

## Impact Objectives

- Enhance the forest and natural resources policy and governance, as well as the sustainable, multifunctional forest management in the Western Balkans and across Europe
- Create a strong, regional collaborative network of experienced and future leaders in science, policy and management
- Support strong connections to European and international networks in forestry management

# Seeing the forest for the trees

*Highly experienced forest economics researcher Dr Dijana Vuletic shares her thoughts on working within the EU COST Action framework, and how important international support is to becoming visible at the national and regional level*



**Can you share a little about how your career has developed?**

I started as a young researcher

in the Croatian Forest Research Institute right after I graduated from the Faculty of Forestry at the University of Zagreb. My first research was in the field of forestry economics, but my focus soon became the economics of timber and wood production. I completed my Master's and PhD at the University of Zagreb. As my career developed professionally and scientifically I was made Head of the Department for Forest Management and Forestry Economics at Zagreb. With my more intensive international involvement in forestry economics I worked on establishing the regional office of the European Forest Institute in Croatia. After 23 years of working at the Institute, I took the role of Director, which I have held since.

**Have there been any key moments that have changed the direction of your research career?**

Key moments for me include my intensive involvement in a COST project related to the use of forests for recreation and nature

tourism (FORREC), participating at the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) World Congress in 2000, and working on the Forest Policy, Economics, Education and Research (FOPER) project on capacity development in the area of forest policy and economics in the Western Balkan region.

**How did the idea for the EU Cost Action CAPABAL (Capacity Building in Forest Policy and Governance in Western Balkan Region) come about? Was it developed from previous work that you or colleagues have been involved in, or to respond to a specific issue?**

The idea came after we finished the second phase of the FOPER project when we, together with the Coordinator of FOPER II, Professor Margaret Shannon, detected a continuing need for capacity building in the region. We felt it was very important to create the space and means to maintain the already developed network of young professionals and researchers in the field of forest policy and economics in the region. We learned during the FOPER project that the field of forest policy needs more attention and that this specific field can contribute to the development of forest and natural resources management and governance. This is of great importance

for those countries that are rich in forest and natural resources but lacking in the utilisation of the potential these forests hold.

**When you set out on the project did you have a clear pathway to its impact?**

I have experience working with COST Action projects and I was convinced that CAPABAL was the best and, at that time, only way to keep this network together. The goal was to facilitate exchange and networking and ultimately initiate research in this field. We also wanted to raise awareness of the network and highlight the initial capacities on the national level necessary for improvement in forest and national resources management, governance and policy development. Sometimes you need international support to become visible on the national and regional level. The COST Action Targeted Network CAPABAL was absolutely critical, as it provided the space that we needed for strengthening this small but important network of early stage researchers and young professionals. Ultimately, this network can and will make a difference in the future of forest and natural resources management, governance and policy making.



# Building blocks

*By building on an existing network of young professionals and researchers, the CAPABAL project is guiding the future of national policy development and unlocking the potential of forest resources in Eastern Europe*

For many Eastern European countries forests hold great value from both an ecosystem services and economic perspective. However, there are conflicts in resource use and benefit sharing, with competing claims on what is essentially a limited resource the demand for which is only likely to increase in the future. Growing linkages to the EU holds significant potential for the governance of forestry in the Western Balkan region; however, this requires informed decision-making and strong capacity in forest policy. With this in mind, the EU COST Targeted Network Action CAPABAL (Capacity Building in Forest Policy and Governance in Western Balkan Region) is focusing its efforts on fostering an already developed network of young professionals and researchers that resulted from the Forest Policy, Economics, Education and Research (FOPER) project. FOPER was financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland and coordinated by the European Forest Institute (EFI) under the leadership of Professor Margaret Shannon who shared the CAPABAL vision and helped develop the proposal.

Their vision is to grow this network to increase its influence in this arena by targeting the early stage researchers, future policy leaders and young resource managers working in forestry and governance roles. One of the key ways this will be achieved is by maintaining and supporting the existing network of young people in the region who are building their capacities and expertise in the area of forest management, governance and policy making. Chair of the Action Dr

Dijana Vuletic, who is based at the Croatian Forest Research Institute, explains that as a result of this effort they are aiming to set 'a path from forest policy to forest governance through an open dialogue between science and policy, more and better cross-sectoral initiatives, and more openness towards international processes'. Ultimately, it is hoped that this will enable the forestry research sector to make significant process in policy making in the Western Balkan Region by 2020.

The project has been separated into three Working Groups: Sustainable Forest/Natural Resources Management, Forest/Natural Resources Governance, and Forest/Natural Resources Policy. In this way energy can be focused around these particular areas and resources can be targeted to where they will add the most value. Being a part of the COST framework means that the group has access to all COST tools, including training schools, Short-Term Scientific Missions (STSMs) and regular meetings.

