

The Future of Global Forest Governance

Key findings of a transdisciplinary Delphi assessment

1. Background and objectives

Today a large variety of global forest governance initiatives exists, dealing with forests and wider forest related issues and including state and non-state actors alike. Each initiative follows distinct rationales of how forest governance ideally operates. These global efforts, despite some successes, have not been able to reverse big trends of deforestation and forest degradation, although this is the main objective for many of them.

Against this background, the European Forest Institute's Bonn Office has carried out a Delphi assessment involving 38 experts from intergovernmental as well as international non-governmental organizations, public administrations and academia, to assess:

- major challenges and lessons learnt in global forest governance and related initiatives
- possible future options for global forest governance and related initiatives

2. Selected key findings¹

2.1 Current state of global forest governance

Deforestation and forest degradation were reported to be among the top **most important challenges** for global forest governance by the experts. Drivers of deforestation and forest degradation were, hence, identified as most important issues to be tackled by global forest governance initiatives. Many of these drivers are originating from outside the forest sector. Population growth and the related demand for food were perceived as especially important governance challenges to consider.

Among the **most promising initiatives** to tackle these challenges, experts rated Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT), forest big data/transparency initiatives and zero deforestation/commodity initiatives. In contrast, the United

Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 were found being less promising.

Most influential actors to tackle the challenges, according to the experts, are the governments of sovereign states, followed by private sector entities such as multinational companies. More specifically, China, followed by Brazil, the EU, and the US were mentioned as the most influential states. Within states' governments, agricultural administrations were reported as being most influential, followed by forest(ry) and development cooperation ministries and agencies. With regards to influential specific international organisations, the UNFCCC Secretariat, the World Bank, and FAO were ranked highest.

Method

The assessment employed a Delphi method, which is an established foresight technique based on experts' individual and group deliberations. Generally, it consists of several rounds, including feedback loops based on a panel of experts. In this study, the Delphi method was applied in three consecutive stages, including structured expert interviews (1st round), an online survey (2nd round), and a workshop (3rd round) in which the expert panel participated. The key findings presented here display the majority of experts' opinions, not all lessons learnt were consensual.

¹ More detailed and nuanced results can be found in the full report that will be made available soon.

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The **main effects of global forest governance** were found lying in awareness raising about the different values of forests. According to the expert panel, forests are increasingly regarded not only for their multiple economic, but also for their environmental and social values. Also, global forest governance has increased the awareness for smallholders and local communities' (forest) land tenure rights and their role as managers and custodians of forests. Additionally, global forest governance was perceived as having mainstreamed the core idea that managing forests in sustainable ways is key in creating an incentive for the protection of forests. Lastly, (forest) landscape restoration was reported creating opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration as well as a new understanding of how forests intersect with other land-uses. On the contrary, the expert panel negated that global forest governance has had no effects on the ground level and no positive effect on deforestation.

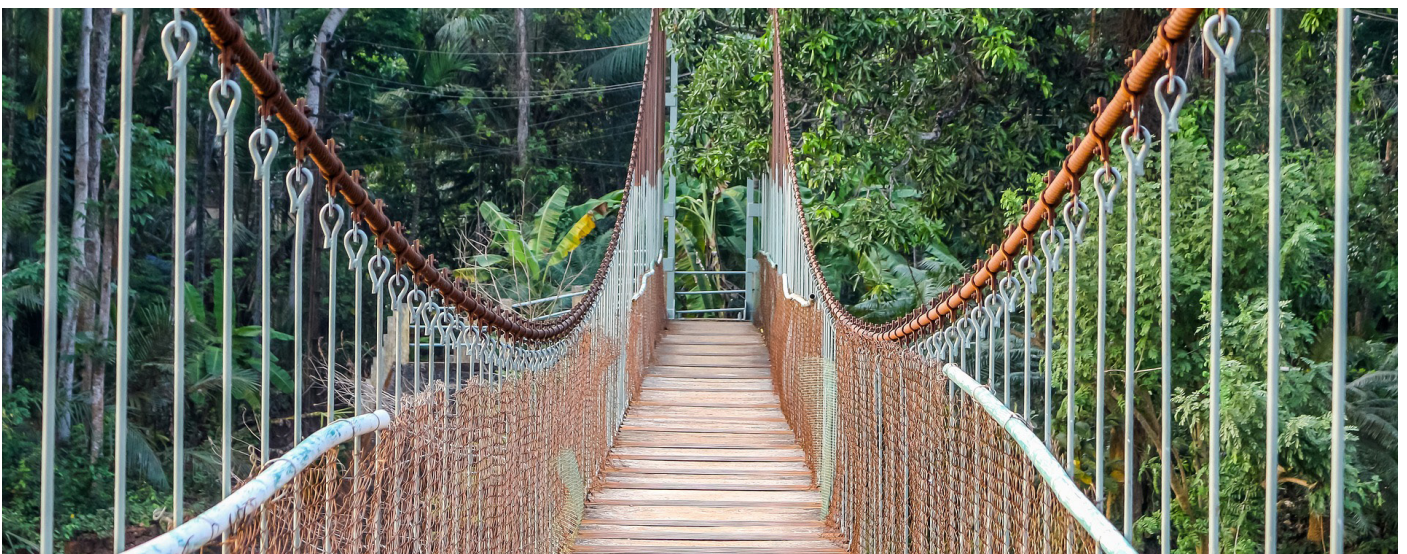
2.2 Future of global forest governance

In the **most desirable future of global forest governance**, according to the panel, cooperation between different governance initiatives and processes is better streamlined. Additionally, experts stressed that global forest governance becomes more multipolar, involving collaboration with countries such as China and India. Raising the awareness for forest issues beyond the forest sector as well as more information disclosure of companies and governments

to enable independent monitoring was also perceived as desirable. The development of new global forest/environment governance related institutions as well as a legally binding forest convention, however, were not favoured by the expert panel.

