

## **MDTF EXTERNAL EVALUATION 2018-2020 FINAL REPORT**

### **1. Background**

The Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Policy Support Facility (MDTF) of the European Forest Institute (EFI) has been in operation since January 1, 2015. It has functioned under slightly different names during that time, but with similar purpose, mandate, and approach. The MDTF operates in 3-year cycles and is evaluated every third year of the cycle. The current term ends in December 2020, and this report responds to the mandate of evaluating and assessing the impact of the MDTF activities throughout the last cycle, namely the operational period 2018-2020. The evaluation process complies with the Terms of Reference of the Evaluation as adopted by the MDTF Steering Committee (SC) in February 2020.

The aim of the Evaluation is the assessment of the work conducted in implementing MDTF activities. This assessment will help the donor countries to judge the usefulness of the MDTF, its possible continuation for a new period (2021-), and contribute to more effective management, accountability, learning, and program improvement. It will also allow the EFI and its donors to assess whether there is any need for possible changes to the MDTF design, if MDTF is continued for the new period. The proposed scope of the Evaluation responds to the objectives and purpose of the MDTF EFI Policy Support Facility (PSF), as established in the operational guidelines and approved by the SC (donors) in 2018.

The specific objective of this report is a general, not detailed, assessment of MDTF policy support work (*ex post*) from January 2018 until March 2020. The assessment focuses on analysing the role and impact of the MDTF in helping to fill the gap for pan-European policy and relevant knowledge for decision makers. The main questions of the evaluation process are:

- Has the MDTF work helped to inform the decision makers policy planning and policy discussions?
- What are the future opportunities and challenges (*ex ante*) which the MDTF work may face in the coming years?
- What are the potential needs and changes required?

### **2. Methodology**

Evaluation is a process that critically examines a program. The methodology adopted for this evaluation of the MDTF program under EFI is essentially qualitative and is based on the cross-checking of information (e.g., triangulation), on one hand, and on the collection of information until no significant new element is found (e.g., saturation), on the other hand.

The data and information for this evaluation came from the analysis of the following documents on MDTF activities, provided by the EFI Policy Support Facility which assists MDTF to implement these initiatives:

- MDTF Guidelines;
- MDTF Annual Reports from 2018 and 2019;

- MDTF SC minutes from 2018, 2019 and 2020;
- Previous Evaluation Report of the MDTF from 2017; and,
- Survey of EFI ThinkForest events and studies from 2017.

These documents and information were complemented by semi-structured interviews with the staff of the EFI Policy Support Facility, with MDTF-SC members, and with selected participants and authors of MDTF publications. The main evaluation outcomes and the related recommendations of this report will be presented to members of the MDTF-SC and to the EFI Secretariat in the month of July 2020.

### **3. Evaluation Items**

This evaluation intends to provide an independent assessment of the MDTF for the funding countries in order to help to support decision on the continuation of the trust fund. It gives suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the MDTF in pursuit of its goals. The evaluation also provides advice on changes EFI might consider in terms of objectives and implementation of the work. As indicated by the MDTF Evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR), the review process has been structured in evaluation items, with embedded groups of questions, which have been detailed as follows.

#### ***3.1 Policy Support: Assessing Issues and Priority Setting***

The objectives and priorities of the MDTF work program are approved by the SC at the beginning of each operational 3-year cycle, and integrated annually, on the basis of propositions developed by the EFI Secretariat. The staff of the Policy Support Facility efficiently integrates suggestions from EFI Heads of Programs and Facilities and from the Scientific Advisory Board. As recommended by the 2017 Evaluation Report, also careful analyses of the most recent strategies and policies of the EU in the fields of forestry and related environmental, industrial, and energy sectors, as developed with the EFI Brussels Office, are systematically considered for elaborating the MDTF working priorities.

