

**Assessment of the Impacts of COVID-19 on Forests and Forest Sector
UNFF Expert Group Meeting (Virtual)
2-4 February 2022**

Summary by the Co-Chairs

I. Background

1. At the sixteenth session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF16), Members of the Forum and stakeholders reviewed the findings from the UNFF Secretariat initial assessment on the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector¹ and made recommendations on how some of these impacts could be reduced. The UNFF16 discussions also highlighted the need for a second assessment with a focus on assessing the challenges faced by countries, and the strategies, recovery measures and best practices for reducing the impact of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector.
2. In this respect, the Secretariat of UNFF convened the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Assessment of the Impacts of COVID-19 on Forests and Forest Sector from 2 to 4 February 2022. 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 review the findings of the second assessment, and share their views on: (i) the challenges faced by countries in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector; (ii) the strategies and recovery measures being adopted by countries in combatting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector; and (iii) best practices adopted by countries and other stakeholders for reducing the impact of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector.
3. To assist the discussions among experts, several background papers were prepared to assess the challenges, the strategies, recovery measures and best practices for reducing the impact of COVID-19 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 2021 to December 2021 by a group of consultants².

II. Opening of the meeting

4. The meeting was opened by the UNFF Secretariat and followed by opening remarks by Ms. Juliette Biao Koudénoukpo, Director of the UNFF Secretariat. In her opening remarks, Ms. Koudénoukpo welcomed the participants to the meeting. She reviewed the purpose of the meeting and the Forum's decision on conducting the assessment of impact of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector. She highlighted the link of forests and trees to the health and wellbeing of people and the planet. She also stressed on the importance of maintaining the momentum generated by the adoption of the Glasgow Declaration on Forests and Land Use Change and engaging more effectively in the implementation of the Paris Agreement and other global forest-related instruments.
5. Following the opening remarks, experts elected Ms. Maureen Whelan from Canada, and Mr. Clement Ng'oriareng from Kenya, as the Co-Chairs of the EGM. In their opening remarks, the Co-Chairs informed participants that consultants encountered a number of obstacles in preparing the background assessment due to the global pandemic of COVID-19. This included restrictions on travel and a low level of responses received in some regions from UNFF national focal points, and other stakeholders. In this respect, the Co-Chairs invited all experts, in particular, the countries who could not provide timely input to the assessment, to engage actively in the interactive discussions during the expert group meeting.

III. Summary of discussions of the expert group meeting

6. Following presentation of the background papers by the consultants, 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.

¹ Please see the initial assessment conducted by the UNFFS at: <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/documents/index.html>

² <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/forum/index.html>

A. Challenges faced by countries in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector

- a. The pandemic revealed systemic weaknesses of the global social, economic, development and environmental policies and institutions. Depending on their level of development and availability of resources and location, forests and the forest sector were impacted to different extents by the pandemic.
- b. Major initial socio-economic and environmental challenges related to forests and the forest sector emerged from mobility restrictions, reduction of capital investments and low prioritization of forests in national plans, shortage of skilled personnel, financial and technological constraints, disruption of trade and supply chains of wood and other forest products, delayed planting and other forest operations, and price increases of various goods and services. In some regions, these negatively affected the importation of machinery and spare parts for the forest sector. These impacts of the pandemic have been more visible in Africa, and Asia-Pacific regions.
- c. In several regions, the reduced forest enforcement and monitoring due to travel restrictions resulted in reduced inspection activities and an increase in illegal activities in forests, including illegal mining. This subsequently caused an increase in deforestation in some regions, as well as forest fires. In some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the opposite occurred and forest degradation and forest fires were reduced.
- d. In the Eastern European region, the pandemic had negative impacts on the wood processing industry due to a decline in foreign trade and disrupted cross-border trading in countries with clear export orientation. Forest production and forest management in this region were not strongly affected by the pandemic, and the demand for basic forest products remained unchanged.
- e. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on many indigenous people and tribal territories. Thousands of dwellers were infected. Many forest-based communities' lost markets for their forest products and tourism services. In some countries, forest landscape restoration activities were unable to proceed, resulting in both environmental and socioeconomic consequences. Efforts to prevent forest fires and illegal logging in these territories had been weakened. Measures to prevent forest invasive species were also negatively affected.
- f. In several regions, operating from home due to COVID 19, had negative impacts on the performance of staff in forest sector. In addition, lack of financial resources caused difficulties to maintain the same level of staffing in some sectors, including the forest sector. These impacts may affect the performance of forest sector in short term.
- g. Shortage of financial resources was a major challenge in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and Caribbean regions. Many developing countries had difficulties mobilizing adequate funding for combatting the health and economic crises caused by the pandemic. The insufficiency of resources resulted in natural resource management programs, including forests, not being recognized as a priority in some countries.
- h. Forestry enterprises, especially in Africa and Asia-Pacific experienced difficulties in several aspects. Mobility restrictions, trade barriers, new health and safety measures, were some of the challenges faced by forest enterprises. Additionally, changing production and market dynamics, reduced availability of workers, global supply chain disruption and travel bans contributed to a challenging situation.
- i. In Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and Caribbean regions, a decrease in income was observed in forest-based tourism and recreational industries due to supply chain disruption and travel restrictions. It was reported that in some areas of Africa, women were disproportionately impacted as they lost their forest income when urban dwellers moved to rural communities and entered the forest sector. The North American, Western and Eastern European regions reported a surge in the use of forests for recreational purposes during the pandemic with some challenges arising related to local over use. Forest and the forest sector in North America also received support through government stimulus packages.
- j. Lack of capacity, appropriate infrastructure and financial resources to access technology, such as digital technology, drones and satellite data for forest monitoring in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and the Latin America and Caribbean region were also major constraints for countries in these regions to maintain the level of efficiency and effectiveness of their forest sector during the time of the pandemic.

