Towards a Common Information Framework for Forest-Related National Reporting to International Processes

CPF Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting
Interim report[1]
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Summary

The Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting has examined the wide array of forest-related reporting to international bodies. Mindful that member countries themselves made these requests, this paper concludes that better information management will achieve the most in terms of streamlining. The task force proposes that CPF develop a common information framework for national forest-related reporting to international processes to guide information management and reduce the reporting burden on countries. CPF members are invited to promote this common approach within their work and to their respective governing bodies in order to obtain feedback from countries on its utility.

Changes to international reporting processes will take time and implementation of a reporting framework must be undertaken in the context of a long-term perspective. Budgetary resources will be needed to develop and implement the framework.

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[1] Approved by CPF members for presentation at UNFF *ad hoc* expert group on monitoring, assessment and reporting.

1. Introduction

National forest-related reporting is requested by several conventions, agreements, intergovernmental agencies and non-legally binding processes. Reporting varies in scope, periodicity, as well as the nature of the information.

Although it is difficult to envision a single request (questionnaire) that can fulfil all requirements of all international processes, many other possibilities exist to streamline reporting, improve information management and reduce reporting burden. This paper advocates the development of a ***common information framework for forest-related reporting***, which is a long-term effort to facilitate access to information and its use.

Information framework is defined here as a set of principles and methods that international bodies can apply to organize and store information. Easy access to information that is organized in a systematic way would help organizations and instruments design information requests, prepare reporting schedules, and use information. Similarly, such access would assist countries to compile and manage information for reporting purposes. *Reporting* is defined here as official country reports submitted to international bodies, normally conventions or intergovernmental agencies.

The purpose of a common information framework for forest-related reporting is to create an environment for sharing information on forests that minimizes reporting burden and maximizes the reusability of information provided.

Benefits of a common information framework

- conformity and cross-references between information requests, including terms and definitions, will increase consistency and comparability of information submitted to various international instruments, organizations and processes;

- better coordination between reporting processes will reduce inconsistencies between reports;

- information can be used for several purposes and across different processes thereby reducing repetitive requests;

- information management and documentation increase transparency and quality in reported information, and make it easier to reuse information, retrieve and verify data for further analyses;

- better information management reduces errors, and improves reporting and provision of trends over time;

- specifying more clearly how the requested information will be used in analyses and reports to help the requesting international body achieve its objectives may increase the usefulness of the reported information, and the motivation to submit reports;

- improves prospects for synchronized information requests;

- enhances coordination among focal points.

Other means and ways to reduce reporting burden

A common information framework can both contribute to and benefit from other ways to streamline reporting, improve information management and reduce reporting burden in the short and medium-term, including the following:

- Collaboration among two or more bodies to *collect and to report information in a unified way*. This includes joint information requests or cross reference to existing sources of information which could be an option, for example, between UNFF and CBD on common areas of IPF/IFF proposals for action and CBD's expanded Programme of Work on Forest Biological Diversity[2]. It could also extend to joint questionnaires such as the successful Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire developed by FAO, UNECE, ITTO and Eurostat, where countries provide information on production and trade of forest products only once but the organizations involved use this information in various ways for reporting to their own constituencies.

- *Use of and cross linking existing information* in the reports and analyses by organizations and secretariats.

- *Improvement of information requests*, including formats and questionnaires, by:
  - shortening questionnaires and rephrasing questions;
  - referencing existing information available from other sources;
  - continuing to ensure professional designing and processing of the questionnaires.

- Continuation of the work on *harmonization[3] of forest-related definitions*. The task force members stress the importance of including in future forest-related information requests a list of definitions as well as cross-references, where possible, indicating those definitions that are used in other processes/organizations.

- *Capacity building* at the national level for data collection, processing, and reporting, including improving in-country coordination among national agencies responsible for reporting to different processes/instruments. The task force plans to tackle the issue of capacity building as one of its top priorities.

It should be noted that some countries and processes have not always fully supported the need to coordinate and streamline reporting requests. There has been a tendency to require a full range of reporting to every forest-related process regardless of the fact that the same information was collected elsewhere. Attention by all parties, country representatives and secretariats to the burden of forest-related reporting is the first step to improving coordination among international processes requesting the information called for by their governing bodies.