##### ***Questions:***

- ***Do MDTF activities address the right topics?***
- ***Is the process of selecting topics for policy support work appropriate?***
- ***Does MDTF have the right thematic priorities?***
- ***Are the activities interdisciplinary enough?***

The *raison-d'être* of the MDTF is the anticipation and identification of forest-related topics which will provide a fundamental science-based platform for high-level policy discussions and deliberations at the European level. Topic themes that have been analysed and implemented by MDTF work plans in the 2018-2020 operational cycle include some of the most debated and crucial subjects tackled by European policy, including climate smart forestry, managing landscapes for fire resilience, disturbances impacts on forest ecosystems, substitution effects of wood products and the forest bioeconomy, also in cooperation with China.

The significance of these topics can be validated, *ex post*, in two ways. The first, called triangulation, is based on developing quantitative information, such as webometrics or scientific publication mapping, to identify the most currently considered trends and challenges in forest and environmental policy and science. The second, called saturation, relies on data developed through interviews of experts on forest management, science, and policy. The results of this validation largely recognise a well-balanced selection of topics of European interest for the MDTF activities, with careful attention paid to the different continental and regional priorities within EU, though some topics not currently considered could become important issues in the future. Major current issues were discussed at an EU level at multiple annual events, generally in Brussels, with regional issues discussed at events each year in a different European country. The issues could generate lively

discussions from different viewpoints, including academic authors and policy makers. However, in the future it would be beneficial to include also more cross-sectoral topics and horizontal integration issues as with rural development policy.

The process of selecting topics for MDTF activities is a balanced and multi-actor process, whose deployment takes generally one to two years. First, the EFI Secretariat identifies a number of crucial questions, thanks to a series of internal meetings and discussions in relation to its activity of continuously monitoring upcoming policy developments, particularly at European institutions level. This foresight exercise provides matter and substance for the proposition of topics by the EFI-Policy Support program and EFI-Scientific Advisory Board. At the beginning of each MDTF operational cycle a set of topics are submitted to the SC, thoroughly discussed, asked for integration or correction, and eventually approved for the 3-year work program. The process is quite flexible, however, as it could be updated on an annual basis with new proposals submitted by EFI Secretariat or by Donor Countries, as approval by the SC. At the onset of the last operational cycle (2018-2020), seven topics were proposed at the SC, with three being approved to start in 2018 and the others being postponed with revisions. During 2019, one of the latter proposals was accepted after revision while new proposals were formulated by Donor Countries and will be taken into considerations in the post-2020 MDTF term. The process of writing and editing each publication for approved implemented studies takes at least one or two years, respectively for FSTP and WSCTU publications. It is possible that some studies could bridge from one MDTF operational term to the next one.

Overall, the process of topic selection is balanced and flexible, allowing for the strategic organization of the MDTF activities while, at the same time, enabling the various actors in the process (e.g., Donor Countries, the EFI-PS facility, the EFI Network) to add new proposals on a short-term interval, as based on the most recent policy and scientific developments at European or regional levels. In this process, the role of the EFI Liaison Office in Brussels is strategically important and well taken into consideration as was recommended by the 2017 MDTF Evaluation Report. In the future, however, it would be beneficial for the program to clarify and make more transparent the role of different actors (e.g., the Scientific Advisory Board) while also favouring bottom-up approaches to the formulation of topics (e.g., through the EFI Network).

Themes and priorities selected during the 2018-2020 period reveal a balanced scheme of prioritization based on European, regional and country priorities as from SC proposals, suggestions from EFI scientists, and overall EU interests indicated largely through meetings with EU officials. By focussing on thematic areas such as climate change, the bioeconomy, and developing trends in EU policy, the process of prioritization ensured the relevance of the work output. Also, a kind of rotation among issue topics has been adopted by the MDTF over multiyear activity to avoid overlapping with similar priorities pursued by parallel platforms and organizations (i.e. Forest Europe).

