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Panel discussion on forest landscape restoration

Forest Landscape Restoration in Eastern and South-East Europe (executive summary of the upcoming publication)

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

This document contains the executive summary of the study “Forest Landscape Restoration in Eastern and South-East Europe”, which will serve as background document for the Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the ECCA30/Bonn Challenge in Eastern and South-East Europe. The meeting is scheduled to take place in 2021.

1. The study “Forest Landscape Restoration in Eastern and South-East Europe” is developed to support the preparations for the Ministerial Roundtable on Forest Landscape Restoration and the ECCA30/Bonn Challenge in Eastern and South-East Europe, scheduled to take place in spring 2021. It examines the forest landscape restoration potential in seventeen countries of Eastern and South-East Europe. The report is based on three sources of information: (i) a review of relevant literature, (ii) an online survey completed by national experts of the participating countries, and (iii) discussions and outcomes of the sub-regional workshop for countries of Eastern and South-East Europe, that was held in Belgrade, Serbia on 16-17 December 2019 (hereinafter referred as a “Belgrade workshop”). The mostly state-owned forests in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine have similar ecological conditions. Of the eight EU countries covered by the study, Hungary has the lowest forest cover (20.8%), followed by Romania (28.8%), Poland (30.9%), Czech Republic (34%), Bulgaria (37%), Slovakia (45.1%), and Croatia (47%). Slovenia has the highest percentage of forest cover (62%). The study also covers five countries in Western Balkans, out of which Serbia has the lowest forest cover (29.1%), followed by Albania (36.6%), and North Macedonia (42.5%). Bosnia and Herzegovina (54%) and Montenegro (60%). Forests in Turkey cover 29.2 % and half of them are classified as productive.

2. The study found discrepancies between nationally-submitted data and international reporting sources. These types of discrepancy may arise from the differing definitions and methodologies used when collecting data. They may also be due to the lack of reliability of data from multiple sources, the lack of national forest inventories in some cases and deficiencies of systematic data collection. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, reported forest cover of 63 %, based on its second national forest inventory, which differs from the 54% reported by their national Agency of Statistics, and the 43% in the most recent Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) 2020 report. For consistency, all data appearing in the four paragraphs below have been taken from FRA 2020 and United Nations (UN) sources.

3. According to FRA 2020, primary forests constitute less than 10% of the forest in all countries of Eastern and South-East Europe, apart from Bulgaria (15%) and Albania (10%). Planted forests, generally grown for timber production, are most common in the Czech Republic (94%) and Poland (78%). Most other countries have naturally-regenerating forests. The forest area changed only incrementally from 1990, with none of the recorded changes exceeding 1%. With the exception of Albania, which recorded a reduction of -0.25 % in forest cover, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, -0.45%, all other countries in Eastern and South-East Europe saw a slight increase in forest area between 1991 and 2000.

4. Turkey has reported the highest annual rate of afforestation, with the forest area increasing continuously since 2000. By contrast, most considered reduced their afforestation efforts after 2010, favouring natural regeneration to expand the forest area. The underlying reason behind this trend was a gradual reduction in financial and human resources, the abandoning of small-scale agriculture and decrease of rural population. The countries that continue afforestation at a high rate are Turkey, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine.

5. There is significant diversity between the countries in this study. Eleven countries have fewer than 10 million inhabitants, and the majority of people live in urban and peri-urban areas. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova have more than half of their population living in rural areas. The forestry sector contributes, on average, 1.2% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia and the Czech Republic at the higher end and Moldova and Montenegro at the lower end of the range. Employment in the forest sector also varies considerably: Slovenia, for example, employs only 3,630 people, compared with Turkey, which employs 286,460.

6. Timber and fuelwood play a dominant role, as do non-timber forest products, particularly for rural livelihoods. The importance of forest products is clearly visible in rural areas, where fuelwood is still a significant source for heating and cooking. Most countries covered by the study reported a stable share of fuelwood overall. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovakia and Ukraine significantly increased the share of solid biofuels between 2000 and 2015, whereas Poland and Turkey showed the opposite trend. With the exception of Albania, renewable sources have become increasingly important in electricity production, since the mid-1990s.

7. The survey has identified that a landscape planning approach to forest management is largely absent from the countries covered by the study. There is no awareness overall about the process and dynamics of forest and landscape degradation. Countries have widely-differing perceptions of what constitutes forest degradation. There is no national definition of forest degradation in more than half of the countries. Four countries have accepted the definition that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has put forward, which states that “forest degradation is the reduction of the capacity of a forest to provide goods and services”. Forest degradation is most frequently the result of forest fires, pests and diseases, wind and storm damage, over/under-exploitation of forest goods and climatic effects, such as summer droughts. Most countries foresee fires, pests and diseases, droughts and invasive species to pose an increased risk for forest degradation in future.