## ON A MISSION

Fostering cross-generation exchanges is important for the success of the project. To this end the team paid special attention to the way these tools could be used to enable early stage researchers and young managers and policy leaders to participate in the whole range of opportunities to exchange experiences with senior researchers, managers and policy leaders. During regular meetings participation and exchange from managers and policy leaders is encouraged. The older generation are present at general

meetings where they exchange experiences and hold discussions with younger future leaders, as well as being mentors in hosting institutions for STSMs.

The STSMs are one of the key ways to enable capacity building. To prioritise which projects would benefit from being a STSM the team developed a list of topics for each Working Group which scoped out how candidates could develop their STSM. They also prepared evaluating criteria which emphasised regional participation and contribution to CAPABAL goals. 'So through each STSM we look for clear inputs into our goals and objectives, but also to enable young researchers to develop their own career by working in an international environment under the leadership of an experienced mentor,' observes Vuletic. A number of STSMs have now been completed, including Comparative Evaluation of State Forest Institutions in the Western Balkans; Implementing Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management in Countries of the Western Balkans region; and Development of Analytical Framework for Governance Analysis.

After 10 years working in the region during the FOPER project and being involved in EU policy research projects in different countries, Vuletic and her team bring some highly valuable experience to this project. The team were already known to the national and regional policy and research arena and had good connections with EU researchers and, through them,



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Joint meeting in Montenegro

with policy leaders in the forest policy arena. This meant that the potential challenges associated with collaborating across so many different countries were easily overcome.

However, there are other challenges that have arisen, particularly in terms of the wider support for this kind of network. ‘This region does still need help from outside to be able to sustain this attempt to bring EU and global policy processes into the region and to support young researchers, managers and policy makers in their career development,’ explains Vuletic.

#### SHINING A LIGHT ON FORESTRY POLICY

It is hoped that CAPABAL will lead to new concepts and products being available to foster sustainable, multifunctional forest management in the Western Balkans. The whole Action and all activities executed will lead to development in the area of policy making, especially in the field of adjusting national policy to the EU, pan-EU and global policy processes like the Natura 2000 and Kyoto Protocol. Those topics have been tackled by the Working Groups and in policy research, as well as addressed in the regular CAPABAL meetings. ‘Discussion on relevance of topics to the region and specific countries was very intensive and ultimately we expect that this work will be of use for all the countries in the region,’ says Vuletic.

The Vision document for the forest policy and governance research in the region has been developed to reflect the main problems in the region and highlights the



An area included in the CAPABAL research projects

way to build research questions and regional cooperation on those projects. To achieve the strengthening of the network of early-stage researchers, forest managers and policy makers within the region the team used the existing database developed by the Central-East and South-East European Regional Office of the European Forest Institute (EFICEEC-EFISEE) and enriched it with new contacts. It is expected that the Regional Research Agenda for forest policy in the Western Balkan region, developed through the project, will also bring some policy topics to national research agendas.

The work conducted under the scope of the STSMs is disseminated to all the partners as well as published in professional and scientific journals. The group has also taken every opportunity to present about their work at meetings of other connected COST Actions as well as the EFI’s annual meeting and some national events. The final CAPABAL meeting was held in August 2016 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where final documents were presented and future activities planned. Vuletic is confident that as a result of their specific knowledge, international experience and relationships the network will encourage national authorities to acknowledge forestry in the national policy and research arena and for this topic to be included in policy processes.

## Project Insights

### FUNDING

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### PARTICIPANT COUNTRIES

Austria • Bosnia and Herzegovina • Bulgaria • Croatia • Czech Republic • Finland • FYR Macedonia • Germany • Greece • Hungary • Italy • Montenegro • Poland • Serbia • Slovakia • Slovenia • Spain • United Kingdom

### CONTACT

**Dijana Vuletic**  
Action Chair

T: +385 1 6273010  
E: [dijanav@sumins.hr](mailto:dijanav@sumins.hr)  
W: [www.capabal.sumins.hr/](http://www.capabal.sumins.hr/)

### ACTION CHAIR BIO

**Dr Dijana Vuletic** became the Director of the Croatian Forest Research Institute after earning her PhD in the field of forestry economics from the Faculty of Forestry at the University of Zagreb, where she rose to Head of the Department for Forest Management and Forestry Economics. Vuletic is the Editor-in-Chief of South-East European Forestry, an open-access, peer-reviewed, international journal on forest science. As well as coordinating the CAPABAL network, she has a history of cooperation with the EFI, the IUFRO and other EU Forest Research Institutes. She has published a number of research papers in scientific journals on forest management and forestry economics.

