



COMMITTEE ON FORESTRY

TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION

5 - 9 October 2020

**REPORT ON COVID-19 FORESTRY WEBINAR WEEK,
22-25 JUNE 2020**

**Building back better:
COVID-19 pandemic recovery contributions from the forest sector**

1. The COVID-19 Forestry Webinar Week¹ was held during the week initially selected for COFO25 and the 7th World Forest Week. It featured a series of virtual sessions, organized in two high-level dialogues and seven thematic sessions.

I. Participation

2. The COVID-19 Forestry Webinar Week attracted between 200 and 400 participants each day including country representatives, representatives of UN agencies, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society, academia and individuals with interests in forestry.

II. Objectives and programme of the week

3. The objectives of the COVID-19 Forestry Webinar Week were to:

- Assess impacts of pandemics on people and forests;
- Identify and discuss possible responses that help mitigate impacts on people and forests, while at the same time contributing to building a more resilient and sustainable future;
- Propose follow-up steps.

4. The first Dialogue focused on COVID-19 impacts – main issues, response needs and opportunities to build back better and the second one: a Partnership for Development Dialogue, focused on COVID-19 responses: how to integrate forestry in recovery support measures.

5. The thematic sessions were structured around three main themes: (i) Mitigating impacts on forest-dependent people and recovery support to enhance their resilience; (ii) Mitigating impacts

¹ Detailed programme, speakers and links to documents are available at: www.fao.org/about/meetings/cofo/covid-19-forestry-webinar-week/programme/en

on forests and restoration as a means to enhance ecosystem and community resilience; and (iii) building back better, including through legal and sustainable value chains.

III. Key findings and messages

a) High-level Dialogues:

- The high-level dialogues demonstrated that the pandemic's impact on jobs was caused by different factors such as the increased prices of materials and reduced demand for products, which are forcing a reduction in employment opportunities. They noted that many of the issues that existed before the pandemic were exacerbated in that context: illegal logging, lack of interest to invest in certified industries, persistence of drivers of deforestation, lack of a holistic vision of the landscape that embraces forests and agriculture in a cross-sectoral manner.
- They also observed that private sector showed more interest than ever in investing in sustainable, nature-based and nature-positive solutions: a priority for the forest sector.
- Since January 2020, the biggest challenges faced on wood value chain across all segments are disruptions in workforce, operations and finance.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is just one of several crises taking place simultaneously. It adds to the ongoing crises of biodiversity and habitat loss, climate change, social conflicts and inequity. Forestry is influenced and influences all these crises.
- The pandemic can be framed as a choice between economic prosperity and human health. This is a conflicting choice showcased by the economic loss accepted by countries instituting lockdown measures to safeguard public health.
- Human health and the health of the planet are strongly interlinked, this realization has had a huge impact on the political thinking planning for the revival phase. The growing awareness of the need for sustainability is one of the most promising opportunities deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is revealing the unsustainability of the development path of the past decades.
- The reverse migration from urban to rural areas has significantly increased the pressure on forests and other ecosystems. Trade and supply chains were disrupted, and ecotourism opportunities were lost - both severely affecting forest communities and the most vulnerable people.
- The other consequence of the health and economic crises were weakened environmental regulations. Often environmental regulations are still seen as an add-on, with economic health being seen as disconnected from environmental health.
- The convening power of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) members and other partners needs to be mobilized for a quick and technical response. The evidence, research and expertise regarding forestry's role in recovery lies with CPF members. The CPF can connect forest actors with those engaged in development work building on the coping mechanisms of communities.

b) Thematic sessions

6. Three main themes of the Week: (i) Mitigating impacts on forest-dependent people and recovery support to enhance their resilience; (ii) Mitigating impacts on forests and restoration as a means to enhance ecosystem and community resilience; and (iii) building back better including through legal and sustainable value chains.
 - i. Mitigating impacts on forest-dependent people and recovery support to enhance their resilience
 - Research is starting to show clear links between deforestation, forest degradation, climate change and emergence of infectious diseases: there is a need to maintain healthy and diverse forests and agricultural ecosystems to prevent emergence of new diseases.

