, a commitment to convene UNFF biennially after 2007, and a request that UNFF7 adopt a non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests.

UNFF6 also finalized the four global objectives on forests for the IAF to:

- reverse the loss of forest cover worldwide through SFM, including through protection, restoration, afforestation, and reforestation;
- enhance forest-based economic, social, and environmental benefits, and the contribution of forests to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals;
- increase significantly the area of protected forests worldwide and other areas of sustainably managed forests; and
- reverse the decline in ODA for SFM and mobilize significantly increased new and additional financial resources from all sources for the implementation of SFM.

UNFF7: UNFF7 (April 2007) adopted the non-legally binding instrument and a Multi-Year Programme of Work for the period 2007-2015. Delegates agreed that a “voluntary global financial mechanism/portfolio approach/forest-financing framework for all types of forests” would be developed and considered, with a view to its adoption at UNFF8.

UNFF9: UNFF9 (January-February 2011) launched the International Year of Forests 2011. The Forum adopted a resolution on forests for people, livelihoods, and poverty eradication, which addressed, *inter alia*: procedures for assessment of progress; increased regional and subregional cooperation; enhanced cooperation, including with Major Groups; and means of implementation for SFM, including an ad hoc expert group process on forest financing.

UNFF11: UNFF11 (May 2015) forwarded a resolution to ECOSOC recommending, *inter alia*, to:

- rename the non-legally binding instrument the “UN Forest Instrument”;
- strengthen and extend the IAF to 2030;

- decide that the IAF is composed of the UNFF and its Member States, the Secretariat of the Forum, the CPF, the GFFFN, and the UNFF Trust Fund;
- set clear priorities for the GFFFN in a new strategic plan, later officially named the UNSPF; and
- convene an ad hoc expert group to develop proposals on a replacement for the reference to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the UN Forest Instrument with an appropriate reference to the SDGs and targets, the UNSPF, and the Quadrennial Programme of Work (4POW) for the period 2017-2020.

UNFF11 also agreed on a new format for the Forum: sessions would take place annually, but based on two-year thematic cycles, with the first year comprising discussions on implementation and technical advice and the second focusing on policy dialogue, development, and decision making.

ECOSOC approved the UNFF11 recommendations in its resolution 2015/33, and the UN General Assembly gave effect to the changes recommended by ECOSOC on 22 December 2015 in resolution 70/199.

Recent Meetings

UNFF12: UNFF12 (May 2017) was the first session to be held under the new format. UNFF12 adopted an omnibus resolution covering monitoring, assessment and reporting, means of implementation and enhanced cooperation, coordination, engagement on forest-related issues, and contributions to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The resolution, *inter alia*:

- requested the Secretariat to revise the format for voluntary national reporting on UNSPF implementation;
- adopted guidelines for country-led initiatives in support of the Forum; and
- requested the Secretariat, with the CPF, to prepare a report on actions to accelerate progress in achieving SDG 15 (life on land) and forest-related targets, and a background study on the contribution of forests to other SDGs.

UNFF13: UNFF13 (May 2018) forwarded a resolution to ECOSOC which, *inter alia*:

- adopted a communications and outreach strategy;
- decided UNFF would consider the results of the first round of voluntary national reporting at UNFF15; and
- requested the UNFF Secretariat to initiate development of the GFFFN’s online clearinghouse mechanism.

UNFF15: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in accordance with ECOSOC resolution E/2020/L.8, the Forum took place through virtual informal consultations. UNFF15 adopted an omnibus resolution on:

- the implementation of the UNSPF;
- monitoring, assessment, and reporting;
- means of implementation;
- emerging issues and challenges;
- the 4POW for the period 2021-2024; and
- information on the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) reform pertaining to the Forum.

UNFF17: UNFF17 (May 2022) adopted an omnibus resolution on: implementation of the UNSPF; means of implementation; monitoring, assessment, and reporting; and preparations for the 2024 MTR of the effectiveness of the IAF.

UNFF18 Report

On Monday, [8 May](#), UNFF18 Chair Zéphyrin Maniratanga (Burundi) opened the meeting.

The Forum approved the Bureau candidate endorsed by the Latin American and Caribbean Group, Leticia Zamora Zumbado (Costa Rica). As the Eastern European Group offered two candidates for its vacancy on the Bureau, a secret ballot election was held, electing Jaroslav Kubišta (Czechia). Vice Chair Ismail Belen (Türkiye) was appointed rapporteur for UNFF18 and UNFF19.

Delegates approved the provisional agenda ([E/CN.18/2023/1](#)) without amendment and the organization of work as proposed by the Chair.

Opening Statements: Chair Maniratanga stressed the linkages between forests, biodiversity, climate change and land degradation. He urged “breaking the silos” between these issues and tackling them in a holistic, integrated manner, through concrete efforts on the ground.

ECOSOC President Lachezara Stoeva (Bulgaria) noted the alignment of the GFGs and UNSPF with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the importance of forests for achieving all the SDGs. She urged UNFF18 to propose concrete actions reflecting the GFGs to the HLPF in July 2023 and the SDG Summit in September 2023.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Li Junhua said forests play a fundamental role in addressing the many challenges faced by today’s world. Noting the approach of the halfway point in implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the UNSPF, he called for drawing attention to the critical role of forests and SFM in eradicating poverty and achieving the SDGs. He said the upcoming SDG Summit is an opportunity to renew the commitment to the GFGs and SDGs and urged UNFF18 to deliver concrete solutions that reinforce the role of the GFGs in achieving the SDGs.

