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Policy discussions on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030: activities in support of the thematic priorities for the biennium 2023–2024

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Monitoring, assessment and reporting

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

At its eighteenth session, the United Nations Forum on Forests held technical discussions on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030, including on monitoring, assessment and reporting. A summary of the discussions of the Forum and the Chair's proposals for transmission to and consideration by the nineteenth session of the Forum are contained in the summary by the Chair of the eighteenth session ([E/2023/42](#), annex).

At its nineteenth session, under agenda item 3, the Forum will discuss monitoring, assessment and reporting and consider the relevant proposals contained in the Chair's summary. The present note provides the background information and highlights the result of the intersessional activities undertaken on monitoring, assessment and reporting since the eighteenth session of the Forum.

* [E/CN.18/2024/1](#).



I. Introduction

1. In accordance with its programme of work for the period 2022–2024, the United Nations Forum on Forests, at its nineteenth session, will hold policy discussions on the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030. At its eighteenth session, the Forum held technical discussions on monitoring, assessment and reporting, including the global core set of forest-related indicators, as well as the preparations for the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025 of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). A summary of the discussions of the Forum and the Chair's proposals on these issues for transmission to and consideration by the nineteenth session of the Forum are contained in the report on the eighteenth session ([E/2023/42](#)). At its nineteenth session, under agenda item 3, the Forum will discuss monitoring, assessment and reporting and consider the relevant proposals contained in the Chair's summary (*ibid.*, annex).

2. The present note provides the background information and highlights the result of the intersessional activities undertaken on monitoring, assessment and reporting since the eighteenth session of the Forum, and it serves as the basis for discussion on the above-mentioned issue under agenda item 3.

II. Background

3. The Forum has regularly called upon member States to develop adequate monitoring systems and upon relevant international entities, especially member organizations of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, to share data and streamline reporting on forests.

4. With the adoption, in 2017, of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030, the focus of monitoring, assessment and reporting to the Forum was placed on the progress made in the implementation of the strategic plan and the achievement of its goals and targets. The assessment of the plan's implementation should take into account, *inter alia*, voluntary national reporting, voluntary national contributions and the results of the most recent Global Forest Resources Assessment of FAO, as well as inputs from the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and its member organizations and other partners within and outside the United Nations system, including regional and subregional organizations and relevant stakeholders.

5. The first round of national reporting on progress towards the implementation of the strategic plan was conducted in 2019 and 2020. The information submitted in national reports, combined with biophysical data from the Global Forest Resources Assessment carried out in 2020, made it possible to conduct an assessment of progress towards achieving the global forest goals of the strategic plan and produce the flagship publication entitled *The Global Forest Goals Report 2021*, the first such publication produced by the secretariat of the Forum in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat. The report provided a summary of the actions taken and challenges encountered by member States in their efforts to achieve the goals and highlights the areas in which progress has been made and those in which more action is required. An informal advisory group established to provide advice on the development of the publication was actively involved in its production and provided recommendations on various aspects, including its scope, main objectives and data sources, as well as feedback and suggestions related to communication and outreach.

6. Following the production of the publication, the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution [2022/17](#), requested the Forum secretariat to amend the format for voluntary national reporting, taking into account the suggestions and proposals received from members of the Forum, and conduct a pilot phase for the use of the

refined format in interested countries. In the same resolution, the Council invited the Forum to consider establishing an advisory group on reporting, taking into account the experience gained and lessons learned from the informal advisory group involved with the 2021 flagship publication. In this respect, the secretariat was requested to propose terms of reference, including the suggested composition of the group, with due regard to the need for balanced United Nations geographical representation, to the Forum at its eighteenth session.

7. In the same resolution, the Council further requested that the Forum secretariat, in the context of preparations for the midterm review of the international arrangement on forests, and in consultation with members of the Forum, prepare a road map and timeline for the next reporting cycle, in conjunction with the Global Forest Resources Assessment cycle, and explore options for establishing an online reporting platform for the Forum, recognizing the need for streamlined reporting and minimizing the reporting burden, including the challenges faced by developing countries. Detailed information on progress in implementing intersessional activities in preparation for the midterm review is contained in the note by the Secretariat on the subject (E/CN.18/2024/5).

8. In response to resolution 2022/17, the Forum secretariat developed terms of reference for the advisory group on reporting to the Forum and presented it to the Forum at its eighteenth session (see E/CN.18/2023/5, annex). During the technical discussion on this matter at the eighteenth session, members of the Forum generally supported the establishment of the advisory group and emphasized the need for effective participation by experts from developing countries, FAO, other member organizations of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, and intergovernmental organizations, with due regard to geographical and gender balance. Members of the Forum stressed the need for cost-effective working modalities and supported the organization of virtual meetings of the group (E/2023/42, annex, para. 48 (j)–(l)).

