

Forest Policy

Basic Knowledge



This module sets out the key elements of public forest policies. It explores how forest managers can assist in developing consensus-based forest policies that balance the interests, priorities and needs related to the conservation and use of forests and the benefits derived from them, and it addresses questions such as: “What is a forest policy?” “Why should countries have a policy on forests?” and “What makes a good forest policy?” The module also examines various forms of forest policies and sets out the steps involved in policy development.

What is a forest policy?

A forest policy – sometimes referred to as a forest strategy – is a long-term vision for the forest sector comprising a set of aspirations, goals and objectives and an outline of a [course of action for pursuing those](#). FAO defines a “forest policy” as:

“a negotiated agreement between government and stakeholders (i.e. all those who depend on or benefit from forests or who decide on, control or regulate access to these resources) on the orientations and principles of actions they adopt, in harmony with national socioeconomic and environmental policies, to guide and determine decisions on the sustainable use and conservation of forest and tree resources for the benefit of society.”

Involvement in forest policy development can help forest managers, owners and individuals affected by forests to express their expectations from forests and contribute to the achievement of these expectations. Core issues addressed in forest policies may include the extent of forest resources (including goods and services); forest biological diversity; forest health and vitality; the productive functions of forest resources; and the legal, policy and institutional frameworks. Comprehensive forest policies address issues such as land tenure, land use, climate change, employment, community forestry, financing and investment, payments for environmental goods and services, wood consumption, international markets, and forest industry.

Why should countries have forest policies?

It is increasingly recognized that forests have multiple values that must be maintained or enhanced, and that diverse stakeholders have legitimate claims on forest benefits. Forest managers, therefore, face an increasingly complex challenge, as forest management shifts towards a more inclusive and cross-sectoral process requiring the involvement of diverse stakeholders and the balancing of their often-competing interests. Different stakeholders may prioritize different issues, such as the economic, social, cultural or environmental benefits they derive from forests; in some cases, national development priorities may overshadow the immediate needs of local people. Increasingly,

developers of forest policies need to be aware of the impacts and dependencies of forests and forest management on other sectors, and vice versa. A forest policy can provide a framework for enabling sustainable forest management (SFM) that balances the economic, social and environmental goals of stakeholders and of society. Specifically, a forest policy:

- **establishes a long-term vision** that ensures the values of forests are protected, maintained and enhanced for present and future generations;
- **provides a strategy for addressing emerging challenges** such as climate change and for responding to **new opportunities** such as the “greening” of economies;
- **helps reconcile the demands of different users** and **define the roles and functions** of all actors in and outside the public forest sector, from forest managers to the public administration in charge of forests; and
- **provides a framework for institutions, including laws and regulations.** Forest policies provide direction, and legislation is usually considered an instrument for implementing a forest policy, establishing rights and responsibilities, and formalizing [governance arrangements](#).

FAO estimated that the number countries elaborating formal forest policy statements increased by 15% in the period 2007–2015, demonstrating a global [trend in developing forest policies](#).

Why do forest managers need to be involved in policy development?

Policies have impacts on management decisions. Although governments should take a lead role in the development of forest policies, the process should involve all concerned actors and take advantage of their knowledge, experience and perceptions. Today more than ever, stakeholders want forest policies to address broad socioeconomic concerns, such as tenure, access to forest resources, the equitable distribution of benefits, and local versus state-sanctioned rights; if ignored, such concerns can breed prolonged conflict. Moreover, forest managers are increasingly held accountable by society for the way in which they manage and use forest assets. The process of developing a forest policy, therefore, requires regular consultations among stakeholders with the aim of balancing divergent interests, identifying key issues and ensuring that the benefits derived from forests, and the costs, are distributed equitably. It is crucial that forest managers – who may be professional foresters or traditional managers – are involved in the development of forest policies for the following reasons, among others:

- Societies increasingly hold forest managers accountable for how they manage and use forest assets.
- Forest managers possess knowledge about forest users and uses that other stakeholders may not have. They can play a key role in policy development by sharing their day-to-day experiences in managing forests and by ensuring that policy priorities and objectives are technically viable.
- A forest policy defines general long-term goals that frame managerial decisions. A long-term goal to increase forest cover, for example, will require activities set out in management plans involving a specific number of hectares, the identification of suitable species, etc., and an associated budget. Involving managers in policy development will help ensure that goals are realistic and achievable.
- The involvement of forest managers in policy development, together with other stakeholders such as local people, local authorities, private interests and other sectors, can help in creating partnerships to implement the policy that is ultimately developed and in avoiding or managing conflicts over land use.
- The involvement of forest managers in policy development increases their responsibility for policy implementation and, where those managers are government employees, promotes government accountability.

