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The sixteenth session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF16) in April 2021 requested the Forum secretariat, in collaboration with members of the Forum, CPF member organizations and stakeholders, to conduct an assessment of the challenges faced by countries, and the strategies, recovery measures and best practices for reducing the impact of COVID-19 on



COVID-19 and forests in Asia-Pacific Region

An assessment of challenges faced by countries, and the strategies, recovery measures and best practices in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector

A synthesis report prepared for the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat

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There is not much concrete information on challenges faced by countries in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector in the subregional reports. Most subregional reports focus on COVID-19 rather than in addressing the impacts of COVID-19. The likely reason for this is that it is too early to develop, implement and assess strategies, measures, plans and programmes specific for forests and the forest sector.

Nevertheless, after a careful analysis of the subregional reports and available literature, the following emerged as the key challenges faced by countries of the region in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector:

- x Mobility restrictions induced challenges in monitoring and managing forests;
- x Low or lack of political commitment to forests;
- x General absence of forest-specific policies and strategic plans to combat the impact of COVID-19;

developed against the backdrop of COVID and focused on two objectives: protecting nature and creating green jobs. It provided jobs and income to many workers, mostly rural and youth, and factory jobs in cities due to the lockdowns. Kazakhstan also has announced a massive tree planting program as a part of its recovery strategy.

The application of modern ICT and other technology is seen as a more common measure in many countries o

- c) Support new business opportunities that emerged during the pandemic, and encourage
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AsiaPacific region at a glance

& K [• W & 1 (<https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/apfc/en>) states:

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the region's land area, and 18 percent of global forest cover. On a per capita basis, Asia Pacific is the least forested region in the world. However, an annual regional loss of over 0.7 million hectares of forests from 1990 to 2000 has reversed into an annual increase of 2.3 million hectares during 2000 to 2005. Between 2005 and 2010, the rate of increase declined to under 0.5 million hectares per year.

Notwithstanding the positive trend in forest area at the aggregate level, forest degradation and declining health and vitality remain the hidden problems confronting Asia Pacific forests. Despite a wide range of supporting initiatives and much discussion, implementation of sustainable forest management continues to be a challenge.

Forests provide homes and sources of livelihoods to hundreds of millions of people in Asia and the Pacific. They are also generators of national wealth and economic advancement: the annual À o μ } (š Ç] v % Ç] u Ç Ç (} Ç • š % Ç } μ š •] v š Z Ç P] } v Æ

According to FRA2020, Asia had the highest net gain in forest area since 1990. In 2000, it saw an annual increase in forest area by 202,000 ha per year, but the rate of net forest gain went up to 2.35 million ha per year in 2002-2010, then to a slightly lower rate of 1.17 million ha per year in 2010-2020. Most of the increase in forest area occurred in China, followed by India and Vietnam. Oceania recorded the second largest average annual net gain in forest area (after Asia) in 2020, at 423,000 ha, Ç À Ç •] v P š Z Ç P] } v [• v P š] À š Ç v the (Ç ì n Ç Æ) of forest loss • X • %] š worldwide, many countries of the Asia Pacific region are still facing serious challenges of deforestation and forest degradation.

Demography

The region has the largest population in the world.

from the chart from the New York Times website (23 December 2021), the trend in the region is relatively modest compared to other regions, in particular, Europe and North America (Figure 1). The Asia Pacific region saw a dramatic increase in COVID infections during the spring of 2021, mainly in India, with the Delta variant of the coronavirus. The total infection and death in India are the highest in the region. On the other hand, Turkmenistan reported zero infections, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have 7 and 20 infections respectively, and Bhutan reported a total of just 3 deaths (see Table 1). In other regions, from 3 January 2020 to 23 December 2021, there have been 34,765,976 confirmed cases of COVID

Chapter 2 Challenges faced by countries in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector

From a careful analysis of the subregional reports for South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia Pacific Islands, and available literature, the following emerged as the key challenges faced by countries in the region in addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector:

unprecedented health crisis. Thus, the impact of Covid-19 on forests and the forest sector often does not receive much specific attention (Markovic et al. 2021).