This paper is an output of the CPF Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting (see Annex 1 for description, mandate and Terms of Reference of the task force). The proposal to develop a common information framework for forest-related reporting is based on a review by the task force of the existing forest-related reporting requirements and processes by major international bodies. The results are summarised in the task force's meeting reports[4]. A more

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[2] A preliminary comparison of the IPF/IFF proposals for action and the activities of the expanded program of work on forest biological diversity can be found in UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/9/INF/31

[3] Harmonization does not mean standardization but seeking common understanding by pointing out the meaning of the various definitions, clarifying differences and relations and easing informed choices.

[4] See CPF Task Force meeting reports.
Report of the first meeting, 19-20 November 2002, Bonn, Germany:
http://www.fao.org/forestry/foris/webview/cpf/index.jsp?geoId=0&langId=1&siteId=2823
Report of the second meeting, 24-26 February 2003, Cambridge, United Kingdom:

comprehensive working paper, "International Forest-related Reporting: a Review and Comparative Analysis", is being finalised. Annex 2 summarizes the reporting processes included in the review. The proposal also builds upon the CPF portal on forest-related reporting (www.fao.org/forestry/cpf-mar) that provides easy access to national forest-related reports submitted to CPF members, the corresponding reporting formats, information on streamlining efforts and the work of the task force.

2. Two types of forest-related reporting

Based on the review of the forest-related reporting processes of CPF members, the task force found that the information reported on forests can be categorized in two broad categories:

1. <u>Actions</u> taken in relation to the stated objectives of an international arrangement, instrument or agreement. The purpose of action reporting is to indicate countries' implementation of commitments they have made under the international agreement in question. The information requests include UNFF (annual), CBD (national reports every 4 years), CSD (biennial national reports), UNCCD (variable according to the category of the Party), UNFCCC (national communications; variable according to the category of the Party) and some international/regional criteria and indicators (C&I) processes[5].

2. <u>Situation and trends</u> on forest resources, products and services, and policy and institutional frameworks. The purposes of situation and trend reporting are to (a) describe the situation on the ground, and (b) help assess the impact of implementation measures. Such reports include those for FAO Forest Resources Assessment (every 5 years), the Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire (annual), national greenhouse gas inventories to UNFCCC (annual for Annex I Parties), to ITTO on progress toward the Year 2000 Objective (in progress) and to some of the C&I processes.

The nature of these reporting types is very different. Actions are related to the objectives of the arrangement, instrument, or agreement and are often about national implementation, policy development, planning processes, or are related to public participation. While these are essential to establish a conducive political, institutional and social environment for sustainable development of which sustainable forest management is an integral part, information on these actions is fundamentally different from information on situation and trends. The latter includes assessments of the condition of forest and tree resources, the management, uses and users of the resources, and quantifications of tangible and intangible benefits from the forests and trees.

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http://www.fao.org/forestry/foris/webview/cpf/index.jsp?geoId=0&langId=1&siteId=2823

[5] The Pan-European C&I for SFM were developed by the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) to monitor, assess and report on the state of , and changes in, SFM. An improved set of pan-European indicators for SFM was adopted at the Fourth MCPFE in 2003. ITTO C&I are used to report on progress towards Year 2000 Objective and the Montreal Process C&I were developed to monitor forest management trends in non-European temperate and boreal forests. While reporting has already commenced to each of these processes, other regional processes are not yet at this stage.

3. Finding a basis for a common information framework

It would be useful to use a set of thematic areas as a framework to organize and categorize the vast amount of information reported on both "situation and trends" and "actions". Such areas should reflect all characteristics and benefits of forests as well as legal, policy and institutional aspects.

The task force recommends the use of the following common thematic areas:

1. Extent of forest resources[6]
2. Biological diversity
3. Forest health and vitality
4. Productive functions of forest resources
5. Protective functions of forest resources
6. Socio-economic functions
7. Legal, policy and institutional framework

The above thematic areas have surfaced in a variety of fora. They are based on the criteria of the nine on-going regional/international processes on criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management, and were acknowledged by the international conference in Guatemala in February 2003 (CICI 2003)[7] and by the FAO Committee on Forestry in 2003[8].

