



Policy Brief on the thematic priorities for UNFF20

Background

The United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 (UNSPF) serves as a reference framework for the forest-related work of the United Nations system and for the fostering of enhanced coherence, collaboration and synergies among United Nations bodies and partners with programmes on forests. It also serves as a guide to enhance the coherence and focus of the work of the International Arrangement on Forests and its components. The Plan features a set of six Global Forest Goals and 26 associated targets to be reached by 2030, which are voluntary and universal.

According to the quadrennial programme of work of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) for the period 2025–2028, the thematic priorities for the twenty and twenty one session of the Forum are Global Forest Goals (GFGs): 1, 3 and 5. The twentieth session of the Forum will include an interactive exchange of experiences and lessons learned related to the achievement of these thematic priorities among members of the Forum, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and its member organizations, regional organizations and processes, and major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

Objective

This policy brief aims to support discussions during UNFF20, on the session's thematic priorities. It contains i) a snapshot of information¹ and most recent data relevant to the current status of progress towards achievement of Global Forest Goals (GFGs) 1,3 and 5 ii) an overview of the challenges, and emerging issues, which might hinder their achievement, and iii) suggestions to accelerate the achievement of these GFGs.

UNFF20 Thematic Priorities

Global forest goal (GFG) 1: Reverse the loss of forest cover worldwide through sustainable forest management, including protection, restoration, afforestation and reforestation, and increase efforts to prevent forest degradation and contribute to the global effort of addressing climate change

State of progress

¹ The main sources of information to measure progress towards achieving the Global Forest Goals are national reports submitted to UNFF Secretariat and bio-physical data from the Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) of FAO. The last reporting cycle to UNFF and the FRA was conducted in 2020. Both, UNFF Secretariat and FAO will obtain and release the new forest information and data, only towards the end of this year. Due to this situation, this policy brief draws some relevant forest related figures from other, alternative sources of information. These include several, more recent reports and platforms sharing information on forests and forests related matters. It should be noted that these sources are not to replace but rather complement the official UN data on forests and sustainable forest management.

GFG 1 calls for reversing the loss of forest cover through sustainable forest management. In recent years this call has been reiterated by other international initiatives, organizations and governments establishing time-bound commitments to end deforestation, restore degraded forest landscapes, and achieve sustainable forest management.

According to the last FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) 2020, some regions, namely Asia, Europe and Oceania were on track to achieve GFG1, others however, such as Africa and South America, are still losing forest area, although at a slower rate than in the past. Regarding sustainable forest management, in most of the subregions, and with regard to most of the five sub-indicators used to monitor Sustainable Development Goal target 15.2.1, some positive change had occurred in the years leading up to 2020.

In the last reporting cycle to UNFF (2020), all countries indicated having strategies and/or plans to maintain or increase forest area, often with quantified targets, detailed objectives, methods and resources. Sometimes these strategies cover only the forest sector, such as National Forest Programmes, but sometimes they are part of broader strategies and plans, for mitigation of climate change (REDD+) or national development and poverty reduction. Existing national forest laws and codes, as well as national forest programmes or strategies, provide the framework for achieving GFG1. Countries provided examples of the new actions which help the increase of forest resources:

- In China, forest management was listed as an independent chapter in the new Forest Law, which stipulated regulations that governments above the county level should make reasonable plans, set targets for the protection and development of forest resources, and increase forest cover. Governments at all levels organized all social sectors and urban and rural residents to fulfil the tasks of afforestation and greening according to the plans.
- The Government of Jamaica in consultation with the private sector, communities and civil society, amended its Forest Policy and outlined the principles critical to the sustainable management, including transparency and accountability, the use of best science and participatory and collaborative approaches in forest management planning and implementation processes.
- In Ghana, the Forestry Development Master Plan 2016 – 2036 includes targets to promote sustainable forest management including increasing forest cover, enhancing carbon stocks, and halting deforestation and forest degradation. About 45,000 youth, were employed between 2017 and 2018 under the Ghana Youth Employment for Afforestation

There is growing recognition that we cannot meet any global sustainable development, climate or any nature-related goals, without reversing deforestation. Just within the last three years, the role of forests contributing to globally agreed goals was underlined, inter alia, in the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use (UNFCCC COP26, 2021), the Seoul Forest Declaration (XV World Forestry Congress, May 2022), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD COP15, 2022), the Amazon Summit Belem Declaration (August 2023), the One Forest Summit Declaration (March 2023), the Global Stock take of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC COP28, 2023), Declaration of the UNFF19 High-Level Segment, the Pact for the Future (September 2024) and other forest-related commitments. Additionally, forest landscape restoration has been recognized as one of critical actions to reversing deforestation and land degradation, contributing to biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and sustainable development. For example, if the Bonn Challenge reaches its goal to restore 350 million hectares (ha), it could potentially sequester up to 1.7 gigatonnes (Gt) CO₂ per year (FAO 2021)².