When political leaders are made aware of the significant role that forests can play, they would be more supportive of integrating sustainable forest management in strategies for pandemic recovery and reduction. The Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme of Pakistan and the recent announcement by the President of Kazakhstan to plant 2 billion trees in the countryside and 15 million trees in urban areas are examples of such conviction and vision in making forests an integral part of the recovery strategy.

economic disruption posed by COVID and in Japan, the forest sector needed finance and capital investment to stabilize and strengthen its domestic timber market (Damayanti 2021)

Survey respondents from several developing countries of the region mentioned instances of

hand, the growth of e-commerce has contributed to increased demand for wood-based packaging materials (Markovick et al. 2021). Cases like these can present further environmental challenges in the future.

Chapter 3 Strategies and measures taken to combat the impacts

The findings from the sub-regional reports of South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Pacific Islands are consistent: there are very few, if any, forest sector-specific strategies and measures to combat the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector. Governments adopted different policies to recover from the negative impact of COVID-19. These were often not specific for the forest sector, but rather general epidemiological safety measures and in support of the economy as a whole (see Box 1).

Countries covered in the sub-regional assessments have launched economic stimulus packages to revive their economies and assist people impacted by the pandemic. Although each country's package is designed to address its specific needs, circumstances and capacity, there are some common key measures include concessional loans to small businesses (MSMEs), extension of loan repayment deadlines, refinance facilities, extension of tax payment deadlines, a grace period extension for infrastructure projects, and targeted lending in productive sectors at concessional rates and other supportive measures. Several countries such as Thailand, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka also launched cash transfer programmes, price ceilings on essential food items, and food allowances to thousands of poor and vulnerable population groups affected by COVID-19. Such nationwide strategies and measures would obviously provide relief to people, communities

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In Nepal, community forest user groups (CFUGs) ran awareness campaigns, and provided their CFU buildings for COVID-19-related purposes, such as for treatment and quarantine centers within the country. Another respondent from Nepal

15 million trees in urban areas as an integral part of the recovery strategy from COVID-19 (Doshi 2021, Markovic et al. 2021).

There are also growing signs of countries integrating the well-being of all living things, including humans, pandemic, and in the continued pursuit of sustainable development literature indicates, at the least, China, India and Nepal have committed to the K v , o š Z % % a p p a c z integrating animal, environmental, and human health at the core of its COVID-19 recovery policy

E % o [• D] v] • š Ć Ć } (& } Ć • š • v v Ā] Ć } v u v š Zarrying) u ā activities š] o P μ] related to the management of forests, wildlife and environment under different levels of COVID related restrictions/lockdowns. The guidelines include key management issues such as the surveillance against illegal forest harvesting and wildlife poaching, forests and wildlife management, supply of forest products to industries and consumers, supply of fuelwood for crematoriums, forest research, training, and environment as well as the operation of offices under the Ministry for providing services to the general public (personal communications Ā] š Z v } (([] o } (š Z E % o [• D] v] • š Ć Ć } Environment).

It is also noted that several countries in the region have developed or are in the process of developing new national action plans and revising their existing plans. (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) that include socioeconomic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as biodiversity conservation and GHG emission reduction through afforestation (Markovic et al. 2021)

There are some examples of forest-specific strategies and recovery measures being developed or already in place in a few countries. For example, the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) has launched the Korea Forest Plan: Korean Forest New Deal Policy 2020 to address current and post-pandemic situations innovatively. The Korea Forest Plan promotes the application of IC Sustainable forest management (SFM), including the forest-related market, as well as creating and supporting forest-related businesses and jobs. The Korea Plan also aims at generating career interest in the younger generation in the forest products sector, and more active bi- and multilateral global forest partnerships to overcome the trend of protectionism in world trade after the pandemic. Furthermore, the K & } Ć • š W o v] v o μ • % o v } v • š o] • Z] v P Z (} Ć • š μ ((Ć • [P] v neighborhood areas by planting hinoki cypress (Shamaecyparis obtusa) or needle fir (Abies holophylla) trees, which are known for being curative (Damayanti 2021)

The Forestry Agency of Japan reported various measures designed to help address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, in coordination with various stakeholders. Some of the measures designed for forest products and the production sector include

- organizing national and regional forums with the involvement of all stakeholders to share information about various support measures
- promoting new business opportunities to help adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and greater use of remote meetings for sales promotion and online bidding systems
- These modalities may be mainstreamed in the forestry and wood industry as a result of the pandemic (ibid.).

to label an approach, measure, or practice as the best practice. In the case of strategies and measures to cope with the challenges faced by forests and the forest sector due to COVID-19, it may be too early to determine best practice or practices, to collect information on what strategies, measures, and activities seem to be working (or not); and what the experiences and conditions under which certain results seem to emerge. The report on East Asia (Damayanti 2021) also notes that recovery measures, and best practices on forest and forest sector are too early to be published or because relevant research has not yet been conducted or publication on the impacts was limited.

