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Moving Forward With Forest Governance

EUROPEAN TROPICAL FOREST RESEARCH NETWORK





5.1 Are National Forest Programmes valid instruments for improving governance?

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Introduction

This paper summarizes a 2010 survey¹ capturing the lessons learned from National Forest Programmes (NFPs) in 76 countries. This survey was cross-referenced against a poll conducted by FORIS² in 2009 as well as the NFP update³ and the Forest Resources Assessment (FRA). The survey was validated through focused interviews with different stakeholder groups and a comprehensive document review. Combined, the results provide insights into different NFPs and suggest ways to put the concept into practice. This paper serves as a reference for parties involved in NFP processes and the members of the wider professional community who seek lessons learned and recommendations on how NFPs promote forest governance.

Background: the NFP concept

NFPs as unified policy frameworks

One of the most important outcomes of the international post-UNCED forest policy dialogue, the NFP concept was officially endorsed at the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF, 1995–97). The term “National Forest Programme” was used to describe a wide range of approaches to sustainable forest management at the sub-national and national levels. It applies to all countries and to all types of forests.

An NFP consists of repetitive cycles of analysis, planning, implementation and monitoring/evaluation of

forest-related policies and activities. A widespread misconception about NFPs is that they are either a one-time exercise or a tangible product. The NFP concept stresses the need to address forest sector issues in a comprehensive and cross-cutting fashion. It looks beyond the forest sector, involves all forest stakeholders and links the international forest policy dialogue to national strategic and operational planning. In this way, an NFP serves as a permanent national framework that coordinates a range of forest-related international agreements and national programmes and plans.



NFPs HAVE COME TO BE RECOGNIZED AS AN IMPORTANT PROCEDURAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING GOOD FOREST GOVERNANCE AND, BY EXTENSION, SFM.

For international cooperation, NFPs can provide a common basis for support. As a commonly agreed, comprehensive forest policy framework (e.g., COFO 2010, Forest Policy Development Guide 2010) an NFP can guide countries in their pursuit of good forest governance.

NFP principles

NFP principles are procedural benchmarks that determine how the elements⁴ of an NFP have been achieved. Originally, the IPF/IFF agreed on 37 procedural principles. These were later streamlined into three groups: (1) national sovereignty and country leadership; (2) consistency within and integration beyond the forest sector; and (3) participation and partnership.⁵

National sovereignty refers to the acknowledged right to manage forests. It implies that NFPs are to be aligned to each country's context. Donors should provide their support in a way that addresses national priorities. The forest sector needs to exercise effective leadership and coordination when dealing with other sectors and the international community.

Consistency within the forest sector promotes synergies. It applies to policies, legislation, procedures, instruments and institutions. Integration refers to linking the NFP to overarching policies (e.g., national development policy, poverty reduction strategy) and to other sectors.

Participation promotes transparency and consensus. It requires clarification of stakeholders' mandates, tasks, rights and obligations and the establishment of effective coordination mechanisms.

Findings and observations

Prevalence of NFPs

By 2010, the number of countries operating NFPs had risen to 131⁶ from 99 in 2008.⁷ Countries with NFPs account for 75% of the global forest area. Almost three-quarters of all NFPs started after the year 2000; one-third started after 2006. This suggests that the NFP concept is gathering momentum. Most NFPs came about through external support by donors or NGOs. Currently, the NFP Facility – a multi-donor programme hosted by FAO – is the most important provider of small grants, procedural support and information related to NFPs to 70 partner countries.

Main functions

Most respondents to the 2010 survey perceived NFPs as either a strategic planning document or a forest policy forum in parallel with other initiatives, such as the non-legally binding instrument (NLBI).⁸ Only about one-third identified NFPs as their main forest governance reform framework, which suggests that there is a long-term need to promote NFPs.

Aside from the need to communicate the concept, develop capacities and mobilize support, structural deficits in many countries need to be overcome; this can be a slow

process. The number of countries regarding their NFPs as only a “project” had dropped markedly in the survey, compared to the 2009 FORIS questionnaire. This attests to the success of coordinated support of the kind the NFP Facility provides.