Technical Discussions on the Implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030

On Monday, Chair Maniratanga opened this agenda item. UNFF Secretariat Director Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo presented the Secretariat’s Note ([E/CN.18/2023/2](#)) providing background information on UNFF thematic priorities for the biennium 2023-2024, including information on Forum members’ contributions.

A summary of the general opening discussion on this topic can be found [here](#).

Secretariat’s vision, priorities and achievements: On Monday, Director Biao presented “Building a shared vision: priorities, achievements and future opportunities.” She encouraged a common vision on UNFF global leadership and raising its impact on providing strategies and action to accelerate UNSPF/GFG implementation. She urged greater UNFF attendance by ministries, heads of state, the private sector, and multilateral development banks.

She called for strengthening GFFFN resource mobilization for Secretariat work supporting the UNFF, facilitating access to finance, monitoring progress toward the UNSPF and SFM, and increasing awareness and engagement. She reported:

- a renewed memorandum of understanding with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD);
- discussions on partnerships with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UN Framework Convention on Climate

Change (UNFCCC), UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), African Forest Forum, and others;

- discussion on improving the UNFF-CPF partnership;
- new connections with academia and the private sector; and work on connections between forests, energy, and livelihoods.

She cited figures on Trust Fund contributions, noting their inadequacy. She said transparency on the Secretariat’s vision and direction will build trust, which will encourage greater support.

In responses from the floor, all countries expressed appreciation to Director Biao for detailing challenges facing the Secretariat. SWITZERLAND, CANADA, AUSTRALIA, the US, BRAZIL and NEW ZEALAND called for greater transparency on staffing constraints and lauded the efforts to engage with other environmental entities. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION, with several countries, called for saving on travel and accommodation costs by hosting hybrid sessions. MALAWI and UGANDA urged greater mobilization of financial resources and encouraged Member States to contribute to the Trust Fund. CHINA urged countries to “make the case for forests” to ensure sufficient financial support for SFM as the total supply of funding is finite. MOROCCO suggested hosting a high-level forum to develop funding strategies.

Director Biao agreed with many comments but noted the need for evidence-based proposals for funding. The Secretariat explained that hybrid meetings double costs for interpreters. After SWITZERLAND’s comments on possible funding of these costs and, with INDIA, on time commitments, Director Biao agreed to investigate these and share the information.

Thematic priorities for the biennium 2023-2024, in support of the implementation of the UNSPF: Director Biao introduced this item on Tuesday ([E/CN.18/2023/2](#)). She recalled that the three thematic priorities for biennium are:

- enhancing forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits;
- increasing significantly the area of protected forests worldwide and other areas of sustainably managed forests, as well as the proportion of forest products from sustainably managed forests; and
- mobilizing financial resources and strengthening scientific and technical cooperation; promoting governance frameworks to advance implementation; and enhancing cooperation, coordination and coherence for SFM.

Consultants introduced analytical background studies on the [first](#) and [second](#) thematic priorities. Léonce Konguem reported key findings on the interlinkages between GFG 2 (enhance forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits) and the SDGs. Noting at least 10 SDGs will be impacted through GFG 2 achievement, he recommended that UNFF:

- assist developing countries in their efforts to secure funding;
- improve accuracy of measuring GFG targets 2.2 (access of small-scale forest enterprises to financial resources) and 2.5 (contribution to biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation);
- improve the valuation of forest ecosystem services;
- strengthen national forest regulation and combat illegal activities; and
- highlight the role of forests in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic during the SDG Summit in September 2023.

Mahendra Joshi presented key findings on GFG 3 (increasing protected and sustainably-managed forest area) captured in national reports between 2020 and 2021, suggesting that the UNFF

encourage countries to include details on progress made in GFG 3, explore ways to measure progress on target 3.3 (increasing the proportion of forest products from sustainably-managed forests) more realistically, launch consumer awareness programmes for forest products from sustainably-managed forests, and undertake in-depth case studies and impact assessments.

The EU, with CANADA, urged UNFF-CPF-FAO engagement on GFG 1 (reversing deforestation). INDIA, with BRAZIL, deplored assessing sustainability solely through certification. The US suggested the GFFFN is UNFF's unique contribution among CPF organizations, and, with CANADA, emphasized nature-based solutions and natural capital accounting. BRAZIL underscored natural capital and environmental services accounting, bemoaned overemphasis on mitigation, and suggested UNFF studies on achieving GFG 2.

URUGUAY highlighted conserving native forests while promoting forest plantations through tax rebates for carbon stocks. MEXICO expressed support for the idea that UNFF members share best practice on access to financing through a clearinghouse. MALI urged the Forum to form partnerships to address finance access issues.

