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2013 Strategic Review of the ECE/FAO Joint Programme of Work

Secretariat's assessment of work and outputs

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This document contains a summary of the secretariat's assessment developed in the context of the 2013 Strategic Review.

As a follow up to the Timber Committee /European Forestry Commission decision on the 2013 Strategic Review (ECE/TIM/2011/9 and FO:EFC/2011/9), the secretariat carried out an internal review of the 2008-2013 programme of work and outputs. The review is intended to assess challenges that the secretariat faces in implementing the programme of work, evaluate the structure of the programme, and suggest possible improvements.

The review by the ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section is the outcome of a retreat held on 23 and 24 April 2012 in Geneva, in which the whole team participated. In addition to the main elements of the 2008-2013 joint programme of work, the secretariat discussed the overall usefulness and adequateness of the programme of work for the region and evaluated the relevance of the Section's and the programme's outputs.

I. Introduction

1. This review of the 2008-2013 joint ECE/FAO programme of work evaluates the spectrum of activities undertaken over the past five years. As in the case of previous reviews, the feedback received from countries and other stakeholders will serve as a basis for drawing up the new programme of work. In parallel, the secretariat also carried out its own assessment of work and outputs that will complement the results of the main evaluation done by member States and other stakeholders. Given its daily involvement in carrying out the programme of work and its continuous cooperation with national and international actors involved in the process, the secretariat was able to identify areas of the that need improving or are often non-operational. These areas need to be taken into consideration when framing the new programme of work. The main purpose of this document is to share these observations in order to improve communication and mutual understanding among all stakeholders involved in the process.

2. All staff members of the ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section took part in the review exercise, which was held during a two-day retreat in Geneva on 23 and 24 April 2012. To evaluate the joint programme of work, the Section used the “H-form scheme”: a method that enabled all staff members to evaluate what they thought were the weaknesses and strengths of the areas assessed, and suggest improvements. The Section also jointly formulated recommendations for the next programme of work.

3. The scope, structure and method used was the same as that used by the bureaux in their review. This should facilitate the reading of the document and the comparison of results (see document ECE/TIM/2012/9).

4. The thematic elements of the current programme were the basis for the review. The context and conditions during the implementation phase (facilities, resources), as well as the interaction between the parent bodies, the secretariat and other stakeholders were also taken into account. Staff members also discussed the relevance of mandates, structures and functioning of the main bodies supporting the programme in order to address current needs and challenges faced by the forest sector in member States. These bodies are as follows:

- (a) UNECE Timber Committee, FAO European Forestry Commission (and their joint meetings)
- (b) UNECE/FAO Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management
- (c) Teams of specialists.

5. Staff members also discussed the overall usefulness and adequacy of the joint programme for the region and evaluated all the outputs.

II. Effectiveness of the UNECE Timber Committee, the FAO European Forestry Commission and their joint meetings

Observations

6. The ECE Timber Committee and the FAO European Forestry Commission are valuable bodies. Their role has changed over time, reflecting the social, economic and political developments that have taken place in the world and the ECE region. Even though the two bodies have neither legislative nor normative authority, they are generally valued by the member States for serving as discussion forums and platforms for debate.

ECE Timber Committee

7. The Committee was perceived as the body with the most comprehensive and broad view over the whole forest sector. It was described by the staff as:

- (a) A body with a unique mandate and focus;
- (b) A discussion forum addressing thematic issues consistent with the programme of work;
- (c) A trusted source of information and expertise on forestry and the forest sector, in particular on forest products and innovations, as well as other forest-related cross-sectoral aspects and emerging issues (usually addressed through policy discussions).

8. It provides a good forum to discuss issues related to forest products. As the sector is continuously changing, the Committee also has the potential to evolve. Staff members were also satisfied with the frequency of meetings of the Committee, which seem to respond to stakeholders' needs.

9. The Committee is a body that brings together a variety of countries with different interests in the forest sector, including global producers and consumers of forest goods, but also various experts from forest-related international organizations, and the private sector. The Committee facilitates cooperation among these stakeholders.

10. Even though the work of the Committee was rated highly, its agenda was seen as being dominated by matters related to forest products, thus deviating slightly from its original mandate (see ECE/TIM/2008/9 and FO: EFC/2008/REP, annex). The mandate requires more balanced attention to all aspects and areas of the forest sector, including its social and environmental dimensions. Interaction with other sectors is insufficient (e.g. construction, energy and biodiversity). The Committee's work is often too technical, and misses the link between data collection and policy development.