The global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) process led by FAO has also endorsed the use of common thematic areas. For the next update in 2005, FRA has adopted the first six common thematic areas as its reporting framework.

4. Fitting information to the framework

Structuring reported information into a common information framework

Organizing forest-related reported information by common thematic areas may improve information management and use and ultimately lead to reduced reporting. Annex 3 provides a template for a common information framework for both "situation and trends" (table 1) and "actions" (table 2), where components of existing reporting, i.e. reporting requests and data can be mapped against the thematic areas. It should be noted that not all forest-related information requests and data will fit into the proposed framework. On the other hand, one particular reporting item may be relevant to several thematic areas.

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[6] This also includes forest contribution to the global carbon cycle.

[7] International Conference on Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management: The Way Forward (CICI-2003), 3-7 February 2003, Guatemala City. Report available at
http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/Y8694E/Y8694E00.HTM

[8] Sixteenth Committee on Forestry (COFO), 10-14 March 2003, Rome. Report available under
www.fao.org/forestry/cofo

Challenges

Information reported on "situation and trends" covers a wide range of benefits and uses of forests and forestry. Also, instruments and organizations use different definitions and reference dates. The complexity and diversity of information pose challenges in developing a common information framework. In addition, the capacity of countries may restrict their ability to report comprehensively on "situations and trends". However, synergies between the global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) and the regional processes on criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management provide a solid basis on which to build a common information framework. For example, the MCPFE reports on the State of Europe's Forests prepared in 1998 and 2003 have been structured according to the six Pan-European Criteria for SFM and based on data collected by UNECE/FAO in the context of FRA.

For reporting on "actions", the task force concludes that streamlining reporting to forest-related conventions is challenging in the short term because governing bodies usually decide on the content, periodicity and timing of information requests a few years in advance. In the long run, the task force foresees that a common information platform on reported actions would generate synergies between processes and help reduce the reporting burden to countries.

Information management

The development of a common information framework would largely build on the positive experience of setting up a CPF portal for forest-related reporting, which has led to an information service role in relation to CPF members and countries.

It is assumed that while each international process will continue to manage information separately, they will work on their forest-related information formats so that they fit to the common information framework.

Establishing a common information framework will require the following:

- A work process by which the framework is further developed, including active communication with each convention and body to support information management;

- An information service (portal) that provides easy access (e.g. through the Internet) to the reporting concepts/guidelines/procedures of international processes, as well as access to reports and report items, and that includes the ability to search by keyword and references;

- Maintenance of data at a level sufficiently disaggregated to find common elements of reporting between the processes. Synergies in reporting and reporting requests can only emerge when easy access and cross-referencing are possible. Serving the needs of different processes and country situations will be a challenging task.

5. Way forward - Recommendations

In order to establish a common information framework for forest-related reporting and to move towards information management arrangements that facilitate the use of the framework, both CPF members and countries will need to take actions in the coming few years.

The task force recommends that:

- *The CPF endorses the development of a common information framework for forest-related reporting on "actions" as well as "situation and trends".*

- *The following thematic areas be used as an organizing principle in such a framework:*
    1. *Extent of forest resources*
    2. *Biological diversity*
    3. *Forest health and vitality*
    4. *Productive functions of forest resources*
    5. *Protective functions of forest resources*
    6. *Socio-economic functions*
    7. *Legal, policy and institutional framework*

- *CPF members use the CPF streamlining portal (www.fao.org/forestry/cpf-mar) as an information platform to provide access to their reporting requirements and results of country reporting[9] with respect to the above thematic areas.*

- *CPF members post their reporting requirements and results of country reporting on their websites.*

- *Countries agree that reported information be shared or reused between closely related reporting processes when possible.*

- *To avoid redundancy, countries build upon prior forest-related reporting and foster communication between national focal points in the preparation of reports.*

- *Countries provide sufficient financial and human resources for the development of a common information framework for forest-related reporting.*

- *CPF continue its strong efforts towards streamlining forest-related reporting and reducing the reporting burden on countries.*

- *CPF involve criteria and indicators processes in the development of a common information framework for forest-related reporting.*

- *CPF members continue to increase comparability of forest-related terms and definitions to facilitate the development of a common information framework for forest-related reporting*

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[9] Original country reports and/or processed information.

