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# COMMITTEE ON FORESTRY

## Twenty-seventh Session

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### FAO's work on urban forestry and its contribution to urban agrifood systems transformation

#### Executive summary

Today, 57 percent of the world's population lives in cities, and this percentage is expected to rise to 68 percent by 2050. Rethinking urban planning and design becomes imperative to transition from holding cities accountable for environmental degradation, to recognizing their potential as engines for green growth. Goods and services associated with urban and peri-urban forests, such as the creation of public green spaces, heat reduction, clean air, clean water, disaster risk reduction, construction material and health benefits, among others, offer great opportunities for cities as they can help mitigate some of the impacts and social consequences of urbanization and better adapt to the effects of climate change. FAO supports Members through the implementation of activities falling into four main areas of work: technical assistance, awareness raising, global and regional dialogues and interdisciplinary activities. Urban forestry activities contribute to PPA BE4 (achieving sustainable urban food systems) by promoting the adoption of supportive policies and programmes, and the initiation and scaling-up of actions and investments by national and local stakeholders in the areas of sustainable management of natural resources in and around cities.

Furthermore, and to speed up the transformation of urban agrifood systems, FAO launched the Green Cities Initiative to help generate tangible impacts on the improvement of health and well-being of people and the surrounding environment in 1 000 cities around the world by 2030, by strategically integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, urban agriculture and the bioeconomy into the fabric of urban life.

This document highlights the role of urban and peri-urban forestry in the transformation of urban agrifood systems and provides an overview of FAO's work on urban and peri-urban forestry and FAO's Green Cities Initiative.

#### Suggested action by the Committee

The Committee is invited to:

- a. encourage countries to integrate sustainably managed urban forests and trees into urban planning, as essential steps for achieving the SDGs, tackling climate change, increasing the sustainability of agrifood systems in urban areas, and ensuring people's health and well-being;

Documents can be consulted at [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)

- b. recommend that Members join the FAO Green Cities Initiative and the Tree Cities of the World programme, and that they promote knowledge transfer through active participation in regional technical networks;
- c. recommend that FAO develop capacity-building programmes and tools to assist governments and other actors, upon their request, in the planning and sustainable management of urban and peri-urban forests, to contribute to the sustainability of agrifood systems; and
- d. recommend that FAO, through the FAO Green Cities Initiative and other ongoing programmes and projects, provide technical assistance on urban and peri-urban forestry, urban and peri-urban agriculture, and bioeconomy for green urban regeneration, with the aim of increasing the resilience, health and well-being of urban and peri-urban dwellers, improving the sustainability of agrifood systems, and supporting sustainable urban development.

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## I. Introduction

1. Today, 57 percent of the world's population lives in cities, and this percentage is expected to rise to 68 percent by 2050. Cities occupy 2 percent of the Earth's surface, use 75 percent of its natural resources, and produce 50 percent of global waste<sup>1</sup>, accounting for more than 70<sup>2</sup> percent of global energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
2. Urban planners and city administrators face daily challenges in managing complex urban environments, such as providing sufficient healthy and safe food, clean water, clean air, energy, housing and green spaces, and adapting to the effects of climate change. More than ever, they must rise to the challenge of ensuring that their cities are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable while being resilient and capable of providing the ecosystem services needed by their citizens for a good quality of life.
3. The United Nations recognize sustainable urban development as a challenge to be addressed through more sustainable and equitable development. Sustainable Development Goal 11 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for "Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". Moreover, the New Urban Agenda, approved at Habitat III in 2016, encourages urban actors to develop more sustainable and resilient models, including by giving special attention to green public spaces. The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), held in 2023 to review progress and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, also reaffirmed the countries' commitment to contributing to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable to help achieve and localize the 2030 Agenda.
4. The interconnection between urbanization, space constraints and urban problems underscores the need for innovative solutions, and local governments are increasingly recognizing the role of urban greening as a powerful lever for sustainable change in urban environments, offering a range of social, economic and environmental benefits.
5. For this to happen, rethinking urban planning and design becomes imperative, to transition from holding cities accountable for environmental degradation to recognizing their potential as engines for green growth. Balancing urban development and ecosystem services requires an integrated approach that considers both human well-being and environmental health, in line with the One Health approach.
6. To this end, urban planners and local decision-makers need to be empowered to implement and sustainably manage integrated actions, and a framework to effectively steer structural changes and innovation is also necessary to avoid the risk of compartmentalization, with health, the environment, infrastructure and food often being separate portfolios. Hence, fostering intersectoral coordination among the various levels of government (national, sub-national and local) on the development of policies, strategies and urban-planning approaches is needed to maximize the contribution of urban and peri-urban forestry to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDGs 1, 2, 11, 13 and 15.