The PHILIPPINES stressed that the amended format for national reporting on progress in meeting GFG 2 and 3 targets should include greater detail, given the limitations of the current format. NEW ZEALAND suggested adapting the Montreal Process framework of criteria and indicators for the conservation and sustainable management of temperate and boreal forests and applying it to all types of forests.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH emphasized the importance of recognizing the rights and needs of local communities and Indigenous Peoples who utilize the forest, since they are crucial to achieving GFG 2 and can collaborate on GFGs 3, 4, 5, and 6.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES stressed SDG 17 on partnership and called for improved UNFF engagement of Indigenous Peoples as caretakers of Mother Earth.

Responding to questions and comments, Konguem proposed promoting research and development (R&D) on bioenergy and advised Brazil and India to share their expertise in accounting practices for forest ecosystem services. Joshi acknowledged that simplistic approaches to a carbon market will lead to incorrect practices and urged engaging large corporations to mobilize funding for R&D on an appropriate forest carbon framework.

Director Biao outlined the dual responsibility of the Secretariat to support the Forum on substantive issues while facilitating implementation through strategic partnerships, mobilizing funding and accessing these through the GFFFN.

Contributions of Members of the Forum to implementing the UNSPF: On Monday, Vice Chair Javad Momeni (Iran) opened this agenda item. On [Monday](#) and [Tuesday](#) members presented updates on their national actions in support of the three UNFF thematic priorities, including any updates to their Voluntary National Contributions and implementation of the GFGs.

Contributions of and enhanced cooperation with partners to achieving the thematic priorities: UNFF18 Vice Chair İsmail Belen (Türkiye) opened this agenda item on Tuesday. Director Biao introduced the Secretariat Note ([E/CN.18/2023/3](#)) on contributions of and enhanced cooperation with partners.

Contributions of the CPF and its Member Organizations and Progress on the Implementation of its Workplan: CPF Chair Zhimin Wu (FAO), acknowledged there is still room for

improvement in joint programming among CPF members. Wu reported that the CPF has already conducted its effectiveness assessment for the MTR, which recommended clarifying CPF focus and alignment and sharpening work plans with a focus on more concrete action. He said the CPF will have a retreat in Nairobi in June 2023 to discuss ideas for improving support to UNFF, such as through: staff secondment; regular reviews of CPF work; enhanced joint advocacy on specific themes; webinars; and improved CPF working modalities such as task forces or joint programming committees. Wu announced that the proposed theme for the 2024 International Day of Forests (IDF) will be “forests and innovation.”

Contributions of Regional and Subregional Organizations and Processes: The AMAZON COOPERATION TREATY ORGANIZATION (ACTO) said achievements are more visible at the regional level, pointing to the Amazon Observatory.

FOREST EUROPE said its 45 signatories significantly contribute to the UNSPF, including through green jobs and forest education to create work opportunities along the whole forest sector value chain.

The UNECE highlighted their capacity-building work on urban forestry, noting the release of a series of podcasts on urban forestry.

A summary of the general discussion on partners can be found [here](#).

Panel on Regenerative Agriculture: A panel moderated by Catherine Grenier, President and CEO, Nature Conservancy of Canada, discussed how regenerative agriculture can contribute to the achievement of the GFGs. Grenier, noting the area required to achieve the GFGs by 2030 is twice the size of France, said: “We cannot achieve these goals without the private sector.”

Alexander Gillett, CEO, Howgood, suggested the best way of achieving the 1.5°C climate target is through forest regeneration, noting that due to the time frame requirements of farming, the targets “become harder and more expensive.” Emphasizing that shifting to regenerative agriculture requires capacity building for farmers, and related funding, he suggested leveraging funds through engaging with private companies who buy agricultural and forestry products to utilize opportunities presented by the carbon market.

On drivers of deforestation and how Nestlé addressed these, Michèle Zollinger said the biggest impacts come from the ingredients sourced for the company's products, which drive land degradation. She described the company's positive strategy launched in 2021 to take proactive action by focusing on restoration, including through: allowing no deforestation in their supply chain, taking long-term action on restoring forests, and considering landscape approaches.

Stéphane Hallaire, CEO, Reforest'Action, presented on sharing carbon market revenues with regenerative agriculture using principles of high carbon prices, benefit-sharing, risk acceptance, development of additional revenues, and long-term monitoring. He said Reforest'Action co-designs projects with local community representatives and local governments, sharing understandings on goals and revenues of the projects.

During the subsequent discussion, Zollinger said Nestlé supports regenerative practices, urging governments to help scale up; drive and enforce forest legislation; and reduce supply-chain traceability barriers.

Gillett noted five agreed actions for common metrics on regenerative agriculture and called for supporting farmers until regenerative agriculture brings them higher yields.

Hallaire advocated combining carbon funding with agroforestry for higher co-benefits.

Moderator Grenier noted take-aways that: progress is already happening; these community-based projects require partnerships, co-development, and collaboration across sectors; the bioeconomy creates opportunities to leverage market incentives; and more learning will accelerate implementation.

Interlinkages between the GFGs and targets and the SDGs under review by the HLPF in 2023, the work towards the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and other international forest-related developments: On Tuesday, Vice Chair Zamora opened this agenda item. Jihyun Lee, CBD, provided an update on the [Kummig-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) (GBF) and discussed its linkages with the GFGs, such as to facilitate national implementation of ecosystem protective actions, acknowledge the role of Indigenous Peoples, and respect traditional knowledge systems. She said this will require a whole-of-systems approach.

