

## UNFF19 Highlights: Tuesday, 7 May 2024

At the conclusion of the first full day of negotiations by two “informal groups” on the draft texts of the High-Level Declaration and the omnibus resolution, UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) Chair Zéphyrin Maniratanga noted limited progress made in resolving differences and the little time remaining before the deadline for completing negotiations by 18:00 on Wednesday, 8 May. He called for all delegates to show “utmost flexibility and understanding” to complete their work on time in a positive and constructive manner. Maniratanga pointed out that all text under consideration was the product of two years of extensive work, months of detail, consultation and many revisions, so the time has arrived to decide on compromises.

The declaration is intended to serve as a high-level political commitment on the way forward on forests, while the resolution would set future actions for the UNFF and its stakeholders in implementing the UN Strategic Plan for Forests, agree the Mid-Term Review on the effectiveness of the International Arrangement on Forests, and set the UNFF’s Quadrennial Programme of Work for 2025-2027.

### *Negotiations on the Draft High-Level Declaration*

In the morning, UNFF19 Vice-Chair Jaroslav Kubišta (Czechia) co-facilitated the conclusion of the first reading of the draft text of the declaration. Many of the same reservations that were raised during the first reading on Monday afternoon were repeated Tuesday morning.

Among complex threats to forests, a delegate wanted inclusion of reference to “drivers of deforestation and forest degradation,” while others wanted specific reference to extractive industries and agricultural production as threatening to forests. Several delegations opposed specific mention of such threats and preferred a general reference to unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

Any textual suggestions on financing efforts towards halting and reversing deforestation elicited strong views, in particular regarding references to sources of funding. Many countries called for using the phrase “from all sources and all levels” while others preferred a specific reference to developed countries and developing countries instead of the “international community,”

implying that developed countries will carry the responsibility of funding developing countries as beneficiaries. In this regard, a reference to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) likewise elicited multiple calls for deletion or support for its retention, dividing members into two different camps.

The question of which terms to use to refer to Indigenous Peoples, forest communities, local communities, and traditional knowledge proved as divisive, with multiple members expressing different positions on which terms to include and how. Referencing other environmental agreements and decisions proved equally contentious, with many calling for either inclusion or deletion of reference to the [Paris Agreement on climate change](#), the [Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use](#) and the [Global Stocktake](#) among others.

The reference to forest degradation, and, to a lesser extent, specific mention of trade and value chains, also evoked opposing calls for retention or removal.

Afternoon discussions facilitated by UNFF19 Vice-Chair Leticia Zamora Zumbado (Costa Rica) resolved only a few contentious issues, such as references to the Rio Conventions and a reference to “Indigenous Peoples, forest communities and local communities.” Delegates agreed to continue discussions informally in small groups on text regarding the placement of “land tenure” and “user rights” as important in advancing sustainable forest management (SFM).

Despite several attempts by different members to resolve deadlocks, compromises eluded delegates on passages regarding deforestation drivers, CBDR, and the responsibilities of developed countries to provide funding.

### *Negotiations on the Draft Omnibus Resolution*

In these negotiations, co-facilitated by Maureen Whelan (Canada) and Avhashoni Renny Madula (South Africa), delegates engaged in lengthy debate over whether small contact group discussions would be needed to reach agreement on some specific language. Ultimately the informal group did not split into smaller groups.

Concerns were raised in numerous paragraphs about which actor or actors should be responsible for particular activities. On the question of engaging Major Groups in communications and outreach, one delegate opined that Major Groups themselves

should reach out to Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) organizations, with another proposing that funding should be raised for the UNFF Secretariat to be able to engage with Major Groups.

Also regarding the role, competency, and resources of the UNFF Secretariat to carry out activities specified for it, several queries were heard on the possible programme budget implications that any proposed Secretariat activities would have, such as undertaking capacity-building activities on monitoring, assessment, and reporting (MAR) on the Global Forest Goals—if this is even within the Secretariat’s capacity, or preparing a concise report and/or targeted communication products highlighting the contributions of forests to the SDGs under review each year.

