

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

13-14 June 2017, Bratislava, Slovakia

Minutes of the meeting

The second meeting of the Working Group on Future Direction of FOREST EUROPE (WG) took place on 13-14 June 2017, in Bratislava. It was attended by 35 participants representing 21 signatory countries and the European Union as well as 4 international observer organizations.

The meeting considered outcomes of the questionnaire survey on future direction of FOREST EUROPE, conducted in the beginning of 2017. Full version of the report is available at http://foresteurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WG2_Review_2017_1_Report_on_Future_Direction.pdf. Main findings of the survey are summarized in Annex I.

The WG discussion was led by the Co-Chairs and focused on challenges, opportunities and possible recommendations for future direction of FOREST EUROPE to be adopted at the Expert Level Meeting in November 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. Liubov Polyakova on behalf of Ukraine.

At the beginning of the meeting, Ms. Leire Salaberia of the Union of Forest Owners of Southern Europe (USSE) presented a brief statement on behalf of forest owners' associations, stressing the importance of engagement for cooperation with the FOREST EUROPE platform.

2. Adoption of the agenda

Ms. Claire Morlot (Co-Chair) introduced the agenda of the meeting. The agenda was adopted with slight amendments in time schedule of the meeting.

3. Introductory information on the progress made in the Review of the FOREST EUROPE process

Ms. Ludmila Marušáková (LUB) presented progress made in the Review including the process of development and completion of the questionnaire survey and outlined further steps towards expected outcomes of the Working Group on future direction of FOREST EUROPE.

4. Presentation of findings from the questionnaire survey on future direction of FOREST EUROPE

Mr. Jozef Turok (LUB) introduced main findings of the survey. He described the approach used in interpretation and analysis of the responses received. Most questions were sets of multiple options rated by the respondents, but some questions were open to collect views in narrative way. They complemented the quantitative analysis of the multiple-choice data sets. The responses of signatories (31) and observers (8) were treated separately in the analysis.

Overall, the survey indicated a high degree of support for the continuation of FOREST EUROPE as a voluntary high-level political process for dialogue and cooperation on forest policies in Europe, with adjustments needed at operational level. Ministerial Conference including its commitments remains to be the core of the process. The survey complemented and its interpretation builds upon the previous two surveys (2009 and 2015).

The participants acknowledged the professional and transparent conduct of the survey and recommended to publish final version of the report on FOREST EUROPE website.

Some signatories pointed out that lumping answers (agree completely and agree somewhat) may intensify interpretation of results, but their distinction would be necessary for some questions. There is a need to highlight disagreement in the report. Disagreement might also be larger outside of the group of respondents as not all signatories or observers completed the questionnaire.

5. Preparation of recommendations on future direction of FOREST EUROPE

Ms. Liubov Poliakova (Co-Chair) opened the agenda item stressing the need to focus on recommendations. However, she explained that the recommendations would not actually be drafted during the meeting.

Discussion was structured and facilitated following the Co-Chairs presentation divided into four parts: (i) Enhancing political relevance of FOREST EUROPE; (ii) Strengthening cooperation at all levels; (iii) Increasing visibility, communication and outreach; (iv) maximizing the effectiveness and efficiency of the structures, procedures and work modalities.

(i) Enhancing political relevance of FOREST EUROPE

Acknowledging the achievements and added value of the process, in line with the results the questionnaire survey, the WG agreed that the current role of FOREST EUROPE is appropriate, but the process needs to be enhanced in terms of political relevance and effectiveness of its structures, procedures and work modalities.

