

Catalysing regional action

Regional collaboration provides a means for countries that face common problems to take effective action to achieve shared goals, thus bridging national and global efforts. Forests and watersheds cross national boundaries, and each country's management has an impact on its region's forest resources. Similarities in terms of forest types, economic development, language, culture and other factors may make it easier to reach consensus on steps for improving forest resource management at the regional level than at the global level. As examples in this issue of *Unasylva* show, regional groups may also be better able to agree on specifics of implementation.

Note that although FAO's organizational structure sorts the world's countries into well-defined regions and subregions, for the purposes of this *Unasylva* issue the term "regional" is used relatively loosely, in some cases describing arrangements, initiatives and processes that FAO and others might usually consider subregional.

In the overview article, R.M. Martin describes the advantages and limitations of regional approaches, and provides a typology of various kinds of intraregional collaboration – including processes for criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management; high-level processes on forests; regional economic and trade groups; regional networks in such areas as research, education and technical cooperation. He also describes FAO's support to regions, including regional and subregional offices, Regional Forestry Commissions and regional projects. A box describes the use of regional forest sector outlook studies in planning for future challenges.

Next, P. Koné *et al.* describe the history and activities of FAO's six Regional Forestry Commissions, which advise FAO on policy formulation and priorities for its forestry programme. These commissions are increasingly active in regional networking, information sharing and joint problem-solving, for example through working groups. As fora for countries to work together to find common solutions to forest issues, the commissions help translate global commitments into action in the regions.

The Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) is a good example of a country-led regional process whose success is explained in part by high-level political support. T. Juszczak and co-authors describe MCPFE's activities on several key issues of importance to the region: collaboration between Eastern and Western Europe; pan-European criteria and indicators; economic aspects of forests; and intersectoral cooperation to conserve forest biological diversity.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has coordinated regional forestry cooperation for two decades. An article by L. Mubaiwa focuses on the recently developed SADC Protocol on Forestry, signed by most of the SADC countries in 2002 but not yet ratified, which could provide an effective policy framework for the management of the region's forest resources – but only if it is effectively supported and implemented. Its success will depend on commitment from all stakeholders and a balance between sovereignty and good will of participating countries.

In Central Africa there are numerous regional initiatives directed towards forest sector development – the Conference on Central African Moist Forest Ecosystems (CEFDHAC), the Conference of Ministers in Charge of Forests in Central Africa (COMIFAC) and the recently created Congo Basin Partnership, to name a few. J.P. Koyo notes that these initiatives provide evidence of the political will to reverse deforestation in the region but have not yet had significant results on the ground. He postulates that improved socio-economic conditions and better policy coordination between forestry and other sectors are necessary to their success.

N. Sizer describes the efforts of four regional processes in Asia – the Asia Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) process, the Asia Forest Partnership, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and FAO's Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission (APFC) – to tackle a specific problem: illegal logging. He addresses issues of overlap and the need for collaboration among processes. His analysis suggests that requisites for successful regional approaches include well-defined objectives, broad participation, shared leadership and regional ownership of the process.

The last article, by E. Elías, also describes a regional endeavour with a specific objective: the Tarapoto Process for the development of criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of Amazon forests. Carried out within the framework of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), the process is the outcome of five years of consultation at all levels within and among the eight ACTO member countries. Fifteen priority indicators have been identified and are now being validated in close cooperation with national forest programmes in each country.

The issue also highlights several other initiatives and processes – the Central American Forestry Strategy; collaborative arrangements for sustainable forestry in Pacific islands; the Northeast Asian Forest Forum; and an initiative of the North American Forest Commission to assess forest resources at the regional level.

Together, these initiatives show the power and promise of regional action. Clearly there is no substitute for local and national commitment to sustainable forest management, but regional approaches can add momentum and complement global interest in better stewardship of forests. ♦