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**Capacity Building in Forest Policy and  
Governance in Western Balkan Region**

COST-CAPABAL 2<sup>nd</sup> Policy Brief

**POLICY RESEARCH CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**- A GAP BETWEEN THE IMPORTANCE AND THE UPTAKE OF SCIENTIFIC  
EXPERTISE**





## How Forest Policy research can make a difference

### Forest Policy Research – why is there relevance?

Forests are subject to increasing scrutiny in recent years both in Europe and the region of the Western Balkans. While over decades forests had a traditional flavour with stable, but little development potential, in the Western Balkans we see a dormant resource that faces many structural problems. However, in moving towards a bioeconomy, forest resources happen to gain a renaissance as one of the major, and most long-lasting natural resources to make a paradigm shift happen.

From the forest policy research point of view we see some major trends arising:

- Both the environment (e.g. climate change) and the society (e.g. demography) and its demands on forests change in a pace not known before
- Forests are an important factor for sustainable development but, increasingly, there are competing claims on forests.
- Forests are the focus of a range of different targets. The most appropriate use of wood is under discussion: as solid material, for bio-energy or in a cascade use, ie the recycling of wood products with conversion to energy after one or even multiple cycles of material use. In addition, climate change adaptation and mitigation in forests and biodiversity conservation are current pressing topics.
- Understanding the role of forest owners is important to properly addressing trade-offs as they are instrumental in the implementation of forest-focused and forest-related policies. Contradicting messages and incentives can reduce impacts of political steering means and instruments.
- There are structural weaknesses in the region that hamper both the development of the sector and a proper deliberation on unraveling the potential of forest resources in the Western Balkans

### The research governance aspect

In this rapidly changing surrounding, policy and governance research is requested to analyse the mechanisms that dominate the discourse and find methods and approaches for policy-makers to respond. In doing so, there are some key issues to be recognised

- Forest policy issues are currently gaining increasing importance, in particular in EU and international policies (e.g. bioeconomy, climate protocol). While forests are often at the core of broad interests, forest policy making tends to stay sectoral. Sectoral boundaries lead to a lack of context, of foresight on policy-relevant topics, and limit strategic thinking. While the Western Balkan needs to open and comply with the EU, most activities in forest policy and research development come from outside, and only little inherent stimulus grows inside the region.
- Forest policy research is still underdeveloped and underrated as such, although significant progress has been achieved in the past 10 years in terms of education and capacity building. While research is generally insufficiently prepared, transferred and used as critical input to policy making processes, forest policy research is among the weak elements in this arena. This relates to both input of scientific knowledge and process guidance.
- There is a gap between the gravity of topics and problems, and the uptake of scientific expertise, and hence the chances for young scientists. Human capacities in forest policy research have been built up, but are not fully recognized by research and administrative institutions to further mature. Consequently, a severe brain drain is ongoing from the region because of scarcity of development in forest policy research and other employment opportunities.

- The role of science and policy research shall not only embrace the provision of information and knowledge, but also support procedural advancements based on insights on actors, institutions, instruments, and their interaction. Forest policy research is thus summoned to catalyse and act as a vehicle for a common dialogue on a science/policy agenda within and between sectors. It shall help develop new fora and platforms for better science uptake into policy decision making and inform on new processes and modalities in the science/policy interface.
- It is important that forest policy research stipulates and carries new modes of knowledge exchange and training, both on transnational and international domains. Exchange and open discourse among researchers and policy makers in the regions shall improve the long-time competitiveness of the forestry community. It is a competitive advantage that countries in the Western Balkans hold different EU status, so there is ample opportunity for mutual learning in the compliance processes both in research and policy making.