²FAO (2021). Forest restoration for climate change mitigation and adaptation: Opportunities and challenges.

Despite recent international initiatives and existing progressive, national, legal forest frameworks, policies and strategies, the deforestation – often of the most precious, natural forests continues in some regions and countries. The most recent data sources indicate that countries are falling short of their international forest-related commitments, and it is unlikely that the global goal of halting and reversing deforestation will be achieved by 2030. According to the Forest Declaration Assessment³ the world lost at least 5.4 million hectares (Mha) of forests in 2023, with some estimates suggesting that the loss was higher, at 6.4 Mha (including 3.7 Mha of irreplaceable tropical primary forests). Using the higher estimate, global deforestation increased slightly in 2023 compared to 2022. Should current trends continue, the world will fail to halt the forest loss by 2030. The annual rate of gross deforestation must instead fall by over 1 Mha each year throughout the rest of this decade to deliver on the GFG1. Forests continue to suffer from degradation due to human activities and climate change, which damage ecosystem services for carbon sequestration, water regulation, and flood control contributing to food and water security, protecting human health, and enhancing our ability to adapt to a warming planet.

The main driver of deforestation is agriculture. Unsustainable food systems promote commodity growth that leads to the conversion of forests to agriculture land uses. According to a recent assessment by FAO⁴, agricultural expansion drives almost 90 percent of global deforestation – an impact much greater than previously thought. Worldwide, more than half of forest loss is due to conversion of forest into the cropland, whereas livestock grazing is responsible for almost 40 percent of forest loss. Unfortunately, this situation is likely to continue, since the full spectrum of services provided by forest is still undervalued and it is more profitable for the forest owners to convert forests into other, mostly agricultural, land uses.

Not only are forests undervalued but also, globally, at least 100 times more public funding goes to environmentally harmful subsidies than financing to support the sustainable management and conservation of forests. Globally, between \$378 billion and \$1 trillion in public funding annually goes to environmentally harmful subsidies. Only \$2.2 billion in public funds is channelled to forests each year compared to other global investments.⁵

Challenges

At UNFF19 Member States adopted a High-Level Declaration⁶, in which they expressed deep concerns about the continued global trend in deforestation, as well as the mutually reinforcing adverse impacts of climate change, desertification and land degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste, while acknowledging efforts of countries in addressing deforestation.

Climate change

In 2020, in their national reports to UNFF, countries identified climate change and its associated risks and impacts, such as forest fires, floods, droughts and other natural disasters, as well as pests and disease, as the greatest challenges in implementing GFG1. Forest fires have emerged as an important factor contributing to forest loss in recent years. Indeed, if we do not take concrete actions, forests will very soon begin to act as a carbon source, not a sink, under the pressure of warming, drying, and increasingly extreme climate.

Competition with other land users

Forests and their full spectrum of services and benefits for society and planet are not monetized and continue to be undervalued. Financial incentives supporting activities that drive deforestation continue to outweigh the

³ <https://forestdeclaration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024ForestDeclarationAssessment.pdf> - the Forest Declaration Assessment annually publishes researched and peer-reviewed progress assessment reports on the state of global forests.

⁴ <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/cop26-agricultural-expansion-drives-almost-90-percent-of-global-deforestation/en>

⁵ <https://forestdeclaration.org/resources/forest-finance-2023/>

⁶ <https://docs.un.org/en/E/2024/42>

incentives for sustainable forest management. Almost all countries reporting to UNFF mentioned the challenges arising from competition for land use from agriculture, infrastructure, urbanisation, mining and other sectors which are more important sources of revenue for government than forests.

Policies and laws enacted but not implemented

While countries have made progress in adopting national policies programmes and legal frameworks that support and promote sustainable forest management and protection of forest, it seems that the laws are often not implemented or not sufficiently applied, there is little follow-through, and the deforestation of the world's forests continues.

Multiple forest goals and fragmentation of forest issues at the international level

The loss of forests and their fragmentation, which is a major component of forest degradation - is a serious environmental concern as it leads to biodiversity loss and ecosystem integrity disruption. Likewise, the lack of consideration of the most valuable forests in terms of biodiversity and carbon storage (such as the primary forests) and the increasing fragmentation of forest issues at the international policy level is also a cause for concern. While convergence of goals and targets in different global agendas, conventions and initiatives is a demonstration of consensus on current forest, climate change, biodiversity and general sustainable development challenges and priorities, a plethora of similar sounding goals and targets may also run a risk of overwhelming the policy makers and practitioners/implementors at national and local levels. There is also a risk of lack of coordination and duplication among the implementing agencies as they compete for the attention of donors and funding. Moreover, this fragmentation can potentially weaken the overall impact of forest sustainable management and conservation efforts by diluting focus and making it challenging to track progress across different initiatives.

