



Towards forestry information dissemination and communication strategies: new partners, priorities and technologies

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Needs and opportunities for forestry information dissemination and communication strategies are evolving in response to broad changes in the world forestry debate, particularly with regard to new partners, new priorities and new communication technologies. An analysis of the situation and the evolving response from FAO.

Changes in the world of forestry, including increasing concern for sustainable and more diversified management of forest ecosystems encompassing wood and non-wood products and benefits, are resulting in new demands on the sector and in the expansion of the people involved in forest management. These trends are exemplified by the priorities affecting forestry that emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or the Earth Summit, in 1992. Recognition of the important role of multiple partners in sustainable forest management - including local people, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector as well as governments - is resulting in an expansion of the audiences for forestry information and in a need for communication based on dialogue, feedback and flexibility. Simultaneously, technologies are evolving, offering new, more extensive, often faster and more cost-effective tools for the exchange of forestry information. Video, multimedia, electronic publishing and networking offer exciting opportunities. The emerging new demands for information are related to the nature of appropriate communication strategies, i.e. a message/medium continuum.

FAO has 50 years of experience in the production and the dissemination of forestry information, both through its headquarters-based Regular Programme and through field projects. Until recently, reflecting the prevailing demands on the forestry sector, the FAO forestry publications and information programme focused on the provision of technical information, statistical and policy analysis and organization of and reporting on technical meetings at various levels. Print has been the primary medium and the main audiences have been government-employed professional foresters and natural resource decision-makers. At present, FAO (primarily but not exclusively through its Forestry Department) is developing new strategies and adapting its approach to publishing and information (gathering and

dissemination) to meet more adequately the demands being placed on world forestry.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT ACTIVITIES

"The need to make useful facts about nutrition and the consumption and production of foods far more widely known is so great and so essential to progress that promoting the dissemination of knowledge is to be given equal weight [our emphasis] with research The development of a program of publications will be important from the beginning."

These words are taken from the *First Report to the Governments of the United Nations by the Interim Commission on Food and Agriculture* (UN, 1944). Thus, the importance of and need for communication - on equal footing with the generation of knowledge - was well recognized by the founders of FAO.

[FAO's first forestry statistical analysis and outlook publication](#)

[One of FAO's most recent forest resource assessment publications](#)

The first FAO forestry statistical analysis and outlook publication, *Forestry and forest products: world situation 1937-1946* (FAO, 1946), was presented in 1946 and the first issue of *Unasylva*, FAO's international quarterly review of forestry and forest industry, appeared in July 1947. Over the years, the number and range of forestry publications increased significantly, in response to the Organization's forestry programme; however, virtually all of these efforts continued to be aimed at the professional forestry community, were based on printed media and were distributed through official government or institutional channels.

Current headquarters-based activities

Today, headquarters-based forestry information and communication activities can be grouped into five broad categories: the provision of statistical data and analysis; the production and dissemination of technical publications; the production and dissemination of periodicals; the organization of and reporting on meetings; and public presentations by staff, largely at meetings.

The collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical data has always been an essential part of FAO's work in forestry. The *FAO Yearbook of Forest Products* is in its 47th annual edition, and numerous statistical analysis and outlook publications are produced: for example, *Forest resources assessment 1990. Global synthesis* (FAO, 1995a); and the sixth edition of the *European timber trends study* which will be completed in early 1996.

Recent developments include a computerized World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT) which provides statistical data (FAOSTAT), including forestry data, as well as textual information (FAOINFO) on-line, on floppy disks and on CD-ROM.

[Forestry is included in FAO's World Agricultural Information Centre \(WAICENT\)](#)

The production and publication of technical monographs is an ongoing part of the Forestry Department's activities. These documents range from state-of-the-art analyses, published in multiple languages in the well-known Forestry Paper series (now numbering nearly 130 volumes) - for example, *Forestry and food security* (FAO, 1989) and *Biotechnology in forest tree improvement* (FAO, 1994a) - to working papers designed to stimulate further debate and discussion - for example miscellaneous publications such as *The potential of urban forestry in developing countries: a concept paper* (FAO, 1994d).

The Forest, Trees and People Programme (FTPP) is the front runner of FAO's efforts in developing participatory approaches and methodologies; FTPP has produced communication

materials in a range of media, from comic books and videos to guidelines and manuals. It has also supported the development of local communication techniques and systems as well as the development of analytical tools for examining communication systems. Since the early 1990s, the programme has developed and maintained a global network that now links more than 5 000 individuals and institutions.

The contribution of the FAO regional and national offices to the forestry information dissemination programme is also noteworthy. For example, the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific publishes an average of eight to ten forestry publications per year as well as the important periodical *Tigerpaper*.

Unasylva, FAO's flagship periodical on forestry, is published quarterly in separate English, French and Spanish editions, with a total distribution of approximately 10 000 copies. Each issue focuses on a selected theme. Additional periodicals with a more narrow focus have also been introduced, for example the annual *Forest Genetic Resources Bulletin*, the *Forest Harvesting Bulletin* and *Non-wood News*. These publications are distributed to specifically tailored mailing lists.

