

# Regional approaches: bridging national and global efforts

*R.M. Martin*

*As a complement to global and national initiatives, regional approaches can help countries that face common problems take effective action to achieve shared goals.*

**D**eforestation, forest degradation, loss of forest biological diversity – countries face these and a number of other issues as they prepare for the fifth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) in May 2005. In particular, they will be considering whether new or innovative approaches are needed to motivate action to protect forests and help them contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

While the focus is on national action supported by global dialogue, it will be important not to overlook a useful complement: regional approaches and agreements to tackle important environmental, trade and development issues.

Regional approaches add value to national initiatives and global commitment. National action is the backbone of efforts to improve forest management, but forests and watersheds cross national boundaries, and the market accepts products from all sources. In addition, many developing countries lack the finance or political weight that might be mobilized at the regional level.

Similarly, agreement on global initiatives is hindered by the fact that there is so much variation among countries in

terms of forest types, economic development, language, culture and other factors. The most common complaint about the “global dialogue on forests” is that discussion has not yet been followed by action. Regional approaches can sometimes bridge the gaps, making substantive action more feasible.

## **WHAT IS A REGION?**

The composition of a region (or a regional organization) is usually defined by its members, often reflecting a combination of geographical proximity, political similarities, common economic interests or similar environmental factors. The sharing of experiences among countries with similar conditions and similar types of problems, and thus the chance of finding common solutions, is perhaps the major reason for the establishment of regional processes.

Because there is no fixed rule for defining regions, anomalies are common. For example, Latin America is delineated more by language and culture than by geography, as it is usually considered to include Spanish-speaking Cuba but not English-speaking Jamaica. Or consider that the FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment 2000 declared Europe as the

*Regional processes enable countries with similar conditions and similar types of problems to share experiences and seek common solutions (shown, a regional workshop for low-forest-cover countries in the Near East)*



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region of the world with the most forest area – only because the vast forests of Siberia are included in Europe rather than Asia; the Russian Federation, which geographically straddles two continents, had to be counted in one region or the other.

Despite these anomalies, regional approaches – which can be defined for practical purposes as activities that involve more than one country but are less than global in scope – are used for a variety of endeavours.

#### **REGIONS AND THEIR FORESTS**

The concerns of countries in Europe and North America are very different from those of most countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Near East. Most countries with developed economies used their forests to progress through the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Now these countries are restoring their forest landscapes. For example, following centuries of forest clearance, use and management, most of Europe essentially lacks primary forests. Thirgood (1989) has argued that the modification of the region's forests has been the greatest single factor in the evolution of European civilization. "European forest history is not the story of the preservation of forests," he wrote, "but of their destruction and successful reconstruction." Thirgood concluded that the great lesson of Europe is that "the path of forest destruction, although it inevitably results in change, need not lead to catastrophe, and may indeed lead to higher productivity" – a lesson that may be considered when the appropriate policies for developing regions are debated today.

In Europe and North America, economies have developed, technological advances have stabilized the amount of land required for agriculture, and deforestation is no longer a serious problem. Concerns such as biodiversity and cli-

mate change – concepts that had not yet been expressed during the centuries when the northern regions were developing – now dominate discussions.

The forest debate is very different, however, in developing regions where agriculture and forests still compete for the same space and human populations are increasing. In tropical regions, many countries have deforestation rates exceeding 1 percent per year. For example, in Central America every country lost at least 10 percent of its forest cover between 1990 and 2000. The primary concern in this region is how to manage forests sustainably while realizing the full economic benefits of forests.

Given this historical perspective, it is not surprising that countries from different regions have been unable to reach agreement on key issues. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, countries from developing regions insisted on each country's sovereign right to decide how best to use its forest resources. Countries from developed regions argued that stopping deforestation was a global imperative. Twelve years later, most countries have concluded that sustainable forest management is in their best interest, but the pace of action is slow as strongly held and divergent views continue to plague the global forest debate.

#### **REASONS FOR REGIONAL APPROACHES**

Regional approaches have a number of advantages relative to national and global arrangements, although they have their limitations.

##### **Advantages over national approaches**

- Many forest issues – e.g. forest fires, forest insects and disease, forest products trade – cross national boundaries.