Annex 1: CPF Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting

The CPF Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting was established in July 2002 and currently includes the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), United Nations Environment Programme/World Monitoring and Conservation Centre (UNEP-WCMC) and the secretariats of the Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF). Its mandate is provided in the resolutions of the first session of UNFF[10] as follows:

> UNFF *"further requests the CPF and its member organizations to: reduce duplication in the reports required from countries by its member organizations".*

> UNFF *"invites CPF members to streamline reporting requests and, to extent possible, to synchronize their reporting cycles so as to reduce reporting burden on countries".*

The objective[11] of the task force is to propose ways to reduce the reporting burden, through, for example, reducing and streamlining reporting requests; synchronizing reporting cycles; harmonizing data collection methods; increasing data comparability and compatibility; and facilitating the accessibility and flows of existing information. Its purpose is also to guide ongoing international processes by sharing experiences and lessons learned from different reporting frameworks and by seeking possibilities for common approaches for data and information collection, storage and reporting by international organizations. In the longer term, the work aims to contribute to better information management system(s), whereby data and information will be more easily accessible and widely available, and in which the information could eventually be inserted and updated by countries themselves.

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[10] Paragraph 9c of UNFF resolution 1/3 (E/CN.18/2001/3) and section E of UNFF resolution 2/2 (E/CN.18/2002/14)

[11] According to the Terms of Reference and Work Plan for the CPF Task Force on Streamlining Forest-Related Reporting, endorsed by the CPF at its eighth meeting on 3-4 October 2002, New York. ToR available at (www.fao.org/forestry/cpf-mar)

Annex 2: Brief description of reporting processes

CBD	The Conference of the Parties (COP) of CBD establishes the format and interval of reports and their scientific and technical contents. National reports are prepared by Parties through a consultative process involving relevant stakeholders, and/or by drawing upon information developed through other consultative processes. Parties are also invited to prepare and submit voluntary, thematic reports on one or more specific items for in-depth consideration at the COP ordinary meetings. The topics of the reports concern the implementation of the articles of the Convention and related COP decisions addressed to the Parties. The first national report (1997) focused on implementation of general measures for conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. The second national report (submitted in 2001 for discussion at COP 6 in April 2002) provided assessments on CBD's thematic programmes and cross-cutting issues, and it includes information on forest biological diversity. The third national report shall be submitted by Parties by 2005 for discussion at COP 8 in 2006.
CSD	A principal function of the CSD is to review and monitor progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and to foster coherence of implementation, initiatives and partnerships. Reporting to CSD is voluntary. Beginning in 1992, countries were asked to provide national reports annually. National reports provide information on the status of implementation of the Agenda 21 chapters related to the themes of the CSD session. The eighth session of CSD in 2000 focused on forests, amongst other things. The guidelines for reporting on forests to CSD8 and the national reports are available on-line. As a result of the new programme of work adopted at CSD-11, national reports are to be presented to the Commission's Review Session and will focus on concrete progress in implementation, including achievements, constraints, challenges and opportunities. Forests will be addressed in the 2012-2013 cycle. The next national reporting on forests to the CSD will take place at the Review Session in 2012.
FAO	Forestry has been part of FAO's mandate from its establishment in 1945. Forestry is specifically included in the global goals of the Organization in relation to its contribution to economic and social progress, to environmental stabilization and to the conservation, improvement and sustainable utilization of natural resources. The mission is: "to enhance human well-being through support to member countries in the sustainable management of the world's trees and forests." FAO's Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) programme builds upon country reporting to generate information and knowledge about global forest resources. A major output of the programme was the publication of the results of the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2000 (FRA 2000). The FAO Yearbook of Forest Products is a compilation of statistical data on basic forest products for all countries and territories of the world. It contains time series on the production and trade of forest products and data on the direction of trade. This publication is made possible by the cooperation of governments which supply most of the information by replying to questionnaires (which is a joint venture with ITTO, UNECE and Eurostat).
ITTO	ITTO members report on forest management using national level reporting formats which are based on individual forest management unit reports. The reporting format for the national level report is detailed, calling for both qualitative and quantitative information on the ITTO indicators of the criteria for sustainable forest management (SFM). The national reporting formats will be available on ITTO's web-site. The ITTO/FAO/UNECE/EUROSTAT Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire is used to collect country data on production, consumption and trade of forests products that is subsequently published in the ITTO annual review and assessment of the world timber situation.
UNCCD	The first reporting process under the UNCCD took place in 1999-2000. The second reporting process under the UNCCD took place in 2002. It included affected country Parties of all regions,