Closer coordination among different conventions, frameworks and initiatives to streamline such goals, targets, deadlines and processes for assessing progress could improve efficiency in implementation, resource mobilization, monitoring and reporting. Synergy and cooperation between different processes enhance the chances of progress and transformative changes on the ground.

Suggestions for accelerating the achievement of GFG1

- Strengthen the implementation of forest-related national legislation and the provision and mobilization of means of implementation from all sources for sustainable forest management and the achievement of the global forest goals, considering the specific challenges faced by developing countries (ECOSOC Res 2024/15),
- Address the threats to forests as well as the significant drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, including unsustainable practices across economic activities and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production (UNFF19 HLS Declaration),
- Strengthen political engagement, cross-sectoral cooperation, coordination, coherence and synergies, as appropriate, and reduce fragmentation at all levels on issues related to all types of forests, by facilitating and encouraging partnerships among stakeholders, in particular within and among member organizations of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, in line with their respective mandates (UNFF19 HLS Declaration),
- Develop and communicate a strong economic narrative with facts and evidence of how sustainable management and protecting forests conserves current benefits and avoids long-term costs related to environmental degradation,

- Strategize, coordinate better the international forest agenda and fully implement the existing international commitments on and the forest strategies, legislation and policies at the national level,
- Recognize the true value of forests and phase out forest-harming investments and/or subsidies responsible for the loss of forests,
- Establish and/or support revenue streams that depend on keeping forests standing,
- Leverage extreme weather events such as fires and floods, mudslides attributed to forest loss to harness fleeting political will for action,
- Amend rules of trade that harm forests by cutting deforesting commodities out of global supply chains.

Global forest goal (GFG) 3: Increase 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

State of progress

According to FRA 2020, globally, countries have made reasonable progress towards the GFG3, as the proportion of forest area within protected areas increased from 17 percent to 18 percent from 2010 to 2020. According to World Resource Institute (WRI) the area is even larger, approximately 21 percent of global forest area is currently under some form of legal protection⁷.

In their last national reports to UNFF in 2020, countries reported on many existing and new forest legislation, codes, and policies, that had specific provisions addressing protected areas, sustainable forest management and the promotion of markets for products from sustainably managed forests.

- Liberia reported on actions taken to involve local communities around protected areas so that they monitor, maintain boundaries and facilitate effective management together with governmental forestry officials. They promote the traditional knowledge, and the innovative practices of forest-based communities directly related to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.
- The Forestry Agency of Japan introduced a more effective and easy-to-understand protected forest classification system, focusing on the sustainability of forest ecosystems and populations. As a result of this reorganization, effectiveness in conservation of protected forests has been improved.
- Austrian private forest owners are holding 80% of the country's forests. Most of them are family-run operations in which the forest is handed over from one generation to the next. Fundings for reforestation, forest protection are undertaken by the forest sector itself. However, in addition, public investments to ensure vital ecosystem services like the protection against natural hazards and long-term maintenance of biodiversity are necessary and public subsidies are granted to stimulate and refine sustainable forest management.

A wide range of planning approaches has been applied, alongside improved classification of protected areas, sustainability reporting and resource assessment, manuals for providing conservation services, research into wildlife habitat, transboundary wildlife management protocols, wood tracing systems, legality assurance systems,

⁷ Protected Forests | Global Forest Review

verification protocols, improved mapping, use of remote sensing, targets for biodiversity conservation and red lists of threatened species.

GFG3 is directly in line with Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), which aims to conserve 30% of the world's land, water, and oceans by 2030. According to the recent Protected Planet Report 2024⁸, which provides a global evaluation of progress towards Target 3, at the global level we have seen an increase in protected and conserved areas in all regions in recent years. Indeed, a third of countries have expanded their networks since 2020. While 30% is a global target, there are 51 countries and territories that already have networks of protected and conserved areas that exceed this level of coverage on land.

The Goal also calls for an increase of products from sustainably managed forests. While it is difficult to monitor at the global level the volume of forest products from sustainably managed forests, some indications may be obtained from the area of certified forest. FAO estimated in 2018⁹ the volume of wood from certified forests at 689 million m³ which was 38% of global industrial roundwood production¹⁰. In addition to this, it should be mentioned that there are very significant volumes of wood supplied by forests which are sustainably managed but not certified.