11. Its work was valued highly also due to the good cooperation between countries and organizations, who work together on joint reporting on wood products and energy as well as on the annual market review and on statements. It was seen as efficient in addressing issues contained in the programme of work, in the frequency of the meetings, and in involving other bodies in its work. This enabled the delivery of good quality outputs, which make it a reliable source of information on forest industries, products and markets.

FAO European Forestry Commission

12. The FAO European Forestry Commission is perceived as less effective and visible than the Committee. According to the feedback of staff members, the Commission lacks a clear identity and the link to the programme of work needs to be strengthened. It was also noted that the development of other international forest-policy-related initiatives with higher funding (e.g. European Forest Institute, Forest Europe and sectoral groups within EU) and similar expertise may have overshadowed the work and role of the Commission.

13. The Commission is expected to "advise on the formulation of forest policy and to review and coordinate its implementation at the regional level" (see annex of ECE/TIM/2008/9 and FO: EFC/2008/9); this is not happening in practice. The reasons for such a gap may lie in the absence of forest-policy-related elements in the current joint programme of work, as well as in the active role of other organizations in this area. The Commission's meetings seem to be unrelated to the joint programme of work and therefore lack impact.

Joint sessions

14. Joint sessions of the Committee and the Commission, held every four years, were seen as a unique opportunity for experts in the forest sector to meet and share knowledge and expertise on topical issues. The frequency of meetings could be improved.

Geographical representation in joint sessions

15. The geographical representation in the sessions of both bodies is uneven. The low representation of Eastern and Southern European, Caucasus and Central Asian countries is noticeable. Moreover, the profile and level of representation differ from country to country. This could lead to a different understanding among participants of the objectives and mandates of the bodies. Not only might this, but they also might participate in meetings with different interests and expectations. As a result, the capacity of the Committee and Commission to influence national policy is often limited.

16. The Committee is often considered by participants as the main forum for discussing forest-product issues; while the Commission is seen as the body debating forestry-related issues. This consequently requires expertise in both forestry and the forest sector, which might require the participation of two or more experts, and not all countries are in a position to send such a delegation. Also, the lack of representation of some countries in these intergovernmental bodies often leads to a misbalance in geographical coverage which results in meetings dominated by Central/Western European countries.

17. Joint meetings and further ECE/FAO programmatic cooperation should be enhanced. The joint cooperation attracts stakeholders' interest in the programme. Activities carried out jointly (e.g. reporting on forest resources) are far better harmonized and efficient than if carried out separately. The joint character of the programme ensures access to parent organizations (UNECE and FAO) and gives access to their capacities, as well as strengthening the outreach via different UN channels. In addition, the work of the secretariat, composed of both ECE and FAO staff, is perceived as synergetic, increasing the capacity of these two organizations.

Recommendations

18. Integrating activities relevant to all countries in the region into the programme of work should be prioritized. The new programme should better address the specific needs of all the subregions. As the poor participation could have various causes, specific solutions and proposals should be developed to stimulate a broader and more strategic engagement of member States and stakeholders. For instance, additional resources should be identified to finance the participation of delegates from the eastern part of the ECE region.

19. Policy advice should be strengthened and more closely linked to data work. "Housekeeping business" should be kept to a minimum during meetings to allow more time for substantive discussion.

20. To increase member State commitment to the joint programme of work, more dynamic, participatory working methods should be used for conducting the meetings. Moreover, new and alternative meeting formats allowing more dynamic discussions could also attract other sectors and increase general participation.

21. The performance and relevance of the European Forestry Commission could be strengthened through improving its integration and involvement in the activities of the joint programme of work and the outputs. It was recommended that all meetings of the Commission be organized jointly with the Committee. Annual meetings could also be considered.

22. A mapping exercise with member States, focusing on the role the Commission plays in relation to other organisations and in Europe, could clarify its role and mandate and help enhance cooperation among the Commission's countries and other organizations. Regional coverage could be improved by enhancing cooperation between the Committee and the Commission and the FAO North American Commission as well as other forestry commissions.

23. For the next joint programme of work to be effective and efficient, the governing bodies need to work cooperatively and in an integrated manner. The structure of the secretariat and distribution of the budget should be also coherent with the programme. The work of the two bodies should be further promoted by the parent organizations and communicated externally as an example of the long-lasting integration of work between two organizations in one region.