The respondents in South Asia either mentioned some general programmes and practices as examples of best practices, such as the community-based forest management, livelihood-focused forestry programmes or the application of digital technologies for providing services during the pandemic, but did not provide any answer to the question. Similarly, the report on Central Asia also observed that there were no explicit examples of best practices for the forest sector in the literature. More than half of its respondents could not recognize best practices. This lack of specific examples of COVID-19 related best practices in the forest sector further support the authors' view that, in the midst of the ongoing health and economic crises, it is too early to ascertain if any COVID-19 related best practices have emerged in the forest sector.

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In a broader scale the cooperation and commitment for collective action by political leaders in different sub-regions to address the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic on public health and economy may be considered a good policy practice. The region has witnessed several such collective commitments and actions for instance, the commitment by the member governments of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)¹⁰ in promoting investment in the essential sectors of food, agriculture and forestry as a part of the COVID recovery package in their regions.

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- x New policies/strategies for a green economy, building back better after the pandemic, fiscal incentives, investment and technical assistance for timber trade associations, community groups and CSOs, and farmer and other stakeholder groups;
- x Coordination on international timber trade;
- x Capacity building, cross-sectoral and inter-regional cooperation and
- x Funding for research and development and improvement of forest education.

^ t v -to% late, accurate, scientific research results, which could show clearly, in figures, dynamics, etc., the important role of the forests for the pandemic recovery. They could provide a clear basis for the local population and public authorities to take decisions concerning the forests. As well as good practices that could be clear examples of the possibility to preserve forests benefits _A respondent from Kyrgyzstan)

Chapter 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

All countries of the world, including those in the Asia-Pacific region, have been struggling with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in all aspects of life. The impact and challenges posed by the pandemic and actions to contain it have created several challenges to the forest sector, as well. Forests in the subregions are predominantly under public ownership, but are virtually an open access resource. This made the forests more prone to be overutilized for food, shelter, and income by desperate poor people further impoverished by the lockdowns and job losses. It has also been observed that countries and their specific stakeholders have experienced different impacts on their forests and the forest.

Despite it being almost two years since the coronavirus was first detected, and the development and

- digital technologies for SFM, including monitoring, law enforcement, and communication;
- g) Consider initiating or partnering with relevant organization(s) for a systematic global monitoring system to track what changes/measures/results are emerging on the issues concerning forests, the forest sector, and other related sectors (e.g., agriculture, energy, transportation, trade, etc.) as a result of COVID-19. UNFF sessions should be updated from such monitoring, and space out depth assessments at 2-3 year intervals;
 - h) Encourage countries to launch new or to reorient currently operational forest rehabilitation and management programmes and projects to help employ a low skilled workforce, including women, youth, migrant workers, and the unemployed as a result of the pandemic and economic slowdowns
 - i) Strengthen regional and international cooperation in tackling the impact of the COVID pandemic on forests and the forest sector
 - j) To overcome some of the challenges experienced by the current subregional assessments, for example, the minimal timeframe, language barriers and low rates of survey responses, the Secretariat may consider conducting future assessments by allocating sufficient time involving in-country experts and national workshops and
 - k) Invite Pakistan to organize a special side event at UNFF to share its experiences,

The sixteenth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), identified the following responses and measures, and policy recommendations for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and an enhanced contribution of forests to inclusive sustainable development:

- a) Integrate sustainable forest management into COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans;
- b) Renew the commitment to internationally agreed forest-related goals and targets and sustainable use;
- c) ~~WCE } u } š š Z ^ K v , o š Z _clud~~ ~~to the value of ecosystem~~ ~~services in recovery~~ ~~plans;~~
- d) Build momentum to halt illegal and unsustainable forest practices;
- e) Integrate investment in forests into the recovery plans;
- f) Strengthen institutions and policies;
- g) Strengthen forest governance;
- h) Strengthen science and technology;
- i) Strengthen data collection, analysis and exchange; and
- j) Mobilize resources from all sources for forests.

Source: UNFF (2021). Report on the sixteenth session ~~5/2021/42E/CN.18/2021/8~~

<https://www.un.org/esa/forests/documents/index.html>