- Countries can pool resources to address problems that are too costly for one country to address effectively alone.
- Countries can create synergies by sharing information, experience and expertise, e.g. through research networks.
- Regional groups may carry more political and economic weight than individual countries.

##### **Advantages over global approaches**

- Countries in a region are more likely to have common interests and therefore reach consensus on controversial policy issues.
- Countries with similar environmental conditions are more likely to develop common approaches to forest policy, planning and resource management.
- The cost of doing business (e.g. of travel to meetings) is significantly lower within a region.

##### **Limitations**

Regional initiatives are a complement, not a substitute, for work at the national level. For example, individual countries have laws and institutions enabling them to take actions, e.g. to levy taxes and enforce regulations, whereas regional groups do not usually have these powers.

Furthermore, some issues – for example, international trade or climate change – cannot be addressed sufficiently at the regional level because the problems themselves are global.

#### **SOME REGIONAL INITIATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE IMPACT ON FORESTS**

##### **Processes for criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management**

In the years following UNCED, a number of voluntary initiatives emerged in which

like-minded countries got together to identify the key elements of sustainable forest management. The criteria and indicators processes, which include for example processes for dry-zone Africa, dry forests in Asia, the Near East, Europe, non-European temperate and boreal forests, Central America and the Amazon countries, are often cited as successful examples of regional or ecoregional initiatives.

#### High-level processes on forests

In several regions, ministers responsible for forests have met to address common issues related to forests, including conservation and management issues and forest law enforcement and governance (see specific articles in this issue). In three instances, ministers have met on a fairly regular basis: the Conference of Ministers for the Forests of Central Africa (COMIFAC); the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE); and the Central American Ministers for Environment and Development (CCAD). CCAD, formed by the environment ministers of seven countries, has developed a Central American Forestry Strategy (EFCA) (see Box).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has established a Forest Protocol, a regional policy framework to foster a common approach to the management of the region's forest resources, which was signed by SADC Heads of State and Government in 2002.

Forest policies are an important dimension of the work of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OTCA). OTCA supports the development of regional criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management through the Tarapoto Process, and also emphasizes the role of indigenous communities in the conservation of Amazon forests.

### Central American Forestry Strategy

**In the 1990s, every country in Central America (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) lost at least 10 percent of its forest cover, largely through conversion of forest lands to agriculture and expanding urban population centres. To meet the challenge of increasing economic development while conserving the forests, the Central American Ministers for Environment and Development (CCAD) has developed a Central American Forestry Strategy (Estrategia Forestal Centroamericana, EFCA), approved in 2002, which establishes 10- and 25-year targets for forest cover in the region. It also calls on all the countries in Central America to revise or update their forest policies and their national forest programmes by 2005.**

The strategy, devised with assistance from FAO and IUCN among others, is intended to assist countries in the region to implement the proposals for action of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF). In addition to increasing forest cover, its goals include:

- restoring degraded forests;
- strengthening the Central American Protected Area System (SICAP);
- promoting the forest sector as a major player in the overall strategy to conserve the environment, reduce the vulnerability of rural people and combat poverty.

Progress has already been made in the implementation of the Forestry Strategy:

- Ministers responsible for the environment have met three times with ministers responsible for agriculture, the first intersectoral meetings at this level to address the problem of deforestation in the region.
- Several countries have adopted mecha-

nisms for payment for environmental services.

- Countries in the region have made an effort to increase the area of forests that are protected under SICAP. By late 2004, 554 biodiversity conservation areas had been established covering 12.9 million hectares, 24.8 percent of the land area of the region. The first Central American Congress on Protected Areas was held in Managua, Nicaragua in March 2003.
- With financial assistance from FAO, seven Central American countries have identified areas for forest development projects under the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol.
- With the help of FAO, a Central American regional forest health and management strategy has been prepared.
- With the assistance of FAO and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a forest fire commission for Central America and Mexico has been established which has developed a regional forest fire strategy.
- National forest programmes have been or are being updated or revised in all seven countries with assistance from FAO, the National Forest Programme Facility, the World Bank and the governments of the Netherlands and Sweden.