Forest policy contributes to SDGs:

8 DECENT WORK AND
ECONOMIC GROWTH



15 LIFE
ON LAND



16 PEACE, JUSTICE
AND STRONG
INSTITUTIONS



Related modules

- [Forest governance](#)
- [Forest management planning](#)

In more depth

What makes a good forest policy process?

A good forest policy is **participatory, compromise-based, cross-sectoral, long-term, adaptable, evidence-based** and **country-led**.

Participation, and building compromises. Ideally, forest policies should aim to capture the differing and often changing objectives of stakeholders in a shared vision for the forest sector and an agreed plan of action, and this is best achieved through a participatory policy development process. Not only is this key for attaining a sense of joint ownership, it is vital for implementation and ensuring that stated objectives are met. Extra care should be taken to include women and indigenous people in these processes. Women are major stakeholders but are often faced with insuperable obstacles preventing them from offering their unique contribution to the policy making process. As a result, valuable knowledge is lost and communities' needs are not equally and efficiently addressed (see the [Cases](#) section for lessons learned on women's inclusion in policies and practices). Involving key sectors outside the forest sector in the policy development process can also facilitate implementation.

Cross-sectoral, long-term and adaptable. A good national forest policy will be rooted in broader, long-term societal goals such as economic development, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability. It will recognize that forests need to be managed in ways that take into account the interdependence of forests and other sectors, policies and land uses. For example, a forest policy will influence the extent to which people benefit from forests, including who receives which benefits – it might do this, for example, by [influencing regulations on tenure](#). A good forest policy will also be consistent with other sectoral policies, such as energy, agriculture, industry, trade, biodiversity and climate change. [Forest conversion](#) – the clearing of natural forests for other uses, such as agriculture or mining – is a reminder of the negative effects that incentives and policies in other sectors can have on SFM if they are not mutually supportive. Decision-makers in central, provincial and local governments have key roles to play in harmonizing policies cross-sectorally (e.g. energy, agriculture, industry and trade sectors but also those charged with biodiversity and climate change, for example).

Good forest policies will be adaptable in the face of changing conditions related to, for example, urbanization, decentralization, climate and demand for forest products and services. Accordingly, forest policies should be subject to periodic review and modified where necessary.

Evidence-based. Forest policy development should make use of all available ecological, silvicultural, economic and social knowledge – both scientific and traditional.

Country-led. Above all, national forest policy development should be country-led so that it is rooted in broader national sustainable development goals and in line with political, economic, social and environmental priorities. That said, forest policy development processes often benefit from technical support from donor agencies and international processes such as [REDD+](#) and [FLEGT](#), and effective national policies will place domestic issues and priorities in their regional and global contexts (see “different levels of forest policies” below).

What does a good forest policy look like?

A typical forest policy consists of a policy statement, sometimes called a declaration of policy priorities; a medium-term programme (e.g. a “multi-year programme of work”); and a short-term plan of action.

Policy statement. Different countries have different statement structures – some are as short as ten pages and others are much longer. All policy statements set out the objectives or goals for the forest sector. Examples of policy objectives include the following:

- “The forest policy is well integrated within the national, regional and sectoral policies and is high on the national development agenda.”
- “Negative impacts on forests are reduced and forest resources and biodiversity are protected and conserved.”
- “Forests are managed in line with integrated multipurpose management plans and developed based on reliable information and modern methodologies for forest resource inventory and assessment.”
- “Improve the legal and institutional framework for development, management, and conservation of all forests, streamlining coordination and cooperation among agencies.”
- “Outline measures to improve transparency and accountability in the management and use of forest resources, including appropriate enforcement of the forest law.”
- “Expand the jurisdiction of the forest agency to facilitate the protection and conservation of trees, forests and mangroves on private lands in urban and rural areas.”
- “Reinforce institutions and capacities in the forest sector.”
- “Gather information on forest resources.”
- “Reduce poverty and ensure food security.”