The area of forests under certification is in general growing. In 2023, 389 million hectares of forest were under a certification scheme, marking a 13 percent increase, equivalent to around 46 million hectares since 2010¹¹. Despite this overall positive trend, forests under a certification scheme presented a decrease of 56 million hectares (12 percent) between 2022 and 2023, primarily linked to suspension of certificates in Europe due to ongoing conflicts.

There is wide variation between regions, some of which are almost entirely certified (for instance North America and Europe without the Russian Federation), while others have only a few certified forests. As the current data shows, forest certification is concentrated to Europe and North America, which collectively represent 79 percent of the certified forest area in 2023 (FAO). The forest certification trend in developing countries seemed to be still very low. Some of the critical and limiting factors include complicated procedures and additional costs, management burden, uncertainties over market benefits and incompatibility between legal setting and certification standards.

Challenges

Lack of resources

Protection requires active management which includes monitoring, safeguarding the rules of the protected areas and working with various stakeholders, including Indigenous Peoples and local communities, to balance forest protection with their needs and aspirations. In their voluntary national reports to UNFF, many countries stated that their biggest challenge is lack of resources and staff with the necessary skills, resulting in a lack of capacity to enforce and implement provisions of the existing laws and regulations.

Ineffective protection and land use planning

⁸ <https://digitalreport.protectedplanet.net>

⁹ State of the World's Forests 2018

¹⁰ This is the volume of wood harvested from certified forests, which enters the supply chain, not the volume of certified and labelled wood products, subject to a chain-of-custody certificate, which reaches the consumer. The latter is considerably less than the harvest from certified forests, but is not yet measured

¹¹ https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/extended-report/Extended-Report_Goal-15.pdf

Legal designation of protected areas does not necessarily imply that active protection is occurring, especially in places where financial resources for conservation are limited. While the international community has made progress towards increasing the size of protected areas and forests within the protected areas, the effectiveness of the management quality of these areas seems to be generally insufficient, according to the Protected Planet Report 2021 from (UNEP-WCMC) and (IUCN). More recently, the Protected Planet Report 2024 echoed this, underling that there is little evidence that protected and conserved areas are effectively governed.

Many protected areas are threatened by agricultural expansion or by industrial-scale resource extraction. Achieving consensus on forests in protected areas, with pressures from competing land uses and different interests, including resource extraction, poverty, unemployment, and population growth is a complex task. Frequently, there is little coordination across government institutions on land planning and use, as lands become increasingly attractive for developers, mining, or production purposes, these situation create land-use conflicts and highlight the need for better planning and management of land and natural resources.

Meaningful assessments of effectiveness, equitable governance and recognition of rights of stakeholders in protected areas are currently lacking, and greater data collection and analysis efforts are required to fully measure and understand the effectiveness of protected and conserved areas. According to UNEP, less than 5% of the world's land is covered by protected areas where management effectiveness has been assessed.

Increasing demand for timber products

Another substantial challenge in achieving GFG3 is growing global demand for wood products. The growth is driven by increasing population, urbanization, and a need for housing and infrastructure. Projections to 2050 indicate significant increases in wood demand. Global roundwood demand could increase by as much as 49 percent (between 2020 and 2050), driven mainly by demand for industrial roundwood, although this projection is subject to considerable uncertainty (SOFO 2024).

According to some estimates, the demand for timber will quadruple over the next 30 years (World Bank). Meeting current demand already puts significant pressure on all types of forests, including forests in protected areas.

Overall, global natural resource consumption is predicted to increase by 60% by 2060, compared with 2020 levels, according to the United Nations Environment Program Global Resources Outlook¹².

Suggestions for accelerating the achievement of GFG3

- Involve the civil society public in implementing policies and programmes in support of GFG3: in particular for effective land use planning, establishing and managing protected areas, supporting forest certification and purchasing behaviour for certified forest products,
- Strengthen existing and/or develop new synergies for implementation of GFG3, in line with the Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF),
- Increase resources and capacity of national forest institutions and other relevant entities and stakeholders to effectively manage protected forest areas,
- Develop sustainable finance mechanisms and approaches to promote long term resources for the protection of forests,

¹² <https://www.unep.org/resources/Global-Resource-Outlook-2024>

- Expand application of forest certification schemes, especially in the tropics, and build green value chains to help meet the growing demand for forest products and materials and support sustainable economies.

