

UNFF18 Highlights Thursday, 11 May 2023

The fourth day of the 18th session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF18) reviewed preparations for the Midterm Review (MTR) of the International Arrangement on Forests (IAF), the state of the UNFF Trust Fund, and integrated policies on forests and energy in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the pros and cons of bioenergy.

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

Update on the IAF MTR: Secretariat Director Juliette Biao Koudonoukpo introduced the Secretariat 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 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.

INDIA, the EU, US, JAMAICA, MEXICO, SWITZERLAND, and AUSTRALIA favored hybrid meetings, MEXICO stressing their 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 called for focusing on enhancing synergies with other forest-related processes during the MTR.

The AMAZON COOPERATION TREATY ORGANIZATION 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.

Thematic Priorities for 2023–2024 Biennium and

Contributions of Forum Members: CHINA reported priority sustainable forest management (SFM) activities, including on promoting timber forest reserves and innovative ecological development for forest and grassland.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH said civil society fills the gaps between needs and Member States' actions, stressing collaboration with Major Groups on implementation but warning that their engagement is declining.

BRAZIL emphasized indigenous peoples and local communities' (IPLCs) role alongside scaling integrated investments in livestock, agriculture, and forestry for forest restoration and management.

The REPUBLIC OF KOREA highlighted: increasing state-owned forest area by 2028; peatland restoration; and its timber certification programme for forest management and chain of custody.

Interlinkages Between the GFGs and Targets and the SDGs Under Review by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2023, the Work towards Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and Other International Forest-related Developments: The EU called for aligning UNFF's goals with the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), through SFM and forest restoration. BRAZIL predicted adoption of a GBF Fund at the June 2023 Global Environment Facility (GEF) Council meeting in Brasilia. The Secretariat confirmed ongoing preparations for joint work with the CBD on the GBF.

Forum Trust Fund

Director Biao introduced its Secretariat Note (E/CN.18/2023/7) on the Trust Fund, thanking the donors. She noted the UNFF Secretariat remains the smallest unit within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and lamented declining funding, given its negative effects on supporting countries' achieving the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) and the UNSFP implementation.

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 (GCF) 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 contribution targeted for Major Groups' engagement in UNFF and urged others to contribute similarly.

The AFRICAN FOREST FORUM noted the declining funds and few contributors, suggesting the Secretariat consult with countries and publish contributions.

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

Emerging Issues

A panel moderated by Paola Deda, UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), discussed the contributions of forests

and SFM to energy, livelihoods, and the SDGs. John Parrotta, President, International Union of Forest Research Organizations, summarized the messages of an April 2023 meeting organized by the Bureau on:

- attention to all of forests' roles for achieving the SDGs;
- coordination and compromises among decision makers across scales and boundaries to minimize tradeoffs;
- investment in research identifying underlying causes of deforestation/degradation and stakeholders' needs/knowledge; and
- just transition toward modern energy.

Sheam Satkuru, Executive Director, International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), noted ITTO's mandate to further SFM in the tropics and source tropical timber from sustainable sources. She highlighted, *inter alia*: increased use of bioenergy since 2013; new pressure on forests for firewood for the market; and sustainably-produced wood as the most sustainable energy source. She urged: recognition of socially- and environmentally-safeguarded SFM as economically viable; innovative financing; capacity building and technical cooperation; and inclusiveness.

Zhimin Wu, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), recalled that 5 billion people use non-timber forest products, 55% of renewable energy is supplied by forest ecosystems, more than 2 billion people cook with wood, and 33 million people are employed in the forestry sector. He emphasized that 85% of industrially-harvested trees becomes wood residue, providing a significant source of bioenergy although requiring technology transformation for its utilization.

On leveraging synergies across the forests, energy and livelihoods nexus with multiple SDG dividends, Tim Scott, UN Development Programme (UNDP), recommended: increasing and targeting forest-energy-linked finance; strengthening institutional capacities, including public-private sector governance; and ensuring a just energy transition mitigating impact on workers in informal sectors while lowering costs to communities.

Mirey Atallah, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), cited UNEP's Emissions Gap Report findings that forests could generate 5 gigatons of emission reductions. On carbon markets, she opined that demand sets the price, rather than the supply of forest goods, saying forest countries are told how to use the proceeds of forest resources as if being given typical official development assistance.