III. Effectiveness of the joint Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management

24. The joint Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management has been acting according to the mandate endorsed at the TC/EFC session held in October 2011 (document ECE/TIM/2011/20–FO:EFC/2011/20, annex).

Observations

25. The joint Working Party is an example of successful cooperation between different stakeholders. The Working Party, which belongs to both organizations, is a key body for the joint programme of work. The new mandate, however, has generated different opinions on the Working Party's role and function. Both the Section and the bureaux believe that the Working Party has the potential to successfully implement its mandate.

26. The Working Party has a clear structure and provides a good forum for discussions on cross-sectoral issues within the forest sector. It provides good reporting lines for the teams of specialists, and as it takes place halfway between the Committee sessions, it offers a good opportunity for teams of specialists to discuss and prepare. Thematic seminars preceding Working Party sessions were found to be relevant and beneficial for participating delegates and specialists.

27. Working Party meetings held since the mandate was updated have still seen the same level of participation. The delegations that now attend should, however, be able to cover issues relevant to the whole forest sector, and not only statistics, as is mostly the case now. Aspects related to data collection and analysis are so far privileged and participants provide excellent knowledge/expertise on those matters. Also here, the south-eastern and eastern parts of the region are usually underrepresented.

28. Advice received from the Working Party focused mainly on the areas that were closely linked to forest-sector statistics. Thematic areas not traditionally linked to the Working Party's agenda received less attention. Delegations were also cautious in providing advice to the teams of specialists on matters not related to data collection.

Recommendations

29. With its new mandate, the Working Party is now a crucial body for implementing the programme of work. The new focus has greatly extended the scope of the activities. As a result, participation in the meetings needs to be adjusted. As part of their preparations, national delegations should consider consulting with the national experts who participate in the thematic teams of specialists. Since the Working Party is the main link between the teams of specialists and the two parent bodies, national delegates should also act as facilitators of communication among the national delegations to the Committee, Commission, and members of the teams of specialists.

30. The new Working Party is expected to feature substantive discussions and limit its “housekeeping” matters to a minimum. The Working Party is now structured in a way that should facilitate the communication and reporting of the teams of specialists and allow the Committee and Commission to benefit from their work. Before, some teams of specialists had no reporting line, or reporting was inconsistently done (e.g. for those teams that were supposed to report to the Committee/Commission bureaux). Meetings should also include thematic seminars/workshops to address emerging/current issues.

31. Following the implementation of the new mandate, the format of the meetings should be improved. More work should be done in thematic or regional groups, allowing participation and the interaction of all participants.

32. The comprehensive, cross-cutting character of the Working Party should be maintained. The Working Party currently has two main tasks to fulfil: (a) guide and advise all teams of specialists reporting to it and (b) advise and guide ECE/FAO work on statistics. This requires the participation of delegates with different expertise. For the Working Party to work effectively, clear meeting guidelines should be drawn up to avoid misunderstandings and overlap between the general and the statistical part. A team of specialists on forest-product statistics could also be created. This would allow the Working Party to focus entirely on providing guidance to the teams of specialists, and statistical work could be covered by a dedicated group of specialists.

IV. Effectiveness of the UNECE/FAO teams of specialists

33. There are seven teams of specialists, with different scopes, tasks, structures and regional coverage. The teams were assessed collectively. Observations and recommendations presented below do not therefore necessarily reflect on all of teams. However, they could be usefully applied for improving the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of each.

Observations

34. The teams of specialists are a valuable component of the programme of work. They ensure the exchange of information and increase the visibility ECE/FAO among scientists and practitioners. Their meetings are attended by experts who dedicate their time and resources to supporting the programme of work.

35. With some exceptions, experts from the eastern-southern part of the UNECE region are not sufficiently involved in the work. This is most likely due to other initiatives on international scientific and technical cooperation (in particular in Europe), which are reducing the experts’ engagement in the work of ECE/FAO.

36. According to the UNECE general guidelines on teams of specialists (ECE/EX/2/Rev.1), the teams of specialists are time-bound. Their expertise should be called upon to resolve a particular problem/issue pertinent to the joint programme of work. The evolution of the joint programme of work was not, however, fully reflected in the composition and number of teams of specialists. As a result, some teams did not fully address or contribute directly to the activities of the joint programme of work, and for some work areas new teams would need to be established (eg. wood energy).

37. For implementing the programme of work, it is crucial that the teams be closely linked to specific work areas and outputs. The programme and products developed by the teams benefit from high-level expertise that is visible, valued and recognized both within and outside the region.

