

Opening remarks by Manoel Sobral Filho, Director, UNFF Secretariat

Second meeting of the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the IAF

12 January 2015, UNHQ, NY

Excellencies,

Distinguished Experts,

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a pleasure to address you for the first time in my capacity as Director of the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat; and to welcome you to United Nations Headquarters for this very important Second Meeting of the Open-Ended Ad Hoc Expert Group on the International Arrangement on Forests (IAF). I am truly honored by the responsibilities entrusted upon me, and look forward to working closely with you in the coming days.

As pointed out by Ambassador Marianne Odette Bibalou in her presentation of the statement on behalf of His Excellency Minister Noel Nelson Messone, Chairman of the UNFF11 Bureau - we are poised at a critical moment in the history of international forest policy.

From the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to the 2012 Rio+20 conference – we have kept forests high on the international policy agenda. Member States created the International Arrangement on Forests for this purpose – to raise the profile of forests while maintaining a permanent forum for dialogue, policy development and promotion of implementation.

This year – 2015 – is the Year for Global Action – For People and Planet. It is the year the United Nations will set the sustainable development agenda for the next 15 years.

Forests and the forest sector will be crucial to achieving this agenda.

- Forests directly affect the livelihoods of 20 percent of the world's people.
- Energy from wood is our single most important source of renewable energy, representing 9 percent of the total primary energy supply worldwide.
- Sustainable Forest Management and responsible use of forest products present the most effective and cost-competitive natural carbon capture and storage system.
- Forested catchments supply 75 percent of the world's freshwater.
- Forests are home to 80 percent of the world's terrestrial biodiversity.

I could go on, but all of us in this room know how crucial forests and the forest sector are to people everywhere. The world's population is predicted to reach 8.4 billion people within the next 15 years – with most of the growth in Africa and Asia – and the demand for forest goods and services will increase proportionally. We will need more forests in the future but our forests are being destroyed and degraded in many regions of the world.

The challenge for the global forest community is to make sure everyone outside this room, in other sectors, also recognizes how crucial forests are. To do this, I believe we in the forest community need to focus on five priority areas:

1. First, we need to mainstream forests and the forest sector into the sustainable development agenda at all levels: global, regional, national and sub-regional. This means we need to coordinate policies at all levels across sectors – including agriculture, energy and transportation- so that forests can fully contribute to these sectors rather than be destroyed or damaged by them.
2. Second, we need to secure the forest estate by addressing the issue of unplanned and illegal deforestation, which has enormous negative impacts on economies and the environment. Almost all loss of natural forests today is due to illegal deforestation. Though we need to continue to expand the area under plantation forests, this cannot make up for loss of biodiversity-rich natural forests.
3. Third, we need to mobilize financing for SFM, including from the private sector, which is by far the greatest current and potential investor in the forest sector. In most developing countries it is unlikely that SFM can compete with pressing social needs and servicing national debts in allocations in national budgets – or compete with other land uses which are demonstrably easier to finance than forests and produce more rapid and higher financial returns. Mobilization of financial resources to fund forest development and conservation – beyond national government funding – remains a core issue
4. Fourth, to mobilize resources we need to have stable enabling environments that attract investors. We need governance systems that address illegal deforestation and destructive practices, that ensure equitable sharing of benefits from forests and the production of forest products, and that help ensure payments for forest ecosystem services not remunerated by markets. Without good governance and good prospects for fair returns, there can be little hope for investment in sustainable forest management.
5. Finally, at the global level, we need a coherent institutional governance system that fully recognizes the contribution of forests to sustainable development.

This brings me to the IAF and the challenge before you this week and in the run up to UNFF 11. The key question is how we can build a stronger International Arrangement on Forests—an IAF that effectively contributes to meeting the challenge of managing the world's forest resources to meet people's needs for forest products and services - now and in the future.

The forest instrument has already set us on this path. It provides a framework for national action and international cooperation to help address the challenges facing forests and the people that depend on them. In preparation for UNFF 11, we have received an unprecedented 79 reports on progress in implementation of the Forest Instrument. These reports indicate actions are being taken to achieve the Global Objectives on Forests and to address various issues related to poverty alleviation, food security, energy security, climate change, and biodiversity conservation. At the same time, the full potential of the Forest Instrument has yet to be fully explored and utilized, as progress in its implementation has been slow for various reasons.

Forests are at the forefront of international policy debates from the UN Climate Summit held in September last year here in New York to UN-led initiatives on combatting illicit trade in wildlife and other forest resources, to various FLEGT initiatives. However many of these discussions and developments are taking place outside the IAF, resulting with the Forum, and often the CPF, being left on the sidelines. The only way to counter this is with a stronger and more relevant and action-oriented IAF.

Whatever form the future IAF takes, with or without a dedicated global financial mechanism for implementation of the Forest Instrument, I hope that it will have a strengthened role in advancing implementation of SFM and in facilitating access to existing forest-related funds, in particular the Global Environment Facility SFM Strategy and the Green Climate Fund. I am convinced that the relevance and effectiveness of the UNFF will increase significantly if it has the means to assist Member States and stakeholders in accessing financing to implement the Forest Instrument. This could be in the form of assistance in the design of strategies, programs and projects to tap into global and regional financial mechanisms, and it could include elements aimed at making forest sector related programs more competitive vis-à-vis other sectors that have preferred access to these funds.

This is the year when the United Nations will embark on a post-2015 transformative development agenda and shape the framework for action until 2030. This is also the year where you, as Members of the Forum, will decide on the post-2015 IAF. This convergence of timing is a rare political opportunity to integrate the rich spectrum of the contributions and needs of forests and forest dependent people into the broader post-2015 sustainable development agenda and its Means of Implementation.

As you advance your work in constructing the building blocks for the post-2015 IAF, I am confident you will keep this larger picture in mind. As the AHEG Co-Chairs have emphasized – we have been gathering your views and innovative suggestions through a nearly 2-year process of intersessional activities, and what is needed now is to distill these ideas into concrete, practical and politically viable actions for consideration by UNFF11.

2015 is the time for Global Action, and we in the forest community must seize this opportunity. This gathering of experts is an important milestone in this journey. We in the UNFF Secretariat stand ready to serve and assist you in any way we can be of help.

Wishing you all a successful meeting,

I thank you for your kind attention.