A panel moderated by Sheam Satkuru, Executive Director, International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), discussed transformative actions needed to ensure achievement of the thematic priorities. Ulrich Apel, GEF, emphasized: protecting primary forests through strategically targeting investment and innovative financing; restoring degraded forest ecosystems; and investing in integrated work on deforestation drivers in food systems.

Mikko Ollikainen, Manager, Adaptation Fund, said this UNFCCC-mandated Fund accelerates access to finance for adaptation with co-benefits. He highlighted action, innovation, and learning for accelerating and scaling finance for developing countries' priorities, including locally-led adaptation, while increasing food security and biodiversity conservation.

Vanessa Ushie, African Development Bank (AfDB), said the AfDB addresses challenges from: weak capacity, governance, and forest law enforcement; outflows of capital; conflict; and competition for resources. She urged strengthening institutions, capacities, political will, and regional cooperation, alongside increasing forestry investments to 5% of regional banks' portfolios.

Qingfeng Zhang, Asian Development Bank (ADB), highlighted ADB's Innovative Natural Capital Financing Facility, which co-finances and supports projects with significant natural capital components that contribute to SDGs in developing member countries, with a focus on sustainable food value chains, climate-resilient agriculture, and natural resource management.

Implementation of the UNSPF Communication and Outreach Strategy and the International Day of Forests in 2023: Chair Maniratanga opened this agenda item on Monday. On [Monday](#) and [Tuesday](#), the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, ECUADOR, FAO, INDONESIA, JAPAN, KENYA, MALAYSIA, MALI, MEXICO, the PHILIPPINES, SAUDI ARABIA, SOUTH AFRICA, THAILAND, REPUBLIC OF KOREA, and UZBEKISTAN described national activities to implement the IDF in 2023.

The INTERNATIONAL UNION OF FOREST RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS (IUFRO) reported the release of its global assessment report, "[Forests and Trees for Human Health](#)," on IDF 2023, and plans for its use as the basis for communications to the HLPF and the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties.

MEXICO described its national communication and outreach strategy on forests' contributions to the SDGs.

On communications, the EU, supported by CANADA, suggested:

- rethinking the UNFF website;
- more collaboration with celebrities;
- supported by INDIA, more targeted messaging on the contribution of forests to the SDGs and international agreements;

- greater use of the HLPF for UNSPF messaging;
- more messaging to youth; and
- strengthened coherence and coordination with other UN initiatives to increase impact.

INDIA noted his country currently chairs the G20, and expressed hope for a constructive G20 Ministerial communique on land degradation.

The US urged greater use of short videos, and more infographics. CHINA requested Secretariat provision of more digital posters. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION suggested developing more tools for stakeholder information exchange on plans for IDFs. AUSTRALIA, with SWITZERLAND, said the current UNFF website threatens its credibility.

SWITZERLAND called for a communication document for the SDG Summit about all the ways forests contribute to achieving the SDGs, offering to coordinate interested countries to produce one for circulation among Heads of State and Ministers.

Responding to questions on revamping the UNFF website, Director Biao provided reasons for the state of the website and detailed a short-term solution offered, through funding of USD 498,592 by Germany that would allow for appointment of a communications officer until 2024. She noted that a long-term solution beyond 2024 remains elusive.

Means of implementation, including operations and resources of the GFFFN: On Wednesday, Vice Chair Momeni introduced this agenda item. Director Biao introduced the Secretariat's Note on means of implementation ([E/CN.18/2023/4](#)). A summary of interventions can be found [here](#).

Steven Witte, Chief Operating Officer and Founder, Xange, elaborated on how a well-functioning carbon market will accelerate the GFGs' achievement. He pointed to a currently fragmented market and recommended digitizing the carbon market through block chain technology to ensure liquidity; cost efficiency, transparency and quality without double-counting; and incentives for improved performance.

UNFF18 Vice Chair Belen and members posed questions on potential opportunities, improved deployment of the market, green bonds' potential contribution to GFGs, avoidance of greenwashing and double counting for carbon, accounting for co-benefits, introducing coercive methods for compliance, and ensuring the market actually supports the projects it is intended to benefit.

COSTA RICA stressed accountability, transparency, reducing transaction costs and time, and improving traceability of the funds. MEXICO appealed for more non-market options for carbon financing for forests and urged a full assessment of the potential carbon market in forests of the Global South.

Witte noted that within the voluntary carbon market several guidelines are already in place, such as the Core Carbon Principles released by the Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market in 2022. He said what is needed is a strong, solid, trustworthy, credible transparent third-party verification system that uses digital measurement and reporting mechanisms to track what is actually happening, perform audits and publish records for public scrutiny. He noted satellites, data sets and guidelines already exist, and suggested these should suffice if everyone cooperates and agrees on which guidelines to follow.

"That's the most important message to leave with you: we have the tools and core principles already in place, we don't need additional layers, we just need standardization of methodologies, and digital monitoring, reporting and verification that is open

and transparent. With that,” he concluded, “We will have a great opportunity for developing countries to get carbon credits for forest financing.”

