

**UNFF Expert Group Meeting on the Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Forest Management
(Virtual Meeting)
19-21 January 2021**

Co-Chairs summary of key points and suggestions on the way forward

I. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an enormous disruption to human lives, livelihoods and economic systems worldwide. It is the worst global crisis humanity has faced since the Second World War with its impacts being felt in all aspects of social and economic spheres. The on-going pandemic has caused a massive public health crisis and economic contraction, led to huge human losses, shuttered countless businesses whether big or small, thrown tens of millions out of work, disrupted global supply chains, severely strained fiscal capacity and safety nets. The pandemic-induced turmoil in the global economy has led to the sudden loss of livelihoods and increase of extreme poverty, income inequality and food insecurity of some of the most vulnerable segments of society. In view of the broad range of vital services that forests provide for economic functioning and human well-being, the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) through resolution of its 15th session, requested the Secretariat to assess the impact of the pandemic on: i) Sustainable forest management, ii) Forest sector, forest-dependent people, Indigenous peoples and local communities, and iii) Forest financing and international cooperation.

In this respect, the UNFF Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Forest Management was convened from 19 to 21 January 2021. The main objectives of this meeting were to allow experts from Member States, international forest-related organizations, regional and sub-regional partners and civil society to discuss and share their views on the: i) Impact of the global pandemic on forests and the forest sector, including risks, threats and challenges; ii) Potential responses and measures for forests and forest sector recovery; iii) Role of forests in the post COVID-19 recovery; and iv) Potential opportunities that COVID-19 has brought to the fore to enhance contribution of forests to inclusive and long-term sustainable development.

To assist the discussions among experts, background papers were prepared to assess the impacts of the pandemic on forests and forest sector in various regions, namely; Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, North America, and Western European and Others Group. These studies were carried out during the period of July 2020 to December 2020. It was reported that in some regions, consultants faced difficulty in getting responses from the UNFF National Focal Points. More specifically, there were very low level of responses from Asia-Pacific countries, hence, the assessment prepared by the consultants mainly focused on two countries of the Asia-Pacific for which the consultants had enough information.

II. Summary of discussions of the expert group meeting

Prior to presentation of the regional assessments, Co-Chairs informed participants that in some regions, consultants had difficulty in getting responses from UNFF National Focal Points. More specifically, there was very low level of responses from Asia-Pacific countries, hence, the assessment prepared by the consultants for that region, was mainly focused on two countries of the Asia-Pacific for which the consultants had sufficient information. In this respect, the Co-Chairs invited all experts, in particular, those countries who could not provide timely input to the assessment in their region, to engage actively in the interactive discussions during the expert group meeting. Following presentation of the background papers, experts engaged in interactive discussions. The Co-Chairs summary of the key points of the discussions and suggestions on the way forward are presented below.

A. Impacts of the global pandemic of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector

a. Impacts on Forests and Forest Management

- i. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause severe negative impacts on the course of socioeconomic development. The extent of the impacts on forests and forestry varies in different countries and regions. National and regional circumstances, including the structure of economies and forestry, the level of development, as well as degree of urbanization influence the pandemic impacts.
 - ii. The pandemic caused negative impacts, including delays and reduction of planned forest management activities, as well as reduced public involvement in forest related activities such as reforestation campaigns in several regions. Movement restrictions and measures to curb spread of the disease resulted in postponement and/or cancellation of some forest management activities such as silviculture.
 - iii. Incidents of illegal harvesting of forest resources, including illegal logging, illegal harvesting of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and poaching were observed in several regions. With the likelihood of reduced monitoring by the public sector forest agencies due to COVID-19 restrictions and risk of increased illegal activities, these remain important areas for monitoring.
 - iv. Incidents of forest fires in community forests and protected areas decreased in some regions but increased in others. The resulting smoke caused a significant health hazard to vulnerable populations in those regions. There have been also valuable lessons learned from fire suppression activities and preparations and personnel management in some regions, which could be beneficial to other regions.
 - v. In Latin America and Caribbean, forest management activities continued over the pandemic, while some countries during the meeting reported that their forest production activities were negatively impacted by the pandemic, and their forest community enterprises had insufficient cash to pay for their workforce and continue their operation. The forest industry also faced restrictions resulting from reduction of staff and/ or work hours of official agencies. Nevertheless, the forest sector in the region has proved to be resilient and can play a significant role in socio-economic recovery.
 - vi. In more developed regions like North America and WEOG, forest management and forest products manufacturing were declared essential businesses. This allowed essential activities to continue, while taking measures to protect workers and the public.
 - vii. In Africa and other less developed regions, lack of income and resources negatively impacted management of protected forest areas and increased the risk of illegal activities.
 - viii. The pandemic has impacted forest recreational services in various regions differently. Some regions like North America, Eastern Europe and WEOG have experienced an increase in the use of urban and peri-urban forests for recreational purposes. This demonstrates an important benefit that forests can provide for human health and wellbeing, particularly when normal events and travel are disrupted.
 - ix. In other regions like Africa and in some countries in Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and Caribbean, recreation and hospitality sectors were severely affected by the pandemic, due to closure of urban and local markets, and subsequent loss of jobs and incomes of local communities, especially women and youth.
- b. Impacts on livelihoods of forest-dependent people, indigenous peoples and local communities, smallholder forest owners, workers, women and youth**

