

Distinguished Experts,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to UN Headquarters and to this first meeting of the UNFF open-ended intergovernmental ad hoc expert group. As the AHEG Co-Chairs said, your discussions will shape a new path for the International Arrangement on Forests. By developing proposals for IAF Strategic Plan until 2030, you will be building the foundation for the future of international forest policy.

As input to your deliberations, 22 Member States and 12 organizations and Major Groups submitted their views and proposals. These submissions were posted on the UNFF website as they were received, starting in September last year.

In order to further facilitate the work of AHEG1, the Secretariat also undertook three initiatives.

First, we engaged two expert consultants (Ms. Stephanie Caswell and Dr. Ivan Tomaselli) to work closely with the Secretariat in preparing a background paper on elements for the IAF Strategic Plan. The background paper has been available on the UNFF website since 15 February.

Second, we convened an Expert Panel in March in Tokyo, in collaboration with the Government of Japan, to further explore ideas on the possible content and elements of the Strategic Plan and first quadrennial program of work. The Panel brought together 35 experts participating in their personal capacity. Mr. Arvids Ozols moderated the discussions and his summary has been available in the UNFF website since 31 March.

Our third initiative was to cooperate with the Government of Japan in organizing a public seminar in parallel with the Expert Panel. The Seminar provided an opportunity for a wider exchange of views and ideas on actions needed to promote sustainable forest management in the context of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

As you have seen in the AHEG organization of work, we will hear presentations on these three initiatives later this morning.

There have been two major developments in international policy since UNFF11 met in May 2015, which are relevant to your deliberations on the Strategic Plan.

First, as many of you know, world leaders of the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a historic summit in New York in September 2015. At the center of the 2030 Agenda are a comprehensive and far reaching set 17 universal goals and associated targets covering social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

We as foresters know that forests are essential for the implementation of all 17 SDGs, from poverty and hunger, to health and gender, to energy and economic growth, to name a few. It is up to us, to communicate and demonstrate this to the broader development community.

Forests are at the core of SDG 15 which promotes sustainably managing forests, combating desertification, and halting and reversing land degradation, as well as halting biodiversity loss.

Forests are also highlighted under SDG 6 on Water. Target 6.6 recognizes the central role forests play in our planet's hydrological cycles and in providing clean water.

As you may know, the discussions on the modalities for the 2030 Agenda are still ongoing. Later this week, on 28 April, informal consultations among Member States and stakeholders will take place on the follow-up and review framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Last month, the UN Statistical Commission agreed on a set of 230 global indicators as a framework for reviewing progress on the SDGs. Two indicators specifically mention forests but many more can be disaggregated for forests.

It is clear that for a substantial number of indicators, including some of the forest-related ones, there are no established methodologies and standards for data collection. It is thus evident that work on SDG indicators will continue. In this regard, on 29 April, we will host an expert meeting organized by FAO, to further advance work on SFM and forest related indicators for the SDGs.

A second major development is the Paris Agreement, adopted by the UNFCCC parties in December 2015 and signed by 175 Governments last week in New York. Article 5 specifically integrates forest-based climate change mitigation and adaptation measures in the operational scheme of the Agreement. It calls on Parties to take action to enhance sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases; reaffirms the importance of non-carbon benefits of forests; and encourages implementation and support of REDD+ and alternative policy approaches.

Distinguished experts, let me now update you on developments related to the UNFF since UNFF11 met in May last year.

First, I am pleased to inform you that through resolution 2015/33, adopted in July 2015, ECOSOC endorsed the UNFF11 Resolution on the International Arrangement on Forests beyond 2015.

Among the landmark decisions included in the UNFF11 Resolution were important recommendations that prompted the General Assembly to take action. Through its Resolution 70/199, dated 22 December 2015, the General Assembly approved the Forum's recommendations to extend the timeline of the Global Objectives on Forests to 2030, in line with the timeline of the 2030 Agenda, and renamed the non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests - the UN Forest Instrument.

Secondly, I am also pleased to inform you that the General Assembly approved the establishment of 4 new posts for the Secretariat under the UN Regular Budget, as a result of the recommendations and provisions of the UNFF11 Resolution. This welcome development will enable us to decrease our reliance on extra budgetary voluntary contributions to meet staff costs, and ensures that the UNFF will be appropriately served and supported by a permanent core group of staffers.

These additional staff resources have also enabled us to initiate operations of the Global Forest Financing Network (GFFFN).

We have organised 2 national and 3 regional, capacity building workshops on designing bankable project proposals on sustainable forest management.