Forest policy statements often contain the following sections: context or background; vision for the sector; approach to implementation; and [distribution of responsibilities](#).

Medium-term programme. Policy statements generally do not provide copious detail about the means of implementation or responsibilities of actors. Instead, such detail is provided in an ensuing stage of policy development in which a medium-term programme is defined through consultative processes. A medium-term programme seeks to address *how* policy priorities will be achieved and *who* will be involved in achieving them. The following is an example of (part of) a medium-term programme:

- Linkages and complementarities of the forest policy with the other national, sectoral and regional development policies (e.g. poverty reduction, regional development, agriculture, tourism, energy, education, climate-change adaptation, etc.) will be enhanced by:
 - the establishment of a coordination/advisory body, made up of high-level representatives of key ministries, including the ministry of finance, to coordinate national sectoral policies and international donor activities that may have impacts on forest development;
 - the assessment and specification of the institutional set-up for policy implementation, including the functions and responsibilities of various ministries and agencies. This will include a definition of how affected citizens (e.g. indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers and the private sector) will participate in respective bodies to protect their rights.
- Integrated programmes for the conservation and use of forests and other natural resources will be introduced and supported.
- Budgetary and financial provisions will be made to make the policy feasible by:
 - allocating budgets for the responsible organizations;
 - looking for internal/external investment possibilities;
 - creating capacities in both the public sector and private organizations; and
 - designing innovative mechanisms such as payments for environmental services, based on compensation for externalities by the public and private sectors.

A short-term plan of action for the implementation of the policy and achievement of the stated goals might also be prepared. An example can be found [here](#).

The [case studies](#) listed in this module provide more examples of forest policies and forest policy development processes.

Different levels of forest policies

Most forest policies are nationally driven, although subnational and local forest policies may also exist. There has been a proliferation of international forest policy agreements since the early 1990s, and some 20 such agreements now deal with various aspects of forestry. Forest policies cannot work in isolation; to the degree possible, therefore, national forest policy development processes should engage and be compatible with policy processes at both the higher (e.g. regional or global) and lower (i.e. subnational) levels.

Forest policies are developed at different levels of government for various reasons. In some countries, for example, subnational governments have greater expertise in SFM than national governments, highly diverse contexts, and clear constitutional responsibility; in such countries, it makes sense to develop subnational forest policies. In Canada, the forest policy frameworks differ considerably among the provinces. In British Columbia, community forest agreements have been developed which, in the view of community forest organizations, have been broadly successful in terms of [public participation](#). The province also boasts a successful model of multistakeholder consultations in land-use decision-making, based on [consensus-based exercises](#). Such processes bring the risk of provincial versus central policy incoherence; ideally, countries with subnational forest policies will also have overarching national policies to ensure coherence at the national level.

Subnational multistakeholder forums and councils are important tools for enhancing dialogue among government and stakeholders in national policymaking processes. Forest managers and owners should see these platforms as opportunities to become involved and to play leading roles in decision-making on forests.

Forest-related multistakeholder forums have proved successful in Guatemala, a country with 20 years of experience in participatory forest policy development and implementation. It has established [forest policy roundtables](#) ("mesas de concertación y política forestal") as autonomous mechanisms for subnational dialogue comprising representatives of the central government, local authorities, non-governmental and civil-society organizations and private companies involved in the production, conservation, protection and use of forest

resources. The aims of the roundtables are to discuss, analyse and propose solutions to forest problems; support the formulation of the national forest policy; propose and implement actions at the subnational and national levels; promote the use of forests for socioeconomic development; and propose and implement training and capacity building. Participants widely perceive the roundtables as successful because of the involvement of subnational actors from multiple sectors; the consequent formulation of subnational forest development agendas; and their role in disseminating the national forest policy and agenda.

A particularly interesting example of an outcome of the roundtable process is the community concessions in Guatemala, granted in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the Petén, in which about half a million hectares of forest are being managed sustainably by local communities, providing local benefits and conserving forests. In the areas granted to communities, forest fire and land invasions are virtually non-existent; in the rest of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, in contrast, deforestation and forest fire are prevalent.

