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**United Nations Forum on Forests**  
**Nineteenth session**  
New York, 6-10 May 2024  
**Item 3<sup>1</sup> of the provisional agenda**

**Policy discussions on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030: activities in support of the thematic priorities for the biennium 2023–2024**

**Monitoring, assessment and reporting**

**Note by the Secretariat**

### *Summary*

At its eighteenth session, the Forum held technical discussions, including on monitoring, assessment and reporting. A summary of the discussions of the Forum and the Chair's proposals for transmission to and consideration of the nineteenth session of the Forum are contained in the summary by the Chair in the report of the eighteenth session. Under agenda item 3, the Forum, at its nineteenth session will discuss monitoring, assessment and reporting, and consider the relevant proposals contained in the Chair's summary of the eighteenth session. This note provides the background information and highlights the result of the intersessional activities undertaken on monitoring, assessment and reporting since the eighteenth session of the Forum.

<sup>1</sup> \*E/CN.18/2023/4

## I. Introduction

1. In accordance with the Programme of Work of the Forum for the period 2022-2024, the Forum at its nineteenth session will hold policy discussions on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030. At its eighteenth session, the Forum held technical discussions on monitoring, assessment and reporting, including the global core set of forest indicators, as well as the preparations of the 2025 FAO Global Forest Assessment Report. A summary of the discussions of the Forum and the Chair's proposals on these issues for transmission to and consideration of the nineteenth session of the Forum are contained in the official report of the eighteenth session<sup>2</sup>. Under agenda item 3, the Forum at its nineteenth session will discuss monitoring, assessment and reporting, and consider the relevant proposals contained in UNFF18 Chair's summary.

2. This note provides the background information and highlights the result of the intersessional activities undertaken on monitoring, assessment and reporting since the eighteenth session of the Forum, and it serves as the basis for discussion on the above-mentioned issue under agenda item 3.

## II. Background

3. The United Nations Forum on Forests has regularly called upon member States to develop adequate monitoring systems and called upon relevant international entities, especially member organizations of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, to share data and streamline reporting on forests.

4. With the adoption, in 2017, of the United Nations strategic plan for forests (UNSPF) 2017–2030, the focus of monitoring, assessment and reporting to the Forum was placed on the progress made in implementing the plan and achievement of its goals and targets. The assessment of the implementation of the UNSPF should take into account, *inter alia*, voluntary national reporting, voluntary national contributions and the results of the most recent Global Forest Resources Assessment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), as well as inputs from the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and its member organizations and other partners within and outside the United Nations system, including regional and subregional organizations and relevant stakeholders.

5. The first round of national reporting on progress towards the implementation of the strategic plan was conducted in 2019 and 2020. The information submitted in national reports combined with biophysical data from the Global Forest Resources Assessment carried out in 2020, made it possible to conduct an assessment of progress towards achieving the global forest goals of the UNSPF and produce the flagship publication entitled *The Global Forest Goals Report 2021*. It was the first flagship publication produced by the Secretariat of the United Nations Forum on Forests of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Forum Secretariat). The report provided a summary of the actions taken and challenges encountered by member States in their efforts to achieve the goals and highlights the areas in which progress has been made and those in which more action is required. An informal advisory group established to provide advice on the development of the publication was actively involved in its production and provided recommendations on various aspects, including its scope, main objectives and data sources, as well as feedback and suggestions related to communication and outreach.

6. Following the production of the publication, the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2022/17, requested the Forum secretariat to amend the format for voluntary national reporting, taking into account the lessons learned and feedback received from members of the Forum after the first reporting cycle and conduct a pilot phase for the use of the refined format with interested countries. In the same resolution, the Council invited the Forum to consider establishing an advisory group on reporting, taking into account the experience gained and lessons learned from the informal advisory group involved in the production of the 2021 flagship publication. In this respect, the secretariat was requested to propose terms of reference of the advisory group, including the suggested composition of the group, with due regard to the need for balanced United Nations geographical representation, to the Forum at its eighteenth session.

7. The Council further requested that the Forum secretariat, in the context of preparations for the midterm review of the international arrangement on forests, and in consultation with members of the Forum, prepare a road map and

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<sup>2</sup><https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/150/55/PDF/N2315055.pdf?OpenElement>

timeline for the next reporting cycle, in conjunction with the Global Forest Resources Assessment cycle, and explore options for establishing an online reporting platform for the Forum, recognizing the need for streamlined reporting and minimizing the reporting burden, including the challenges faced by developing countries. Detailed information on progress in implementing intersessional activities in preparation for the midterm review is contained in the Note by the Secretariat to UNFF19 in document E/CN.18/2023/5.

8. In response to ECOSOC resolution 2022/17, the Forum secretariat developed “Terms of reference for the advisory group on reporting to the United Nations Forum on Forests” and presented it in Annex of the Secretariat Note E/CN.18/2023/5, at UNFF18. During the technical discussion on this matter at UNFF18, Members of the Forum generally supported the establishment of the advisory group (AG) and emphasized the need for effective participation by experts from developing countries, FAO, other Collaborative Partnership on Forests member organizations and intergovernmental organizations, with due regard to geographical and gender balance. Members of the Forum stressed the need for cost-effective working modalities and supported the organization of virtual meetings of the group<sup>3</sup>.