	developed country Parties, as well as intergovernmental and United Nations organizations. The reports were reviewed by the CRIC 1 in November 2002. Reports are provided at four different levels. The different kinds of reports and their related main topics are: -Reports on national action programmes -Reports on subregional and regional action programmes -Reports of developed country Parties -Reports of affected developed country Parties not preparing action
UNDP	UNDP member countries were asked to report on the implementation of the Millennium Project towards the achievements of the MDGs. The Goal 7 Ensuring environmental sustainability has the following objectives: - Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources. - By 2015, reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water. - By 2020 achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. reporting to goal 7 therefore includes indicators on forest-related issues
UNFCCC	The national communication is the main channel through which countries inform the UNFCCC about their activities related to implementation of the Convention. The national greenhouse gas inventory is prepared following the Revised 1996 IPCC guidelines for national greenhouse gas inventories, produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Guidelines include a default method for estimating emissions and removals of greenhouse gases for five sectors of human activities that influence sources and sinks of greenhouse gases: energy, industrial processes, agriculture, land-use change and forestry and waste. In order to carry out the national inventory, specific data on forests and forest resources are required on:[12] - changes in forest and other woody biomass stocks; - forest and grassland conversion; - abandonment of managed lands; - emissions and removals from soils.
UNFF	National reporting to UNFF focuses on countries' progress in implementing the IPF/IFF proposals for action. National reporting is voluntary and is carried out annually. The voluntary national reports and the Guidelines for the preparation of voluntary national reports to the various sessions of the UNFF are available on the UNFF web site.

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[12] Conference of Parties (UNFCCC) will consider new greenhouse gas inventory requirements for land use, land-use change and forestry sector in December 2003, based on the IPCC good practice guidance for LULUCF

Annex 3: Template for a common information framework

Table 1. Common information framework on situation and trends by thematic areas.

PROCESS	CBD	FAO[13]	ITTO[14]	UNCCD	UNFCCC	UNFF	CSD
THEMATIC AREAS OF SFM							
1. Extent of forest resources[15]		FRA tables 1,2,4-11	Criterion 2 Items 23-30; Criterion 7 Item 84 (carbon)				
2. Biological diversity		FRA tables 1,3-6,9,10	Criterion 5 Items 53-64				
3. Forest health and vitality		FRA tables 4,8	Criterion 3 Items 31-36				
4. Productive functions of forest resources		FRA tables 1,3,5-13 Forest Products Yearbook/JQ	Criterion 4 Items 37-52; Annual Review/JQ				
5. Protective functions of forest resources		FRA tables 3,4,8	Criterion 6 Items 65-72				
6. Socio-economic functions		FRA tables 2-16 Forest Products Yearbook/JQ	Criterion 7 Items 73-83 and 85-89 Annual Review/JQ				
7. Legal, policy and institutional framework		nfp updates	Year 2000 objective progress reports				

NOTE: the table is partially filled in for illustrative purposes only.

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[13] FRA tables numbers refer to global tables in FRA 2005
[14] ITTO Criteria/Items refer to the National C&I Reporting Format (www.itto.or.jp)
[15] This also includes forest contribution to the global carbon cycle.

Table 2. Common information framework on actions by thematic area.

PROCESS THEMATIC AREAS OF SFM	CBD	FAO	ITTO	UNCCD	UNFCCC	UNFF	CSD
1. Extent of forest resources[16]			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
2. Biological diversity			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
3. Forest health and vitality			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
4. Productive functions of forest resources			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
5. Protective functions of forest resources			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
6. Socio-economic functions			Year 2000 objective progress reports				
7. Legal, policy and institutional framework			Year 2000 objective progress reports; Criterion 1 Items 1-22				

NOTE: the table is partially filled in for illustrative purposes only.

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[16] This also includes forest contribution to the global carbon cycle.