Basic steps to policy development and when and how forest managers can and should be involved

Effective policy formulation involves several key steps. Individual forest managers, owners and communities may not be involved in all of these (although their representative organizations should be), but it is important that they understand them, the possibilities for participating at various stages, and the benefits that may arise from such participation.

Planning, capacity building, communication. The first steps in policy development involve the following: outlining the responsibilities of decision-making bodies; establishing how concerned stakeholder groups will participate; drafting work plans, timetables and budgets; preparing communication strategies; and building capacities to manage the process and to meaningfully [engage stakeholder groups](#). On average, this process takes 12–18 months.

Forest managers can and should engage in this step of policy development to communicate their expectations about how forests should be managed, drawing on their own experience, and to help inform their constituents (for example, local people, including indigenous communities) about what to expect from the policy development process and to encourage broad participation. Depending on the context, resources may be available (or could be sought) to help build the capacity of forest managers to engage in this step. For example, informing and negotiating with constituencies require communication skills that can be developed through training.

Preparatory analysis: providing key background information. Reliable, high-quality information on relevant legal, economic, environmental, technical, political and social issues and other policies is essential for the development of sound forest policies. For example, unbiased data are required on:

- forest resources, their uses and management;
- environmental, political, societal, demographic, economic and technological developments and trends;
- past and current policies, laws and strategies relevant to forests;
- land uses, land-use planning, and land ownership and tenure;
- institutional arrangements and capacities;
- key national forest policy issues – what has worked well (and not so well) in the past, and links with other policies; and
- international commitments related to forests.

The experience and knowledge of forest managers and forest owners – and the data they hold – on various aspects of forests make them well-placed to participate in evidence-based policymaking. Forest managers can help ensure that policy goals are technically feasible and therefore have a realistic chance of being implemented.

Obtaining high-level political leadership and administration support. Without high-level political support from, for example, heads of state, government ministers or Parliament, it is unlikely that ministries in other sectors will participate constructively in the development and implementation forest policies. Engaging government agencies in sectors other than the forest sector at the local, subnational and national levels is essential, therefore, for good policy development and effective implementation (including financial support).

Forest managers and owners must be aware of the need for high-level political support. They can support this step by contributing objective information to the policymaking process, which may help convince high-level authorities of the need for reform and to ensure that an adequate budget is allocated.

Determining who should be involved and how, and the type of support needed. The sound representation of constituents in the policy development process is crucial, but different stakeholders will be involved to varying degrees – from informing (e.g. through presentations and flyers) and consulting (e.g. through questionnaires), to shared decision-making (e.g. involvement in negotiation) and implementation. For this reason (among others), participatory policy development can be challenging. The following tools may help those managing or coordinating policy development to determine the extent to which (and when and how) different stakeholders should be involved, and to

help in resolving conflicts regarding the management of forests: [Enhancing stakeholder participation in national forest programmes](#); [Training manual on collaborative conflict management for enhanced NFPs](#); [Power tools: handbook to tools and resources for policy influence in natural resource management](#); and [Tools for institutional, political and social analysis \(TIPS\) – a sourcebook for poverty and social impact analysis \(PSIA\)](#).

Although forest managers are unlikely to be the ones determining who needs to be involved in the forest policy development process, they should be aware that facilitators should engage them as well as other stakeholders at different stages of the process through different means. Why is this important? Among other things, the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the policy development process can help build partnerships among stakeholders, avoid or manage conflictual situations, and build capacity to deal with disagreements among interest groups.

Guiding and managing the process. A steering body or management team – often called a steering committee – comprising representatives of local and national governments, the private sector, civil society and indigenous peoples – is typically used to lead forest policy development processes. Such a steering committee is ultimately responsible for submitting the draft policy document to government and for various related aspects, such as communication with constituents. Steering committees with representatives from the main stakeholder groups can:

- enable access to information from those stakeholder groups and improve understanding of the impacts of previous forest policies;
- make recommendations that take into account the concerns of the main stakeholder groups;
- improve the dissemination of conclusions and recommendations among the various constituencies; and
- obtain greater acceptance of revised forest policies and of arrangements for implementing them.

Forest managers should keep informed of the work of the steering committee (or other form of management team) and be willing to engage with it, if and when the opportunity arises.