The interdisciplinary approach to MDTF studies and ThinkForest events is well documented, including climate change impacts on forest management, diverse uses of forest biomass in substitution for carbon-intensive materials, plantation forestry, prevention of forest damages, and the sustainability of ecosystem services across the landscape. Other MDTF publications, like newsletters and executive summaries, included innovative concepts such as design of bio-cities for improving urban quality of life, of great relevance particularly after the Covid19 pandemic, how to link European forest policy to the EU Green Deal, and the European-China dialogue on forest bioeconomy. Overall, MDTF interdisciplinary activities indicate a diverse field of expertise of the authors and experts involved in the publications and events. This diversity can also be seen in the wide range of regional issues and themes that MDTF activities address, from Central-East Europe to the Atlantic region, and from the Mediterranean to Central and Nordic areas. At the same time, despite the relative larger portion of resources allocated to the MDTF from the latter countries, it would be creditable to further improve the balance of themes and priorities among and throughout the member regions. It may be considered, however, whether the outcomes of MDTF studies and

events would benefit from the involvement of authors and speakers not only from different EU regions but also from diverse policy sectors. It may be beneficial “to have controversial positions” from both inside and outside the forest community, as well as from other scientific and policy sectors.

### **3.2 Publications and ThinkForest Events**

The relevance and quality of MDTF activities, primarily publications and events, can be analysed from two perspectives: 1) the intrinsic quality of the MDTF products (e.g., publications, as WSCTU-What Science Can Tell Us and FSTP-From Science To Policy and workshops) and 2) the relevance of the authors and speakers. Therefore, both aspects should be considered when evaluating MDTF publications and ThinkForest events.

#### **Questions:**

- *Is there enough scientific excellence?*
- *Are there adequate mechanisms and processes for ensuring quality?*

The general opinion of MDTF publications from interviews and wider discussions with their intended audience indicates that WSCTU receives high interest and credibility for its scientific quality, while FSTP may benefit from being even more accurately designed to the needs of political decision makers by giving a clearer, perhaps more daring, message towards making concrete recommendations. Policy briefs, “Knowledge to Action,” and Executive Summaries are also very effective and should be more widely disseminated and communicated.

The scientific excellence of the authors that contribute to MDTF publications is generally very high and they are well regarded in their different fields of expertise, both in Europe and in non-European countries where some of the experts originate. Scientific excellence of most authors and experts is unquestionably vital, as verified by any metrics of science quality evaluation. The identification of experts has been accomplished, according to the MDTF Guidelines, with due consideration of appropriate geographic and regional representative balance, and the need for interdisciplinary diversity. However, although the publications issued by MDTF are clear evidence of high scientific quality, diligence is required to maintain the highest standards for all publications generated by the MDTF program.

Beside the relevant publications, ThinkForest events are widely recognized as the most powerful tool of the MDTF. ThinkForest events continue to be structured with careful attention to the high standards of scientific presentation, and given generally by the coordinators of the related studies or their prominent authors. At the same time, ample consideration has been devoted to the best selection of speakers from European and national institutions, representing the decision- and policy-maker point of view. They include European and national representatives of legislative assemblies, Commissioners and other high-ranking officials of the EU Commission, government executives of various European and non-European countries, as well as recognized leaders of stakeholder organizations at national and European levels. It is of utmost importance for the status, credibility, and public impact of MDTF programs that prominent European policy makers, such as Mr. Janez Potočnik, at present, and as Mr. Göran Persson in the past years, continue to chair ThinkForest events and other meetings.

The established process to select authors and experts for MDTF activities, while ensuring the necessary scientific quality and integrity, relies on the expertise of the EFI Policy Support Facility, and the assistance by the Scientific Advisory Board that ensures also the necessary links to the large network of EFI member organizations. It is a difficult task, however, to ensure high quality standards for publications and events while, at the same time, making considerations for representative geographical balance and interdisciplinary diversity. This is a delicate issue as the credibility of the

entire MDTF program depends on excellence and scientific integrity of the selection process of scientist and experts.

