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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION
European Forestry Commission

JOINT FAO/UNECE WORKING PARTY ON FOREST ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS
Twenty-sixth session

to be held in the Palais des Nations, Geneva
15 – 17 March 2004, starting at 10.00 hrs on Monday, 15 March

Item 8 of the Provisional Agenda
Role and functioning of the Working Party

Note by the Secretariat

This document presents, in brief, the role and methods of work of the Working Party. In the context of the Strategic Review, a review of the Working Party's role and contribution is necessary. The secretariat recognizes that the Working Party has made a major contribution to the understanding of economic and statistical problems in the region, and has provided wise guidance for the core part of the secretariat's activity. However, in undertaking its functions, the Working Party has encountered some unresolved problems, which are discussed in this document. The Working Party is invited to determine how it could best contribute.

Introduction

1. In 2001, the Working Party reviewed its role and methods of work. The relevant section of its report is reproduced in Annex I. In 2003, it reviewed whether it had achieved its objectives: its conclusions are also contained in Annex 1. In the context of the Strategic Review (see agenda item 6), it is appropriate to revisit the WP's role and contribution, so that the Strategic Review could use the information in better articulating the priorities and the mechanisms to be in place to accomplish them.

2. In the secretariat's view, the Working Party has made a major contribution since its foundation to the understanding of economic and statistical problems in the region, and has provided wise guidance for the core part of the secretariat's activity, as well as being an excellent network of experts in these areas. It is hard to see how the achievements in the field of statistics, forest resource assessment and outlook studies over the last decades could have been achieved with out the wholehearted support of a long succession of extremely well qualified and generous delegates.

3. However, it is undeniable that there are several unresolved problems. In particular:

- Now that there are strong teams of specialists in all three work areas reporting to the Working Party (not the case before the late 1990s), there is a possible duplication and confusion of roles, possibly leading to an excessive reporting/guidance burden on secretariat and delegates. The Working Party Chairman is contacting team leaders to find their opinion of the Working Party's role in this respect. It appears however that teams do feel the need for a link to the policy level, to prevent them concentrating only on their own specialised interests.
- Country coverage continues to be disappointing. The Working Party Chairman is writing to countries, which have not participated to ascertain their thinking, but it would be hard to justify on a continuing basis a body where there is little participation from North America and the CIS and only weak participation from central and eastern Europe.
- Countries are also finding it difficult to identify delegates in touch with the policy level but with the requisite technical knowledge in three advanced work areas, in order to fulfil the expected role of interface between the policy and technical levels in the three areas. This tends to result in discussions of a high level, but with the participation of only a few delegates (those who do have the requisite combination of skills for the area in question).
- Delegates to Working Party sessions being high-level experts in a specific work area (Market, or FRA, or EFSOS) might find it not stimulating to participate in discussions on the other two areas; their contribution to the decision making (without sufficient knowledge of roots of problems in the different areas) might bring a bias to the decision taken.

4. The opinions of the team leaders and non-participating countries will be transmitted to the Working Party, and it is suggested that Working Party delegates consult with other agencies and experts in their countries to determine how the Working Party could best contribute.

5. *The Working Party is invited to indicate which of the three options it prefers:*

- *Maintain the present role and methods of work;*
- *Modify and strengthen them (see possibilities below);*
- *Discontinue the Working Party.*

6. A decision on the future of the Working Party is the responsibility of the parent bodies, who would take a decision, taking into account the Working Party's opinion, at their joint session in October 2004.

7. As regards modifications, which might contribute to resolving the issues outlined above, some possibilities are set out below, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages:

- Return to biennial sessions, thus reducing the reporting burden, but also the Working Party's closeness to events, and ability to contribute.
- Focus each annual session on only one of the work areas, turning it into an in-depth review of that topic, possibly with a seminar-type emphasis on new approaches and needs, with implementation for the three work areas left essentially to the teams, with minimal reporting to the Working Party. Another emphasis could be on presenting advances and results in the technical areas to the policy level. Each team would then only receive in-depth guidance every three years. A danger of "discontinuity" of the WP participants might be in the application of this option.
- Other ideas are invited.