Institutional set-up

The significance of the structure of governance bodies within the forest sector and in related sectors, along with procedural rules governing inter-institutional coordination and cooperation, is increasingly apparent. Half the respondents cited organizational and structural deficits as major constraints for NFP implementation. Most countries report progress in this regard, having successfully established different forms of focal points, steering committees and consultation platforms. NFPs are commonly spearheaded by the ministry in charge of forestry. Their focal points are often attached to a relatively low level of the forest administration, however; this results in a lack of political influence. Many countries established dedicated structures for thematic focus, such as round-tables, advisory groups, working groups, task forces, monitoring and/or validation units. Only a minority of countries deliberately reflect ongoing decentralization processes within the set-up of their NFPs, e.g., by means of conducting regional dialogue processes.

Several cases have been recorded where established structures and processes broke down after donor support (especially funding of running costs and investments) had ceased.

NFPs as iterative processes

Almost 70% of respondents characterized NFPs as iterative. Some phases seem to have progressed better than others. Most countries judged their analysis, policy formulation and planning phases as nearly complete: 80% of all responding countries now have a forest policy statement and have enacted forest legislation. Findings suggest distinctly less progress in terms of institutional reform and implementation at the field level, owing primarily to a lack of resource allocation, weak capacities and changes in personnel. Monitoring and evaluation seem to be least well developed in most countries.

Implementation of the NFP principles

The 2010 survey, like earlier assessments,⁹ found widespread satisfaction regarding national sovereignty. The NFP exercise apparently promoted country leadership in forest sector development. Most progress occurred in terms of a common vision, donor coordination, and funding (national budgets or other sources, including donor support). Most countries based their forest policies on broad stakeholder consultation. Some had their forest policy signed by high-ranking government officials so as to highlight the forest sector’s significance.

Findings suggest that NFPs in most countries depend on external support. Some NFPs were initiated through donor influence, i.e., with a view to streamlining donor involvement in forest sector development. Such observations tally with earlier studies (e.g., the 2009 NFP Facility survey). Donors can also have negative influences, however, as shown by responses criticizing donor dominance, even to the point of disregarding national

priorities. Further concerns suggest that especially in African countries NFPs did not strengthen governance to the extent necessary, due to institutional deficits, the low profile of the forest sector and insufficient implementation.

Country responses highlight participation and partnership as a factor in the success of the NFP and even an objective in itself, one that demonstrates democracy and legitimizes decisions. This contrasts with findings from the 1990s indicating a certain reluctance to involve non-state stakeholders. For most respondents participation has become a reality, and is often linked to constitutional reforms and decentralization.

Most countries have devolved management and decision-making rights to local groups and to the private sector. Participation by marginalized/indigenous groups often leaves room for improvement, however. Participation seems to be strongest in terms of policy formulation, planning and monitoring, while involvement of the private sector reportedly lags behind. Because stakeholders often lack self-organization, negotiation skills, political leverage and awareness, they often fail to meet official registration requirements without donor support. An absence of tangible benefits can leave stakeholders frustrated. Further bottlenecks include inadequate access to data and lack of procedures adapted to specific target groups. Furthermore, countries report difficulties in funding information management. Donor support to this end was reportedly not sustained.

Consistency within and beyond the forest provided a mixed result. Coordination within the forest sector had progressed most; cross-sector mainstreaming had waned (despite the fact that the number of respective coordination mechanisms had grown markedly compared to the 2004 NFP update). Only a few countries had succeeded in establishing permanent cross-sector working groups (e.g., on land use, energy, biodiversity, climate change etc.). Donor support was instrumental to this end.

In a majority of countries, the forest sector's economic significance remains underrated, owing to a lack of data or data dispersal among various ministries. Environmental services provided by forests are often underrated due to a lack of valuation methods and instruments. References to forest sector development in development strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) tend to be generic and lack substantiation.

Legal/regulatory consistency across sector boundaries was identified as a critical issue in the 2004 NFP update. Findings from 2010 corroborate this observation, with most countries reporting weak progress. Findings regarding coordination between NFPs and processes in support of various forest-related multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) suggest that parallel implementation rather than consistent mainstreaming is occurring.

Lessons learned

Based on these findings, the following lessons learned seem pertinent (Table 1).