Several members of the WG stressed the central issue of enhancing political relevance of FOREST EUROPE. This is also a prerequisite for participation and engagement of ministers at Ministerial Conferences. Other contributions to the discussion also highlighted:

- Need to address emerging issues that are politically relevant, and to use science policy dialogue to predict such issues and develop responses to them;
- Cooperation with other ministers across sectors;
- Role of FOREST EUROPE as an agenda taker from global level such as UNFF;
- Linkage with the broader global policy agendas is crucial, and attention needs to be paid to bringing messages about the contributions of European forests to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals;
- Agenda setting role of FOREST EUROPE towards European processes and organizations
- Criteria and Indicators are an important communication tool, FOREST EUROPE continues to be part of global initiatives and activities;
- Timeliness of outreach and promotion of forestry issues across sectors in order to bring the forest sector out of isolation;
- In communication about forestry activities towards the general public, we need to explain how the forest sector addresses and brings solutions for particular problems of society;
- Need to closely follow policy relevant developments at the global and regional fora, and bring them up in the FOREST EUROPE context – this is a role of all signatories and observers, but the GCC and the Liaison Unit have a particular responsibility to bring new relevant issues to the attention of Expert Level Meetings;

- Implementation of commitments could be enhanced at different levels. It was mentioned that this is a responsibility of countries and that signatories could better implement the ministerial commitments through their incorporation into national policies.

(ii) Strengthening cooperation at all levels

The WG expressed its support for strengthening partnerships with other actors at regional and global levels, including cooperation with forest related organizations but also with other sectors. This is seen as a way to enhance implementation of the ministerial commitments and to increase efficiencies. Several participants acknowledged the existing examples of current cooperation with other actors, and proactive approaches by FOREST EUROPE were encouraged. Other interventions focused on:

- FOREST EUROPE needs to facilitate sharing of best practices how to tackle specific challenges and solve problems related to SFM- best practice database (which goes beyond guidelines and tools);
- Science policy dialogue is a relevant and key element of cooperation, which could contribute to strengthening the agenda-setting role of the FOREST EUROPE based on science. Existing mechanisms (specifically ThinkForest under the auspices of EFI) could be a concrete example of this. It should be noted that science policy dialogue has a key role to play once the political agenda has been set;
- Cooperation with tangible outcomes at pan-European level is key to the mission of FOREST EUROPE, however it was pointed out that FOREST EUROPE should primarily facilitate cooperation between countries and different sectors from these countries (country-driven nature) basing on the purpose of the cooperation. Purpose of the cooperation need to be clear in order to avoid cooperating just for the cooperation. Different issues need different forms of cooperation;
- Implementation of sub-regional projects would fall outside of the main scope of FOREST EUROPE, since the added value of the process is cooperation at pan-European level.

The idea of developing a rapid response approach or mechanism was discussed at length, and is viewed by a number of signatories as a way to increase the relevance and effectiveness of FOREST EUROPE. However, the concept needs to be described, prepared and tested, possibly looking at existing examples. Such a mechanism would enable FOREST EUROPE to address emerging issues by providing statements, position papers, etc. Concerns of some signatories about lacking mandate and roles and responsibilities in enacting a rapid response approach (particularly in form of providing statements or position papers) need to be carefully taken into account. It is recognized that it would require human and financial resources, which would need to be put into balance with implementation of the activities of the regular WP.

(iii) Increasing visibility, communications and outreach

Ms. Ludmila Marušáková (LUB) explained the tools for internal communication, including a new feature for on-line communication forum on the webpage. She also introduced a FOREST EUROPE leaflet and raised the opportunity to translate the leaflet into national languages (by focal points). She also introduced a story map to serve as a tool for sharing best practices, which will be available by the end of the year.

The participants acknowledged the work done by LUB in communications. Especially internal communication works well, with documents circulated on time, but a document sharing portal with proper format could be useful.

Increasing on-line discussion tools/communication forum was agreed to be a good way forward, helping to avoid face-to face meetings and decrease the travel costs. The cost-benefit ratio of different communication tools, especially personal costs related to management and moderation of the forum would need to be critically assessed.