Global forest goal 5: Promote governance frameworks to implement sustainable forest management, including through the United Nations forest instrument, and enhance the contribution of forests to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

State of progress

In their latest voluntary national reports to UNFF, countries indicated that forest issues have been increasingly integrated into broader development or poverty reduction plans and strategies, and that the contribution of forests to national sustainable development strategies has been increasingly recognised in national decision-making.

- The Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS) is Canada’s primary vehicle for sustainable development planning and reporting. Forests and trees figure into several of the FSDS goals, including clean growth and the transition to a low-carbon economy, sustainably managed lands and forests, access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy and effective actions on climate change.
- Nepal has integrated its forests into the national periodic plans with an aim to increase the forest sector's contribution to the livelihoods of the local people and the national economy while maintaining healthy ecosystems. Similarly, forests have been well integrated into Nepal's plan to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

Countries also reported that forest law enforcement and governance have been enhanced, and policies and legal frameworks are in place to promote sustainable forest management. Wide range of measures have been implemented to improve policy coherence and involve stakeholders, communities and indigenous peoples.

Many stated that the authorities of forest agencies have been strengthened, notably by increasing their law enforcement capacity. Donors reported strong support of the actions to improve forest law enforcement and governance. Technical measures, such as monitoring and tracing wood flows, using modern techniques for tracing, verification and wood identification are being put in place. All countries reported that they had taken steps to prevent or reduce international trafficking of illegal forest products. Many have adopted measures aimed at ensuring sustainability in their supply chains, such as codes of conduct, due diligence, certification schemes, the exclusion of specific providers or areas of supply, spatial monitoring systems and traceability instruments.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to ascertain the effectiveness of the systems in place to improve forest governance and law enforcement. Due to its nature, official data on illegal logging and trafficking is scarce. However, according to the limited, existing sources at least 69% of the tropical forests converted for agricultural production between 2013 and 2019 were cleared illegally (Forest Trends, 2021¹³). This is an increase by one-third in the unlawful clearing of tropical forests for commercial agriculture since 2014, and the trend is expected to grow further. The increasing demand for a few commodities, particularly for palm oil, soy, and beef, is driving illegal tropical deforestation around the world.

Efforts to address illegal logging and reduce the trade in illegal timber have had some results and deforestation is high on the agenda for many countries around the world right now. Some countries are expanding on their demand-side regulations and enhancing traceability in the forest sector. A prominent example of this is the EU’s

¹³ https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Illicit-Harvest-Complicit-Goods_rev.pdf

Regulation on Deforestation-free products (EUDR), adopted in 2023 and which aims to eliminate all deforestation – legal or not – from the supply chains of agricultural products entering EU countries. Strengthening forest and land-use governance must be the ultimate response to illegal activities also in producer countries. One recent example worth highlighting in this regard comes from Brazil. The country reported a 50% decrease in deforestation only between 2022 and 2023, thanks to strong political commitments and increased enforcement against illegal logging and land grabbing, as well as improvements in promoting sustainable development and increasing protections for Indigenous lands.

Challenges:

In their latest voluntary national reports to UNFF, countries highlight the integration of forest issues in land use planning systems. However, it is difficult to assess whether the mechanisms described ensure that forest issues are fully integrated into land-use planning processes.

Low priority of forests issues at the national level – due to the small contribution of the forest sector to national economies

Once again, because the contribution of forest to national economies is undervalued, the forestry sector is often minimized and forestry issues are neglected in favour of other priorities such as food and energy security, social issues, environmental constraints etc.

Weak governance

Forest governance is often seen as a prerequisite for sustainable forest management and for reducing forest loss and degradation. The remoteness and vastness of forest areas in some countries makes it difficult to effectively manage forests and monitor logging activities. The important role played by illegal economic activity in driving deforestation show that there is still much work to be done to strengthen forest governance and law enforcement.

Suggestions for accelerating the achievement of GFG5

- Strengthen the weak legal frameworks and institutional capacities of government entities in charge of enforcing forest legislation,
- Effectively implement forest-related legislation, strengthen forest law enforcement as needed and promote good governance at all levels, as appropriate, to advance sustainable forest management, including forest conservation, in a manner supportive of local livelihoods, land tenure and user rights, in accordance with the national regulatory frameworks (UNFF19 HLS Declaration),
- Implement processes for forest governance, in consultation with the forest-dependent communities and ensure the participation of non-state actors in policy, land-use planning, law enforcement and forest monitoring,
- Develop and implement coherent cross-sector strategies and actions plans that extend beyond the forest sector and tackle the illegal logging resulting from the expansion of agriculture, mining and infrastructure,
- Expend the progressive demand-side approaches, regulations and enhance traceability in the forest sector broadly among all consumer countries and new/emerging markets.