Table 1. Lessons learned from NFP implementation in 76 countries

Prevalence	The large number of NFPs creates considerable opportunities. Most countries have structures and procedures in place and have achieved preliminary results.
Main functions	National and international perceptions differ considerably. NFPs rarely become a unified framework for all forest-related initiatives.
Institutional set-up	The duplication of coordination frameworks diminishes the efficiency and impact of NFPs. The role of NFPs as related to the NLBI warrants further clarification. Coordination is hampered by the often low status of lead agencies.
Iterative process	Despite considerable progress in policy formulation and planning, implementation is critical. Weak M&E obstructs learning and adjustment at the policy level.
Country sovereignty and leadership	Lead agencies lack political leverage, due to low administrative attachment, a weak public image of forest authorities, capacity deficits and insufficient resource allocation. Competent leadership requires capacity and continuity. Highly elaborate arrangements outside existing governance structures prove unsustainable. Adequate funding depends on political commitment. Donor support is crucial, but should not become dominant. Despite a tight project schedule, donor support needs to respect the country-specific pace of development.
Participation and partnership	Participation is highly successful in general, but still requires improvement regarding (i) involving other economic sectors; (ii) empowering NGOs and informal stakeholder groups; and (iii) involving the private sector. Participation depends on tangible benefits and impacts from the NFP, especially at the local level. Overly ambitious planning runs the risk of discouraging stakeholders, particularly in the absence of corresponding funds. Equal satisfaction among all stakeholders is unrealistic. Conflict mediation is required, especially where large numbers of stakeholders with specific agendas are involved.
Consistency within and beyond the forest sector	Cross-sector coordination and alignment of NFPs with overarching policies warrant further attention and improvement. Recognition of the forest sector's economic and social significance facilitates cross-sector streamlining. Information management and availability of data are pivotal to this end. Joint activities, such as cross-sector projects and streamlining of EIA processes, facilitate cross-sector coordination.

Conclusions and recommendations

From a general perspective, the extent to which NFPs improve forest governance depends on how effectively they are structured. Several factors are required:

- raise the profile of the forest sector;
- promote adequate institutional settings for the NFP;
- enhance leadership capacities and participation;
- demonstrate tangible benefits of NFPs; and
- institutionalize learning and knowledge management.

Profile of the forest sector

Communicating the forest sector's contribution to development and poverty reduction requires sound information:

- forest data should be systematically assessed and streamlined into the M&E routines of other sectors and overarching programmes;
- local data (e.g., Forest Management Plans) should be consolidated at the regional and national levels; and
- disclosure rules and data accessibility need to reflect stakeholder needs, including level of complexity and availability in local languages.

Many forest products are used informally and are hence not reflected in official data, and markets do not yet reflect the forests' environmental services. Several actions are required:

- establishing a value for forest services, e.g., through payment for environmental services (PES);
- formalization of production and marketing to promote the accurate pricing of forest products; and
- support to smallholders and local communities to promote the development of forest management units, capacity development, market outreach, and to increase the value added from forest production.

In many countries the forest sector remains tainted by corruption. This problem is difficult to change. These are examples of needed improvements:

- a neutral NFP moderator;
- information and public relations;
- capacity development in terms of professionalism and standards of conduct; and
- networking.

Political commitment to transparency, participatory decision-making, and decentralized implementation are the main ingredients of a successful NFP.

Institutional setting and management

If NFPs are to be recognized and accepted, they must be attached to public governance structures, and authority should be shared among various sectors. This can be achieved by linking the NFP to an influential ministry; establishing inter-ministerial steering committees for coordination purposes and strategic decision making; promoting

decentralized governance; and linking the NFP to wider contexts such as environment or sustainable development.

NFP structures become more durable when they are kept lean and efficient, in line with domestic funding capabilities. NFPs should be able to remain operative if external support is withdrawn.

Efficiency also depends on strategic planning, including mobilization of human resources and capital. Professionals spearheading the NFP require specific skills besides technical knowledge, including expertise in organization and accountability and communications, and social awareness and competence in interacting with lay people.

National sovereignty and country leadership

Successful NFPs require that forest sector not to be marginalized in terms of high-level political attention or fund allocation by more prominent sectors or influential stakeholders in the national development context. This is particularly important as donors switch to joint assistance strategies and budget support in reference to country-driven development priorities.

Although Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been instrumental in promoting NFPs, dependency on external aid may weaken national commitment and leadership. Balancing proactive interventions and respect for national priorities and time requirements can be challenging for donors. Lean and efficient structures are more likely to survive the withdrawal of donor support.

Participation and partnership

Participation requires the political will to improve framework conditions (democracy, decentralization, good governance). If these conditions do improve, stakeholder analyses serve to clarify the roles and mandates, interests, capacities and political leverage of various stakeholder groups. Empowerment of marginalized stakeholders promotes acceptance of the NFP, and increases the chance that it will be implemented.