We have assisted two pilot countries -- Cameroon and Senegal -- in preparing project proposals for multilateral donors. For each country, we set up a team of national and international consultants to help prepare tailor-made proposals.

Senegal is about to submit a concept note to the Green Climate Fund for a \$35 million programme to introduce a mechanism of payments for forest ecosystem services. Cameroon is preparing a concept note to the Green Climate Fund and a project identification form for submission to the GEF.

Based on these pilot cases, each dollar spent on the GFFFN has the potential to leverage \$350 for implementation of sustainable forest management.

As of today, however, the requests for assistance are considerably more than the funds available to the GFFFN to deliver such assistance. The Secretariat will continue to seek and welcome voluntary contributions in order to fund work to catalyse and increase forest financing in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

Thirdly, the Secretariat has engaged in discussions with the GEF secretariat to facilitate collaboration between the Facility and the Forum to support eligible countries in gaining access to funding for sustainable forest management. The Secretariats have established an effective consultation and cooperation system, and the GEF has designated a liaison to serve as a link between the Forum and the Facility.

Consultations are also underway with the Green Climate Fund on cooperation to facilitate project development and increase access to financing for the forest sector. Moreover, the Fund expressed interest in contributing to the IAF Strategic Plan.

Fourthly, let me briefly update you on celebrations of the 2016 International Day of Forests. This year's theme was forests and water, as proposed by the CPF. As highlighted in the Secretary-General's message on the International Day, it is estimated that by 2025, nearly 1.8 billion people will live in areas with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world's population could face water-stressed conditions. Given that forested catchments provide three-quarters of all freshwater used worldwide, safeguarding the water-providing capacity of forests is becoming all the more urgent.

The theme of "forests and water" provided an opportunity for the UNFF Secretariat and UN-Water to work together in organising a joint celebration of the International Day of Forests and World Water Day on 21 March at UNHQ, in collaboration with the Government of Sweden.

The UNHQ event was opened by DESA USG Wu Hongbo, ECOSOC Vice-President Ambassador Jürg Lauber, and Ambassador Per Thöresson, Deputy Permanent Representative of Sweden. It included a panel discussion with speakers from the Ramsar Convention, New York City's Urban Field Station, the UN Global Compact and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The event concluded with statements by 10 UN Member States and FAO. Over 130 participants from 52 Member State delegations participated in the UNHQ event.

From 18 March - 23 March, the social media campaign by UN-DESA, DPI, FAO and UN system partners using the hashtag #IntIDayForests had an overall reach of over 65 million, with over 261 million timeline deliveries. Of the top 3 IDF digital media, two were designs produced by the UNFF Secretariat – making 9.5 and 8.7 million timeline deliveries respectively.

Forests make important contributions to all the SDGs, across sectors. Based on our experience from this year's IDF celebrations, communication activities like the International Day provide a valuable opportunity to spread the message that well-managed forests are vital for sustainable development and human well-being.

Finally, let me close by taking this opportunity to thank the UNFF11 Bureau for their outstanding accomplishments and to welcome the new UNFF12 Bureau which was elected earlier this morning.

Ambassador Noel Nelson Messone and his vice-chairs -- Mr. Heikki Granholm, Mr. Srecko Juricic, Mr. Vicente Bezerra and Mr. Wu Zhimin -- excelled in guiding the long, intense and fruitful preparatory work that preceded UNFF11, and subsequently ably presided over the UNFF Session in May 2015, in which the Members States adopted the landmark UNFF11 Resolution.

Now, as we move into a new phase, I am sure that Mr. Peter Besseau of Canada and his vice chairs, including Ms. Clarissa Souza Della Nina of Brazil, Mr. Wu Zhimin of China, Mr. Tomas Krejzar of the Czech Republic, will guide us equally well. We in the Secretariat are looking forward to serving and working with the distinguished elected Bureau members.

Let me note, that I didn't update you on developments related to the work of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, as we will be briefed through a statement presented on behalf of the CPF Chair, Mr. Renee Castro, ADG of FAO'S Forestry Department.

As a final note, we have a busy work schedule planned for the next 12 months – the second meeting of the AHEG is planned for 29-31 August, the UNFF working group and UNFF Special Session are expected to take place in January 2017, leading up to UNFF12 in May-2017. During this period, we will continue to work with regional and sub-regional organisations, as well as Major Groups on exploring practical options to further enhance their involvement in the work of the IAF and the Forum.

Member States at UNFF11 realised that in order for the next chapter of the International Arrangement on Forests to deliver results on the ground, we would need to balance aspirational goals with practical action. As the saying goes – now it's time for us to roll up our sleeves and get started!

Thank You