9. As reflected in the summary by the Chair of the eighteenth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests, the Chair made the following proposals for consideration by the Forum at its nineteenth session: i) Take note of the amended format for national reporting and the ongoing preparatory work for the next reporting cycle to the Forum; ii) Decide to establish an advisory group on reporting to the Forum, in accordance with the terms of reference contained in the note by the secretariat to the eighteenth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (see E/CN.18/2023/5);(iii) Request the Forum secretariat to produce another publication/report that includes short case studies on progress on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030 and the global forest goals; (iii) Request the Forum secretariat to continue to organize, jointly with FAO, capacity-building workshops in the area of monitoring, assessment and reporting;

### III. The timeline for the next reporting cycle to UNFF

10. The table below contains the main activities, with proposed dates for the next reporting cycle to UNFF. It follows the recommendation from the Forum to synchronize the national reporting to UNFF with the five FAO/FRA reporting cycle. The timeline allows for the use of data collected within the FRA2025 process by the UNFF Focal Points when preparing their national reports to UNFF and by the Forum Secretariat when analysing the information submitted by countries and assessing the progress made towards achieving the Global Forest Goals at the global level, it accommodates the time needed for production of the next Global Forest Goals report, to be released by May 2026. This schedule was presented and positively received at the UNFF Expert Group Meeting on the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network, and Implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 held on 20-22 June 2023, at UNON in Nairobi, Kenya.

Activity	When	Who
1. Setting up the Advisory Group on Reporting to UNFF	October 2023 – February 2024	UNFF Bureau, Member States
2. Finalization of the format for national reporting to UNFF <sup>4</sup>	February – May 2024	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group
3. Setting up online reporting tool	March – June 2024	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group
4. Revision of the Explanatory notes <sup>5</sup> for country reports to UNFF <sup>6</sup>	September – December 2024	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group, Member States
5. Circulation of the format for national reporting along with the explanatory notes for country reports	January 2025	Forum Secretariat

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 48j, 48k, 48l in Chair’s summary, contained in annex to the UNFF18 official report-Page 41

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Explanatory-Notes-national-reports-unff15.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Virtual workshop/or online consultations

6.	Capacity building workshop for experts involved in preparation of the national reports to the Forum	April 2025	Member States, Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group,
7.	Deadline for submission of national reports to UNFF	June 2025	Member States
8.	Analysis of information submitted in national reports and incorporating bio-physical data from FRA2025/ other sources	June – October 2025	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group
9.	Production process: drafting, editing, layout/design	October 2025 – January 2026	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group
10.	Final product: publication of the next Global Forest Goals report	May 2026	Forum Secretariat, Advisory Group

#### IV. The Advisory Group on Reporting to UNFF

11. Following the positive reaction regarding the establishment of the Advisory Group on Reporting at UNFF18 and the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network, and Implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017- 2030, held in Nairobi, 20-23 June 2023, the creation of the Group was reconfirmed at the meeting of the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Ad Hoc Expert Group (AHEG) on the preparations for the IAF, which was held from 10-13 October 2023 in Vienna, Austria. In this respect, the Co-Chairs in their summary recommended to UNFF19 to: “endorse the timeline for the next reporting cycle to UNFF for 2024-2026 (as presented by the Forum Secretariat during the UNFF EGM in June 2023 in UNON, Nairobi-Kenya) and initiate, as soon as possible, activities related to the next reporting cycle, including the establishment of an informal advisory Group on reporting to UNFF, in an inclusive and transparent manner.”

12. In light of the broad agreement on the establishment of the Advisory Group on Reporting to UNFF, and to undertake its tasks without delay, the Forum Secretariat with the assistance of the UNFF19 Bureau solicited nominations for this Group, taking into account the qualifications and requirements of the candidates as reflected in the terms of reference for this Group. At the time of writing this Note the Forum Secretariat has received nominations of experts from Western European and other States (WEOG) and Latin American and Caribbean States. The first, informal meeting of the Advisory Group is scheduled to take place in early spring of 2024.

#### V. Amended format for voluntary national reporting and explanatory notes for reporting

13. Following the conclusion of the seventeenth session of the Forum, the Forum Secretariat amended the format for voluntary national reporting<sup>7</sup>, taking into account the suggestions and proposals received from members of the Forum. The format was piloted with interested countries and the results of the pilot phase, including lessons learned and feedback, were presented at the global workshop on national voluntary reporting on progress towards the global forest goals and targets, held from 22 to 24 March 2023 at FAO headquarters in Rome. The pilot countries agreed that the amended format was more concise and simpler and provided a few final suggestions to be incorporated by the Forum Secretariat. The format will be finalized by the Forum Secretariat in close consultation with the Advisory Group on Reporting.