Monitoring, Assessment and Reporting (MAR): On Wednesday, Chair Maniratanga opened this agenda item. Director Biao introduced the Secretariat’s Note ([E/CN.18/2023/5](#)) on intersessional activities on MAR since UNFF17, including: amendments to the UNFF reporting form format; pilot testing and a global workshop; and evaluation of the impact of UNFF’s flagship publication, [The Global Forest Goals Report 2021](#).

Global Core Set of Forest-related Indicators (GSC): Gerfried Gruber (Austria) and Clement Ng’oriareng (Kenya), Co-Chairs of the Global Workshop on Reporting on Progress towards the GFGs and Targets, held 22-24 March 2023 in Rome, Italy, presented their summary of the Workshop, which addressed the GCS and the amended format for voluntary national reporting. Gruber noted recommendations to, *inter alia*: update information on wood/charcoal production; further streamline reporting; include information on emerging topics; update the methodology for estimating employment in the forestry sector; and identify data needs.

Ng’oriareng reported that outcomes of the workshop included a template of an amended format for reporting and feedback from the pilot-testing countries and others, including on: improving accuracy and consistency of forest-related data; support to countries preparing their voluntary national reports for UNFF; and briefings on issues related to data collection. He predicted the amended format will enable more countries to submit progress reports on implementing the UNSPF.

Preparations for the Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) 2025: Malgorzata Buszko-Briggs, FAO, reported on preparations for the FRA and on the FAO-UNFF Secretariat joint initiative on streamlining global forest reporting, which has improved consistency of data for monitoring progress. She noted FAO’s recommendation that the UNFF use quantitative data from the FRA to minimize duplication and ensure consistency. On refinement of the GCS, Buszko-Briggs noted substantial progress but urged further strengthening.

Informal Advisory Group on Reporting: The Secretariat briefed delegates on the terms of reference (ToR) for this group. He noted ECOSOC had asked the Secretariat to consider establishing the advisory group and to draft its ToR. He summarized the draft ToR annexed to the Secretariat’s Note. A summary of interventions during the general discussion on this agenda item can be found [here](#).

Update on the Preparations for the IAF Midterm Review: On Thursday, Vice Chair Kubišta opened this agenda item. Director Biao introduced the Secretariat’s Note ([E/CN.18/2023/6](#)) on preparations for the MTR. She summarized actions since UNFF17, including assessment reports prepared by consultants, a questionnaire circulated among Member States and stakeholders, and assessment meetings held in January and March 2023, noting plans for an expert group meeting (EGM) in June 2023 and an open-ended intergovernmental ad hoc expert group (AHEG) in October 2023.

KENYA reported full recent and upcoming participation. JAMAICA urged UNFF networking to solicit more Member State reporting. CHINA urged measures to ensure broader participation, noting its contributions to the Trust Fund for this purpose.

INDIA, the EU, US, JAMAICA, MEXICO, SWITZERLAND, and AUSTRALIA favored hybrid meetings, with MEXICO stressing its importance to ensure stakeholders’ participation.

The EU, REPUBLIC OF KOREA, MEXICO, and BRAZIL queried the usefulness of the questionnaire, given relatively few responses, and suggested seeking another way of soliciting views.

AUSTRALIA, the EU, US, and SWITZERLAND called for more detailed information for UNFF19, and for posting calendars and documents well in advance. AUSTRALIA also questioned the expected AHEG outcome.

SWITZERLAND observed that the consultants’ assessment reports are long yet essential, although not agreed documents.

The EU proposed a special report focused on target 1.1 (forest area increased by 3% worldwide) that can be circulated and made accessible. MALI urged focusing on enhancing synergies with other forest-related processes linked during the MTR.

ACTO requested participation in the AHEG, given its desire to share information and results for consideration in the MTR.

Director Biao confirmed a hybrid-mode June EGM but said costs for interpretation for a hybrid October AHEG would be prohibitive. She confirmed that: documents for both meetings will be posted well in advance; both meetings will produce Co-Chairs’ summaries; and these will inform the Bureau’s preparation of a “zero draft” resolution on the MTR for UNFF19.

Forum Trust Fund

On [Thursday](#), Vice Chair Kubišta opened this agenda item. Director Biao introduced the Secretariat’s Note on the Trust Fund ([E/CN.18/2023/7](#)), thanking the donors. She noted the UNFF Secretariat remains the smallest unit within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and lamented declining funding, given its negative effects on supporting countries’ implementation of the UNSFP to achieve the GFGs.

In statements from the floor, the five major donors affirmed continued support for the Secretariat. The US, SWITZERLAND, AUSTRALIA, and GERMANY requested clarity on the Secretariat’s staffing and operational needs and a forecast of activities to enable budgetary planning.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA suggested speedy dissemination of implementation reports to ensure attention to funding requirements.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA, with JAMAICA, advocated tapping the Green Climate Fund to supplement funding gaps, given forests’ role in climate change mitigation, but lamented its cumbersome application process.

CHINA, JAMAICA, and many others encouraged countries able to do so to increase their voluntary contributions, calling on the Secretariat for operational efficiency.

GERMANY emphasized its targeted funding for Major Groups’ engagement in UNFF and urged others to contribute similarly.

The AFRICAN FOREST FORUM noted the declining funds and small number of contributors, suggesting the Secretariat consult with countries individually and publish contributions.

