

UNFF18 Highlights: Monday, 8 May 2023

On the opening day of the 18th meeting of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF18) delegates discussed implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF), heard a presentation by the UNFF Secretariat Director on vision and priorities, and discussed the implementation of the Communication and Outreach Strategy for the UNSPF.

Opening

UNFF18 Chair Zéphyrin Maniratanga (Burundi) stressed the linkages between forests, biodiversity, climate change and land degradation. He urged tackling the issues in a holistic, integrated manner, through concrete efforts on the ground.

ECOSOC President Lachezara Stoeva (Bulgaria) stressed forests' importance for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She urged UNFF18 to propose concrete actions to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the SDG Summit during the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2023.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Li Junhua urged publicizing the critical role of forests and sustainable forest management (SFM) in eradicating poverty and achieving the SDGs. Calling the SDG Summit an opportunity to renew commitments to the GFGs and SDGs, he called on UNFF18 to deliver concrete solutions reinforcing the GFGs' role for achieving the SDGs.

Delegates approved the provisional agenda (E/CN.18/2023/1) without amendment and the Chair's proposed organization of work.

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

Technical discussions on the implementation of the UN Strategic Programme on Forests (UNSPF)

UNFF Secretariat Director Juliette Biao 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.

UKRAINE lamented the destruction of a seed planting center and 2.9 million hectares of forested land through the ongoing Russian military operation since February 2022.

MEXICO highlighted the aim of his country to support those who legitimately own or live in forests, to strengthen forestry value chains, and protect forest-dependent communities from climate change impacts.

JAMAICA highlighted his country's ongoing work, including increasing its forest swamp area by 11,000 hectares and increasing access to markets for forest products. THAILAND noted his country's plan to increase its urban and other forest area to 55%. ISRAEL highlighted its plan to expand the Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) partnership which planted over 240,000,000 trees during 2022.

SLOVENIA called for: integrating protection of social, economic, and environmental functions of forests, cooperation on skills-building for SFM, and equilibrium between large carnivores, forests, and human societies. MOLDOVA said forest targets have only been partially met, necessitating development partners' support to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 and benefit the agricultural sector. ARGENTINA noted over 50% of its forests are under strict protection and others under sustainable management plans.

MALAWI reported work on forest rehabilitation, forest carbon markets, and improved monitoring, assessment, and reporting of forest resources. PERU reported: recovering degraded soils and ecosystems; satellite monitoring of forest fires; forest plantation expansion; and certification of deforestation-free supply chains. Eve Bazaiba, Environment Minister, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, called for compensating forest populations, saying her country stands ready to facilitate its own projects.

The EUROPEAN UNION (EU) urged improving international synergies under "emerging issues" in future sessions. INDIA cited progress on its Voluntary National Contribution (VNC) through increasing forest and tree cover and agroforestry, but said certification is challenging for smallholders, calling for other sustainability indicators. MALAYSIA committed to retaining 50% of its land under forest and tree cover through enhancement of forest law of permanent forest reserves, calling for increased assistance.

THE PHILIPPINES emphasized her country's commitment to promoting SFM and achieving the SDGs and GFGs through the implementation of its Master Plan for Climate Resilient Forestry Development. INDONESIA discussed his country's shift to a new forest development paradigm through mainstreaming ecosystem services in forest management, with greater local community involvement. IRAN noted his country has several protected areas and large-scale reforestation campaigns, with a national forest programme encompassing a new SFM strategy under development.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION noted it increased forest cover by three million hectares, improved protection of its forests, and enhanced inspection of its timber industry.

BRAZIL reaffirmed its commitment to the UNSPF through, *inter alia*: resuming prevention and control efforts against deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon and other biomes; conservation coupled with policies to address poverty, emphasizing bioeconomy; aid to Indigenous Peoples and local communities' forestry management efforts; and providing new and additional financial resources, including a reactivated Amazon Fund.

CHINA said his country increased forest cover in 2022 and established five new national parks, noting its efforts to substitute bamboo for plastic.

GREECE suggested forests as key agents of carbon sequestration, highlighting climate change mitigation through: innovative forest policies, a circular economy, an integrated water resource management strategy, anti-corruption measures, and promotion of human rights.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA reported on efforts over the decades, including planting 10 billion trees and expanding forest cover to 165 square kilometers. ECUADOR requested technical assistance to implement the Paris Agreement, saying forests are the most effective mechanism to mitigate climate change impacts. TÜRKIYE noted three million hectares under forest restoration programmes.

MALI stressed its forestry initiatives, despite multiple challenges, through technical and institutional efforts to ensure conservation and restoration of existing forests and discourage exploitation of forest products. ARMENIA highlighted his country's commitment to double forest cover by 2050. JAPAN outlined benefits of using timber in buildings and infrastructure to provide long-term carbon dioxide storage.

GUYANA highlighted the country's low carbon plan for 2030. GABON reported on hosting the One Forest Summit, and its <1% deforestation rate. GUATEMALA noted reduced deforestation rates through state programmes, citing community forestry cooperatives and REDD+-associated payment initiatives.

