Informing European policies and programmes to better sustain forest landscapes and peoples

Renewing the European Tropical Forest Research Network

January 2020
Context

Recognition is growing of the significant contribution that forests and trees must play in meeting the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. The European Commission and its Member States are playing leading roles in raising the importance of forests in international policy agendas and ensuring that it also ‘practices what it preaches’, having done much over the years to build consensus and develop appropriate declarations and policies that are helping to meet global challenges. These include the EU Timber Regulation, FLEGT, the Amsterdam Declarations Partnerships on Deforestation and Sustainable Palm Oil, and support to reducing the impact from the production and trade in all of the main forest-risk commodities.

The need for scaling up concerted European action has been reconfirmed many times in 2019, in ‘Stepping up EU action to halt deforestation and forest degradation’ (factsheet, July 2019), ‘Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world’s forests (communication, December 2019)’, and the European Green Deal.

This is much welcomed, but the pace must be increased given the urgency and the enormity of the task ahead due to continuing commodity-driven deforestation across the tropics, mostly but not exclusively for oil palm, soy and beef. And for example, this is further exacerbated by forest clearance to grow food for rapidly expanding populations in the Congo Basin, by the increasing intensity and scale of fires in the Amazon, and increasing outbreaks of forest pests and disease in the climate-stressed forests of South East Asia, that all demand effective forest landscape solutions. More needs to be done, and more quickly, especially that the global influence of EU consumer demands for products from tropical and sub-tropical forest landscapes is increasing European pressures, directly and indirectly, on water, soil, habitats and biodiversity over massive areas of tropical forest landscapes, and beyond.

There is also increasing consensus that the lack of forest landscape facts limits consensus and progress towards forest landscape solutions. The European Commission acknowledges the need to address the knowledge and innovation gap through scientific evidence and best professional knowledge as a solid foundation for developing effective policies. This is solidly manifested in in Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World’s Forests:

- Priority 1 - Establish a platform for multi-stakeholder and Member State dialogue on deforestation, forest degradation and on sustainably increasing world’s forest cover to provide a forum to foster exchanges with and among stakeholders in order to build alliances, push for and share commitments to significantly reduce deforestation, and share experiences and information.
- Priority 5 - Support the availability of, quality of, and access to information on forests and commodity supply chains. Support research and innovation.

This is reconfirmed in ‘Support information, research and innovation’ in the December Communication:

- 40 - ENCOURAGE Member States, through national and EU programmes, to contribute to research, development and innovation related to integrated land-use planning, sustainable forest management including afforestation, reforestation, protection, conservation, restoration, as well as agroforestry and sustainable agriculture production;

Introducing ETFRN

The European Tropical Forest Research Network (ETFRN) was established in 1991, prompted by an initiative from the European Commission’s Directorate General for Research (DG RES). It was founded to ensure that European research and knowledge activities contributed effectively to the conservation and sustainable use of forest resources in tropical countries, with three main roles, as: (i) a network for collaboration and cooperation, (ii) providing services for synthesis, information exchange, communication, and advocacy, and (iii) for leveraging funding.

Core funding was provided by European Commission’s DG RES until 2004. In 1997, the Secretariat moved to Tropenbos International in the Netherlands, where it has been hosted until today. ETFRN received a very positive external review commissioned by DG RES in 2003, and a working group including members from eight countries met in Brussels in March 2009, confirming the mission, purpose and structure (see box). But there was limited follow-up and EC funding dried up, being taken over by ad-hoc financing from different sources, particularly for the production of its flagship publication ETFRN News. In addition, in recent years, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality provided critical funding to upkeep the coordination of the ETFRN
network, providing continuity to it functioning at the current level, including the production and dissemination of the ETFRN News.