Numerous delegates weighed in, from opposite sides, on a proposal to invite members to adopt measures to eliminate the use of unilateral economic, financial, or trade coercive measures, particularly against developing countries.

Delegates also disagreed on whether the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) should have a role in exploring options for further voluntary contributions to the UNFF Trust Fund.

The informal group did manage to agree on language regarding support for the UNFF Secretariat which calls for the Secretariat to submit an information paper on its workload, needs, and gaps, including its human and financial needs, for the Forum’s consideration.

They further generally agreed to a compromise proposal for a subsequent subparagraph recommending that the UN General Assembly consider strengthening post and non-post resources of the UNFF Secretariat to enable it to perform its responsibilities and mandates in an efficient, effective, and sustainable manner.

The informal group also extensively discussed, without a final breakthrough, provisions on bioeconomy, synergies, the CPF, and whether to refer to “gender-responsive” or “gender-sensitive” approaches in implementing sustainable forest management (SFM) and access to forest finance for SFM.

On the CPF, delegates appeared close to agreeing to invite the CPF and its member organizations to conduct an assessment of options to strengthen collaboration within the Partnership. They also invite the Bureau to reach out proactively to the governing bodies of CPF member organizations to strengthen collaboration and their support for UNFF work.

On bioeconomy, one delegate suggested referencing “the role of forests in sustainable bioeconomies,” another suggesting “forest-based bioeconomy,” and a regional group calling for reference to “a sustainable and circular bioeconomy.” Several suggested borrowing “agreed language” adopted by different international bodies but could not agree on which language to use.

Delegates disagreed over whether the UNFF and its members should enhance “synergies” or just “collaboration” with relevant multilateral environmental agreements.

On the question of gender-responsive or gender-sensitive approaches in implementing SFM and access to forest finance for

SFM, several delegates noted that “gender-responsive” is used in many UN bodies, including UN-Women, as “the formative body on gender issues,” and within the context of the three Rio Conventions. One delegate proposed adding reference to girls as well. Several delegates objected to both. Co-facilitator Madula deferred further discussion.

### *In The Corridors*

Long-suffering co-facilitators of the two informal working groups, alternating as contact groups/“informal informals,” had to contend with irate small-delegation negotiators unable to be in two groups at the same time. Concerns were repeatedly raised throughout much of the day on Tuesday about how to progress on negotiating the two documents that are expected to be the outcome of UNFF-19: the draft High-Level Segment (HLS) Declaration and the omnibus resolution.

A procedural proposal by the co-facilitators of informal group 1 to break into two small contact groups to achieve some progress received vehement opposition from several small delegations. In an attempt to forestall such complaints, informal group 2 considered a suggestion that parties holding strong positions on specific pieces of text should meet among themselves to strive for compromise. At least one delegation, however, said that any small group would require a facilitator. After strong opposition continued, both informal groups remained intact and proceeded to make progress in several areas.

Interestingly, the original idea of three small contact groups meeting in parallel would have had implications not just for the small delegations who eventually defeated it, but also for all observers, comprising representatives of both civil society as well as other intergovernmental organizations. While all observers were welcome to attend the informal working group sessions and speak at the end of each segment if time permitted, the proposed small contact groups would have been closed to everyone except member states. Indeed, there was some question as to who was permitted to attend and observe the afternoon sessions of the informal working groups, now labelled alternatively as “contact groups.”

One civil society representative suggested that it is this attitude of non-transparency, in which the UNFF has fallen behind numerous other intergovernmental organizations, that has resulted in a radical decrease in the presence of Major Group representatives at UNFF meetings.

While the informal group report back to plenary was somewhat upbeat, several delegates expressed doubts that the deadline for finishing will be met. They pointed to the persistence by many delegations to stick to positions and not consider compromise, and duels over what constitutes “internationally agreed language” on outstanding issues. Despite the urging from the co-facilitators and a promise by an informal working group co-facilitator that small groups would “work through the night if necessary” on their own, outside the venue, few expected such talks to occur, leaving only a few hours on Wednesday to break many remaining logjams.