The US highlighted its new reforestation strategy for national forests, climate adaptation plan, wildlife crisis strategy, and mobilization of funds for the GCF and Amazon Fund.

KENYA reaffirmed its goal of increasing national forest cover to 30% by 2030 and improving livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.

MOROCCO noted recent improvements in Morocco's forest strategy to make it more inclusive and participatory. FRANCE discussed the Libreville Plan to protect vital carbon and global biodiversity reserves, including mangroves, peat bogs and certain primary forests, and urged its implementation. SAUDI ARABIA discussed implementation of its Strategy and National Forestry Plan, and its Green Initiative to expand plant cover to combat desertification.

SOUTH AFRICA noted its Forests Matter Initiative, landscape restoration, national agroforestry strategy framework, and strengthened forest protection. BOTSWANA reported its goal to plant two million by 2030 and confirmed Botswana's intention to submit its VNC before UNFF19.

The AMAZON COOPERATION TREATY ORGANIZATION (ACTO) noted its regional forest programme's emphasis on fighting forest fires, preserving biodiversity, monitoring forest cover and its desire to strengthen the contribution of regional and subregional organizations to the UNSPF.

The FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UN (FAO) noted challenges to achieving the GFGs and related SDG targets, emphasizing the need to prioritize preventing forest loss.

COSTA RICA expressed satisfaction with progress in implementing the UNSPF, noting its role as a champion of reversing forest cover loss. He stressed the importance of linking this to rural ecosystems and livelihoods.

Secretariat's Vision, Priorities and Achievements: Director Biao presented "Building a shared vision: priorities, achievements and future opportunities." She encouraged a shared 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 noted:

- 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 its 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 detailing challenges facing the Secretariat, and 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 towards 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.

New Announcements of Voluntary National Contributions (VNCs) and Updates on VNCs: MALAWI reported its July 2022 VNC submission, emphasizing national strategies including its:

- National Forestry Landscape Restoration strategy;
- National Charcoal Strategy, promoting alternative household cooking fuels and sustainable wood production through fast-growing tree species; and
- National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan to increase forest cover area by 4%.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA highlighted its 2050 Carbon Neutrality Vision and its 2030 Nationally Determined

Contribution (NDC), including 17 national actions and related targets towards achieving GFGs and increasing forest cover to one million hectares.

SLOVAKIA said its VNC provides funding for non-productive functions of forests, including regulating climatic conditions, social functions, and biodiversity and water source protection.

PERU highlighted five goals for improving SFM in community and commercial plantations, including to: increase forest cover by 2.7 million hectares; establish 144,000 hectares of commercial plantations; and restore degraded commercial forests, by 2030.

INDIA reaffirmed its commitments to, *inter alia*, increase carbon dioxide sequestration by 3 billion tonnes and restore 26 million hectares of degraded land, by 2030.

ECUADOR pledged to reduce gross carbon emissions by 20% by 2025 through REDD+ policies and achieve zero net deforestation by 2030.

BRAZIL emphasized its intention to strengthen regional cooperation towards SFM, including through the Amazon Summit and North-South and South-South cooperation.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION reported a new presidential measure to decrease forest fires and increase financial support to raise forest cover by 50% from 2021.

TÜRKIYE highlighted mass tree planting and pasture improvement, inviting participants to a November 2023 event on improving collaboration.

THAILAND noted four key actions, including increasing forest cover to 28.4 million hectares by 2037, equaling 55% of Thailand's land area, and strengthening the forest sector's policy and legislative framework.

MALAYSIA emphasized the UNSPF "is a collective responsibility" proposing that business and stakeholders support scaling up least developed countries' capacity.

The DOMINICAN REPUBLIC noted relaunch of its reforestation program to cover water basins and plant two million trees.

Implementation of the UNSPF Communication and Outreach Strategy and the International Day of Forests in 2023: MEXICO, SOUTH AFRICA, INDONESIA, ECUADOR, SAUDI ARABIA, the PHILIPPINES, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, THAILAND, and MALI described national activities to implement the International Day of Forests in 2023.

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

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

- rethinking the UNFF website;
- more collaboration with well-known persons;
- more targeted messaging on the contribution of forests to 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 also stressed targeted messaging on forests' contribution to the SDGs and UNFCCC. He noted India currently chairs the G20, expressing 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 International Days. AUSTRALIA, with SWITZERLAND, said the current UNFF website threatens its credibility.

SWITZERLAND also called for a communication document for the SDG Summit, offering to coordinate some countries to produce one, to be circulated among Heads of States and Ministers, about all the ways forests and contribute to achieving the SDGs.

In the Corridors

Several delegates expressed appreciation for the Director's presentation on vision, saying it provided a clearer picture of the current state of the Secretariat and UNFF resource restraints. "I sent a picture of that Trust Fund contribution pie chart to my government and asked them why our slice isn't bigger," quipped one, saying it might be useful to have a Director's report as a regular part of the agenda.

Several delegates privately agreed with concerns publicly voiced about the UNFF website and its threat to UNFF credibility. Most, however, acknowledged difficulties in fixing this issue, including that any fix has to await a broader UNDESA website remake.