B. Strategies and recovery measures being adopted by countries in combatting the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector

- a. Governments around the world have adopted different strategies to limit the spread of COVID-19 and measures to promote economic recovery and stability. In some countries, especially in the Latin American region, civil society also played a significant role in addressing pandemic-related challenges in some communities.
- b. In Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Eastern Europe, most countries adopted general strategies and recovery measures aimed at reducing the impacts of the COVID-19 and not specifically at forests and the forest sector per se, although the forest sector has also benefitted. Many of the measures adopted by governments have tended to focus on fiscal policy responses and strategies to address the health and economic challenges caused by the pandemic.
- c. In Western Europe and North America, forests were deliberately included in both stimulus and pandemic recovery plans and programs, as well as recovery plans. Some countries in the Asia-Pacific region took similar strategies and measures, and in Eastern Europe, strategies and recovery measures specifically related to forests and the forest sector included financial support in the form of subsidies, deferred payments, and costs reductions.
- d. In Asia-Pacific and Eastern Europe region, a common strategy adopted by the forest sector in the region was the use of modern digital technology and innovative measures for providing services, conducting trade and virtual meetings. Some countries in the region included specific provisions related to the forest sector in measures undertaken to revive the economy.
- e. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the most common key response and recovery strategies includes designation of forestry activities as essential services that could continue to work during the emergency period. The economic measures undertaken in this region include, inter alia, credit lines for small and medium-size companies, direct payment assistance to low-income households, programs/special funds for economic recovery, and assistance to people in vulnerable situations. In some cases, programs to maintain existing jobs or create new ones were developed, some of which included provisions for paid leave.
- f. In Africa, a few countries with better fiscal space have increased their social protection expenditure to cushion the most vulnerable households. Some multilateral institutions working in Africa have put in place stimulus packages and support mechanisms that can be accessed by all African countries. Many African countries have also accessed grants from bilateral donors mainly for conservation and ecotourism related activities. Other measures taken in some regions include provision of subsidies, deferred loan and other payments to ease burden on businesses.
- g. The important role of forests in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 are now more evident and recognized worldwide. At the global level, forests have also risen on the political agenda during the pandemic for several reasons, including an increased recognition of their benefits to human health and their importance to rural economies. The COVID 19 pandemic has contributed to this increased recognition. Additionally, forests contribution to Sustainable Development Goals, and climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as their importance to the conservation of biodiversity are now accepted concepts. As a result, a number of developed countries and countries with economies in transition have adopted or initiated policies addressing nature conservation and restoration of forest ecosystems and have started working on conceptualization of resilient forest management systems, which integrate the role of forests in a green economy.
- h. Other recovery measures included targeted forestry programs linked with wider objectives, especially climate change, forest fires, pests and disease management, as well as enhanced regional cooperation especially in fire management.

C. Best practices adopted by countries and other stakeholders for reducing the impact of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector

- a. As the timeframe covered in these assessments is only two years, it was recognized that determining “best practices” in terms of addressing pandemic challenges in forests and the forest sector was premature. Instead, a

number of strategies and measures were identified as being effective in reducing the impact of the pandemic on forests and the forest sector.