Sustainable management of natural resources is no longer a traditional business. It is at the very centre of managing our future, of striving for more resource independence and growth. For the management of natural resources three major aspects come to glance:

- Environment as basis for management and resource use can no longer be seen static, in particular with long production periods such as in forestry
- In a globalized and technological world traditional knowledge and approaches are no longer sufficient to provide a broad range of forest goods and services
- Planning and management is no longer a technical task but implies the inclusion of multiple interests and stakes
- Management and governance require “shifting from identifying attributes to a search for solutions”, and “choosing ends instead of achieving ends”

## How to make a difference

Many aspects of forest resources show features of public goods that is why market approaches are but one approach, but strong policy and governance solutions are needed, where market failure is predominant, e.g. in the domain of ecosystem services. As well, a modern society cannot be governed by regulatory instruments alone. In this respect, new modes of governance are requested that cope with a changing society and environment.

In the policy aspects, forest policy research in the Western Balkans is to make a difference in

- Policy coordination

The use of natural resources is inherently sectoral, while natural ecosystems are generally regulated by different sectoral policies. For instance, forests and forest resources are commonly governed by forest policy, nature conservation policy, hunting regulations, water and hazards regulations, and many more. On the hand, integrated policies are widely lacking, regulations are often non-coordinated and often contradictory. In addition, multi-level regulations (from global to local) add on to this fragmentation. Forest policy research can help overcome this phenomenon by providing integrative approaches that unveil sectoral interests, define overarching entry points for solutions, and develop methods and fora to negotiate interests on forest resources that allow for more efficient use and governance, goal-setting and benefit sharing in forests.

- Clearer understanding on the role of actors in the policy process

From the analysis on the fragmentation of forest governance it is important to shed clarity on the role of public and private actors in the forest policy process to develop more efficient strategies of policy design. It is important to understand power relations that are often not visible and informal, and the interlinkages of interest groups and public services. While this might be painful for established networks, it may lead to more transparent and democratic decision-making structures.

- New steering instruments

New steering instruments in the context of new governance strive for balancing power positions of actors in policy design, and try to render short-termed informal policy process into long-termed participatory processes that guarantee transparent and comprehensible strategies decisions that are required for the maintenance of forests and their goods and services. This includes institutionalising the deliberation of sectoral interests (new forms of exchange and decision-making) and more integrated strategies for forest resources in a socio-ecological context in the Western Balkans.

- Clarity on the role of values

Beyond interests of actors, it is particularly the role of different value systems that implicitly shapes the decision space for forest policy. Conflicts on resource use might strongly depend on value systems, that create gaps between sectoral actors, rural and urban communities, or private and public actors. A transformation of our society into a sustainable society requires understanding these value systems and their underlying norms and limits, space for consensus and implicit and explicit conflicts.

- Political and societal discourses

Political and societal actions and decision are strongly driven by overarching discourses that might be implicit (tradition) or explicit (responsive). One important driver for these discourses is a proper understanding of the big societal narratives, that allow for a better understanding on the current and future role of natural resources use. An example might be the evolution from an industrial modernisation towards a sustainability discourse.

- International regimes

The importance of international policy regimes is of growing importance for the regional and national policy domains. We encounter an increasing number of international policy processes that have direct impact on the use of forest resources in the region. Effects imply the compliance with international policy instruments (e.g. climate change protocol), the compliance with market regulation (e.g. EU timber regulation), and political processes (e.g. FOREST Europe). In this complex conglomerate, forest policy research is requested to provide analysis, concepts and guidance to secure a sound cooperation between policy research and policy-making in the Western Balkans.

6

## The way forward

Forest policy research is to be active in a cross-sectoral, inter- and transdisciplinary environment. To unravel its full potential to inform decision and policy making, it is required to foster

- Institutionalisation of cooperation both within the scientific community and creating interfaces between science, policy and practice for a consistent uptake of science into a rationale decision-making
- Interdisciplinary and intercultural communication that allows different communities and cultures to exchange on forest-relevant topics and problems in the Western Balkans
- Exchange and mobility to support young scientists and policy-makers to open new horizons and international views
- Seed funding to developed stable relationships of science-policy exchange and policy support in the domain of forestry and natural resources, and avoid brain drain of young excellence in the region



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