

First Meeting of the Working Group on Future Direction of FOREST EUROPE

12-13 October 2016, Bratislava, Slovakia



Minutes of the meeting

The first meeting of the Working Group on Future Direction of FOREST EUROPE (WG) took place on 12-13 October 2016, in Bratislava. The meeting was attended by 35 participants representing 21 signatory countries and the European Union as well as seven international observer organizations (see List of Participants in Annex I). The format of the meeting was a discussion forum to enable brainstorming about key issues that need to be further addressed with special attention to FOREST EUROPE achievements and added value, structures, procedures and work modalities, as well as interplay with other actors in the pan-European forest policy arena. Its outcomes provide a key input to the comprehensive, web-based questionnaire survey of opinions of all signatories and observers to be developed before end of 2016, and conducted in the beginning of 2017.

1. Opening of the meeting

The meeting was introduced by Ms. Ludmila Marušáková, Head of the Liaison Unit Bratislava (LUB) and co-chaired by Ms. Claire Morlot on behalf of France and Ms. Lyubov Polyakova on behalf of Ukraine, with technical and administrative support by the LUB. Mr. Peter Kicko, Director-General of the Forestry and Wood Processing Section, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic officially opened the meeting.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda circulated by LUB in advance of the meeting was approved without amendments.

3. Starting points for discussion of the Working Group

Introductory presentations on the history and milestones of FOREST EUROPE, relevant outcomes of the previous two assessments and objectives of the first WG meeting were made:

- Outcomes and milestones of FOREST EUROPE – an overview (presented by Ludmila Marušáková, LUB)
- Outcomes of the “Review of the MCPFE” (2009) produced by IIASA (presented by Jozef Turok, LUB)
- “Assessment of the achievements and added value of the Forest Europe Process” (2015) by Helga Pülzl and Peter Mayer (presented by Peter Mayer, BFW Austria)
- Terms of Reference and Roadmap for the Working Group on Future Direction of FOREST EUROPE – purpose, format and objectives of the WG meeting (Ludmila Marušáková, LUB)

4. Discussion forum -- taking stock of signatories' and observers' views

In accordance with the Terms of Reference and Roadmap, the discussion was structured into three main blocks of the review: (A) Achievements and added value, (B) Structures, procedures and work modalities, and (C) Interplay with other regional and international actors. Each block started with an introductory description and broad questions formulated by the Co-Chairs.

A. Achievements and added value, future direction

The participants agreed that key, widely recognized achievements include the SFM definition, tools and guidelines, as well as the political commitments and the Ministerial Conferences themselves. They emphasized the need to preserve the flexibility, openness and inclusiveness that have characterized the process since its inception in the 1990s.

Institutionalizing FOREST EUROPE structures might put these recognized strengths at risk, and would imply additional costs. On the other hand, the absence of a legal status is viewed by some participants as an obstacle to progress.

The idea of a rapid response mechanism on emerging issues of high political relevance was proposed, which would enable FOREST EUROPE to influence relevant debates and other processes, for instance climate change policy negotiations. Some participants cautioned about extra costs related to these rapid response activities as they are not explicitly included in the Work Programme.

The interplay with global forest policy fora including specifically in the area of criteria & indicators is viewed as key. FOREST EUROPE gives forest sector the opportunity to raise issues of high political relevance at international fora. This is particularly timely as forests and forestry have received more prominence in global policy agendas during recent years. Strong support was also given to enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation.

Whereas the process is widely recognized for its valuable outputs promoting Sustainable Forest Management (SFM), implementation is lagging behind as the tools, guidelines or other commitments are often not put into practice. Ways for improving implementation of previous resolutions including reporting will be explored in the survey. Finding appropriate balance in engagement of non-governmental organizations also needs to be addressed.

To promote implementation, the participants expressed support for regional approaches and regional/bilateral partnerships and joint transboundary projects. A mechanism could be created within FOREST EUROPE to facilitate cooperation and resource mobilization for joint projects.

The Co-Chairs enquired about participants' views on definition, status, mission and tasks of FOREST EUROPE. According to the discussion, the survey will assess whether the definition stated at the Madrid Conference and the mission, vision and tasks as they were adopted at the Ministerial Conference in Oslo are still up to date or possibly need to be updated.

Issues of the Legally Binding Agreement on forests was brought up in the discussion. It was generally felt that whereas the prospect of adopting the Legally Binding Agreement in future remains relevant, the current review needs to focus on the future direction of the FOREST EUROPE process itself.

On geographic scope of the process, support was expressed for cooperation with observer countries outside the European region, but also for building capacities and increasing ownership and engagement of the signatory countries within the region.

Each signatory country has a FOREST EUROPE focal point usually based at the ministry responsible for forestry. The focal points are not nominated through a formal procedure. Nomination can be done either through sending invitations directly to the respective ministry before each ELM, or takes place in the beginning of the term of each LU. These possibilities were found adequate by the participants, and the views will be probed in the survey.