Recommendations

38. The new programme of work should be developed in a way that better values the role of teams of specialists. Their role, contributions and mandate should be clearly defined.

Teams might therefore benefit from having a set of guidelines advising on the roles and responsibilities of leaders, reporting lines and procedures.

39. The work of the teams should be aligned with and support the outputs and specific work areas. Cooperation and communication between the teams, the secretariat and parent bodies should be strengthened.

40. For the next cycle (2014-2017) the terms of reference of individual teams should be developed or updated to better reflect key elements of the new joint programme of work. Some new teams of specialists (e.g. on wood energy and forest-product statistics) could be created, and other teams disbanded.

V. Effectiveness and adequateness of the programme of work

Observations

41. The 2008-2013 joint programme does not cover all necessary activities and does not include some of the key emerging issues in the region. Its structure was not flexible enough to address emerging and cross-sectoral issues. It did, however, fully cover the work areas on forest products, forest resources and forest outlook.

42. Although the programme of work should be the main reference for ECE/FAO activities as well as for the Section's work, the activities have often drifted. This is partly because the programme does not include activities that are an integral part of the daily work and tasks of the Section, including its management and cooperation with countries and other organizations.

43. The programme is difficult to communicate, especially for external partners and civil society. It has not been distributed widely and stakeholders from outside the Committee and Commission's constituencies are unfamiliar with it. Its structure does not reflect the roles of member States and other contributors in implementing the programme.

44. Its joint nature is a distinct advantage and should serve as an example to other organizations. It provides an operational framework for their activities in the region for the two parent bodies, the Committee and the Commission, and for ECE and FAO.

Recommendations

45. The activities envisaged in the new programme of work should be designed in a more strategic and coherent way. They should be clearly linked to the general goals, objectives, outputs and mandates of the implementing bodies. The structure of the programme should be reflected in the structure and organization of the work of the secretariat, taking into account available resources. And the structure of the secretariat should be aligned with the work areas.

46. The programme of work should be used as a public relations tool to inform about activities and outputs. It should be written in plain language and have a clear structure, which should make it easier to communicate and to attract possible contributors. It would be useful to produce a shorter version that avoids technical jargon, published in the form of a booklet, for communicating with the public and other sectors.

VI. Relevance of outputs

Observations

47. Publications are the programme's flagship outputs. They are recognized as a unique source of impartial information (including data) on forest and forest products and provide a strong basis for policy advice. The value of ECE/FAO publications, representing various areas within the forestry sector, is being increasingly recognized among traditional users.

Yet, despite increasing outreach efforts, notably during the International Year of Forests, the interest and response from high-level decision makers and mass media remains limited.

48. Efforts to tailor the Section's outputs to different audiences were noted and appreciated. The variety of new products including videos, policy debates, interactive databases etc. was also appreciated by other stakeholders. However, activities still focus mainly on western and central Europe. Specific outreach materials to attract the attention of politicians and the mass media should also be developed.

49. The overall quality of publications and other outputs has improved; also thanks to the feedback received from various stakeholders and users. ECE/FAO publications are increasingly the fruit of cooperation with major actors who bring expertise that complements the work of the secretariat. High-quality results would not be achieved without the financial and support from in kind different stakeholders.

50. A lack of resources often prevents the secretariat from following up with outreach and dissemination activities after publications are issued.

51. The quality of the website and consistency of information presented online is another area of concern. The variety of statistical data that the Section collects through different initiatives and systems covers different regions. Moreover, the information gathered is available in different formats, through different interfaces, which reduces the usability of data and visibility of the Section as a data hub.

Recommendations

52. Improving the visibility of the joint programme of work among member States should be a top priority for the period 2014-2017. This could be achieved by, for instance, making online products more accessible and by providing users with brief, attractive materials based on events and publications. National Forest Policy Dialogues are means that could improve or establish working relations between the programme and selected countries.

53. Resources for communications should be secured in the budget. One staff member should work full time on communication issues. Further work is needed to mobilize resources to meet the programme objectives (increase of visibility, participation, relevance in the whole region, further development of completeness and quality of outputs).

54. Work on improving the website should be continued and the recent trend of developing variety in the secretariat outputs should be maintained. Efforts to integrate databases and disseminate of information should be continued. However, unless resources are increased, priority should be given to improving the quality of the outputs.

55. Reaching high-level policymakers and delivering information to the general public requires the joint efforts of all partners. All efforts aiming at joining forces in communicating forest-related information should be supported.