## II. The role of urban and peri-urban forestry in urban agrifood systems transformation

7. Urban forests and trees are the main component of a city's green infrastructure, and play a crucial role in improving water, energy and food security (which are interrelated as expressed by the water–energy–food nexus). Urban forestry activities contribute to PPA BE4 (achieving sustainable urban food systems) by promoting the adoption of supportive policies and programmes, and the initiation and scaling-up of actions and investments by national and local stakeholders in the areas of sustainable management of natural resources in and around cities.
8. Goods and services associated with urban and peri-urban forests offer great opportunities for cities as they can help mitigate some of the impacts and social consequences of urbanization, increase the sustainability of the agrifood system, and help cities and their surroundings better adapt to the effects of climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/resource-efficiency/what-we-do/cities/resource-efficiency-green-economy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2016EF000381>

9. By providing a continuum between rural and urban areas, urban and peri-urban forests contribute to supporting socioeconomic and environmental sustainability in both rural and urban areas through the provision of the following goods and services.

- a. **Provisioning benefits.** Urban and peri-urban forestry can provide locally grown fruits, nuts and other edible products through fruit-bearing trees in parks and community gardens, and along streets. Also, they play a substantive role in supplying energy through the provision of woodfuel.
- b. **Supporting benefits.** Trees contribute to soil formation, increase soil productivity and improve soil permeability both in urban and surrounding areas. Urban and peri-urban forestry can help preserve local biodiversity and increase ecological connectivity, thereby reducing environmental fragmentation and increasing the resilience of natural ecosystems to human pressures. Moreover, the establishment and sustainable management of peri-urban forests for woodfuel production can protect natural forests from overexploitation.
- a. **Regulating benefits.** Peri-urban forests and trees protect watersheds and water reservoirs by preventing and combating erosion, limiting evapotranspiration and filtering pollution. Trees in urban areas sequester pollutants, thereby improving air quality and helping mitigate climate change. They also provide shade, which mitigates the urban heat-island effect and lowers energy consumption for cooling.
- b. **Cultural benefits.** Urban forests and trees contribute to increased social equity, promote a sense of community, and help preserve local spiritual and cultural values. By beautifying central and suburban areas, urban forests and trees help reduce social, environmental and housing inequities.
- c. **Additional socioeconomic benefits.** Urban forests improve public health by mitigating mental stress, providing attractive spaces for physical activities, and enhancing overall well-being. In addition, urban and peri-urban forests provide direct and indirect socioeconomic benefits and make significant contributions to local, green economic models. The wood and non-wood forest products provided by urban and peri-urban forests contribute to local incomes and improve the economic resilience of communities.

### III. FAO's work on urban and peri-urban forestry

10. To provide the benefits listed above and contribute to the sustainability of agrifood systems, urban forests and trees, and green public spaces require adequate governance through policies, clear norms and sound planning and management.

11. The proper implementation of this type of intervention is, however, often hindered by several factors, namely, the lack of technical skills, intersectoral coordination, integration of urban greening in city planning, public awareness of the benefits of urban greening, and financial resources.

12. To address these issues, FAO supports Members, at their request, through the implementation of activities falling into four main areas of work:

a. *Technical assistance*

FAO provides technical support to its Members, upon the request, in the implementation of urban forestry and urban greening projects. In 2023, for example, FAO launched the Green Urban Oases Programme to support urban communities in drylands in strengthening their policy and technical capacity with regard to designing and implementing integrated urban forestry and urban greening strategies through multistakeholder engagement, and in mainstreaming these into urban and territorial policies, governance, and planning for their implementation on a substantive scale. The programme is being implemented in Jordan, Mongolia, Namibia and Tunisia. As the implementing agency for the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF), FAO is also supporting countries (Algeria, Chile and Zimbabwe) in the formulation and submission of project proposals under the GEF-8 Sustainable Cities Programme, and in the implementation of GCF Readiness projects (Chile and Eswatini). Finally, in the framework of the European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme,

FAO is one of the partners of the CONEXUS<sup>3</sup> project, which aims to strengthen international cooperation on nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration between Latin America and Europe.