Although real change in the forest sector cannot be measured in months or years, but more realistically requires decades or even generations, the world will be watching to see if this dynamic regional approach is successful.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Senior Officials on Forestry (ASOF) have met annually for the past seven years and advise the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry on forest issues. For example, ASOF recommended the adoption of the *Code of Practice for Forest Harvesting in Asia-Pacific* (developed under the auspices of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission), and the ministers accordingly agreed to establish a network for its regional implementation.

A major environmental issue in Asia and the Pacific is transboundary haze, and the major source of the problem is forest wildfire. To address the problem, the ninth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Haze, held in June 2002, adopted the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, by which signatory countries of the region agree to undertake measures to prevent and control activities related to land and/or forest wildfires that may lead to transboundary haze pollution. The agreement also established a coordinating centre to facilitate cooperation and coordination among countries in managing the impact of such fires.

#### **Regional economic and trade groups**

Regional economic or trade groups and organizations facilitate trade in forest products by performing some or all of the following functions:

- establishing a common currency;
- agreeing on product definitions, standards and classifications;
- reducing or eliminating quotas or tariffs;
- harmonizing sectoral policies and government interventions.

These actions make it possible for countries and industries to specialize in forest products manufacture according to their relative economic, ecological and social strengths.

The following are perhaps the best known:

- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN);
- Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM);
- Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS);
- Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA);
- Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS);
- European Community (EC);
- Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC);
- Latin American Economic System (LAES);
- League of Arab States;
- North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA);
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC);
- South Pacific Forum (SPF);
- Southern African Development Community (SADC);
- Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR).

#### **Regional networks**

Regional networks can be a valuable means of disseminating knowledge and promoting collaboration in problem solving among countries with similar needs, at low cost. Networks are effective means of supporting **research** (e.g. Forestry Research Network for sub-Saharan Africa [FORNESSA]; African Forestry Research Network [AFORNET]; Asia Pacific Association of Forestry Research Institutions [APAFRI]); **education** (e.g. Southeast Asian Network for Agroforestry Education [SEANAFE], African Network for Agroforestry Education [ANAFE]); and **technical cooperation** on particular aspects of forestry (e.g. the Latin American Technical Cooperation Network on National Parks, other Protected Areas and Wildlife; the

Latin American Technical Cooperation Network on Watershed Management; the Asia Pacific Forest Rehabilitation Network; and the Asia-Pacific Forest Invasive Species Network). Anderson *et al.* (1999) identified more than a dozen regional networks focusing on non-wood forest products. A number of regional networks exist to strengthen research and conservation of forest genetic resources – for example, the European Forest Genetic Resources Programme (EUFORGEN), the Sub-Saharan African Programme on Forest Genetic Resources (SAFORGEN) and the South Pacific Regional Initiative on Forest Genetic Resources (SPRIG).

To promote biodiversity conservation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has assisted its member countries to establish regional biosphere reserve networks as an operational structure for facilitating exchange of information and ideas.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) promotes regional forest and trade networks of buyer and producer groups as part of its Global Forest and Trade Network, an initiative to eliminate illegal logging and improve the management of valuable and threatened forests. These networks facilitate trade links between companies committed to achieving and supporting responsible forestry.

In recent years, bilateral cooperation to prevent and manage forest fires has rapidly expanded into a series of regional wildland fire networks (Goldammer, 2004).

#### **Regional cooperation on forests initiated at WSSD**

At the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002, two major new regional initiatives on forests were announced:

- Asia Forest Partnership (announced by Japan);
- Congo Basin Forest Partnership (announced by the United States).

### FAO support to regions

**Regional and subregional offices.** Shortly after its founding in 1945, FAO began to organize its secretariat into regional offices for Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, Thailand), the Near East (Cairo, Egypt), Africa (Accra, Ghana), Latin America and the Caribbean (Santiago, Chile) and Europe (Rome, Italy). This approach was later extended in the 1990s to include subregional offices for South and East Africa (Harare, Zimbabwe), the Caribbean (Bridgetown, Barbados), the Pacific Islands (Apia, Samoa), Eastern Europe (Budapest, Hungary) and North Africa (Tunis, Tunisia).