As for external communication, LUB has been on track with promoting the achievements and ongoing activities of FOREST EUROPE, including through social media. Ms. Ludmila Marušáková (LUB) briefed the WG members on holding joint UNFF side event as well as delivering several statements based on ministerial commitments at its 12th session. Interventions made by the WG members included the following points:

- Some signatories would like to see policy statements delivered at different fora (e.g. UNFF), but other signatories cautioned that such policy statements could only descriptively refer to the commitments made and activities undertaken to implement them, and not go beyond what had been agreed at Ministerial Conferences;
- Various events such as the International Day of Forests, European Forest Week offer opportunities for cooperation in communications, e.g. joint press releases with partners;
- Media coverage of the Ministerial Conference is important and needs preparation;
- Focus should be on the work undertaken by FOREST EUROPE and not on promoting the process itself;
- The pan-European region is the geographic scope of communications work;
- Criteria and Indicators can feature prominently in communications;
- One WG member expressed doubts about organizing side events at global meetings due to low participation of European countries in some of them, while others supported the need to communicate at global fora and even exploit the themes discussed at HLPF, e.g. role of forests for sustainable cities in 2018 and forest education in 2019.

(iv) Maximizing the effectiveness and efficiency of structures, procedures and work modalities

Ministerial Conference

- Strong support expressed by the WG for more interactive, dynamic and less formal conduct of the MC, which could be facilitated by a professional moderator/s;
- Focus on few (not too many), most relevant topics/issues and afterwards find format and tools, which would help streamline WP;
- High level panel debates, bilateral meetings, informal discussion among ministers on most relevant topics (not only declaration prepared beforehand). Meetings in a less formal setting could be held a day before MC, however, some signatories expressed doubts about finding proper time slot for such settings;
- Engagement of other sectors, discussion of cross-sectoral issues;
- Increased media coverage;
- Consider having “celebrity”/well-known personality at MC to attract ministers.

Expert Level Meeting

- ELM represents the decision-making level of FOREST EUROPE between Ministerial Conferences, it may not be appropriate to hold ELM back to back with other international meetings;
- The WG fully supported a more interactive format of discussion at ELM meetings aiming to engage more participants into discussion, and requested the Liaison Unit to “test” interactive and dynamic approaches as part of effective meeting management for the next ELM to be held in November 2017;
- Recognizing their different roles, the WG agreed that Roundtable Meeting could not be held back to back with ELM because time is needed for consultation of RTM results at national level, official ELM statements need to be prepared and approved in advance;
- Discussion on changing the name of ELM was inconclusive;
- There was general support for adoption report of the meeting at the end of each ELM.

Supportive structures

- The WG discussed at length the nature of different types of structures and meetings. Some members expressed doubts about the need for several types of supportive structures (Expert Group, Advisory Group, and Working Group) and suggested to simplify that. However, it was explained that different meetings have different functions as well as different composition, therefore, merging them needs to be considered carefully;
- A proposal to make three categories of meetings (supportive work modalities): decision-making, strategic and technical was made by a WG member;
- The WG requested the Liaison Unit to provide a brief description of the roles and purpose of the supportive work modalities and subsequently WG will consider a need to merge some types of meetings or changing their names.

Liaison Unit

- In accordance with the survey, the current rotating arrangement of the Liaison Unit is broadly supported as signatories perceive that it has more advantages than disadvantages, but greater attention needs to be paid to transition. The WG also agreed that a combination of rotating national staff provided by the lead GCC country (for routine work) and seconded staff from other signatories and observer organizations in general, could be an effective way forward. Staff secondment would clearly be recognized as a valuable in-kind contribution to the process;
- The WG discussed at length the status of legal entity of Liaison Unit. The representative of Slovakia as the current host country explained that the LU needed to be institutionalized according to the national law. It operates as part of the organizational framework of the hosting institution. Consequently, the host country is responsible for its staffing and composition;
- Some signatories pointed out that the legal entity for LU or the process is needed for any contractual arrangement. Currently, the legal entity for the LU is provided by the hosting institution to be able to make contracts, however, this is just an established practice. It was recommended to define this established practice as a written rule in the next Ministerial Conference.

General Coordinating Committee

- Representatives of several GCC countries present at the meeting expressed their commitment to the process and specifically to the outcomes of this review. They expressed their delight with the fact that the transparency has been considered to be increased and called signatories to make concrete proposals how to make headway in this regard. They pointed out that being GCC country is linked with long-term financial liability, which could limit and discourage other signatories to become GCC country.