8. Belarus identified drought, pests and diseases, and a gradually lowering ground-water table as major degradation problems, in forests and wetlands. Forest fires were also mentioned as a significant risk. For Moldova, soil erosion and illegal logging (for fuelwood and timber) are listed as important direct degradation issues. Ukraine listed the poor health condition of forests (droughts, biotic diseases) and forest fires as the most important direct drivers for possible future forest degradation.

9. The majority of the EU countries considered in this study cited droughts, pests and diseases as major forest degradation problems. Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Poland acknowledged forest fires as the most urgent degradation issue. Croatia, Romania and Slovakia suffer greatly from the effects of wind damage in forests. Romania cited over-exploitation as a major contributor to forest degradation.

10. With the exception of Serbia, fires (mainly the result of uncontrolled agricultural burning) are seen as the main driver for forest degradation in the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia reported over-exploitation of forests as a driver, which is the consequence of higher demand for fuelwood and logging without (valid) permits, mainly occurring in private forests. Montenegro and Serbia have issues related to land-use change, due to increased pressure from partly unplanned urbanization, or a consequence of rural depopulation. Serbia cited severe degradation as a result of storm and wind damage in northern Serbia, landslides in central Serbia, and a general decline in soil quality affecting the whole country.

11. Turkey considers forest degradation overall to be a minor issue, though overgrazing is a long-standing problem. Pests and diseases, forest fires and invasive species are viewed as drivers of degradation.

12. Forest and landscape restoration (FLR), as a term, is gaining recognition in the study region. Almost two-thirds of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they have formulated national FLR objectives. FLR falls into the remit of ministries responsible for forestry, agriculture, environment, rural and peri-urban development, water and energy as well as bodies responsible for emergency situations and also forest owners. Three countries provided rough estimates for the financial and human resources invested in FLR, while three others mentioned institutions or funds that potentially cover FLR activities. Most countries did not respond

13. Four countries mentioned ongoing or recently-completed FLR projects. Most commented that restoration activity is integrated with forest management practice, including some cases involving trees outside forests (e.g. windbreaks).

14. The most commonly-mentioned restoration activity (14 out of 17 countries) was afforestation on forest land and reforestation of forested land (7 out of 17 countries). Six countries referred to natural regeneration after degradation as the most important forest restoration measure. Other restoration efforts include the establishment of riparian forest belts/wetland restoration (2 countries), forest protection belts on peri-urban margins (1 country), rehabilitation of forests/pasture mosaics (1 country), peri-urban tree planting, reclamation of soils and agroforestry (1 country). Most countries look to increase the quality and resilience of existing forests, rather than actively extending their forest area.

15. Information about countries’ concrete FLR efforts is scarce. Belarus targets afforestation and reforestation in its restoration efforts. Ukraine cites natural forest

regeneration (as “close to nature silviculture”) and afforestation. Moldova is afforesting degraded, unproductive land and establishing riparian forest and forest protection belts. Moldova has two forest restoration projects; the Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMA) on Afforestation of Degraded Land, Riverside Areas and Protection Belts, and the Climate East Pilot Project on rehabilitating forests and pastures in Orhei National Park.

16. Eastern European EU member countries are focusing on afforestation and reforestation. Bulgaria supports natural regeneration to convert conifer stands, that have been planted beyond their natural range, to stands of indigenous broadleaved species. This approach helps to reduce the heavy costs in human resources and afforestation, especially on steeper slopes. Slovenia, among the EU considered countries was the only one that reported landscape-level restoration projects that address aspects of forest degradation together with issues outside forests.

17. Albania has two current restoration projects, *Albania Clean and Green 2020*, and *Create your O2*, that aim to plant trees throughout the country. Montenegro has several national restoration targets, including improving forest quality through sustainable forest management, protecting biodiversity and other ecosystem services, and maintaining a mosaic of forests and open land. Serbia incorporates restoration efforts in forest management practices within national projects. North Macedonia has recently formulated a Project Idea Note to the Green Climate Fund for a major forest landscape restoration project in a highly-degraded natural oak forest.

18. Turkey conducted restoration efforts over several decades to combat soil erosion and land degradation. Afforestation and rehabilitation of degraded land through reforestation are the main activities, but these also include erosion control, private afforestation and forest rangeland rehabilitation.

19. Of the fourteen countries who responded to the survey, eleven expressed an interest in undertaking restoration to increase forest cover, or to restore degraded forest land, as part of their national commitment under the Bonn Challenge.