B. Structures, procedures and work modalities

Role, tasks and adequacy of the negotiation structures (Ministerial Conference, Expert Level Meeting, Roundtable Meeting, Working Groups, expert/advisory groups and workshops) and supportive structures (General Coordinating Committee and Liaison Unit) were discussed at length. The factors influencing efficiency and effectiveness of meetings include frequency, format, nomination and engagement of participants, role of observers, languages. Below is a summary of key points raised in the discussion, which will be included as questions in the questionnaire.

Ministerial Conference (MC)

- New approaches are needed to stimulate interest, increase participation and direct engagement of Ministers. It was recommended that the questionnaire should give the possibility of an open question to ask how Ministers could be more involved at MC.
- To stimulate interest and increase effectiveness, MC could be conducted in a less formal manner, or include some informal segments/sessions. This format goes hand in hand with more dynamic, facilitated discussions.
- Frequency and timing of MC could be adjusted according to needs of the political dialogue.
- Use of modern technology would enable broadcasting spots or web-based conferences, and interactive formats should generally be supported.
- Work Programme outcomes on key relevant topics such as climate change adaptation and bioeconomy transition are expected to themselves draw the attention of Ministers.
- Presentation of successful examples of the implementation of ministerial commitments at national level was also proposed in the discussion.

Expert Level Meeting (ELM)

- Title may not fully reflect the role of ELM as the decision making body between Ministerial Conferences (FOREST EUROPE Council could be an alternative) – and views will be assessed in the survey. In fact, the ELM is a meeting of delegates of signatories and representatives of observers rather than experts.
- Flexibility is a key characteristics and should be maintained, including in frequency based on needs of the political dialogue.
- Some segments/sessions could be less formal, dedicated to brainstorming discussion about arising issues, whereas other parts would keep their negotiating function and format.
- A possible duplication with Roundtable Meeting (RTM) was raised as sometimes ELM and RTM discuss the same topic with the same participants, which might be confusing. The different negotiating *vs.* technical advisory nature of these two types of meetings should always be clearly distinguished.
- Timely preparation and submission of agenda and background documents was acknowledged and needs to be maintained in future.
- Summary with key decisions should be presented and approved at the end of the meeting.
- Observer participation is not restricted but criteria are needed for granting an observer status in FOREST EUROPE. National-level or local-level entities such as non-governmental organizations may typically join through national delegation, or are represented by a regional entity that has observer status.
- Representatives of other sectors are encouraged to attend as observers where appropriate.
- Opportunities for new forms of meetings and discussion (e.g. web-based discussions, consultations, back to back meetings) as well as document-sharing portal were proposed and should be explored within the survey.
- The need for written description of role, tasks and rules of procedure was raised and will be added to the questionnaire.

General Coordinating Committee (GCC)

- Transparency of communication has been acknowledged and need to be maintained.
- Written description of role, tasks and rules of procedure (including selection criteria for GCC countries) is needed, including shares of financial contributions made to the pooled FOREST EUROPE core budget.
- Duration of membership was raised during the discussion and will be addressed.
- The number of GCC member countries could be increased in order to share funding of the process between more members, however operational efficiency should be kept in mind.
- Geographic balances of GCC membership need to be taken into consideration.
- One of the limitations for countries to become GCC members that was identified in the discussion is the lack of financial resources over the entire period of GCC membership.

- To ease the financial burden, several participants indicated availability of potential voluntary or in-kind contributions for concrete activities, events or publications. A Trust fund was mentioned as one of the solutions in this regard. In response, the possibility was re-iterated for signatories to become „lead actors“ with various types of contributions for implementation of the Work Programme.

Liaison Unit (LU)

- Advantages and disadvantages of the current, rotating arrangement were discussed at length. The forthcoming survey will probe views in a way that clearly relates them to advantages and disadvantages.
- Importance of transition to be as seamless as possible was emphasized. Transfer costs related to the rotating principle of the secretariat need to be addressed as well.
- A possible mixed option that combines features of a rotating and a permanent secretariat was discussed (some persons work on permanent basis while new staff join when a country takes over the chairing of the process) and will be added to the survey. Opportunities for seconding staff from partner organizations could also be explored.
- In case of preference for a permanent secretariat, hosting options exist with international organizations. Some participants cautioned of attaching secretariat to an international organization for various reasons (costs, possible conflict of interest between internal rules and GCC guidance).
- Tasks of LU could be expanded, especially with regard to representation at European and international levels. Statements made on behalf of FOREST EUROPE are authorized by the GCC.
- It was proposed to consider in the questionnaire survey the issue of legal entity of LU.
- As for all structures, a written description of role, tasks and rules of procedure is needed.

Other structures: Roundtable Meetings (RTM), Working Groups, expert/advisory groups and workshops

- Currently a rather complicated and possibly outdated set of different types of events.
- There is a need for more flexibility in working methods of these types of structures.
- Inputs to the political dialogue need to be based on knowledge and scientific evidence wherever possible.
- ELM is the proper decision-making level to endorse justification, objectives for each event, typically as a part of the Work Programme adoption and review.
- Opportunities for innovative approaches and working methods, such as public hearings were mentioned, and will be taken up in the survey.
- Support was expressed for organizing side events, workshops specifically aimed at exchange of experience.