Funding

- In terms of the financial management framework it is crucial to secure a solid budget for Liaison Unit (staff costs and operational) and mobilize in-kind contributions from signatories (combination of existing arrangement –solid funding of LU maintenance and in-kind contributions of signatories for funding of WP implementation);
- Flexible approach of funding would allow targeted financial contributions by potentially other donors, however, some WG members cautioned about donors from the private sector;
- Some WG members mentioned that their countries would not be able to provide financial resources to a voluntary process without legal personality;

- The idea of setting up a Multi Donor Trust Fund received relatively high support in the survey and was re-iterated by several WG members as a promising way forward, utilizing available experience from international organizations. It would serve as a pool of resources for implementation of the Work Programme, either in its entirety or for specific activities. A Trust Fund is usually overseen by a Steering Committee composed of its donors. Some WG members expressed caution about a trust fund, which would require a complicated process with legal challenges to overcome;
- In-kind contributions (e.g. staff secondments, studies, workshops) were emphasized by several members and should be encouraged;
- Finally, travel support for eligible countries is important and one of the fundamental principles of international cooperation ensuring inclusiveness through solidarity. It should remain a separate category in the regular budget of FOREST EUROPE.

Formalization

- Recognizing that about two-thirds of the respondents agree and one third disagrees with formalization of the process, the WG came to a conclusion to develop written description of the existing structures, current procedures and work modalities, for adoption by ELM and subsequently by ministers;
- Simple written rules of procedure would be helpful for signatories to ensure proper attendance of meetings, participation in the activities of the Work Programme and provision of in-kind or financial contributions (GCC countries);
- Some participants indicated willingness to negotiate formal rules of procedures for FOREST EUROPE after the next Ministerial Conference.

Based on the outcomes of the survey and the discussions at its 2nd meeting, the WG elaborated conclusions containing key areas and operational suggestions for potential recommendations for future direction of FOREST EUROPE, which are summarized in Annex II to this report of the WG meeting. The document was based on a document prepared by the Co-Chairs and LUB.

6. Discussion on the next steps to finalize the report for the ELM

LUB presented further steps and time schedule towards finalization of the report of the Working Group.

The final report of the Working Group containing recommendations on future direction of FOREST EUROPE and accompanied by the survey results will be submitted to Expert Level Meeting (to be held 28-29 November 2017) for its consideration and adoption.

Key findings from the online survey on future direction of FOREST EUROPE

Question/area probed	Key findings
Achievements and added value of FOREST EUROPE	Main recognized achievements are definition and tools of Sustainable Forest Management, Criteria and Indicators, as well as the ministerial resolutions themselves. In terms of added value, the process provides a high-level voluntary political forum for pan-European forest-related debate, decision making and cooperation.
Political relevance	Defined by and can be achieved through addressing emerging challenges for the society in relation to forests. While a clear majority of signatories support enhancing contributions to global forest policy agendas and want to strengthen the science-policy dialogue, observers find that it is equally important to intensify the cooperation with observers and to implement commitments in signatories. Solid support was also expressed for a continued and even intensified work on Criteria and Indicators. Most, but not all, signatories want to increase the relevance of FOREST EUROPE in relation to national forest policy issues and through establishment of a rapid response mechanism.
Scale of impact	Highest perceived impact was at pan-European level, followed by implementation of goals and achievements at national level, EU and global levels.
Current and future role	The current role, broadly described as a voluntary high-level political process for dialogue and cooperation on forest policies in Europe, is viewed as adequate. Whereas some signatories recommend to maintain the voluntary nature of the process, others see the future role of FOREST EUROPE in political commitments becoming more obligatory. According to most respondents, FOREST EUROPE should continue as a political platform including new interaction mechanisms. Less respondents but still the majority want it to become a platform for information exchange and also a platform for technical, content oriented debate and decision making.
Implementation of commitments	Signatories and observers want to see cooperation, complementarities and synergies with key regional actors as an approach to achieving better implementation of the ministerial resolutions. This goes hand in hand with enhancing the regional, bilateral and possibly targeted sub-regional cooperation and experience exchange, sharing of successful implementation examples, including obstacles and ways to overcome them.
Cooperation with other partners	Exchange of information and knowledge, thematic collaboration and harmonization of Criteria and Indicators with partners outside the pan-European region are broadly supported, and inputs to global forest policy debate and processes are also welcome. The main purpose of cooperation with partners outside the forest sector is to identify key issues to be addressed by forest policy makers. Reaching outside the forest sector could increase its recognition and contribution to emerging issues relevant for the society; strengthen the position of FOREST EUROPE and enhance effectiveness of implementation of the Work Programme.