14. In addition, the pilot countries made some general comments noting that data needed to prepare the national report to the Forum are scattered among different agencies and institutions and completing the reporting format requires early and close coordination at the national level with the engagement of various relevant institutions and stakeholders. Countries underlined the need for capacity building to: i) improve the accuracy and consistency of forest-related data, ii) create and/or improve existing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting forest related data iii) provide assistance to countries in preparation of their voluntary national reports to the Forum. For some specific areas GFGs and targets e.g., GFG4, more explanatory notes are needed, as the issues are complex and difficult to report on.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/MAR-amended-reporting-format-Oct-2022.pdf>

15. The document “Explanatory notes for country reports to the United Nations Forum on Forests at its fifteenth session”<sup>8</sup> was specifically developed and transmitted along with the format for reporting to help countries preparing their country reports for submission to the Forum in 2020. Since the format was amended, the explanatory notes will need to be revised and amended - to ensure that both documents are complementary and correspond to each other. In addition, the document might be further expanded, to provide some additional explanation in areas complex and difficult to report on, e.g.: GFG4. The Forum Secretariat will revise and amend the explanatory notes in close collaboration with the Advisory Group on Reporting, share the document and conduct online consultations with Member States, in due time.

## **VI. The online reporting format**

16. The Forum Secretariat is currently exploring options for online data collection. Data collection with deploying online reporting tools became a standard way of gathering information and data for public agencies and private sector companies. This method has numerous advantages over the traditional data collection/reporting processes, via e-mails with MS Word file attachments, as it facilitates entry and analysis, providing more accurate outcomes within a shorter time frame.

17. The online reporting provides a more dynamic and informative way to compile information submitted in the national reports, presenting the information in a more accessible and manageable format, further contributing reducing time for and putting in place tools that help improve the data quality. The benefits of a flexible and easy-to-use online reporting system would not be limited to the Secretariat, but could also help countries to organize, store, maintain, and share information on progress towards UNSPF and to review progress.

18. The online reporting format would contain all opened ended and closed questions contained in the format for national reporting and structured around the Global Forest Goals and targets of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030 (UNSPF).

19. The information requested from countries in the reporting process to the Forum is mostly of qualitative, non-numerical in nature- narrative text, which would require a relatively simple a web application. There are many exiting online platforms which could be used to collect organize, process, and analyze the information submitted by countries. The functionality of these platforms varies greatly, some simply allow collection, others highlight important parts of reports and the most advanced employ software with the help of artificial intelligence allow to tag, analyze and visualize data/information instantly.

20. The main criteria for selection of the online tool could include: i) an application easy to use, ii) flexibility to add/modify/make visible reporting year(s) and questions/sub-questions and responses; iii) English, as the language of interface, potentially allowing responses in other UN official languages, iv) review of progress and send reminders to optimize response rate, download survey responses in Excel or CSV format, allows for export as PDF document, iv) cost effective, v) in accordance with UN ICT standards.

21. If implemented, countries will be encouraged to use this system, however, the use of it will be optional and a national report in MS Word format will remain as an option for those countries which do not feel ready to get started with the online reporting tool.

22. A review of experiences with online reporting, data and feedback gathering within the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs yielded some insights. One option is Survey Monkey, which is a cloud-based survey platform that allows users to create, send and analyse surveys, is preferred choice for many organizations due to its ease of use and affordability compared to other software of similar nature. The platform questionnaires can be translated into several languages and distributed to target audiences through several channels, including via weblink and email distribution list. Responses can be downloaded in multiple file formats; however, this option is only accessible to questionnaire developers, not respondents. Respondents wishing to keep a record of their responses could request a copy from the Forum Secretariat. Microsoft Forms is also another option being considered. Microsoft Forms is a web-based application for the development of surveys and questionnaires. It is included within the Microsoft

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Explanatory-Notes-national-reports-unff15.pdf>

package used in the UN and therefore would require no additional license. It is also easy to use and integrates well with the Microsoft suite of products. However, compared to Survey Monkey, it offers fewer customization options, for example in relation to the branching logic of the questionnaire, which refers to the individualization of a respondent's path based on their previous answers.

## **VII. Conclusions**

23. The Forum Secretariat has begun the preparations for the next reporting cycle. The format for national reporting has been amended and piloted. The Advisory Group on reporting to UNFF is being created, and it is foreseen for the advisory group to have its first meeting before UNFF19, in order to engage the experts in the delivering the final touches of the reporting format and revision of the explanatory notes. Support from countries is critical for organizing capacity building workshops and production of the next Global Forest Goals Report.

## **VIII. Proposals**

24. The Forum may wish:

- a) To endorse the proposed timeline for the next reporting cycle to UNFF for 2024-2026;
- b) To decide to establish the advisory group on reporting to UNFF, in accordance with the terms of reference contained in the note by the secretariat to the eighteenth session of United Nations Forum on Forests (see E/CN.18/2023/5);
- c) To take note of the amended format for national reporting and entrust the Secretariat of the United Nations Forum on Forests in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to finalize the format, in close consultation with the advisory group on reporting to UNFF;
- d) To request the Forum secretariat to continue to organize, jointly with FAO, capacity-building workshops in the area of monitoring, assessment and reporting.