Work Programme

In light of the recognized need for FOREST EUROPE to retain its reputation as a forum for political dialogue and given the strong support to build capacities for a rapid response mechanism (see above), several participants viewed the current Work Programme as very ambitious due to numerous activities of technical nature. A possible prioritization exercise may be needed in due course. The need for implementation of all activities of the current Work Programme will be probed in the questionnaire in relation to existing capacities and resources of the process.

Languages

The issue of balance between benefits and costs of translation and interpretation, particularly simultaneous interpretation, will be addressed tactfully as this should not imply a possible risk of exclusion of some countries. Opportunities for reducing simultaneous interpretation to high-level sessions and/or replacing simultaneous with whispered interpretation *etc.* will be explored. The importance of translation of FOREST EUROPE tools and guidelines into

national languages was highlighted, and the efforts made in many countries were acknowledged.

Funding mechanism

Currently, the core budget of FOREST EUROPE is covered by pooled financial contributions of the five countries members of the GCC. Whereas voluntary and in-kind contributions from many more signatories and observers have been made over time, it was pointed out that mandatory contributions to a process that has voluntary character could be problematic. In fact, this is where legal status of the process comes into play, and opinions of all signatories and observers on this issue will be assessed in the survey.

Several participants raised the need for written rules of procedure with respect to financial arrangement, which would improve transparency and justification of possible national contributions.

Novel ways of raising funds from the private sector were also suggested by some signatories. Voluntary and in-kind contributions are strongly encouraged and should receive proper visibility. Opportunities for cost reduction and rationalization should always be kept in mind.

Communications

New communication approaches and the need for reinforcement of FOREST EUROPE communication strategy were stressed. It was also pointed out to focus on different target groups such as the general public, or stakeholders from other related sectors. In this context the re-designed FOREST EUROPE website was introduced at end of the meeting.

C. Interplay with other regional and international actors

The question of positioning FOREST EUROPE in the European institutional landscape was brought up as relevant and important for the survey. Advocacy for SFM at regional and international fora represents a key task for FOREST EUROPE by all levels, including LU, GCC as well as signatory delegations attending them. The importance of analytical, knowledge-based inputs for interactions including cross-sectoral opportunities was re-emphasized.

Existing level of cooperation with UNECE/FAO and other international entities working in the region was acknowledged. Cooperation with the European Union is multi-faceted and ought not to be singled out as the EU is a signatory to the FOREST EUROPE commitments. The interplay with the EU should take form of communicating pan-European views, contributing to strategies, green papers, and potentially other types of cooperation.

The issue of legal status of FOREST EUROPE came back again as this is a prerequisite for entering into partnership or contractual agreements.

At global level, FOREST EUROPE has the potential to contribute more towards implementation of UN Agenda 2030, Paris Agreement, the post-2015 International Arrangement on Forests and others. A stronger global engagement is supported by the signatories. Partners in the other regions of the world have already benefited from some of the outputs generated by the process, and the interplay with them should be strengthened in future.

5. Further steps in the Review of the FOREST EUROPE process

According to the schedule briefly discussed at the meeting, draft version of the questionnaire will be developed by independent external experts in close cooperation with the Co-Chairs and the LUB and will be sent to the WG members for commenting in mid-December 2016. The actual survey will be conducted in January--February 2017 and the second WG meeting to evaluate its results and produce a draft report will take place by the end of June 2017. The final report with recommendations will then be presented to the next ELM in autumn 2017.

6. Any other business

The representative of FAO informed on the Organization-Led Initiative (OLI) on "Global Forest Indicators to Support Implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the IAF Strategic Plan" convened by the Collaborative Partnership on Forest (CPF), which will be held 28 to 30 November 2016 at the FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.

The representative of Germany briefed the participants on the 125th Anniversary IUFRO Congress to be held on 19-22 September 2017, in Freiburg, Germany as a joint effort of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The representative of Switzerland informed about the upcoming 74th Session of the ECE Committee on Forest and Forest Industry (COFFI) to be held on 18-20 October 2016 in Geneva, Switzerland. He also provided information on a workshop focussed on discussing the first draft of UNECE/FAO Integrated Programme of Work, to be held on 20-21 November 2016, in Geneva, Switzerland.

7. Conclusion and closure of the meeting

The Co-Chairs and the Head of the LUB thanked all participants for their very active participation and contributions. In conclusion, it was stated that the first meeting of the WG successfully identified main issues and areas that are broadly supported by the FOREST EUROPE signatories and observers, and those issues that need to be further addressed in the review. It was highlighted that there was an ample discussion on factors that influence efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness in order to enhance the contribution of the process to SFM in the region and make it fit and relevant for future. The Co-Chairs closed the meeting.