In contrast, the **most likely future of global forest governance** will hold that forest issues will remain largely in the shade of other prominent topics, such as climate change or migration, especially if states are facing (economic) crises. Yet, experts expect that the advancement of information technology will open up new opportunities for transparency in the sector. Likewise, a continuing boom of legality assurance and deforestation free commodity initiatives is expected. On the contrary, the experts assessed it as unlikely that the global and national/local level will be further disconnected, but also that there will be a global legally binding agreement on forests.

Research should, according to the experts, be done in a transdisciplinary, collaborative manner, involving scientists, practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders. Likewise, more scrutiny on the impact of other sectors and actors on global forest governance and forest management systems was called for. Furthermore, research on the impact and effectiveness of different global forest governance initiatives, instruments and implementation were found to be important.



3. Lessons learnt for the successful design of global forest governance

Based on the aforementioned findings, the expert panel concluded on the following lessons learnt for future global forest governance initiatives to be successful and effective also on the ground:

» **States matter: a supportive global sustainability enhancing regulatory framework is imperative**

Despite an overall “fatigue” with multilateral forest governance processes and institutions, the experts assessed that an explicit international framework and structures provided for by states are important in enabling action of all other actors, especially by providing mandates and framework conditions to act.

» **New coalitions for old problems: issue-specific regional and inter-regional “coalitions of the willing” are key in advancing global forest governance**

In the context of an increasingly multipolar world, new issue-specific coalitions across continents with countries that are willing to advance certain aspects of global forest governance hold big promise.

» **Hinge on “high politics”: forest governance initiatives should use powerful issues as a lever**

Initiatives such as FLEGT, which are linking forest issues with trade as an issue of “high politics”, are perceived as most promising due to the associated political visibility, options to build alliances with critical policy sectors, and related broad political commitment.

» **Dare sustainability leadership: Self-confident rule-setting in support of the public good can be decisive**

In opposition to a “laissez faire” approach, sustainability leadership of states following advanced sustainability standards can be decisive to advance forest governance globally, and to eliminate incentives that trigger deforestation. It can create first mover advantages for the states taking up such commitments.

» **“Pecunia olet”: Responsible (business) investments needs to be mainstreamed**

Experts underlined that the financial sector has not yet been strategically targeted enough to support good forest governance and tackle deforestation and forest degradation. There is a necessity to focus on this sector, using increasing demands from consumers and institutional investors for sustainable investments.

» **Make wise use of hypes: dynamically emerging new forest governance initiatives provide leverage points to ensure sustainability effects on the ground**

New initiatives and topics in global forest governance, like

zero deforestation and forest landscape restoration, hold potential as they open up new windows of opportunities for global forest governance. At the same time, thorough technical knowledge and established networks are needed to ensure that they do not remain of short-term symbolic nature.

» **Grey is crucial: informal markets need to be acknowledged and targeted**

A large part of the global forest economy is characterized by informal activities, employment and related livelihoods which need to be more actively considered in global forest governance, taking into account advantages and disadvantages of strategies of formalising the informal sector.

» **Clarifying tenure: sovereignty-sensitive devolution towards more inclusive tenure rights**

Although there is an increased awareness for the clarification of (forest) land tenure rights their devolution is still a contested matter between different tiers of government in many countries. Further support from the international donor community will have to find ways accommodating existing concerns, including state sovereignty.

» **Towards legitimate participation: Inclusive “glocal” decision-making needs to be formalized**

So far global forest governance decision making is largely exercised by governments without meaningful participation of local communities, civil society and the private business sector. More “glocal” modes of decision making towards meaningful participation of key stakeholders has the potential to substantially increase the legitimacy of global governance efforts.

» **Harnessing “big brother”: Transparency opportunities through big data**

New technological developments such as remote sensing, big data and the application of new information technologies also by large numbers of citizens, can greatly increase the transparency of global forest governance initiatives. Yet, these developments also entail risks, such as the possibility of manipulating data, the possession of data and technologies mainly by private companies, as well as the possibility to increase inequity and surveillance, which needs to be considered.

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4. Final Reflection

The results are the condensed expression of 38 qualitative expert assessments over 3 interactive rounds of deliberations. Even though efforts were undertaken that the panel represents views from all world regions, most participants were originating from Europe and North America. Hence, **replication in different regional contexts**, and enhanced by additional methods, could be useful for gaining more detailed insights into their specific interpretations and ambitions towards future initiatives in global forest governance.

5. Team and contact

Anna Begemann
Researcher
Resilience Programme
anna.begemann@efi.int

PD Dr. Lukas Giessen
Principal Scientist
Forest Governance
lukas.giessen@efi.int

Prof. Dr. Georg Winkel
Head of office
EFI Bonn & Resilience Programme
georg.winkel@efi.int



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EFI Bonn - Resilience Programme

Platz der Vereinten Nationen 7

53113 Bonn, Germany

www.efi.int

resilience-blog.com

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