**Regional Forestry Commissions.** Six Regional Forestry Commissions, organized by FAO during the period 1948 to 1960, have been meeting on a regular basis for an average of 50 years (see article by Koné *et al.* in this issue). These commissions bring together the heads of national forestry agencies to address issues of common interest to the member countries within the region.

**Technical projects.** FAO carries out many forestry projects with a regional scope, with the following as some examples:

- a project to strengthen the capacity to prevent, control and combat forest fires in Latin America and the Caribbean, through the development of a regional cooperation strategy and the establishment of subregional networks for mutual assistance;
- a project to support the development of a regional strategy for forest health, protection and management in forests

(mainly pine) of Central America (Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua);

- a Central African World Heritage Forest Initiative project to promote the building of protected area management regimes in forest protected areas so as to satisfy standards for World Heritage status and effectively combat the principal threats of illegal hunting and unregulated bushmeat trade;
- a project to develop a coordinated strategy for sustainable development of gum and resin production in sub-Saharan countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Kenya, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan) to enable producing countries to benefit from international trade and to share experiences in production, processing, quality control and marketing;
- assistance in the implementation of the model forest approach for sustainable forest management in Asia and the Pacific, following which consideration is being given to establishing a regional model forest network in the region (FAO, 2004);
- the “In Search of Excellence” initiatives which identified well-managed forests in Central Africa and in Asia and the Pacific to serve as lessons

for sustainable forest management in those regions (FAO, 2003; Durst and Brown, 2003).

### Regional activities of other organizations

Like FAO, many other international organizations dealing with forest issues, including non-governmental organizations, organize their activities through a regional approach. The World Conservation Union (IUCN), for example, has eight regional offices (West Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, Central America, South America, Asia, Europe) dealing with problems particular to the given region. In Eastern and Central Europe, for example, IUCN, in partnership with FAO, is working with forest owners’ associations to promote sustainable forest management and strengthen biodiversity conservation in recently privatized forests, through educational measures, exchange of experience, training and extension materials (see [www.iucn.org/themes/fcp/wherewework/rofe\\_projects.htm](http://www.iucn.org/themes/fcp/wherewework/rofe_projects.htm)). IUCN is also working to ensure that the ongoing afforestation of much of the region’s land that is no longer under cultivation does not lead to loss of valuable habitats or reduction of biodiversity.

**FAO is supporting the development of a regional strategy for forest health, protection and management in Central American forests**



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Another example is the joint IUCN/WWF “Forest Innovations” project (see [www.iucn.org/themes/forests/policy/regional.html](http://www.iucn.org/themes/forests/policy/regional.html)), which helped develop systems for assessing the management effectiveness of protected areas specific to Central America and to Central Africa.

### CONCLUSIONS

Intergovernmental processes usually operate by consensus. This effectively means that countries find agreement on broad principles and goals – such as the desirability of sustainable development for all people or the sustainable management of all types of forests – but not on the specifics of implementation. Thus it is difficult, and perhaps ultimately impossible, for all countries to reach consensus at the global level on the full range of specific actions that are necessary to achieve sustainable forest management. This is especially true if those actions require a large financial commitment or a compromise of national sovereignty over the use of natural resources such as forests.

Regional approaches often provide a means for countries that face common problems and have similar capacities to take effective action to achieve shared goals. There is no shortage of existing regional organizations, processes and initiatives that either have forests as their focal point or that can have a major impact on forests. There may be

little reason to conceive new organizations or processes; on the contrary, in some regions the field is probably overcrowded. In these cases closer collaboration among initiatives could be beneficial.

Regional approaches alone will not solve all of the world’s forest problems. In particular, regional approaches may not directly solve problems between two or more regions without serious negotiations and, ultimately, compromise.

Many participants in the international forest dialogue are experiencing frustration and fatigue. They acknowledge the difficulties of reaching global consensus on additional steps to be taken to improve the management of the world’s forest resources, over and above the voluntary proposals for action that have already been agreed. If this is the case, now may be the time to seriously consider the advantages of emphasizing regional approaches. ♦



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*An FAO regional project is helping gum- and resin-producing sub-Saharan countries share experiences in production, processing, quality control and marketing of these commodities (shown, sorting resin in the Sudan)*