Developing an agreement through dialogue and negotiation. There are four distinct steps in agreeing on a forest policy: 1) stakeholder dialogues at the local, subnational (e.g. provincial or state) and national levels; 2) reaching agreement on the goals and objectives of the forest policy, and how these will be achieved; 3) drafting a forest policy document; and 4) stakeholder validation of the draft forest policy.

Multistakeholder dialogues early in the process on questions such as “Who owns, manages and uses our forests?” “How can land use best be planned?” and “Do stakeholders have adequate rights to meet their needs?” are crucial for avoiding conflict and disagreement later on. Among other things, a discussion on the overall objectives, constraints and opportunities of forest management may emerge (step 2). During this process, a review of existing legislation, related policies, international commitments, institutional frameworks, financing and budgeting implications will also take place, but this will be a technical task done mainly by experts.

In step 3, the steering committee develops a draft policy, taking into account the outcomes of the stakeholder dialogues. The views of technical experts both within and outside government and of people not fully involved in the development process but who have influence over the adoption of the policy should be obtained in this step.

In step 4, a process is put in place to inform stakeholders of the draft policy, obtain feedback on it, and finalize the document. Once a final version has been validated by a multistakeholder conference, the steering committee conducts a final review and submits the package to the government body leading the process, who will present it to the head of government, council of ministers or other high-level body, as appropriate.

Forest policy development processes are ultimately negotiations, and it is in the interests of forest managers and owners to take part in those negotiations, above all to ensure that outcomes are technically viable, economically and socially realistic and environmentally responsible and also to facilitate policy implementation and reduce conflict. A particularly important role for forest managers is to keep local communities informed about high-level decisions and to encourage them to participate in the policy development process.

Implementing forest policy

Despite good intentions, forest policies often fail because of weak implementation, a lack of support, divergent interests and a lack of sanctions and enforcement. Detailed strategies and action plans should be developed for implementing new forest policies, setting out – including with an explicit division of duties – how to put the policy into practice and achieve its objectives. Laws should be aligned with the forest policy, an exercise that may commence on completion of the forest policy development process or be conducted in parallel to it.

Even when a forest policy is implemented effectively, however, changing conditions and new developments may require that the policy is revised or adapted. Forest managers should continue to be fulcrums for policy implementation and revision by ensuring sound technical

knowledge is communicated in a timely fashion to policymakers and that dialogue is maintained among stakeholders to facilitate this.

Roundtables have been used effectively in many countries as a way of maintaining subnational and national dialogues and ensuring that ongoing policy development processes receive adequate operational and financial support. Another way of putting a forest policy into action is to implement elements of it on a pilot basis as a way of demonstrating its value. This approach was taken, for example, in the issuance of forest compensation certificates ("certificados de abono forestal") to smallholders in the county of Hojancha in Costa Rica; after two years, the proven system was applied countrywide.

E-learning

[How to monitor and promote policy changes on governance of tenure](#)



How to monitor and promote
policy changes on
governance of tenure

The course provides guidance on some of the main issues to consider when implementing a monitoring activity: how to select the most appropriate approach or to identify the best data sources for monitoring, how to effectively communicate the results of the monitoring activity...

Further Learning

Arnold, F.E, van der Werf, N. & Rametsteiner, E. 2014. [*Strengthening evidence-based forest policy-making: linking forest monitoring with national forest programmes*](#). Rome, FAO.

FAO. 2013. [*Implementing the Non-Legally Binding Instrument on All Types of Forests*](#)

FAO. 2006. [National forest programmes](#) – Unasylva No. 225

McDermott, C.L., O'Carroll, A & Wood, P. 2007. [*International forest policy – the instruments, agreements and processes that shape it*](#)

Web links

<http://www.fao.org/forestry/72857/en/> FAO Forest Policy website. Last accessed 23.07.2015

<http://www.fao.org/forestry/nfp-facility/en/> FAO National Forest Programme. Facility (NFP) Last accessed 23.07.2015

<http://www.fao.org/forestry/eu-flegt/en/> EU FAO FLEGT Programme. Last accessed 23.07.2015

Credits

This module was developed with the kind collaboration of the following people and/or institutions:

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This module was revised in 2018 to strengthen gender considerations.

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