Director Biao noted donor concerns for clarity and undertook to provide more information.

Emerging Issues

Although this agenda item was opened by Chair Maniratanga on Monday, it was not addressed until Vice Chair Belen introduced, on Thursday afternoon, a panel moderated by Paola Deda, UNECE, which discussed the contributions of forests and SFM to energy,

livelihoods, and the SDGs. Speakers representing IUFRO, ITTO, FAO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) discussed:

- minimizing tradeoffs and leveraging synergies between forests, energy and livelihoods;
- addressing the underlying causes of forest deforestation/ degradation;
- the pros and cons for forests of bioenergy development; and
- the impacts of the carbon markets.

A summary of the panel discussion and its interaction with Forum Members is available [here](#).

Date, Venue and Provisional Agenda for UNFF19

On Friday, UNFF18 adopted the decisions on the provisional agenda, and on the dates and venue for UNFF19, contained in documents [E/CN.18/2023/L.1](#) and [L.2](#), respectively. The provisional UNFF19 agenda includes:

- policy discussions on the implementation of the UNSPF;
- UNFF Trust Fund;
- the MTR;
- a high-level segment, including a forest partnership forum with the CPF, NGOs, and private sector chief executive officers; and
- adoption of the quadrennial programme of work for the period 2025-2028, including consideration of priority actions and resource needs.

Closing Session

On Friday morning, Chair Maniratanga presented his Chair's draft summary of the week's discussions and his proposals for transmission to UNFF19. He explained his summary of input to the 2023 HLPF, submitted by the Bureau in March 2023, will be appended to the UNFF18 report. Maniratanga stressed that he would also accept written submissions regarding the session summary until Friday, 19 May 2023.

Delegates reviewed the draft summary for factual corrections, some noting the accidental omission of a section on the MTR. The Chair agreed to circulate to members via email a new paragraph on the MTR to be added to the summary.

Other issues raised by delegates for possible adjustments in the text included:

- references to forest certification;
- stress on reciprocal linkages between forests, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the GBF;
- whether to include references to calls for a dedicated forest fund or technology facilitation mechanism;
- changing references to "forests fires" to "wildfires";
- what details to include about the proposed GFFFN office in Beijing, China; and
- how to refer to impacts on forests due to the conflict in the Ukraine.

UNFF18 Rapporteur Belen presented the draft report of the session (E/CN.18/2023/L.3) to be submitted to ECOSOC, noting that he would complete the report with the assistance of the Secretariat. The report was adopted.

In closing remarks, Director Biao thanked delegates for the opportunity to share with them her vision and said their contributions will improve the effectiveness of the Secretariat.

Chair Maniratanga commended UNFF18 for the positive discussion among all participants on forests, energy and livelihoods as emerging issues, and suggested it will serve to bolster collaboration and coordination of Member States, CPF, regional

partners, other organizations, industry, and Major Groups. He underscored that resolving forestry challenges will offer solutions to impacts of climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss, and urged Member States to address the drivers of deforestation to make UNFF more effective.

He gavelled UNFF18 to a close at 11:09 am.

A Brief Analysis of UNFF18

Progress in restoring and protecting the world's forests has never been a straight march from strength to strength. It has been more like a dance, some steps forward, some steps back. But at this juncture, is the global forest policy dance one of "two steps forward, one step back" or two steps back for every step forward? Is the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) headed toward meeting the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) it set for 2030 back in 2017? Or is progress being reversed?

Delegates gathered at UN Headquarters in New York for a fairly straightforward eighteenth session of the UNFF. Since UNFF18 was one of its alternate-year "technical" sessions, no policy decisions had to be taken; it was an opportunity to assess implementation of the UN Strategic Plan on Forests (UNSPF) in pursuit of the six GFGs.

As the first fully in-person UNFF meeting since 2019, it was clear that participants were happy to be back in the same room, no matter what economic or indeed political challenges are being faced, given the common challenges and concerns foresters share no matter where they hail from. Yet it was impossible to ignore that, in the words of one participant, the multiple crises the world is currently facing "are worse than any other time in the last 50 years." The fact that forests themselves are affected by so many aspects of these global crises also was not lost on anyone. Yet there was little sense of the urgency that might have been expected given the short time left to meet the ambitious goal of reversing deforestation by 2030. This raises questions about the future. In this brief analysis we consider the outlook in the wake of UNFF18.

Fast-step or Slow-step? A Study in Contrasts

There was a laid-back vibe in the room. Three of the week's nine scheduled three-hour plenary sessions ended over an hour early, and the work on the last day ended after only an hour's discussion. The rhythm of discussion was mostly smooth and steady, with very few dissonant passages. There was little improvisation, as many delegates relied on written statements with information about their progress in sustainable forest management (SFM) and plans for more progress in the future.

Yet this relaxed rhythm seemed at times to belie the fact that rates of deforestation are still alarming—estimated at 10 million hectares per year between 2015-2020—while the world has only 6.5 years left to achieve the key GFG target (1.1) of increasing forest area by 3% worldwide from 2017 by 2030. In this regard, UNFF18 was tasked with reviewing preparations for the 2024 Midterm Review (MTR) of the International Arrangement on Forests (IAF). The MTR will gauge whether the world is on course to meet Target 1.1, or any of the GFGs' targets, in the short time left, yet it was hardly mentioned during the week.