9. As reflected in the summary by the Chair of the eighteenth session of the Forum, the Chair made the following proposals for consideration by the Forum at its nineteenth session: (a) take note of the amended format for national reporting and the ongoing preparatory work for the next reporting cycle to the Forum; (b) decide to establish an advisory group on reporting to the Forum, in accordance with the terms of reference contained in document E/CN.18/2023/5; (c) request the Forum secretariat to produce another publication or report that includes short case studies on progress on the implementation of the strategic plan and the global forest goals; and (d) request the Forum secretariat to continue to organize, jointly with FAO, capacity-building workshops in the area of monitoring, assessment and reporting.

III. Timeline for the next reporting cycle to the Forum

10. The table below contains the main activities, with proposed dates, for the next reporting cycle to the Forum. It follows the recommendation of the Forum to synchronize the national reporting to the Forum with the five-year FAO/Global Forest Resources Assessment reporting cycle. The timeline allows for the use of data collected within the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025 process by the Forum focal points when preparing their national reports to the Forum and by the Forum secretariat when analysing the information submitted by countries and assessing the progress made towards achieving the global forest goals at the global level, and it accommodates the time needed for production of the next *Global Forest Goals Report*, to be released by May 2026. This schedule was presented and positively received at the expert group meeting on the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network and implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030 held at the United Nations Office at Nairobi from 20 to 22 June 2023.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Who</i>
1. Setting up of the advisory group on reporting to the Forum	October 2023–February 2024	Forum Bureau, member States
2. Finalization of the format for national reporting to the Forum	February–May 2024	Forum secretariat, advisory group
3. Setting up of the online reporting tool	March–June 2024	Forum secretariat, advisory group
4. Revision of the explanatory notes ^a for country reports to the Forum ^b	September–December 2024	Forum secretariat, advisory group, member States
5. Circulation of the format for national reporting along with the explanatory notes for country reports	January 2025	Forum secretariat
6. Capacity-building workshop for experts involved in the preparation of the national reports to the Forum	April 2025	Member States, Forum secretariat, advisory group
7. Deadline for submission of national reports to the Forum	June 2025	Member States
8. Analysis of information submitted in national reports and incorporating biophysical data from the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025/other sources	June–October 2025	Forum secretariat, advisory group
9. Production process: drafting, editing, layout/design	October 2025–January 2026	Forum secretariat, advisory group
10. Final product: publication of the next <i>Global Forest Goals Report</i>	May 2026	Forum secretariat, advisory group

^a Available at www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Explanatory-Notes-national-reports-unffl5.pdf.

^b Virtual workshop or online consultations.

IV. Advisory group on reporting to the Forum

11. Following the positive reaction to the establishment of the advisory group on reporting at the eighteenth session of the Forum and at the expert group meeting on the Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network and implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030 held in Nairobi in June 2023, the creation of the group was reconfirmed at the meeting of the open-ended intergovernmental ad hoc expert group on the preparations for the midterm review of the international arrangement on forests, which was held in Vienna from 10 to 13 October 2023. In this respect, the Co-Chairs, in their summary, recommended that the nineteenth session of the Forum endorse the timeline for the next reporting cycle to the Forum for 2024–2026 (as presented by the Forum secretariat at the expert group meeting) and initiate, as soon as possible, activities related to the next reporting cycle, including the establishment of an informal advisory group on reporting to the Forum, in an inclusive and transparent manner.

12. In the light of the broad agreement on the establishment of the advisory group on reporting to the Forum, and to enable the group to undertake its tasks without delay, the Forum secretariat, with assistance from the Forum's Bureau, solicited nominations for the group, taking into account the qualifications and requirements of the candidates as reflected in the terms of reference. At the time of writing, the Forum secretariat had received nominations of experts from Western European and other States and Latin American and Caribbean States. The first informal meeting of the advisory group is scheduled to take place in the first quarter of 2024.

V. Amended format for voluntary national reporting and explanatory notes for reporting

13. Following the conclusion of the seventeenth session of the Forum, the Forum secretariat amended the format for voluntary national reporting,¹ taking into account the suggestions and proposals received from members of the Forum. The format was piloted with interested countries, and the results of the pilot phase, including lessons learned and feedback, were presented at the global workshop on national voluntary reporting on progress towards the global forest goals and targets, held at FAO headquarters in Rome from 22 to 24 March 2023. The pilot countries agreed that the amended format was more concise and simpler, and they provided a few final suggestions to be incorporated by the Forum secretariat. The format will be finalized by the Forum secretariat in close consultation with the advisory group on reporting.

14. In addition, the pilot countries made some general comments, noting that the data needed to prepare the national report to the Forum were scattered among different agencies and institutions and that completing the reporting format required early and close coordination at the national level with the engagement of various relevant institutions and stakeholders. Countries underlined the need for capacity-building to: (a) improve the accuracy and consistency of forest-related data; (b) create and/or improve existing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting forest-related data; and (c) provide assistance to countries in the preparation of their voluntary national reports to the Forum. For some specific areas of global forest goals and targets, for example goal 4, more explanatory notes were needed, as the issues were complex and difficult to report on.