The process may benefit from increased transparency of expert selection with the goal of making it replicable. Possible options include more tendering for the team of authors, or the preparation of an open list of expert names at the beginning of each MDTF term, as proposed by the EFI network and the EFI Secretariat through Scientific Advisory Board or a Scientific Council. It would then be possible to choose appropriate scientists and experts within various disciplines as needed. Another option for maintaining the high quality of MDTF studies would be to consider these studies already as peer-reviewed publications, as occurs with FSTP in some countries, or to continue encouraging publication of these results also in peer-reviewed scientific journals, as for WSCTU. Though these articles require a significant amount of work, they also bring a wider academic audience and are the gold standard of the scientific process. In this way, MDTF publications could be ensured of a high level of scientific quality while also increasing the recognition of the work accomplished by the study authors, and further attracting high quality scientists to take part to these types of studies.

### ***3.3 Accomplishments and Impact of Policy Support Work***

Over the last cycle of MDTF operation, a strong dialogue between European policy makers and forest scientists has been established and consolidated. In a relatively short period of time, the EFI policy-support publications, ThinkForest events, newsletters, and other communication outputs have become well-known tools for knowledge-based policy actions at European and national scales. Accomplishments and impacts of this MDTF work should be evaluated in terms of number of outputs and products, level and institutional positioning of outreach, and on the perceived influence on the processes of policy making and knowledge based strategic discussions at the European institutional level.

#### ***Questions:***

- ***Does the work (and its results) have enough impact?***
- ***Are there effective mechanisms and processes for planning and monitoring impact?***

Accomplishments and impacts of MDTF activities have been measured and assessed as: 1) types and number of activities conducted over the last operational period; 2) the degree of outreach of the diverse MDTF outputs; and 3) the degree of participation/involvement by decision makers at European and national levels.

Since the beginning of the research-policy dialogue initiated by MDTF, the impacts and accomplishments of the program have continued to grow and have reached a consistent level of output of publications, events, and outreach. Numbers are difficult to compare, however, since there are no other programs on science-policy dialogue in Forest and Environmental Science available and easily accessible in Europe. The quantity and diversity of products developed by MDTF to date include:

- Studies and publications (e.g., WSCTU, FSTP, white papers with executive summaries, and more recently the new series on K2A-Knowledge to Action as well as the MDTF Annual Reports) - in paper and/or electronic formats;
- Newsletters and briefs - primarily available in electronic format sent to subscribers;
- ThinkForest events, seminars, and round-tables - located mainly in Brussels, close to European institutions, but also in other European countries; and,
- Expert presentations and other communication and social media products.

The number of products and results has considerably increased in the last MDTF cycle, particularly when compared to the previous operational period. There is a high level of integration among different outputs which serves to raise the potential impact of the outreach.

Hard copies of various MDTF publications are distributed in large numbers (500 to 1,000 for each publication) at ThinkForest events and through the EFI Network. Studies and Newsletters have also been distributed electronically in the last few years (2018, 2019 and partly 2020) to subscribers or directly downloaded from the web page of the Policy Support Facility.

The level of outreach achieved is outstanding and demonstrates a great interest in the research-policy dialogue by a wide audience of experts, practitioners, scientists, and decision and policy makers. Though it would be helpful to have better qualitative information on the web audience, the number of publication downloads off the web average 2,000 to 5,000 copies within one to two years of publishing, with a peak of roughly 8,000 downloads for the study on Forest Bioeconomy over the first two years. Downloading continues to increase with time from first release, showing a continued and non-decreasing interest in the publications. The FSTP3 on carbon neutrality has been downloaded 16,800 times since 2016 and FSTP2 on climate and forests, 11,600 times since 2015. Newsletter subscribers are generally 1,000 to 2,000 per issue, and the number of citations of MDTF publications in scientific journals continues to increase as a measure of interest by the scientific and stakeholder communities.