Panels that sparked strong interest among delegates—one on regenerative agriculture, another on multilateral funding opportunities for forests—were strictly time limited, restricting interaction with participants. Yet *pro forma* interventions listing

national accomplishments were frequently allowed to go over the posted time limit even though they were often out of sync with the agenda, taking time away from other agenda items.

In contrast to the stance many had taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, some developing country and Major Group delegates urged greater UNFF use of virtual or hybrid meetings and workshops to increase participation and get more “bang for the buck” from UNFF’s limited funds. Yet simultaneous interpretation is costly for hybrid meetings, limiting the savings involved and thus the number or types of meetings for which a hybrid format can be used. The hybrid UNFF17 meeting in 2022 also disadvantaged virtual participants by preventing them from joining in-person huddles in the margins, a situation worsened by the fact that the virtual participants were generally from developing countries.

The potential of China’s 2018 proposal for a GFFFN office in Beijing remains unrealized. The setback is due in part to negotiating delays, and in part because repeated attempts by Member States to get more details about the intended funding, organization, and mission of the office have been resisted by Secretariat staff, year after year, provoking still more questions. Director Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo sought to allay suspicions by answering questions at UNFF18. Unfortunately, some of the goodwill created by her gesture was lost when she later only agreed to include a synopsis of her remarks in the Chair’s summary rather than append a verbatim transcript.

Despite the importance voiced by all on improving monitoring, assessment, and reporting on forest activities for SFM as a key element of the MTR, only 53 of UNFF’s 197 member countries submitted reports on their progress for 2023 and little time was devoted to the topic at UNFF18.

The Story Behind the Song

The substantial contrasts that UNFF18 embodied may be partly attributable to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding with the fact that Director Biao’s tenure with UNFF only began in January 2022 after a four-year gap following former Director Manoel Sobral Filho’s retirement.

However, they may also reflect a more general ambivalence about international forest policy, which might help to explain why questions hang over the ability of the UNFF and its Member States to achieve its goals. International forest policy has a history of highs and lows, beginning with the center stage taken by tropical deforestation in the 1970s and 1980s that influenced the creation of the International Tropical Timber Organization and a dream of a binding global forest convention, as proposed by US President George H. W. Bush in July 1990.

That opportunity to set binding regulations and obligations was lost, although agreement was achieved on a general nonbinding Statement of Forest Principles adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992: the first global consensus on forests. It was not the negotiation of the Forest Principles that led ultimately to the UNFF, however, but rather the chapter on forests in the nonbinding “Agenda 21” action plan also adopted in Rio. The fact that global policy on all types of forests has grown up in incrementally, through various non-binding instruments, also meant that those concerned about forests have had to dance to “whatever tune the band is playing,” i.e., wherever there is a promise of funding, such as under the UNFCCC’s REDD+ programme.

The UNFF itself has suffered defeats, such as the Forum’s inability to finalize the “Non-Legally Binding Instrument” on forests (NLBI) under negotiation in 2005 and controversy continuing well into the 2000s over repeated attempts to get agreement on negotiating a binding forest treaty. There also have been persistent worries about UNFF’s loss of momentum or decline. Such worries were prompted by delays in appointing a new Director, or loss of staff from CPF secondments, or rumors that reforms to the UN Secretariat would lead to a downscaled UNFF. Concerns have persisted despite the fact that the NLBI was upgraded and renamed the UNSPF in 2017 and expanded to contain six Global Forest Goals rather than the four of the 2007 NLBI.

A Song of Change?

Despite worsening global crises, the short timeline set for reaching the critical GFGs, and the track record of ups and downs in international forest policymaking and in the UNFF itself, UNFF18 was not full of gloom. Indeed, there was palpable optimism in the air. Despite lamentations about inadequate funding, for the Secretariat as well as for poorer countries attempting to put in place and scale up SFM, more than one delegate asserted that there is more funding for forests available than ever before. The question is really one of improving access to funding—the very question the GFFFN was established to address. Some delegates from donor nations also suggested the Trust Fund might receive more contributions if Director Biao just provided an indicative budget showing what tasks could be undertaken if more funds were made available.

These statements might have met with skepticism, given the historical ambivalence on international forest policy and the ubiquitous competition for funding for seemingly much more urgent environmental issues such as climate change. Yet by the end of the session, delegates showed a new enthusiasm for their task. One delegate opined that the finalization of the Convention on Biological Diversity’s new Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) was perhaps singlehandedly responsible for this shift—at least in perception, if not reality. Forests are of paramount importance as the habitat for as much as 80% of the world’s species.

What UNFF is showing to the world is that restoration, conservation, and sustainable management of forests is one of the most efficient and effective ways to pursue all the other major goals set for 2030, including the Paris Agreement, most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the 2030 target of the GBF itself. This was exemplified most clearly in the panel of private sector actors reporting their concrete progress in developing forest-related regenerative agriculture. This was exemplified most clearly in the panel of private sector actors reporting their concrete progress in developing forest-related regenerative agriculture. Regarded by many as the highlight of the week, Members underscored that agroforestry incorporates food security in addition to the benefits of protecting ecosystems and sequestering carbon. This, they added, will achieve many more goals and “open many more pockets for funding.” Actors outside the UNFF, in pursuit of their own ambitious environmental goals, will therefore become increasingly aware of the value of forests for achieving them. So, the theme song of UNFF18 effectively became a chorus on synergies.

