

April 2011



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CONFERENCE

Thirty-seventh Session

Rome, 25 June - 2 July 2011

Evaluation of the International Year of Natural Fibres 2009

Executive Summary

This document evaluates the International Year of Natural Fibres 2009 (IYNF). It contains background information regarding its launch. It provides details on the budgetary aspects of the IYNF, as well as its overall objective to contribute to food security, eradication of poverty and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The document also highlights that, because the objectives of the IYNF could not be realized in the space of 12 months, FAO and key stakeholders continued to sustain the momentum beyond 2009. The document further reports on the Germany-funded project “Unlocking Commercial Fibre Potential in Developing Countries: strengthening global value chains for rural development, poverty alleviation and the environment”, which was implemented in December 2010.

The Conference is not required to take any decisions.

1. Resolution 3/2005 of the 33rd Session of FAO Conference in 2005 requested the Director-General to transmit a proposal to declare 2009 as the International Year of Natural Fibres to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.
2. On 20 December 2006 the General Assembly proclaimed 2009 the International Year of Natural Fibres. In doing so, it noted that the diverse range of natural fibres produced in many countries provides an important source of income for farmers, and can thus play a role in contributing to food security and in eradicating poverty, thereby helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The General Assembly Resolution invited FAO to facilitate the observance of the IYNF in collaboration with governments, regional and international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and relevant organizations of the United Nations system.
3. In many developing and least developed countries, proceeds from the sale and export of natural fibres contribute significantly to the income and food security of poor farmers and workers in fibre industries. For some countries natural fibres are of major economic importance at the national

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level, for example, cotton in some west African countries, jute in Bangladesh and sisal in the United Republic of Tanzania. In other cases these fibres can be of less significance at the national level but are of considerable local importance, as in the case of jute in West Bengal (India) and sisal in northeast Brazil.

4. Natural fibres constitute an important renewable resource used as raw material for clothing, upholstery and other textiles for consumers. Many natural fibres also have industrial uses in packaging, papermaking and in composite materials with many uses, including automobile construction.

5. Broadly, the IYNF was intended to raise the profile of natural fibres, thereby strengthening demand, promoting efficient and sustainable industries and contributing to improved welfare of fibre-producing farmers.

6. Several administrative arrangements were proposed at the Joint Meeting of the 34th Session of the Intergovernmental Group on Hard Fibres and of the 36th Session of the Intergovernmental Group on Jute, Kenaf and Allied Fibres to facilitate implementation of the IYNF:

- a) The IYNF was under the general direction of an International Steering Committee (ISC) with representatives of main partners – fibre organizations, other international organizations, producing countries, consumer organizations, donors, etc. The ISC proposed four objectives:
 - i) to raise awareness and stimulate demand for natural fibres;
 - ii) to promote the efficiency and sustainability of natural fibre industries;
 - iii) to encourage appropriate policy responses to the problems faced by natural fibre industries; and
 - iv) to foster an effective and enduring international partnership among the various natural fibres industries.
- b) An administrative secretariat was established in FAO, with staff supported by a project-funded project coordinator and consultants.
- c) Partner organizations worked under the ISC. Within the framework of the IYNF objectives, they would define their own objectives, and plan and fund their own events, drawing on coordination of FAO as the lead unit and under general guidance of the ISC.

7. As the lead agency, with responsibility for all planning and coordinating, it was foreseen that FAO would require approximately USD 2 000 000 to effectively implement the IYNF, namely: to coordinate international action to achieve IYNF objectives; to build an international alliance of international and national organizations; to prepare communications material, provide international communication/media coverage; and to plan/host events.

8. It was unfortunate, however, that the IYNF coincided with the exceptionally difficult economic climate of 2009. The demand for natural fibre commodities is particularly sensitive to changes in the business cycle, as fibres constitute a raw material in a wide array of industrial applications. Perhaps partly as a result of the economic downturn which began in the second-half of 2008, culminating in recession in 2009, potential inflows of donor funds and commercial sponsorship were negatively affected. External donations amounted to around USD 57 000 (USD 44 000 from the Common Fund for Commodities; USD 8 000 from the Government of New Zealand; and USD 5 000 from the International Jute Study Group). As a result, the burden of supporting the activities and commitments inherent in the decision to hold the IYNF fell almost entirely on FAO. FAO endeavoured to make progress, devoting approximately USD 120 000 from its budget to IYNF implementation, excluding staff time and other resources). The following activities were carried out:

- A Symposium on Natural Fibres, held at FAO headquarters on 20 October 2008;
- Published proceedings from the Symposium;
- Design of the IYNF logo;
- The official launch of the IYNF at FAO headquarters on 22 January 2009;
- A seven-minute IYNF video produced in seven languages;
- A series of videos raising awareness among specific fibres;
- A website (www.naturalfibres2009.org) in eight languages, containing:

- profiles of 15 of the world's major plant and animal fibres;
- fibre factsheets on health, responsible choices, sustainability, technology and fashion;
- micrographs of 18 plant and animal natural fibres; and
- a selection of fibre “stories”;
- A poster and a brochure, in various languages;
- Downloadable T-shirt and bag designs for printing, and;
- A display of natural fibres and a fashion show arranged to coincide with the 67th Session of the Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP), from 20 to 22 April 2009.