Another metric to assess the outreach potential of MDTF activities consists of examining the overall attendance at ThinkForest events. Generally, direct participation ranges from 50 to 100 people per event. "Live streaming" of these events, however, has increased their exposure in both 2018, with an average online attendance of 500 people for each event, and in 2019, with up to 1,655 people for the best attended event. That is a 16-fold increase in the number of in-person participants to remote participation!

ThinkForest and scientific events were often followed by presentations, meetings, interviews at the European Parliament, EU Commission, and national institutions. In this way, the impact of the work developed and supported by MDTF was augmented with direct contact with officials, decision makers, and national and EU politicians. Though, it is widely considered that participation of MEPs at the ThinkForests event and interactions with key EU institutions as different EC-DGs, Parliament and Council could be higher.

It has always been difficult to gauge the positive impacts of MDTF publications and events on policy decision making. Raising awareness and facilitating discussion have certainly been the strong suit of the MDTF. And though, overall, the impact of the MDTF has been greater than expected, it is unrealistic to assume immediate effects on policy making and legislative results. Instead, impacts should be measured on the ability to influence discussions, prioritize issues and strategies, and by having involvement from non-traditional sectors (e.g., EC DG Clima and several MEPs before and after the Paris Agreement to elaborate an EU strategy, including the circular forest bioeconomy in the EU Bioeconomy Strategy). Additional actions could be implemented, however, to raise the level of impact and the contribution to the policy discussion.

Adequately monitoring the impacts of MDTF programs, however, requires qualitative aspects besides the quantitative parameters of outreach. A more qualitative assessment would consider additional aspects such as the degree to which PS Facility studies and activities influence decision-making processes, legislative and regulatory outputs, policy directions, and the reflections of stakeholder organizations and associations. To detect and evaluate such impacts would require a greater investment of time and effort.

### **3.4 Networking**

The involvement of the European forest scientific community with the diverse activities of MDTF has been strong, with some participation also from non-European countries. European and national policy makers and stakeholders have responded positively to this innovative opportunity to develop an interface between policy and science.

#### **Questions:**

- *Is the work able to engage the relevant science network to an adequate extent?*
- *Is the work engaging the policy and stakeholder networks to an adequate extent?*

The scientific community inside Europe, and in some cases outside (e.g., USA, Canada, China), has responded positively for the opportunity offered by MDTF to develop a conversation between policy and science to evolve a more informed political approach to forest and environmental issues. Many scientists from diverse backgrounds, approaching 200 people from 20 countries of 4 different continents and 50 Universities and research Institutes, have been overall involved in the FSTP and WSCTU studies, since the start of MDTF 2015 up to 2020. They are affiliated with many member organizations of the EFI network, demonstrating a clear sense of ownership of the policy-science dialogue within the EFI community. At the same time, the authorship of MDTF studies is also open to institutions outside of the EFI network, including other European research Institutes and international Organizations such as the EU-Joint Research Centre, European Agencies, United Nations Agencies, and Institutes of CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agronomic Research). Renowned scientists from countries outside of the EU (USA, Canada, Australia, and China) have also contributed to the studies, demonstrating an interest in this platform from different scientific and political environments. An acceptable balance in geographic representation was sought in each study. There was an average of eight authors from four to eight countries on each FSTP, and each WSCTU had roughly 30 contributors from 11 to 14 countries or international institutions. The networking capability of the MDTF has been extensive and adept at reaching out for the scientific community both inside and outside of Europe. Though an increased effort to more deeply involve the EFI member organizations would be highly beneficial.

The representation of participants in ThinkForest events is a good indicator of the involvement also of policy and stakeholder networks in MDTF programs. Overall, the greatest participation in these events has been by representatives of forest owner associations, forest industries, and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), making up almost half of the participants at each single event. Significant participation has also been from decision makers (20 to 30%), with mainly representatives from European Commission and European Parliament, but also from national ministries and embassies. Similar level of participation has come from the scientific community.