- Social protection and other schemes (...) need to be extended to forest communities and other vulnerable people.
 - During the lockdown, global evidence of increase of natural resource conflicts, between governments and private sector on the one hand and communities on the other. Countries with weaker forest governance are seeing increases in forest fires, illegal logging, illegal land grabbing of community lands, and conflicts over land and forest use.
 - Small-holder family farmers and their rural communities are on the frontlines of the impacts from COVID-19 and ongoing stressors such as climate change.
 - Supporting and investing in Forest and Farm Producer Organizations (FFPOs) and their federations and associations at different levels to build their collective resilience may be the quickest way to reach the largest number of people in ways that will respond immediately to the pandemic while at the same time building long term resilience to other shocks including those presented by climate change.
 - Strong partnerships between government, FFPOs, private sector and other actors are needed in order to share solutions between FFPOs, with and from other actors.
 - Changes in land use, including deforestation and forest fragmentation, along with urbanization and agricultural intensification are evidenced as major factors contributing to the surge in infectious diseases, such as malaria, Ebola, etc.
 - One Health, defined as the collaborative effort of multiple disciplines to attain optimal health for people, animals and the environment, is well-positioned to examine holistically interconnections between human and forest and ecosystem health.
- ii. Mitigating impacts on forests and restoration as a means to enhance ecosystem and community resilience
- The COVID-19 pandemic shows once again the importance of science-based policymaking. Science is essential not only to flatten the curve of the pandemic, but also to flatten the curve of deforestation and land degradation.
 - The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the forestry sector have resulted in disruptions of business. Additional impacts derive in some countries from scaling back of forest plantation developments, resulting from the restrictions on movement and labour activity, and stalled forest protection.
 - The use of data and science is needed for innovative solutions to COVID-19, climate change and sustainable forest management.
- iii. Building back better - legal and sustainable value chains
- Forest products have been critical in the COVID-19 response providing personal protective equipment, and other supplies and services, including hygiene and sanitary products, biomass for heating, ethanol for sanitizer, respirator paper and packaging for parcels. In order to continue the uninterrupted supply of these products, the forest sector has been appropriately recognized in many parts of the world as an essential service.
 - The pulp and paper market has remained relatively steady throughout this period. Solid timber and value-added markets including exports of plywood and sawn timber has been significantly affected although those impacts will become more obvious in the upcoming trade figures.

IV. The way forward

7. The high-level panels recommended that solutions be innovative and designed to avoid future pandemics, such as new models that connect nature with health, resilience and sustainability. The concept of healing forests and forests to improve peoples' immunity can draw investments to protect, restore and manage forests and generate a new field of experts, creating jobs and involving also the youth in the efforts to build back better.

8. Both the dialogues and thematic sessions also highlighted the need for:

- Integrated responses looking at energy supply, agriculture production, biodiversity and healthy ecosystem, together with integrated budgets.
- Education and investment into human capital focusing on equity, (especially gender equity) were qualified as essential for building a zero-carbon future: people living at the margins of societies need to be put in the center of recovery plans. For example, the provision of additional support to community groups and smallholders can solidify their capacity to be entrepreneurs and to become integrated into the value chain: agroforestry represents a bridge between forests and agriculture.
- Working harder than ever on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Forest Goals, the Bonn Challenge and promote more traceable and transparent value and supply chains, as we enter the UN Decade on Action. It was noted that the tools, initiatives and frameworks already available have gained new importance through COVID-19.
- Addressing the global health crisis by revitalizing models of relation with nature. A more comprehensive approach across the value chain, focusing on the most vulnerable groups is required. Closer collaboration with the health sector is needed to ensure a safe manner of returning to work in the forest industry that does not jeopardize rural communities.
- A transition to a territorial focus (rather than sectoral) and comprehensive planning that actively restores forests and includes multisectoral approaches which can be sustained in the long term. Direct connections between these actions and the contributions to global commons like climate change and biodiversity should be established.
- Strict control of legal and illegal deforestation and forest degradation, and an improved forest governance through people centered policies (that will also stabilize local livelihoods). Block or strictly regulate transportation and trade of live animals from recently (less than 2 years) deforested areas.
- Promoting coherent/complementary programmes with both forestry and social protection objectives.
- Developing and improving policies and investments that link forests to a transformation of rural economies, agriculture and food systems.
- Mobilizing direct investment and finance to support FFPOs.
- Invest in capacity development to strengthen forest ecosystem health considerations in the One Health approach, through a One Health country program assessment and other interconnected, cross-sectoral, up-to-date data collection, databases and coordination mechanisms.
- Considering climate and continued forest legality as part of the design of countries' policy responses to COVID-19.
- Build Back Better informed - support the recovery from COVID-19 with response plans.
- Build Back Better Together - pursue a collaborative approach of all stakeholders concerned, including governments, civil society, academia, development partners and the private sector.
- SW4SW Initiative² to produce additional data to better position the forest sector and sustainable wood value chains in the recovery phase and in the post-COVID19 environment e.g. through the production of fact sheets, infographics and policy briefs on the topic.

V. Conclusion

9. The central role of forests for people's health was recognized as zoonotic disease outbreaks are often related with deforestation and forest degradation. The fact that ecosystem integrity plays

² Conducted a survey to assess the impacts of the pandemic on forest businesses and livelihoods. The full survey results are available at: <http://foris.fao.org/cofo/api/file/5ef49fb43ecce72502208331/af51af89-cb2a-4218-a84d-6f3fb6752bfa.pdf>.

the key role in keeping society healthy and on a path of prosperity needs to be strongly advocated. A sustainable forest sector should be a core element of national COVID-19 recovery plans, planting the seeds for a circular economy and a green future.