During discussion, SAUDI ARABIA stressed preventing and fighting forest fires and countering urban sprawl that encroaches on forests. Noting concerns about wildfires and about problems with current forest certification schemes, INDIA offered expertise in this area, announcing its UNFF Country-led Initiative on the UNSPF in Dehradun in late 2023, to include discussion of these issues and long-term SFM.

Noting his country is considered the most forested country on Earth and "carbon negative," SURINAME discussed economic pressures affecting its forest and environmental policies. Noting his country's commitments to a forestry and other land uses (FOLU) net sink by 2030, 23% of energy from renewables by 2025, and carbon neutrality by 2060, INDONESIA said developing countries needed a constructive approach and stronger partnership with developed countries. He lamented "counterproductive and proliferating non-trade measures" with negative socioeconomic impacts on developing countries making it more difficult to achieve the SDGs.

BOLIVIA urged coordinated action and strong political commitment for integration of woodland and energy policies. Stressing its commitment to SFM, REDD+, forest planning and certification, but heavy dependency on fuelwood, CONGO, with the DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, called for strategies reducing pressures on natural forests while also improving livelihoods around them.

Regarding use of wood residue, Zhimin said industry suggests replacing plastic sticks with wood residue or producing large beams from compacted bamboo. Satkuru said sawdust or wood off-cuts can be compacted to produce briquettes and pellets.

Participants also asked about: management of diverse types of forest wood residue; reducing energy use and waste from production of wood biomass products; potential opportunities for

partnerships in the wood residue biomass industry, and how to better value forests.

CHINA reported its generating power of 41.32 gigawatts in the wood biomass energy sector, allowing China to achieve carbon neutrality before 2030.

Scott said UNDP maps biocredits against other quantitative and qualitative data under ecosystem accounting.

Wu stressed forests' renewability and cited FAO's new agroforests/agroforestry model based on global analysis of feasibility of site for forestry, calling for integrated innovative approaches for transitioning to agroforestry for agrofood.

Satkuru said Brazil has a sugar cane advantage, but other countries must use wood waste products, calling for World Trade Organization-compliant due diligence.

Parrotta urged incorporating forest crops in landscape restoration projects.

SWITZERLAND juxtaposed bioenergy safeguards with trade barriers. Satkuru said all wood should be sustainably managed but noted due diligence encompasses accrediting the harvesting source as legal. She called for low-value log production on arid or degraded land.

MOROCCO said wood energy is not inexhaustible and releases carbon.

AUSTRALIA said many species rely on fire for germination and reported on mechanical fuel load reduction trials, urging that wood residue markets be made financially viable.

Parrotta confirmed the US Forest Service thins forests susceptible to fire. Wu noted many FAO examples of science-based prescribed burning.

BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY Major Group called for global leadership from UNFF, producing clear, "coherent and reliable" guidelines that allow fair competition, as well as support and collaboration in working together to meet the Paris Agreement and hit net zero goals. She called for governments and industries "to learn from each other" and embrace more strategic partnerships with the private sector.

The INTERNATIONAL BAMBOO AND RATTAN ORGANISATION suggested greater use of bamboo, "a strategic but often overlooked resource."

EL SALVADOR noted his country has launched a national bamboo plan and is promoting its use in structures and looking into it as a substitute for plastics.

In the Corridors

"While this afternoon's panel was quite interesting and relevant," said one delegate, "the concept of an interactive dialogue between panels and audience seems to be lost to many delegations." He suggested that this may not be unique to UNFF, but a broader problem with meetings held at UN Headquarters, where some nations send officials from their permanent missions in New York with no apparent forest policy expertise to read prepared statements regardless of the agenda item being addressed.

Several delegates noted some unusual features of today's session. The announcement by India of a Country-led Initiative surprised many, since the last one was as far back as 2015. Another unexpected statement was business and industry's intervention and its call for guidelines and partnership. "When did we last hear from them?" mused one government delegate. "Is anyone following up with them?" asked his companion, noting that "they said they were here and ready to talk."

Another delegate observed that several topics were raised repeatedly in interventions that were not on the agenda, such as certification, forest fires, and the role of bamboo. "Maybe we should be paying more attention to these than we did before."

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of UNFF18 will be available on Monday, 15 May 2023 at enb.iisd.org/un-forum-forests-unff18