- i. The pandemic caused decreased income and revenues, lower investments and increased costs for forest companies, especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It has also negatively impacted production of NTFPs as a main source of income and food for local communities.
 - ii. Communities dependent on forest-based tourism for jobs and livelihoods experienced declines in their incomes and increased the risk in engaging in illegal activities such as poaching and illegal timber production.
 - iii. In many regions, especially Africa, Asia and Latin America and Caribbean, lack of access to information and information technology has exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic on the livelihoods and income of forest-based communities.
 - iv. Vulnerability pushed many Indigenous and local communities, including returning migrant and urban workers, to retreating deeper into forests for food, fuel, and shelter, and to protect themselves from the risk of COVID-19 infection.
 - v. In several regions, the pandemic has deepened dramatically inequalities and vulnerabilities of forest-dependent populations. Many people, particularly women and youth have lost seasonal employment. It was reported that women were largely responsible for homeschooling tasks during the pandemic, and as the result, their ability to earn income was negatively affected.
 - vi. Delays in getting administrative permits for harvesting timber and NTFPS negatively affected forest dependent people in some countries in Africa, and Latin America and Caribbean.
 - vii. In some regions, fiscal support was provided to individuals, communities, forest owners, workers, women and youth. In some countries, Indigenous peoples received similar benefits to others. However, given the limitation of resources, this has not been a blanket approach in all regions.
- c. Impact on forest industry and trade**
- i. Forest industries in many countries in Africa and Asia have experienced reduced sales of the timber and falling prices.
 - ii. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on forest industries include, *inter alia*: increased costs in labor, transportation and production and distribution activities of forestry enterprises; liquidity squeeze and capital chain rupture facing forest enterprises; reduced capital investments in forest industries; reduced export demand for forest products; higher costs and lowered efficiency associated with international trade and transportation of forest products.
 - iii. The impact on trade of forest products at the national level included a sharp decline in timber trade and NTFPs, which implies a reduction in national demand and consumption, an accelerated shrinkage of traditional export market for the same reasons, and a significant increase in the risk to the global timber supply chain. These also impacted people's livelihood.
 - iv. Supply chains were adversely affected with impacts on exports of timber and NTFPs, and imports of forest products, chemicals, spares and machinery due to COVID-19 measures/restrictions. Manufacturing industries faced increases production costs, especially in Africa.
 - v. In several regions, forest resources are under increased pressures due to reduced income, increased unemployment, and reduced funding which may harm the stability and viability of the forest sector.

This includes the threat that environmental and conservation projects may lose priority in national budgets.