- b. In all regions, the designation of the forest sector as an essential service has been common. This designation helped keep most forest industries open, thereby, assisting in minimizing the negative impacts of the pandemic on forests and the forest sector.
- c. Another common practice across all regions was the use of digital technology and ICT's for communication, surveillance and monitoring, provision of on-line services and e-commerce. In some areas virtual forest-tours were developed to raise awareness on the importance of forests and to build interest in post-pandemic ecotourism activities.
- d. The provision of financial support was reported as a critical measure to support forest-based enterprises. Provision of concessionary loans, extension of loan repayment periods and credit lines for small and medium-sized companies in the production sector and rural community were all among the reported support measures.

IV. Suggestions on the way forward

- 7. The following is a Co-Chairs summary of key points and suggestions raised during the discussions on the way forward:
 - a. Assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector should be a continuous and long-term task. Such assessments help governments to find solutions to minimize the impacts of the pandemic, identify the best practices, improve their recovery measures and strategies, and incorporate necessary measures in their plans to pursue a sustainable and long-term recovery of their forests and forest sector. Similar assessments being carried out by CPF partners should be utilized to provide a fulsome picture of the impacts of the pandemic on forests and the forest sector.
 - b. There is a need to continue raising awareness among governments, and stakeholders of the recommendations of UNFF16, and those of other CPF member organizations and partners on reducing the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector, which are highly relevant and valid.
 - c. Actions and policies intended to reduce the impact of the pandemic on forests and the forest sector should be conducted in a manner that accelerates implementation of the UNSPF and its Global Forest Goals, as well as other global forest-related goals and commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals. . These actions should be linked to existing forest sector policy priorities, especially climate change mitigation and adaptation.
 - d. Increased investments are needed to enhance forest resiliency and adaptive capacity to climate change. This can help forests to cope with negative impacts of climate change, protect people against current disease, and reduce future pandemics.
 - e. Strategies that promote nature-based solutions to address short and long-term shocks to livelihoods should be applied, and policies to conserve, restore, and sustainably manage and use forests should be promoted as a means to create resilient and sustainable recovery plans.
 - f. There continues to be a general lack of knowledge among the public about the full value of forests, forest products and services, and their contribution to the livelihoods and health of people and the planet. The lack of knowledge of the full value of forests, how to use it in national accounting, and how to translate such knowledge to concrete actions are fundamental gaps that have to be addressed. In this respect, the forest services and products, and the benefits of sustainable forest management for adaptive and resilient development need to be communicated more broadly to the public, as well as decision-makers.
 - g. Improved communications can help with increasing the understanding of the important role of SFM and help counteract misinformation and misunderstandings of the role of forests. Enhanced communications can also help align opposing interests and enhance resilience of forest sector to cope with uncertainties and challenges posed by pandemic.

- h. Innovative forest management practices, like ecotourism, and forest landscape restoration should be promoted to increase economic performance of forests. Improved information exchange about business practices, new market opportunities, and digitalization should be also enhanced.
- i. Enhancing international cooperation in the areas of capacity building, including in forest education, and technological cooperation should be a main component of all strategies and measures to minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and forest sector. There is a need to build capacity to accelerate the migration to the digital age in monitoring and evaluation of forest resources and promoting investments in this area.
- j. Measures should be taken to strengthen monitoring and inspection of forests to prevent deforestation and forest fires, and to promote sustainable development. Forest dependent communities should be supported through social protection, livelihood options, as well as capital investments such as seeds and income generating activities. The most vulnerable and marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples have specific challenges and needs and should be key stakeholders engaged in “building back better”. The impacts of the pandemic on forest-based communities and indigenous peoples should be also assessed with their involvement.
- k. It is important to leverage support from the private sector and the international development community for a post-COVID-19 recovery, and to identify additional funding alternatives to support SFM and production of sustainable timber and non-timber products.
- l. Collaboration on forest-related policies and scientific research, in particular, with the health sector along the “One Health” framework should be promoted. Interdisciplinary research and synergies between foresters, environmentalists, and experts in human and wildlife infectious diseases should also be enhanced to prevent future zoonotic diseases.
- m. Greater investments in new business opportunities, particularly in enhancing the skills of youth, women, and MSMEs should be promoted. The capacity of civil-society groups and their engagement in the implementation of recovery strategies should be strengthened.
- n. Invite countries, which carried out specific initiatives to reduce the impacts of the pandemic on forests and forest sector, to organize side events at UNFF-17, and share their experiences, achievements, and lessons learned from their initiatives.