

UNFF19 Highlights: Wednesday, 8 May 2024

The second full day of informal negotiations on draft texts of the High-Level Declaration and the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) omnibus resolution did not reach consensus on many issues, leading to efforts by co-facilitators to propose “streamlined” compromise text where possible and assigning key contentious issues to contact groups working Wednesday evening (declaration) and Thursday morning (resolution) to forge compromises in time for the declaration to be adopted on Thursday afternoon and the omnibus resolution on Friday.

The declaration is intended to provide a high-level political commitment on the way forward on forests, while the resolution would set the mandate for specific future actions by the UNFF and its stakeholders for implementing the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF), agree the Mid-Term Review on the effectiveness of the International Arrangement on Forests, and set the UNFF’s Quadrennial Programme of Work for 2025-2027.

Negotiations on the Draft High-Level Declaration

These negotiations, co-facilitated by UNFF19 Vice-Chairs Jaroslav Kubišta (Czechia) and Leticia Zamora Zumbado (Costa Rica) resumed in the morning, with Kubišta inviting delegates to a second reading of the declaration. Several delegates raised objections to the tight timeline and challenges of communicating with their capitals on the text. Similar objections that had been made during the first reading were raised again on several issues, with little indication of significant progress in the “informal-informals” overnight.

On including or deleting reference to forest degradation alongside deforestation, members reiterated strong opposing positions. An issue also evoking strong opposing positions was the reference to “unilateral coercive measures,” alongside text on mutually reinforcing negative impacts of climate change, desertification, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste.

Noting very little progress, Kubišta suggested delegates first focus on negotiating sticky paragraphs encountered during the first reading. Delegates appeared to find common ground on including the terms “Indigenous Peoples,” “forest communities,” and “local communities,” and referencing the link between “traditional knowledge” and “innovations” and “better forest conservation and management.”

Following a request to focus on contentious paragraphs in the operational part of the text, delegates debated the inclusion or deletion of other environmental agreements, in particular the reference to the Global Stocktake of the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Several delegates suggested that, rather than citing specific fora and

agreements, the declaration should reference them in a general sense.

In the paragraph on approaches to forest fires and wildfires, debate focused on including early-warning systems or certain management practices such as controlled burning. There was strong support to include reference to different national circumstances and the specific challenges faced by developing countries.

One breakthrough was to agree on the second operational paragraph, on implementation of the UN Forest Instrument, the UNSPF and the role of forests in achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Following deliberations on several other issues, such as how to reference forests as a solution to climate change and whether to include references to forest products or harvested wood products, the informal group was adjourned. Delegates were encouraged to continue deliberations in informal-informal small groups in order to find agreement on contentious text on deforestation drivers and means of implementation, while the co-facilitators attempted to “streamline” other text by formulating compromises.

At the afternoon plenary, Kubišta reported that the small groups had not succeeded and negotiators had not yet had a chance to discuss the text streamlined by the co-facilitators. The Chair authorized further talks in a contact group Wednesday evening in the hopes of finalizing text that could be adopted at the end of the High-Level Segment scheduled for Thursday.

Negotiations on the Draft Omnibus Resolution

In these negotiations, co-facilitated by Maureen Whelan (Canada) and Avhashoni Renny Madula (South Africa), delegates reviewed the latest version of the draft omnibus resolution as revised after Tuesday’s informal consultations. Procedural issues were raised by numerous delegates, including concerns about:

- having limited time for getting instructions on the “large pieces of text” being added now despite months of consultations;
- the fact that small delegations have had difficulty following the two parallel consultation processes; and
- the fact that many written comments submitted were not reflected in the revised draft.

Delegates then discussed substantive concepts still in contention. There were numerous suggestions made for new compromise wording, but while such proposals received some support, there was no general agreement on any of them. There were also many attempts to do what has succeeded in the past when there are irreconcilable differences over which formulation to use: revert to already-agreed language from other negotiated UN documents. However, the question of which document’s language to use also became an issue, so this effort produced no compromise either.

On “synergies,” there was debate over whether to encourage synergies, collaboration, or cooperation, “as appropriate.” A few delegations objected, noted that “greater synergies” are acknowledged as a task of the UNFF in the UNSPF.

On “bioeconomy” there was also no convergence. One delegation offered to accept “sustainable” forest-based bioeconomy, while on the issue of bioeconomy or “bioeconomies” alternative proposals to accept something like “bioeconomy approaches” or “global bioeconomy” made no headway, nor did the call for a sustainable, “circular” bioeconomy, nor an alternative proposal “acknowledging that life cycle and other approaches should be taken into account.” The definition of a “forest-based bioeconomy” was also questioned.