Interplay with other actors and multiple roles of FOREST EUROPE	Recognizing the multiple roles that FOREST EUROPE plays or can potentially play, most signatories support an agenda setting role with regard to EU policy making, and together with observers, they view it could be an agenda setter towards pan-European processes. An agenda taking role is preferred in relation to global processes on forests. Respondents also support a communicator role of pan-European views at global and European fora/processes.
Communications and outreach	Strong support was expressed for using new communication tools in relation to different target groups, including the communication of FOREST EUROPE outputs through social media. Support for awareness raising campaigns across Europe received a lower but still considerable level of support. Internal communication should be enhanced through a document-sharing portal and an online forum.
Ministerial Conference	Ministerial Conference including its political resolutions remains to be the core of the process. Identifying and addressing emerging issues of highest political relevance in a timely manner is agreed to be the critical condition for their success. Participation and engagement of ministers could be enhanced by use of more interactive tools providing space for a direct discussion among ministers, use of facilitated discussion formats including interactions with other sectors, launching of joint ministerial initiatives, etc.
Expert Level Meeting	Increasing participation and engagement in the meetings through effective meeting management is broadly supported by the respondents. This could include the use of new (more interactive) formats for discussions, more inclusive preparations, summaries with key decisions provided at the end of each meeting.
General Coordinating Committee	The signatories generally support the current arrangement, and are most satisfied with its geographic balance, rotation principle for the GCC countries including duration of membership, the established nomination practice, and the number of countries involved.
Funding	The majority of the signatories support the idea of establishing a Multi Donor Trust Fund where signatories, observers and possibly other donors could provide financial resources for implementation of the Work Programme. Slightly less support was expressed for the current funding arrangement whereby the basic financial resources for FOREST EUROPE are provided by the GCC member countries. Mobilizing targeted contributions as a way of better cost-sharing in future receives support among the signatories. This could be in the form of increasing in-kind contributions for the organization of meetings, staff secondments to the Liaison Unit, etc. Most respondents are clearly against establishing mandatory financial contributions from signatories and observers.
Liaison Unit	There is overall strong agreement expressed by the signatories for maintaining current role and arrangement of the Liaison Unit, and the majority is against creating a permanent secretariat. The advantages of a combination of national staff provided by the host country with international staff were emphasized.
Supportive structures/ collaborative tools	Most respondents want to maintain the structure and frequency of meetings for the supportive structures, but possibly using new formats. In the case of Roundtable Meeting, its importance for informal preparatory discussions is recognized.

Annex I

Formalization	The views of the signatories on formalization in terms of obtaining legal status for the FOREST EUROPE process or for the Liaison Unit vary significantly, and overall there is insufficient support for it. However, simple written rules of procedure for all structures of FOREST EUROPE should be adopted.
----------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Key areas and operational suggestions for potential recommendations for future direction of FOREST EUROPE

Acknowledging the achievements and added value of the process and recognizing Ministerial Conference and its commitments as the core of the policy dialogue on forests in Europe, the current role of FOREST EUROPE is appropriate, but needs to be enhanced in terms of political relevance and effectiveness of the process.