To participate meaningfully, stakeholders must have these characteristics:

- well informed about both the subject of the discussion and procedural aspects of their participation. In order to avoid frustration, it is important that stakeholders are well aware of what their participation means.
- organized and legitimately represented. This requires prior internal consultation and consensus.
- empowered — capacity building and advocacy help to avoid inequity and dominance by the most influential groups. Weaker stakeholders need to be encouraged.



- motivated — stakeholder views must be taken seriously, and tangible benefits must be provided to avert frustration.

Stakeholder participation often depends on whether the NFP can provide tangible benefits. Participation strategies should therefore address local priorities. Since SFM means a long-term, inter-generational investment, tenure security and equitable benefit sharing are key concerns of the rural poor. NFPs need to demonstrate the socio-economic viability of SFM. Public support, including PES and incentive schemes that promote investment and employment, can sustain local commitment.

Consistency within and beyond the forest sector

Although NFPs have succeeded in promoting forest sector coordination, cross-sector coordination remains hard to achieve. NFPs must therefore be aligned to the overarching development policies of each country. This requires actions by the forest sector to ensure that it is adequately represented in cross-cutting processes:

- initiate cross-sector decision-making at decentralized levels;
- initiate joint activities, e.g., studies as part of the sector review and implementation partnerships for field projects; and
- engage in cross-sector networking to foster working relations.

The way forward

Findings suggest that in an increasing number of countries, NFPs have come to be recognized as an important procedural framework for promoting good forest governance and, by extension, SFM. NFPs engender societal consensus about the ways in which forest resources are managed and used, and promote social equity in terms of access to and sharing of forest goods and services.

Because forest resources underpin the livelihoods of a large number of people, many more fundamental issues of societal reform and development can be demonstrated, discussed and resolved against the backdrop of the forest sector. On the other hand, NFPs provide no patent remedy for structural weaknesses or deficiencies, such as non-transparent public governance or entrenched corruption. The most fundamental precondition of any successful NFP is political will, arising from awareness for both the ecological/environmental and socio-economic significance of forest resources and the need for consensual change and improvement.

The NFP concept has two main strengths. First, it provides a framework at the national level for all international forest-related processes, such as the NLBI and forest-related parts of MEAs dealing with biodiversity, climate protection and desertification. Second, it can mainstream the implementation of NFP principles — country leadership, participation and coordination — that are universal for sustainable development at large.

Putting this concept into practice requires continuity and coherence. The NFP model is fairly flexible and easily lends itself to the inclusion of new and emerging issues. However, multilateral as well as bilateral processes and initiatives (including donor-support) tend to promote new and parallel processes with similar objectives, principles and structures. FLEGT and REDD+ are examples, because they progress mostly independently of NFPs.

Arguably, both initiatives are directly linked to forest governance and might therefore most appropriately be streamlined into and addressed within the cross-cutting framework of an NFP. On the other hand, both FLEGT and REDD+ are considerably more focused and specific than NFPs, and, owing to the international attention they receive, admittedly more momentous than NFPs. Streamlining such processes into ongoing NFPs depends on effective and efficient progress of the NFP itself. Demonstrating success requires monitoring and evaluation, one aspect of the NFP that needs to be improved in many countries.

Endnotes

1. The survey was commissioned by the FAO NFP Facility and co-funded by GIZ Sector Project International Forest Policy (IWP); it is available on request from GIZ-IWP.
2. This is the Forestry Information System under the auspices of FAO, which provides baseline forest assessment data.
3. The NFP update denotes a global platform for information collection and exchange on NFPs. It operates through coordination between national focal points and FAO.
4. These include a national forest statement, forest sector review, policy and legal-regulatory reforms, strategies including financing, and an action plan.
5. See FAO/NFP Facility. 2006. *Understanding NFPs*. The principal author was Cornelia Sepp, ECO-Consult.
6. See the FRA survey, 2010. Global assessment reports have been carried out by FAO since 1948 at ten-year, and since 2000, at five-year intervals. FRA 2010 is the most comprehensive global assessment of forests and forestry to date. It examines the current status and recent trends for about 90 variables covering the extent, condition, uses and values of forests and other wooded land.
7. See NFP update 2008.
8. See United Nations. 2008. Non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly at its 62nd session (A/RES/62/98), New York.
9. See BMZ 2004 and NFP Facility 2009.