- vi. The annual GDP growth in many countries in different regions has declined significantly, compared to the pre-pandemic year. Consequently, industrial production also decreased in several countries. This could have impacts on forest sectors, and local communities in various countries, including allocation of reduced resources to forest, and forest dependent communities.
- vii. The pandemic has accelerated the already decreasing demand for newsprint, commercial copying and printing paper, and at the same time, it has increased demand for containerboard used in shipping packaging. What was not foreseen was the spike in demand for hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE) in many regions.

d. Institutional capacity

- i. National decision making on forests such as permit issuance, was delayed in some countries, due to measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic, such as travel restrictions, weak information technology infrastructure, and other constraints.
- ii. In urban and suburban areas, increased visitation to forests creates new challenges for land managers. However, there is an opportunity to capitalize on new visitors and educate them on the value of forests and the associated human health benefits of forests.
- iii. Lack of face-to face meetings and reliance on virtual communication may have negatively affected the ability of governments to maintain dialogue, especially with stakeholders who do not have access to digital communication tools. Virtual meetings have been useful for decision making, however essential field monitoring activities require physical presence on the ground and could not be undertaken remotely from home in many regions.
- iv. There are threats of reduced financial allocations to the forest sector in the short term in some regions, as resources are allocated to address the immediate health and economic response measures.
- v. In some regions like WEOG and North America, institutions are strong, well-staffed and well-resourced, while some other regions face challenges, mainly regarding financial, technological and human resources.
- vi. COVID19 impacted and delayed some forest related scientific research, including by lack of access to laboratories and field sites. Science and scientific community have major roles in assisting decision-making officials to devise effective pandemic recovery plans, as well as identifying new opportunities for forests and forest sector to go through the pandemic and beyond.

e. Investment, financing and international cooperation

- i. The impacts of the pandemic on availability of resources for forests vary in different regions. The pandemic has created more challenging situations, especially, in Africa, Asia and some countries in Latin America and Caribbean to fund forest related activities. The limited resources are mainly targeted at funding the most immediate public health needs of these regions.
- ii. Globally, countries have taken various steps to address the impacts of the pandemic on their citizens. Many countries have also provided assistance to forest dependent and Indigenous peoples. However, the extent and scope of recovery measures vary among regions and countries. Compared to WEOG, North

America and some countries from Eastern Europe, other regions encountered more challenges to provide timely stimulus packages, and undertake recovery measures, including for forests and forest sector.

- iii. The pandemic has also caused suspension/rescheduling of international meetings in 2020. This impacted negatively the progress in developing a common global approach/strategy to address the impacts of COVID-19.
- iv. There has been decreased operational and capital investment in forestry in some regions, but that has not been the case everywhere.
- v. Convening virtual meetings has enabled international and regional cooperation on forests and forestry issues to continue in all regions. However, some stakeholders were left behind due to technological limitations in their areas.
- vi. There is concern that the global recession, especially, in donor countries could lead to reduced international public financing for forests, including Official Development Assistance (ODA).

III. **Suggestions on the way forward**

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has caused and continues to cause severe negative impacts on all countries and regions around the world. The extent and scope of the impacts, however, differ from country to country, and region to region. Countries are taking various measures to protect their people and economies from the negative impacts of the pandemic, based on their national conditions and capabilities. There is no one-fits-all solution to confront this situation, however, there are huge opportunities for countries to work together collaboratively to minimize the impacts of the pandemic. The assessment carried out by the consultants in various regions is just an initial step to identify the immediate and most visible impacts of the pandemic on sustainable forest management. As we are still being impacted by the pandemic, additional assessments and studies are needed to provide a better understanding of the short, medium and long-term impacts of the pandemic on sustainable forest management. The following is a Co-Chairs summary of key points and suggestions raised during the discussions on the way forward:

1. **Integrate sustainable forest management in COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans.** Sustainable forest management can make significant contributions to offset many of the social, economic and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The value of forests for preserving biodiversity, regulating climate and supporting livelihoods is undeniable. Sustainable forest management provides essential products and services to support health and livelihoods during times of crisis. Forests and ecosystem services are essential for building resilience and providing safety nets for the most vulnerable communities. It is important to acknowledge the role of forest dependent people, local communities and Indigenous people and their vulnerabilities to crises such as pandemics. Equally, it is important to recognize their contribution in reducing the impacts of COVID-19, including through their conservation and sustainable management efforts.
2. **Renew commitment to the international agreed forest-related goals and targets.** Sustainable forestry practices may reduce the risk of future pandemics and must be prioritized through renewed commitment to the internationally agreed forest-related goals and targets. Healthy forests are vital to addressing many pandemic-induced challenges, including through creating new jobs in afforestation, reforestation and agroforestry.
3. **Promote one-health approach.** The current pandemic has highlighted the close interrelationship between the health of ecosystems, people and species. It has become evident that humanity is an integral part of

nature – there is one planet, one world and one life for all. We need to work together towards a new norm that integrates care for people, species and the planet, based on the “one health” approach to address global challenges. The pandemic should not be used as an excuse to loosen the environmental regulations.

