

Regional forest sector outlook studies – preparing for future challenges

In a rapidly globalizing environment, countries need to look beyond their borders to learn from experiences elsewhere. They also need to foresee changes emerging on the horizon to take advantage of opportunities and better prepare to face potential challenges.

FAO's regional outlook studies, initiated at the request of the Regional Forestry Commissions and carried out in collaboration with member countries, provide critical and far-sighted information for national and regional initiatives in the forest sector, and also place forestry into the larger economic and social context. Drawing from information provided by the countries of a region, they typically describe the current state of forests and forestry, the key change drivers that impact the sector, the collective impact of the driving forces on the sector and the broad direction of changes over a time horizon of 10 to 20 years. An analysis of the general trends in demand and supply and their implications for forests is an important element. Major trends in policy and institutional changes and evolving comparative advantages are analysed so that stakeholders can identify emerging opportunities and challenges. More importantly, the outlook studies indicate the options available to the various stakeholders, especially governments, for improving forest management. Outlook studies help the countries place their own policy objectives in the wider regional and global context, thereby facilitating informed national policy development and planning. They are also useful in bringing region-specific issues into the arena of international policy discussions.

To date, FAO has completed four regional outlook studies, for Asia and the Pacific (1998), Africa (2003), Latin America (2004) and Europe (2004). A study for West and Central Asia is in progress, covering 23 countries that were not included in the previous studies. The outputs generally

consist of in-depth country reports, thematic studies and regional (and sometimes subregional) syntheses. Future work will focus on updating the regional outlook studies, taking into account key developments at the national, regional and global levels and revising the global outlook for demand and supply of forest products and services. Towards this end, a preliminary assessment has been undertaken comparing key changes in the Asia and the Pacific region relative to those forecast in the 1998 study.

The regional outlook studies have been of particular value in developing regional support frameworks and in identifying common issues for further work. For example, the Asia Pacific Forest Sector Outlook Study led to follow-up assessment of issues such as the impact of logging bans and the role of incentives in the expansion of forest plantations in the region. The Forestry Outlook Study for Africa has formed the basis for preparation of the forestry segment of the Agriculture and Environment initiatives under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Both the Latin American and European studies have generated substantial interest in their respective regions, helping to look at the larger picture of change and to suggest what may be done at different levels to address issues such as deforestation, environmental protection and collaboration in research and education, all of which will also help to enhance intra- and interregional trade.

Further information and the reports of the FAO regional forestry outlook studies can be accessed online: www.fao.org/forestry/sector_studies