Key areas	Options for operational adjustments or action – summary of discussion
Enhance the political relevance of FOREST EUROPE	<p>Address emerging challenges for the society in relation to forests, namely through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved inter-linkages with relevant global forest and forest related policy agendas (notably SDGs); • active science-policy dialogue that responds to emerging challenges and identified issues; • recognize and promote an agenda setting role in the region and agenda-taker role with regard to global processes; • outreach forestry issues to other sectors and policies; • flexibility of the Work Programme to address emerging issues. <p>Facilitate implementation of voluntary commitments in signatories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by sharing best practices and experiences; • promoting synergies with other key regional actors.
Strengthen cooperation at all levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FOREST EUROPE should primarily facilitate cooperation between countries (country-driven approach) with a clear purpose of the cooperation; • Develop partnership with partners beyond the forest sector – strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation; • Strengthen and develop partnerships with relevant actors in the sector by applying proactive approaches and encourage joint initiatives and actions; • Continue work as C&I process as part of global ongoing efforts; • Organize a platform for exchange of best practices (best practice database) how to handle challenging issues (e.g. forest fires, bark beetle calamities...).
Increase responsiveness through new interaction approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a rapid response approach for FOREST EUROPE to become a responsive political forum, including outputs, work modalities and responsibilities (quick response format for relevant issues); • Promote a more proactive science-policy dialogue, exploring possibilities to work with adequate.

<p>Enhance communications and use opportunities for partnership</p>	<p>Continue and build upon the efforts made in communications</p> <p>Internal communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document sharing portal; • Online discussion forum (explore added value for limited number of topics). <p>External communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of new communication tools in relation to different target groups; • Promote achievements of FOREST EUROPE; • Coordination with signatories and observers in communications at regional and global fora; • Holding thematic side events at relevant global fora; • Delivering statements within given mandate; • Promote public awareness raising campaigns across Europe; • Increase media coverage at meetings and events; • Explore opportunities for collaborative action in communications, e.g. at the occasion of International Day of Forests.
<p>Maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of structures, procedures and work modalities</p>	
<p>Ministerial Conference</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrate on few, most relevant topics identified by ELM; • Explore possibilities for informal round table discussion among ministers including bilateral meetings during MC; • Professional moderation should be explored; • Conduct as an interactive platform to address issues of highest political relevance; • Enhance participation and engagement of ministers through facilitated discussions incl. interaction with other sectors; • Launch of joint ministerial initiatives; • Media coverage, invite well-known personalities.
<p>Expert Level Meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective meeting management with summary decisions at the end, more inclusive preparation of agenda, etc.; • Use of innovative formats to facilitate discussion (to engage all participants).
<p>General Coordinating Committee</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current role and arrangement is broadly supported; • Explore feasibility of improving its role as a Steering Committee of the process (incl. role as lead committee for the organization of MC; advocacy role on behalf of FOREST EUROPE within mandate agreed by signatories).

Annex II

Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain transparent communication on budgeting and financial reporting; • Encourage voluntary financial and in-kind contributions (e.g. staff secondments, studies, workshops) for specific topics; • Seek shared arrangements for organization of events with international organizations; • Explore possibility of establishing a ‘Multi Donor Trust Fund’; • Explore novel ways of funding from the private sector in a transparent manner; • Explore possibilities to decrease costs by e.g. considering exceptional cases when translation needs to be provided; • Use on-line consultation tools wherever possible and consider cost sharing arrangements for meetings, e.g. by holding them back-to-back with other events.
Liaison Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain current role and arrangement of a rotating LU with improvements; • Combination of national staff (host country) and international staff; • Staff secondment opportunities; • Special attention to transition arrangements, incl. possible overlap of two LUs and transfer of data and knowledge; • LU operates under legal framework of the hosting institution.
Supportive work modalities/ collaborative tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify and distinguish between fora for decision-making (MC, ELM) and strategic (RTM, WG, AG) and technical debate (EG); • Explore possibilities for structural simplification.
Formalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalize and adopt (at ELM level) a description of current practice, including financial arrangement and reflecting any adjustments made by this Review.