An important measure of the impact of the work conducted by the MDTF is its influence on forest policy actions, decisions, legislative measures, and overall policy strategies. Many of these impacts take time to foment into concrete actions and decisions, but it has been possible to identify specific effects, already in the previous MDTF period with the FSTP study on the European circular bioeconomy, and in the last MDTF term as well. Notably, the ThinkForest event and associated study on forest disturbance (e.g., pest attacks) organized in 2019 coincided with national legislative measures taken by the Czech Parliament following the event. The importance of the MDTF initiatives was also acknowledged by an official declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture of seven eastern European countries regarding the need to strengthen international cooperation and contributions to EFI's work in improving resilience and adaptation of forests to climate change. The World Economic Forum established the Sustainable Markets Council in 2020 under the patronage of HRH Prince of Wales, in which EFI has been asked to report on the important role of the forest bioeconomy. For EFI to gain such a position, it has certainly been key to have the experience, knowledge and impact of

the science-policy work that EFI has been doing under MDTF, also directly related to bioeconomy. Finally, a seminar organized by ThinkForest in China, attended by the Chinese Vice-Minister of Forestry, helped to strengthen the role of EFI in providing expertise and support in their circular bioeconomy.

### **3.5 Communication Services**

MDTF activities mesh positively with EFI innovative outreach capabilities, particularly in communication services. This strategic asset for science-policy dialogue is key for positioning MDTF at the nexus of the forest narrative in today's society. Since forest sector communication has traditionally been confined and inadequate, there is enormous potential for public communication about forest ecosystems and their environmental functions in the global society. MDTF activities and initiatives are paving the way to a kind of communication revolution in the whole natural resource sector that can be leveraged by the interactions between policy makers and the forestry community.

#### **Questions:**

- ***Is the communication effective and efficient?***
- ***Are the communication channels adequate?***
- ***Does it succeed to reach target groups and is it effective (website, publications, mailing lists, social media, etc.)?***

Through the years, EFI and MDTF have developed a series of tools and techniques to conduct very effective communication and outreach activities for their Policy Support initiatives. They include:

- Live web streaming and video recording of ThinkForest events as well as recent experiences on web seminars, also in response to Covid19 pandemic lockdown;
- Electronic newsletter subscriptions and new Policy Support Facility webpages;
- Media invitations resulting in press coverage of the events, as well as press communications including ample use of Twitter and of other social media;
- Videos presented on YouTube, including monitoring of stakeholder reaction on website and other social media; also blogs are being started with a quite positive potential effect;
- Positive experiences with the LOOK-OUT station media bootcamp on specific topics related to MDTF activities, and some funded also by MDTF.

These initiatives have grown since the beginning of MDTF and have resulted in the successes of the 2018-2020 operational period. Outreach coverage and effectiveness vary with events and locations, but generally the results are quite good, with some events having exceptional impacts. The ThinkForest event on the "Role of Bioeconomy in Controlling Forest Fires," held in Madrid in May 2018, received the widest media coverage of any MDTF that year, reaching several Spanish media outlets. In 2019, the "How to Respond to Forest Disturbances in Europe" ThinkForest event in Prague spawned 17 articles from various media in seven countries, including the news agency Reuters. This, in turn, resulted in 12 follow-ups with MDTF from different stakeholders belonging from six different EU countries. The event held in Beijing in the Fall of 2019 also received good press coverage by the Chinese media. MDTF engaged the LOOK-OUT station media bootcamp in 2019 to elaborate a new social communication narrative among media experts, journalists, and scientists, about forests and their adaptation to disturbances and climate change; however, its potential impact must be carefully verified. Overall, the communication capabilities of MDTF activities have shown to be quite effective and they are continuously evolving in search of new and efficient tools and techniques.