20. The most common challenge identified by almost every country that responded to the questionnaire, was the conflict with other sectors that arise because of contradictory or poorly-aligned policies. Land-use issues arise with infrastructure projects (roads, energy, mining, waste management) affecting forest/agricultural and pastoral use. State agency views on the use of natural resources may well diverge significantly from small-scale forest and land owners. The lack of finance for carrying out FLR projects is commonly cited as an issue. Seven countries mentioned structural, administrative and technical problems that hinder landscape restoration activity. For instance, state forest and pastureland managers may well hold different views to municipalities and communities that manage land. Some countries report issues related to the need to conserve highly diverse landscapes in some parts of their territory that had been formed through thousands of years and constitute today a rich cultural and biotic heritage worth to be conserved and protected and put into value (e.g. through ecotourism).

21. Discussion during the Belgrade workshop identified challenges related to the implementation of FLR. Participants underlined the need to include climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies into national plans for sustainable forest and landscape management. Additionally, there is a need for better regulation and monitoring to eliminate illegal use and over-exploitation of forests, which will often need cross-border cooperation. Many participants noted the urgency to introduce adaptation measures to increase the stability and resilience of forest ecosystems and to prevent and combat forest fires (and transboundary collaboration in the Western Balkans, in particular). A well-placed adaptation strategy, combined with sustainable forest management, and transboundary cooperation would achieve this, in combination with better fire-fighting equipment and the exchange of best practice in financing, cooperation and fire prevention training. Integrating genetic diversity in forest management should enhance the resilience of forests to pests and diseases and climate change. Training and education of forestry professionals, especially private forest owners, is paramount. There is a need for better engagement with and involvement of policymakers to secure support for restoration work, including at the landscape level, and increased funding for reforestation and afforestation.

22. Belarus assessed the potential for restoration at 100,000 -150,000 hectares by 2030. Moldova set a national target for restoration of 160,000 hectares. Ukraine assumed an increase in forest cover to 16.3% by 2030, depending on availability of funding. Awareness of the need to link forest restoration (reforestation, natural regeneration of forests) to a wider landscape approach is generally low, but there is recognition of the value of peri-urban forests.

23. The EU countries noted that a potential pledge was under consideration by their respective governments but they were not able to provide an explicit answer as to whether their country would join the Bonn Challenge at this stage. Slovenia expects no increase in forest cover but the government considers a pledge to restore damaged forest land. The Czech Republic has formulated a *Strategy of Ministry of Agriculture with a view to 2030* and could potentially support other countries' FLR activities. According to literature sources, Hungary and Poland have targets, respectively, to increase forest cover from 22% to 26 or 27% and from 30% to 33% by 2050. Bulgaria expects an increase of 40,000 hectares of forest by natural expansion within the next ten years. Romania aims to afforest 400,000 hectares by 2035.

24. As indicated earlier, Western Balkan countries have not yet been able to confirm whether or not they would pledge to the Bonn Challenge, primarily because it requires policy-level consideration. Albania has estimated the potential to restore up to 10,000 hectares. North Macedonia has estimated between 3,000 – 5,000 hectares/year and Serbia has estimated 5,000 hectares/year. Montenegro has prioritized the improvement of the quality of forest stands rather than actively increasing its forest area. It has estimated a potential to restore 24,000 hectares and has plans to transform 419 hectares of coppice forests into high forests by 2030. According to FRA 2015, there are one million hectares of coppice and 300 thousand hectares of shrubbery and barren land in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the potential to be restored to meet the Bonn Challenge.

25. Turkey did not comment on the Bonn Challenge before the Belgrade workshop. Turkey's national target set out in the country's Forest Management Strategic Plan 2019-2023 foresees to increase forest cover from 28% to 30% by 2023.

26. The wider aspect of FLR and the role of trees outside forests received limited attention in the survey and at the Belgrade workshop. This can be explained by the fact that the main focus of the questionnaire was on forests and forestry, not specifically including trees in urban and peri-urban areas.

27. In conclusion, FLR in the Eastern and South-East Europe may consider to focus on conserving valuable forest landscapes and cultural heritages, restoring degraded natural and planted forests and deforested landscapes, agroforestry and tree-based measures to protect soil, water and biodiversity. Lying at the core of FLR is adapting to changing conditions, especially climate variability and, increasingly in the future, climate change. Among the targets for FLR are recovery after major events such as forest fires, storm damage, pests and diseases and, more specifically, responding to reductions in soil quality, affecting their productive potential. For farming landscapes, restoring and planting shelterbelts, windbreaks and hedgerows to protect agricultural and horticulture fields and fruit orchards are important elements of landscape restoration. This would include preserving and restoring floodplain forests and riparian buffer zones, to control erosion, sediment transport and desertification. The role of trees in urban and peri-urban settings merits special consideration in developing FLR interventions.