*b. Awareness raising*

In 2018, at the first World Forest Urban Forum (WFUF), FAO and Arbor Day Foundation launched the Tree Cities of the World<sup>4</sup> (TCoW) Programme, a recognition scheme committed to inspiring cities and towns to care for and celebrate their urban tree canopy. By 2023, 200 cities had been recognized as TCoW worldwide. A recent analysis has shown that these cities have healthier forests and have increased their canopy cover between 2021 and 2022, three times more than global average. FAO also regularly participates in international fora, conferences and other events to raise awareness of the role of urban forestry in sustainable urban development, including the European Forum on Urban Forestry<sup>5</sup> and the World Urban Forum.<sup>6</sup>

*c. Regional and global dialogues*

FAO fosters dialogue, collaboration and knowledge exchange through international fora and meetings. At the regional level,<sup>7</sup> the third edition of the Asian-Pacific Urban Forestry Forum was held in 2021, hosted virtually by the Government of Thailand. The third edition of the Latin American and Caribbean Forum on Urban Forests was held in Mexico in 2022, with the fourth edition to be held in November 2024 in Brazil. The first edition of the African Forum on Urban Forests was held virtually in 2021, with the second one planned for early 2025. The FAO Urban and Peri-urban Forestry Programme also leads the *Silva Mediterranea* Working Group on Urban and Peri-urban Forestry,<sup>8</sup> which meets twice a year to develop activities and discuss issues related to urban forestry and urban greening in the Mediterranean region. Building on these regional networks, in 2018, FAO co-organized the first edition of the World Forum on Urban Forests<sup>9</sup> (WFUF) in Mantova, Italy, to promote global dialogue and exchange on urban forestry and urban greening. The second edition of the WFUF was held in October 2023 in the United States of America, with the overall theme “*Greener, Healthier and Happier Cities for All*”. With over 1 200 participants from 61 countries, this was the largest conference on urban forestry ever held. The main outcome of the second WFUF was the Washington Declaration, which acknowledges the ongoing need for intensified efforts in confronting the challenge of ensuring equitable access to green benefits among urban residents worldwide, in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss. The third edition of the WFUF is tentatively planned for late 2026 or early 2027 (venue to be confirmed).

#### IV. FAO Green Cities Initiative

13. In September 2020, FAO launched its Green Cities Initiative<sup>10</sup> (GCI) at the Seventy-fifth Session of the United Nations General Assembly. The FAO GCI is an interdisciplinary initiative that envisions vibrant, resilient and inclusive cities, where urban green and productive spaces catalyse biodiversity, climate resilience, social cohesion and economic prosperity, bridging the gap between citizens and nature, and between urban and rural areas. Its mission is to help generate tangible impacts on the improvement of health and well-being of people and the surrounding environment in 1 000 cities around the world by 2030. This is achieved by strategically integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, urban agriculture and the bioeconomy into the fabric of urban life. The activities implemented under the FAO GCI include:

- a. **Technical assistance.** Technical assistance is being provided to cities in participating countries to support the implementation of context-specific urban and peri-urban agriculture

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.conexusnbs.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://treecitiesoftheworld.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://efuf.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://wuf.unhabitat.org/wuf11>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fao.org/forestry-fao/urbanforestry/87035/en/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.fao.org/silva-mediterranea/working-groups/urban-and-peri-urban-forestry/en>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.worldforumonurbanforests.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.fao.org/green-cities-initiative/en>

and forestry interventions. These would include, for example, the restoration and conservation of riparian ecosystems, the creation of quality green public spaces, the use of sustainably procured timber for construction, the use of food waste for production of compost and animal feed. On the ground, the initiative is promoting multilevel governance, emphasizing coordination and alignment, and a multistakeholder approach engaging all relevant urban actors.

- b. **Resource mobilization.** A multidonor trust fund to pool resources and scale up technical support and demonstration projects at city level is being set up to support GCI activities, and contacts with possible resource partners are ongoing. It is expected that the initiative will create the conditions and foster high-level partnerships for attracting long-term public and private investment through a growing portfolio of funding options.
- c. **Community of practice.** The FAO Green Cities Network is progressively growing as a community of practice, in close consultation with municipalities and other relevant stakeholders to promote city-to-city cooperation, cross-cutting partnerships and support for data analysis. A recognition scheme is currently being developed, as well as a system of awards, to celebrate the achievements of the most virtuous cities.
- d. **Networking.** FAO has established the FAO Green Cities Network to support and facilitate exchanges among cities actively engaged in addressing their urbanization challenges by integrating urban and peri-urban forestry, urban and peri-urban agriculture and bioeconomy.