Generally, forestry issues have had a low resonance in modern societies except in times of crisis (e.g., wildfires, windstorms, and endangered species). The "media ignore forests most of the time...so a narrative is needed" was heard at a recent ThinkForest event. Though recent outreach efforts for MDTF initiatives have so far been very positive, particularly compared to traditional levels,

building an audience outside of the traditional stakeholder and decision-maker networks should still be a priority. One opportunity to attract new interest is to continue to hold meetings and events in a different MDTF country at least once each year. This would likely attract new people and provide an opportunity to improve regional diversity by getting closer to local actors. Similarly, communication efforts (e.g., YouTube videos) could be made available in different languages to appeal to a specific community. Messages could be simplified and “catchy”, also with a better involvement of the EFI Network. At the European landscape level, the “forestry message” could be elaborated with the help of opinion leaders (e.g., personalities, politicians, “archistars”) interested in forest and environmental issues. This has already been shown to be a success with the recent collaboration between the chairs of ThinkForest and EFI Director with HRH Prince of Wales.

### **3.6 Management and Scientific Integrity**

Planning and implementation of MDTF activities are carefully conducted by the Policy Support Facility, under the guidance of the Steering Committee. Generally, it takes one to three years to complete approved initiatives, from initial discussion to full implementation. The initial stage of project identification, discussion, and decision on a proposed event or publication involves both the EFI Secretariat and MDTF-SC, and is completed with the final approval of the work program. The implementation of the study, event, or communication activity is the second stage of the process, conducted by FPS staff within the EFI Secretariat and with the support from SAB for choosing the scientists for the studies, independently of the SC, or organize the ThinkForest events and communication initiatives.

The general consensus of interviews and of the comments collected at the MDTF events considers the work conducted by the MDTF Secretariat to be very professional, serving both as a highly competent and efficient process facilitator and providing the much-appreciated leading role of Assistant Director for Policy Support. Potential efficiencies to improve MDTF management effectiveness could include: 1) making more regular use of video conferences for MDTF-SC meetings to more widely disseminate and discuss the status of activities and programs; 2) using back-to-back meetings whenever possible; and 3) examining the possibility to enlarge the MDTF operational cycle to allow for longer-term planning.

As stated in the MDTF Guidelines and ThinkForest mission, studies and events are prepared in accordance to MDTF work planning but are conducted independently utilizing the best scientific knowledge available at the given time. This includes maintaining a high level of scientific integrity through the “assemblage” of recognized independent experts from diverse disciplines, institutions, and geographic regions both inside and outside of Europe. Only at the end of the studies will the SC issue comments to be considered by the authors, who are free to incorporate or decline them. Some authors of MDTF studies have commented positively about this process, noting that it stimulates a better product by developing more elaborate explanations and clarifications, to be notified to the donors, while maintaining intellectual liberty and scientific integrity.

### **3.7 Budget**

The MDTF budget has been organized according to MDTF Guidelines with categorized and authorized expenditures. As typically occurs at the starting of a new MDTF cycle, the budgets from 2018 and 2019 were consistently below the total contributions from MDTF donor countries, creating a surplus of unused funds carried over to 2020, the final year of the present MDTF operational cycle. The structure of MDTF funding continues to show a marked polarization, with three countries contributing for 60 to 70% of the overall budget while the remaining seven countries providing the rest. Every effort should be made to increase the enlarge the platform of MDTF donor countries since the advantages of a well-developed science-policy forum with crisp and innovative outreach communication of a dynamic forest narrative is an advantage to all EFI member States. The expenses in both 2018 and 2019 can be categorized into two large groups. The first expense group are the

personnel costs associated with PS Facility and EFI to coordinate and manage MDTF work, including communication and overhead. The second group incorporates the costs associated with the implementation of studies and events, including travelling and PR. In both years, the two groups were almost even, with a slight prevalence of the first group of expenses. Overall, there is a general consensus from the interviews that the whole MDTF program has been highly cost-effective.