8. Whatever decisions or proposals are agreed, it is desirable that they be discussed in depth, and be described in detail notably as regards objectives and expected results, so that they can be transmitted directly to the strategic review process.

Annex 1

Extracts from the 2001 Report of the JOINT FAO/ECE WORKING PARTY ON FOREST ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS, Twenty-third session, 14-16 May 2001

47. Role of the Working Party. For the three programme areas assigned to it, the Working Party will have responsibility for detailed review of the elements of the integrated program of work of the joint secretariat. The work of the Working Party will continue to rely on the existence of Teams of Specialists. Therefore the Working Party must be more directly responsible for development of the mandate and terms of reference for Teams of Specialists, and Teams must be asked to report through the Working Party to the parent bodies in order to ensure effective oversight. The Working Party will be responsible for (1) providing guidance to the Teams of Specialists on the decisions of the parent bodies, and (2) communicating to the parent bodies the results of the work of the Teams of Specialists.

48. The bureau of the Working Party (chair and vice-chairs) will function in a manner comparable to the bureaux of the parent bodies: the Working Party can authorise its bureau to take decisions in the period between sessions, subject to review at the following session of the Working Party.

49. The bureau of the Working Party is expected to contribute actively to the work of the bureaux of the parent bodies, and should be represented by its chair at the annual bureaux meetings.

50. With regard to periodicity of Working Party sessions, the Working Party will begin meeting on an annual basis starting in 2002. Meetings will take place in March or April, to precede the meeting of the bureaux of the parent bodies. Meetings of the Working Party will remain 2 to 3 days in duration.

51. In summary, the Working Party's advice to the parent bodies is for (1) renewed commitment for participation in the Working Party, (2) recognition of the responsibility for oversight of Teams of Specialists that accompanies the role of the Working Party, and (3) annual meetings of the Working Party that are designed to integrate more effectively with other activities of the parent bodies.

52. In themselves, these clarifications in roles and changes in methods of work will not be sufficient to ensure that the Working Party remains an effective, intergovernmental, body. There must be a renewed commitment on the part of member governments to contribute to this aspect of the integrated program of work through participation in the sessions of the Working Party. Continued low levels of participation result in ineffective functioning of the Working Party and ultimately transfer its responsibilities in implementing the integrated programme of work (notably, detailed review of elements of the integrated programme of work) to the parent bodies.

53. In addition to wide representation of member governments, participation in the Working Party must continue to include individuals who combine competence in the area of forest economics and statistics and authority to represent the views of their governments.

Extracts from the 2003 Report of the JOINT FAO/ECE WORKING PARTY ON FOREST ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS, Twenty-fifth session, 24 - 26 February 2003

42. The Working Party considered whether it had achieved the objectives it had set itself when it reformed its methods of work in 2000. It drew the following conclusions:

- a. Annual sessions were necessary and should be continued;
- b. The teams of specialists for the three work areas should be asked whether the guidance offered by the Working Party had been useful to them. Likewise the parent bodies should be asked whether the Working Party had helped them to achieve their goals;
- c. The country coverage of the participation in the session had been disappointing (no participation from North America and only a few countries from Central and Eastern Europe, none from the CIS). The bureau should write to non-participating countries to emphasize the advantages of active participation and to ascertain the reasons for their lack of participation;
- d. The discussions at the 2003 session had been lively and constructive, mainly because the documents submitted had been well written and of good technical quality;
- e. However, the volume of the documentation circulated shortly before the meeting had been too large to be sufficiently discussed and prepared in countries in advance;
- f. Some delegations noted the difficulties they had faced in preparing themselves for technical and policy interventions in three differing and highly technical work areas.