15. The document entitled "Explanatory notes for country reports to the United Nations Forum on Forests at its fifteenth session"² was specifically developed and transmitted along with the format for reporting to help countries that were preparing their country reports for submission to the Forum in 2020. Given that the format has been amended, the explanatory notes will also need to be revised and amended to ensure that both documents are complementary and correspond to each other. In addition, the document might be further expanded to provide additional explanation in areas that are complex and difficult to report on, for example goal 4. The Forum secretariat will revise and amend the explanatory notes in close collaboration with the advisory group on reporting, share the document and conduct online consultations with member States, in due time.

¹ www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/MAR-amended-reporting-format-Oct-2022.pdf.

² Available at www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Explanatory-Notes-national-reports-unffl15.pdf.

VI. Online reporting format

16. The Forum secretariat is currently exploring options for online data collection. Data collection with online reporting tools has become a standard way of gathering information and data for public agencies and private sector companies. This method has numerous advantages over traditional data collection/reporting, namely via emails with Microsoft Word file attachments, as it facilitates data entry and analysis, providing more accurate outcomes within a shorter time frame.

17. Online reporting provides a more dynamic and informative way to compile information submitted in national reports, presenting the information in a more accessible and manageable format, further contributing to reducing time for analysing data, and putting in place tools that help to improve data quality. The benefits of a flexible and easy-to-use online reporting system would not be limited to the Forum secretariat but could also help countries to organize, store, maintain and share information on progress towards the strategic plan and to review progress.

18. The online reporting format would contain all open-ended and closed questions contained in the format for national reporting and be structured around the global forest goals and targets of the strategic plan.

19. The information requested from countries in the reporting process is mostly made up of qualitative, non-numerical narrative text, which would require a relatively simple web application. There are many existing online platforms that could be used to collect, organize, process and analyse the information submitted by countries. The functionality of these platforms varies greatly: some simply allow collection, others highlight important parts of reports, and the most advanced employ software that, with the help of artificial intelligence, allows users to tag, analyse and visualize data or information instantly.

20. The main criteria for selection of the online tool could include the following: (a) the application is easy to use; (b) it has the flexibility to add, modify and make visible reporting year(s) and questions, subquestions and responses; (c) it has English as the language of the interface, potentially allowing responses in other United Nations official languages; (d) it allows progress to be reviewed and reminders to be sent to optimize the response rate, and survey responses to be downloaded in Microsoft Excel or CSV format, and allows for export as a PDF document; (e) it is cost-effective; and (f) it is in compliance with United Nations information and communications technology standards.

21. If implemented, countries will be encouraged to use the system; however, its use will be optional, and a national report in Microsoft Word format will remain an option for those countries that do not feel ready to start using the online reporting tool.

22. A review of experiences with online reporting and data and feedback gathering within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs yielded some insights. One option is SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based survey platform that allows users to create, send and analyse surveys, which is the preferred choice for many organizations due to its ease of use and affordability compared with other software of a similar nature. The platform questionnaires can be translated into several languages and distributed to target audiences through several channels, including via a weblink and an email distribution list. Responses can be downloaded in multiple file formats; however, this option is accessible only to questionnaire developers, not to respondents. Respondents wishing to keep a record of their responses could request a copy from the Forum secretariat. Microsoft Forms is also another option being considered. A web-based application for the development of surveys and questionnaires, it is

included in the Microsoft package used at the United Nations and therefore would require no additional licence. It is also easy to use and integrates well with the Microsoft suite of products. However, compared with SurveyMonkey, it offers fewer customization options, for example in relation to the branching logic of the questionnaire, which refers to the individualization of a respondent's path based on the respondent's previous answers.

VII. Conclusions

23. The Forum secretariat has begun the preparations for the next reporting cycle. The format for national reporting has been amended and piloted. The advisory group on reporting to the Forum is being created, and it is foreseen that the advisory group will have had its first meeting before the nineteenth session of the Forum, in order to engage the experts in delivering the final touches to the reporting format and revision of the explanatory notes. Support from countries is critical to organizing capacity-building workshops and to the production of the next *Global Forest Goals Report*.

VIII. Proposals

24. **The Forum may wish:**

(a) **To endorse the proposed timeline for the next reporting cycle to the Forum for 2024-2026;**

(b) **To decide to establish the advisory group on reporting to the United Nations Forum on Forests, in accordance with the terms of reference contained in the note by the Secretariat to the eighteenth session of the Forum (E/CN.18/2023/5);**

(c) **To take note of the amended format for national reporting and entrust the secretariat of the Forum with finalizing the format, in close consultation with the advisory group on reporting to the Forum;**

(d) **To request the Forum secretariat to continue to organize, jointly with FAO, capacity-building workshops in the area of monitoring, assessment and reporting.**