As one forester pointed out: “We must care for the forest in order to care for forest-dependent people, and this actually means Earth’s entire population.” If this ultimate goal is taken to heart, the world’s forest dance in 2030 may be a jig for joy instead of a funeral march.

Upcoming Meetings

UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies: The 58th sessions of the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) will prepare for COP 28. **dates:** 5-15 June 2023 **location:** Bonn, Germany **www:** unfccc.int/sb58

UNFF Expert Group Meeting on the GFFFN, and Implementation of the UNSPF: The EGM will review and discuss assessment reports of the GFFFN and the implementation of the UNSPF, as well as the roadmap and timeline prepared by the UNFF Secretariat for the next UNFF reporting cycle, along with options for establishing an online reporting platform for the Forum. **dates:** 20-22 June 2023 **location:** Nairobi, Kenya **www:** un.org/esa/forests/events/egm-iaf-mtr-gfffn-unspf-nairobi/index.html

HLPF 2023: The 2023 meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, under the auspices of ECOSOC, will convene under the theme “Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels.” The 2023 meeting will hold in-depth reviews of five SDGs and will also support the midterm review of the implementation of the SDGs and preparations for the 2023 SDG Summit. **dates:** 10-19 July 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org

Seventh GEF Assembly: The Assembly is the governing body of the GEF. It includes representatives of all 185 member countries and is responsible for reviewing and evaluating the GEF’s general policies, operations, and membership. The Assembly addresses governance and financing solutions for global environmental challenges, including SFM. **dates:** 22-26 August 2023 **location:** Vancouver, Canada **www:** thegef.org/events/seventh-gef-assembly

SDG Summit: The Summit is the quadrennial meeting of the HLPF under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The 2023 Summit will be the second since the adoption of the SDGs and will take place at the midpoint of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. **dates:** 18-19 September 2023 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** hlpf.un.org/sdg-summit

AHEG on the Preparations for the MTR: The AHEG is to consider the 10 IAF assessment reports prepared by consultants, along with outcomes of other preparatory intersessional work related to the MTR, and make recommendations that can serve as the basis for a “zero draft” of the MTR resolution for consideration at UNFF19. **dates:** 10-13 October 2023 **location:** Vienna, Austria **www:** www.un.org/esa/forests/events/ahég-iaf-mtr

30th Session of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission: Under the theme “Sustainable Forests for a Sustainable Future,” this FAO Regional Commission will discuss, among other things, forest and landscape restoration in Asia and the Pacific, forests and biodiversity, and building resilience to climate change. **dates:** 2-6 October 2023 **location:** Sydney, Australia **www:** fao.org/events/detail/apfc-30

2nd World Forum on Urban Forests: Under the theme of “Greener, Healthier and Happier Cities for All,” the Forum will highlight positive examples of planning, design and management approaches that cities have implemented to optimize the contribution that urban forests and green infrastructure can provide in terms of economic development, environmental conservation and resilience, improved social cohesion, and increased public involvement. **dates:** 16-20 October 2023 **location:** Washington, DC, USA **www:** worldforumonurbanforests.org

IUFRO 2023 Latin American Conference: Under the theme “Sustainable Landscape Management—the Role of Forests, Forestry, Agroforestry, and Agriculture,” IUFRO LA 2023 will discuss different initiatives that aim to create future, more resilient landscapes for the benefit of people and nature. The conference will be held in hybrid format. **dates:** 17-19 October 2023 **location:** Curitiba, Brazil **www:** eventos.galoa.com.br/iufro-2023/page/2479-inicio

59th Session of the International Tropical Timber Council and Sessions of the Associated Committees: The Council is the ITTO’s governing body. It meets once a year to discuss wide-ranging issues of interest to members, including those related to the legal trade of tropical timber and the sustainable management of tropical forests. **dates:** 13-17 November 2023 **location:** Pattaya, Thailand **www:** itto.int

2023 Climate Change Conference: The 28th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28), the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP 18), and the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA 5) will convene. **dates:** 30 November – 12 December 2023 **location:** Dubai, United Arab Emirates **www:** unfccc.int/cop28

UNFF19: The Forum will review progress in implementation of the UNSPF and preparations for the MTR, as well as UNFF19 inputs to the HLPF, and other international forest-related developments. **dates:** 6-10 May 2024 **location:** UN Headquarters, New York **www:** un.org/esa/forests

For additional upcoming events, see: sdg.iisd.org

Glossary

ACTO	Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CPF	Collaborative Partnership on Forests
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
FRA	Forest Resources Assessment
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GFFFN	Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network
GFGs	Global Forest Goals
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
IAF	International Arrangement on Forests
IDF	International Day of Forests
ITTO	International Tropical Timber Organization
IUFRO	International Union of Forest Research Organizations
MTR	Midterm Review
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFM	Sustainable forest management
UNECE	UN Economic Commission on Europe
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFF	United Nations Forum on Forests
UNSPF	UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030