#### **4. Future Opportunities, Challenges, and Recommendations**

The forest sector in Europe is presently at the crossroads, with exceptional opportunities but also some risks. Sound and credible knowledge, better outreach and adequate communication of the forest world, for a global public opinion that is mainly urban oriented, will be crucial in the future. Therefore, the forest community needs more than ever a well-established, knowledge-based science policy dialogue and an attractive narrative about forest ecosystems and forest circular bioeconomy.

MDTF has proved to be the appropriate program to establish a solid science-policy forum, capitalizing on the credibility built over time that it is evidence-based and not interest-based. Therefore, considering the work done, the accomplishments, and the overall impact obtained, valuing the opinions intercepted, it is recommended that MDTF program should be continued for the next operational cycle and possibly reinforced with a stronger consideration from the EFI Council and by the Network of Member Organizations. It is also advisable trying synergies and avoiding possible overlapping with other similar platforms or initiatives that may be developing now or could develop in the future. The management is largely appreciated and considered highly effective. Work program definition and selection of topics should be kept, or even improved as flexible and as transparent as possible, with the last word to the Steering Committee. Here are reported some suggestions and recommendations to improve MDTF effectiveness, management, accountability.

##### Issues and priorities:

- MDTF funding best targeted at broad studies and issues relevant to as many member countries as possible. However, to keep donors interest, further include topics of regional relevance.
- Consider horizontal integration issues such as rural development policy, and more cross-sectoral topics related to other policy domains that will have strong impacts on the forest sector in future.
- For setting up MDTF issues and priorities, the role of different actors (e.g., the Scientific Advisory Board) should be better clarified and made more transparent while favoring also bottom-up approaches for topics formulation (e.g., through the EFI Network).

##### Publications and events:

- Carefully enlarge the array of authors and speakers not only from different EU regions but also from diverse expertise to generate “controversial positions”, by including, beside the forest community, also other scientific or policy sectors.
- Selection process of authors and experts may benefit from increased transparency with the goal of making it replicable. Possible options include more tendering for the team of authors, the preparation of an open list of expert names at the beginning of each MDTF term, careful consideration of the role of EFI SAB, the EFI network or a Scientific Council. Also, a rotation of authorship, a better disciplinary balance, and a more shared but transparent process are advisable.
- Publications as FSTP may be more accurately shaped and be more daring to give clear recommendations for policy makers, while Briefs and Executive Summaries should be better disseminated. Also include short videos carrying key messages of the respective topic.
- Encourage the publication of the already issued MDTF studies in peer-reviewed scientific journals. In this way, MDTF publications could keep the high level of scientific quality while also increasing the recognition of the work accomplished by the study authors.

#### Impact and networking:

- Implement actions to increase participation of MEPs and other policy makers at ThinkForest events, and interactions with key EU institutions (such as different EC-DGs, Parliament, and Council) to produce more regular follow-ups and have more definite impacts at policy decision making.
- An increased effort to more deeply involve the EFI member organizations would be beneficial to further raise networking capability of the MDTF.
- Continue the successful practice to hold meetings and events in a different MDTF country once each year, to attract new people and provide an opportunity to improve regional diversity by getting closer to local actors.

#### Communication:

- Capitalize on the work done with diverse communication tools (e.g., YouTube videos, blogs, social) to use them also at country/region scales, and with easy catchy language, trying to favor translations in different European languages (e.g., with donor countries and EFI network) to increase outreach capacity. Potential positive feedback at the country and EU level could act in a more coordinated way within the EU institutions.
- At the European landscape level, the “forestry message” could be elaborated with the help of opinion leaders (e.g., personalities, politicians, “archistars”) interested in forest and environmental issues.

#### Management and efficiency:

- Make more regular use of digital tools, such as web seminars and video conferences, to follow more closely the MDTF activities while maintaining physical SC meetings once a year.
- Better display linkages and differences between regular EFI work/output and MDTF output.
- Examine the possibility to enlarge the MDTF operational cycle to further improve its efficiency.
- Expanding MDTF to more countries should be actively pursued.
- Consider to better integrate MDTF administration within EFI to improve its cost efficiency.