However, for various reasons, ETFRN has not entirely fulfilled its ambitions and functions in recent years. Acknowledging past achievements, but also that the landscape in which it operates has evolved in so many ways, a scoping study was initiated in May 2019 to reassess its niche and (potential) future roles, with guiding questions that asked if ETFRN is still relevant, and if so what future role, membership, target group, gaps and emerging issues to address, priority activities, organizational and management structure, and how to secure financial sustainability. An interim report in October 2019 summarizes the results from the first set of interviews and presents preliminary findings. Interviewees included some of those who have been involved in ETFRN over the past decades, and others with an interest in tropical forestry related issues but from outside the ‘usual’ sectors or organizations.

"In summary, there is a clear perceived need for a European-level platform for forest-related organizations to advise the European Commission, Member States and institutes within them and beyond, with evidence-based information in support of policy development and programme implementation. And such a renewed network would complement existing international organisations such as CIFOR, EFI, ICRAF and IUFRO. Almost all interviewees confirmed that the ETFRN mission and vision remained valid with some changes, and there is still a role for such a network with some revisions such as a broader focus beyond forests, to cross-sector landscape-level issues that affect forests and forest-dependent people. Gaps in the science-policy interface that ETFRN could help to fill were highlighted repeatedly, ETFRN needs to broaden its membership, however, both in expertise and geography, i.e. including more countries, e.g. looking to other corners of the EU and Europe as a whole. It also needs a renewed secretariat, with EFI Barcelona and TBI Wageningen suggested, with permanent staffing. ETFRN News remains a highly valued publication that should continue. Core funding is needed, and should be sought from the EC, as before, with propositions of how to secure additional income.”

Results of the scoping study were developed into a draft concept note, circulated to those who participated in earlier interviews, and to others who were involved in ETFRN is previous years. The additional feedback received was then included in this revised concept note, including the following summary of the new mission, purpose, objectives and activities proposed. It was also proposed that the main role of the network should be in addressing tropical forest conservation and management from a European perspective; i.e. what Europe can do by means of development aid, trade regulations, legislation, changes in consumption pattern etc. to reduce deforestation and land degradation and enhance forest restoration in the tropics, and as such membership should be opened up to sectors such as agribusiness and trade in forest-risk commodities.

A renewed European Tropical Forest Landscapes Knowledge Network

Based on comments received during the scoping study (interim report available on request), revisions are proposed to the title, mission, purpose and objectives of the original ETFRN, below, with a series of suggested key activities that could form the foundation for a renewed network.

**Mission** – To ensure that knowledge on tropical forest landscapes and peoples effectively contributes to European policies and programmes that help achieve the forest-related targets within the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Purpose** – To enhance forest research capability, analytical consensus and communication of findings by facilitating partnerships, dialogues and communication products between organizations in Europe and tropical countries; and producing and communicating evidence of importance of sustainable management of forests, trees and landscapes and how these can be scaled effective to meet the broad social, economic and environmental challenges of poverty, climate change, biodiversity loss, soil degradation and water scarcity.
Next steps

Based on the identified needs of the European Commission as highlighted in recent reports, and the preliminary findings of the ETFRN scoping study, there is clear potential for the EC and Member States to benefit from the rejuvenation of a broad existing platform with a long history of convening and facilitating the sharing of tropical forest landscape related knowledge.

Such a renewed network would also prove effective in supporting the follow up actions related to forests, biodiversity, climate change and others associated with the European Green Deal.

Based on feedback received from the European Commission and others, this concept note can be developed into a full proposal by ETFRN members and partners who have agreed to participate, including those in EFI, IUFRO, GIZ (Germany), IIED (UK/international), RBINS (Belgium), SFA (Sweden) and TBI (Netherlands).

For more information, contact:

- Rene Boot, ETFRN Chair and Director, Tropenbos International, Wageningen, the Netherlands (rene.boot@tropenbos.org)
- Herman Savenije, ETFRN secretariat, Tropenbos International, Wageningen, the Netherlands (herman.savenije@tropenbos.org)
- Nick Pasiecznik, Tropenbos International Associate, Lyon, France (npasiecznik@wanadoo.fr)

Endnotes

1 - Protecting and restoring the world’s forests: stepping up EU action to halt deforestation and forest degradation. 23 July 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/eu-communication-2019-stepping-eu-action-protect-and-restore-worlds-forests_en