On strengthening the Secretariat, there was disagreement over a deadline for the Secretariat to produce an information paper and over requiring that the note provide concrete details about the Secretariat’s needs in a set format such as a project management matrix. Deliberations also focused on whether language should express the desire to “strengthen the Secretariat” or “evaluate appropriate resource levels for the Secretariat at UNFF21, taking into consideration such information.” Disagreement also extended to the issue of reinserting specification of strengthening “post and non-post resources” which had been removed from the draft resolution.

The co-facilitators proposed a compromise to replace wording on “strengthening” the resources of the Secretariat with wording along the lines of language agreed for the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) on “reaffirming the” (political) “need to ensure the sustainability, predictability, and stability” of the organization. This was supported by some delegations and was tabled for later consideration.

There was lengthy debate on “reversing” deforestation as well as on how to define forest “degradation” which a group of delegates had proposed to add to the draft. A suggestion to replace forest “degradation” with “global deforestation” was not accepted.

It was noted that reversing deforestation and forest degradation reflect the first Global Forest Goal (GFG 1) to increase forest area as well as SDG 15 on halting and reversing land degradation, as well as wording in other internationally agreed documents.

A proposal to add wording on “streamlining reporting and data sharing” received little opposition. Reference to other multilateral environmental agreements and the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) were left to be decided by the informal group negotiating the declaration.

The ecosystem approach was also discussed, and a compromise on referring to “the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and SFM practices” was left for later consideration.

The morning session closed with the co-facilitators tasked to find compromise wordings in these and a few other areas. When they returned to the informal group with proposals for compromise text at the end of the day, Whelan said references to the Convention on Biological Diversity and Paris Agreement on climate change, and to Indigenous Peoples, would follow any agreement reached in the informal group on the declaration.

Many countries stated strong objections to a bracketed proposal to replace the phrase “gender-sensitive,” as drafted in the omnibus resolution, with “gender-responsive.” Many also opposed replacing “gender responsiveness” in another paragraph with “gender inclusivity.” Others vehemently opposed the deletion of reference to gender responsiveness, noting that it appears in a 2021 UN General Assembly resolution, the GBF, and other agreed texts, and stating that “gender-sensitive” is not acceptable.

Several delegations proposed deleting any appearance of bias favoring one gender.

Two countries argued against reference to “groups” in vulnerable situations, preferring “people”.

A group of delegations reminded participants that the resolution’s aim is to address the MTR of the IAF in order to improve and accelerate its implementation.

At the afternoon plenary, Whelan reported that the co-facilitators had proposed streamlined text where possible, but more work was needed on issues such as gender, Secretariat resources, forest degradation, and bioeconomy. The UNFF19 Chair authorized further talks in a contact group Thursday morning before the High-Level Segment in hopes of finalizing an omnibus resolution text that could be adopted on Friday.

In the Corridors

Alarm was suddenly raised Wednesday morning in the informal consultation group drafting the high-level declaration as the tight timelines within which to complete the task came to everyone’s attention. “I’m eyeing the clock,” said one delegate, “and starting to get the jitters because we’re stuck in preambular paragraphs.” Several delegations realized that their ministers were already boarding planes, while there was no end in sight to the myriad of brackets all over the document. “It’s already after work hours in my capital and less than 24 hours before the High-Level Segment will conclude. How can we consult in time for my minister to sign on if there’s no finalized text for him to review?”

The slow pace of negotiations after the time that had been taken up in these initial protestations belied the urgency that might have been expected, with one exasperated delegate heard saying “One would think this is a Sunday school picnic!”

While the co-facilitators tried their “level best” to clean up paragraphs, new proposals for additions were constantly added to the “ballooning text” as highlighted by another frustrated delegate, in both this group as well as in the informal group working on the draft omnibus resolution. This was repeatedly illustrated in the declaration informal group when a co-facilitator would propose deleting one of a set of alternative paragraphs, only for the response to be a suggestion for a new alternative version of the paragraph in question. In one instance a fifth alternative consisting of one simple sentence was promptly transformed into a paragraph, covered in multiple brackets. The omnibus resolution group also found itself discussing a new fifth alternative to a paragraph on strengthening the Secretariat, with no agreement yet reached.

It therefore came as no surprise when the four deflated co-facilitators reported no agreements reached during a brief plenary session shortly before the official closing, and that therefore the 5 pm deadline imposed “due to budgetary constraints of the UN facility management” had not been met.

The Secretariat announced two extra informal sessions had been scheduled outside the regular UN meeting hours, despite the budget constraints, with no interpretation. Whether delegations who could not even agree on text *with* interpretation in the declaration group would manage to convey messages from their capitals adequately in the common working language of English was an open question.

It was with a sense of foreboding that some left the plenary in the evening, brooding over what the implications will be if there is no agreement on the looming task: producing a satisfactory outcome to ensure that the “green lungs of the world” continue breathing.