9. Such has been the success of the centralised outreach, that by the end of 2009, around 1 000 formal requests to use the IYNF logo had been received, roughly 3 000 posters and brochures were distributed and several thousand requests for videos from the IYNF collection received.

10. Key to celebrating the year and promoting its objectives were the host of events that took place outside of Rome. Well over 150 conferences, workshops, exhibitions, seminars, fairs and festivals were organised in 50 countries under the umbrella of the IYNF. These decentralised initiatives have been the key strength in raising awareness about natural fibres and the sheer number and geographical diversity of these events underlines how important natural fibres are perceived around the globe. Indeed, FAO recognizes that decentralized initiatives have potentially greater impact and superior sustainability compared to centralized efforts.

11. There was general consensus that the objectives of the Year could not be realized in the space of 12 months. For this reason, FAO along with key stakeholders supported efforts to sustain momentum beyond 2009. The Website has continued to be maintained and steps are being taken to hand its longer-term management over to a partnership among natural fibre stakeholders (the Discover Natural Fibres Initiative). Key publicity material has been redesigned for longevity.

12. In the context of maintaining momentum, in November 2009 at the Joint Meeting of the 35th Session of the Intergovernmental Group on Hard Fibres and the 37th Session of the Intergovernmental Group on Jute, Kenaf and Allied Fibres, the FAO Secretariat discussed the formulation of a large-scale donor proposal with objectives reaffirming those of the IYNF. In highlighting the potential high-beneficiary impact of enhancing tropical hard fibre sectors, the Group reflected on the large potential payoffs of expanding investment in those sectors.

13. In 2010, Germany agreed to finance USD 3.15 million towards the FAO initiative. The project initiative “Unlocking Commercial Fibre Potential in Developing Countries: strengthening global value chains for rural development, poverty alleviation and the environment” began implementation in December 2010.

14. This project seeks to empower farmers and vulnerable communities in several of the world’s poorest countries to realize the commercial and environmental potential of tropical fibre value chains, through exploiting their comparative advantage in the crop’s cultivation. Via sustainable market-led initiatives in partnership with multinational enterprises, the scientific community, policy-makers and international agencies – working together towards a common vision – the project pioneers an integrated model of value chain development which focuses on penetrating innovative, high value markets for industrial products while at the same time commercializing fibre residues which form as much as 95 percent of plant biomass. To this end, the project: advances technology transfer under south-to-south cooperation and under north-to-south cooperation; advocates equitable business models that reward farmers and other agents for their enterprise; encourages the adoption of ethical social practices including advancing gender equality; and promotes ‘responsible choices’ in the market place that are in concordance with the bio-based economy via sustainability certification.

15. While the FAO project and the Secretariat to the Intergovernmental Groups continue to support the objectives of IYNF, members of the ISC have agreed to assume greater responsibility for achieving IYNF objectives. The original IYNF plan envisaged that sector stakeholders would establish a continuing partnership to this end. In this respect, the Discover Natural Fibres Initiative (DNFI) was founded in early 2010. Comprising an alliance of international natural fibre associations with emphasis on textiles, such as Cotton Council International (CCI), the International Cotton Advisory Committee

(ICAC), Bremen Cotton Exchange, the International Textile Manufacturers Federation (ITMF) and the International Wool Textile Organisation (IWTO), the DNFI is proposing to build on the achievements of the IYNF 2009 and maintain future cooperation and projects between natural fibre organizations.

16. As noted above, attaining the objectives of the IYNF extend well beyond the time frame of a single year. FAO, in its capacity as the lead agency in planning and coordinating activities during the IYNF has endeavoured to ensure that progress in realizing the objectives of the IYNF continue. However, much will depend upon the ability and willingness of natural fibre stakeholders to take on the responsibility. Through the Organization's advocacy campaign via the IYNF Website, the production of media material, overseeing decentralized events and the design of the project funded by Germany currently implemented by FAO, all the IYNF objectives are being addressed. It is hoped that the transfer of the main responsibility for advocating IYNF objectives to representative organizations of natural fibre industries will ensure long term sustainable impact in this sector.