- 4. Build momentum to halt deforestation and unsustainable forest practices.** To mitigate the impact of COVID 19 and future zoonotic diseases, minimize their impacts on global trade and supply chains of forest products, leverage action to build more sustainable production and resilient supply chains, and provide more diverse livelihoods, it is important to build momentum to halt deforestation and unsustainable forest practices.
- 5. Include the value of ecosystem services in recovery plans.** The contribution of ecosystem services is not accounted for in the GDP calculation in many countries, preventing forestry to be seen as a priority in national development planning. In this respect, assessment of ecosystem services provided by forests should be included in the post-COVID19 stimulus packages to enhance these values in short, mid and long terms.
- 6. Integrate investment in forests in the recovery plans.** Countries should integrate forestry investment into their national recovery strategies, taking into account their national conditions and priorities. Integrating disaster-risk reduction, adaptive planning within forest sector and integrating national forest financing strategies as parts of the recovery plans are also useful to proactively plan for and manage future crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 7. Strengthen institutions and policies.** In the long-term, countries, depending on their national conditions and priorities, may consider taking additional steps to adopt optimal land-use planning to utilize the full potential of forests; address policy barriers; promote SFM; improve tenure security; promote community engagement and secure their tenure rights to forests and forest resources; and embed social protection and inclusive measures within forest sector policies and planning. Strengthening governance and support mechanisms to combat forest related illegal activities, integrating disaster and risk mitigation approaches in planning, policies, and response mechanisms; and promoting inter-sectoral consultation and collaboration (e.g. between forestry, mining and agricultural sectors) are also important steps to ensure optimal and efficient land-use planning.
- 8. Increase resources from all sources for forests.** It is important to increase resources from all sources for forests at all levels in the post-pandemic era. At the international level, official financial flows to forestry, in particular ODA, is now more important than ever, along with technological cooperation and assistance, multi-stakeholder partnerships and capacity development. The UNFF Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network could also assist countries in confronting the adverse impacts of the pandemic on forests.
- 9. Seize the opportunities provided by the pandemic.** The pandemic has created opportunities to build back better, create jobs in a more inclusive, sustainable and environmentally friendly economy, while continuing forest restoration and sustainable utilization. It has given forests and the forest sector a higher profile, raising awareness on their significance for people and the planet. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for enhanced forest education and use of online learning platforms, during and after the pandemic. The pandemic has created an opportunity for expanded use of technology, in particular, information and communication technologies. There is need, therefore, to widen the scope of application of these technologies, even, to rural areas and in silvicultural operations as a long-term measure. The pandemic has also paved the way for exchanging best practices among countries, enhanced scientific research on role of forests in addressing zoonotic diseases, and increased use of traditional knowledge of local communities, including indigenous people.

10. Invite UNFF to carry out the second assessment: The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation. Regular assessments have to be carried out to identify the broad range and long-term impacts of the pandemic on sustainable forest management, as well as potential solutions and recovery measures. The UN Strategic Plan for Forests (UNSPF), which is fully aligned with the SDGs, provides a solid basis for concerted actions towards a sustainable, inclusive, fair and resilient recovery from COVID-19. As the responsible body to follow up implementation of the UNSPF, UNFF is uniquely positioned to take the lead in carrying out the second assessment. The second study, among other issues, should also include assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on, and its interlinkages with: i) wildlife, and ii) wildfires. The assessment should be carried out with full engagement of relevant CPF member organizations, in particular, IUCN and CITES, taking into account the findings of the existing regional assessments carried out by the Forum. This assessment should take into full account the official information from UNFF Member States. Members of the Forum, CPF member organizations, regional and subregional partners and major groups should collaborate in providing relevant information to enrich the second assessment. They should also strengthen exchanges and cooperation in response to the impact of the pandemic on forestry and share successful practices, facilitating the mitigation of the impact of the pandemic on forest management and the recovery of forestry and the production of forestry enterprises in a sound and orderly manner.

Advance Uneal