[A video film produced by the FAO Community Forestry Programme](#)

FAO coordinates two international cooperative information systems which include forestry: the International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology (AGRIS) and the Current Agricultural Research Information System (CARIS). AGRIS deals with bibliographic information on world agricultural literature and CARIS deals with information on current agricultural research in developing countries or related to these countries. The AGRIS database contains 260 000 records related to forestry and entered into the system between 1975 and 1994. A CD-ROM on forestry and agroforestry in AGRIS is being produced for distribution to participating centres and forestry research institutions.

One of the mandates of FAO is to provide a neutral forum for discussion and, as such, meetings are a fundamental part of the Forestry Department's work. These meetings include the biennial sessions of the Committee on Forestry, the Organization's highest-level technical body dealing specifically with forestry; standing committees on technical subjects (e.g. the International Poplar Commission or the Advisory Committee of Experts on Pulp and Paper); and ad hoc gatherings on specific technical subjects or policy issues (e.g. a meeting of experts on the harmonization of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management). Significant technical documentation is prepared in advance of and following meetings and is distributed among member countries and on request. Important regional and local gatherings are also organized regularly by the FAO regional offices.

As part of their duties, FAO staff regularly represent the Organization at forestry-related meetings at all levels, from global gatherings such as the World Forestry Congresses (of which FAO is cosponsor) and the IUFRO World Congresses, to technical and community-based workshops and seminars. Presentations by FAO staff at these meetings are an important part of overall information dissemination and communication activities.

Current activities at the field level

Communication and information dissemination are an important part of the FAO Forestry Field Programme and fall into three broad categories. First are information activities related to the project cycle: formulation; field documents and technical reports; terminal reports, statements and letters; and evaluation reports. The system is largely report- and document-based and, except for technical reports, has a fairly narrow audience - the individual Member Governments of FAO.

Of perhaps greater significance, the projects themselves increasingly have a "communication"

or extension component. This component may result in the production of newsletters, information brochures, videos and slide presentations aimed directly at project beneficiaries and, increasingly, at a wider audience, thus permitting a wider impact of field projects. These communication activities also serve to heighten awareness of a given effort's importance at the national and even international levels. Communication components increasingly have included methods to improve the "reception" of information emanating from other partners.

The development of communication components (including extension) in the FAO Forestry Field Programme has paralleled to some degree the evolution of the concept of forestry for rural development, including community and social forestry and participatory forestry approaches. Another important factor has been increasing recognition of the advantages of local control over natural resource management decisions. The shift in orientation has been from a message-oriented, instructional approach to recognition of the importance of dialogue and participation. Successful, sustainable forestry development efforts are based on participation, and participation in turn requires two-way communication.

Another important element is the sponsorship of attendance by national experts and project participants at technical and policy meetings.

Overall, the Forestry Field Programme is evolving a more systematic approach to communication strategies in all projects (with the fundamental assistance of the FAO Development Support Communications Unit). A recent FAO publication states, "A systematic approach brings the best results. Communication succeeds when it is part of a core strategy to set development priorities and carry out planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes..." (FAO, 1994b).

THE CHANGED AND CHANGING CONTEXT

New partners

There has been a virtual explosion in the number and type of partners with an interest and a stake in forests and forestry. As the Earth Summit dramatically reiterated, discussions on forests and forestry can no longer be limited to the three traditional partners: government forestry departments, intergovernmental agencies and forestry professionals.

The growing attention focused on forestry over the past two decades has resulted in (or perhaps is a reflection of) an increased awareness of the various intersectoral linkages that bind forestry to overall socio-economic development. This has been a double-edged sword for forestry; the sector is now in the spotlight but foresters, who once complained about being unable to attract the attention of the general public or of senior decision-makers, now paradoxically risk being overwhelmed and marginalized in the decision-making process. Authority for forestry is being increasingly devolved to other sectors, especially ministries of the environment at the national level, and ministries of foreign affairs in international discussions. This requires dramatically different communication tactics and messages.

There have been radical changes at the intergovernmental level as well. Although FAO remains the only organization with a broad and comprehensive charter that addresses all forests, there are now more than ten intergovernmental organizations, three regional development banks, many bilateral aid agencies and numerous NGOs that have legitimate and important roles to play in world forestry.

Perhaps most important, the legitimate rights, responsibilities and capabilities of local people and other groups as forest managers and users, and the consequent need to include them in forestry decision-making at all levels, are beginning to be recognized. Participatory management involving local people and professional foresters (from both government and the private sector) on an equal footing are slowly but surely supplanting traditional top-down

approaches. As local people organize themselves and their voice in the dialogue becomes stronger, they become viable equal partners in addressing forestry issues. This has profound implications for any information dissemination and communication policy or strategy.

The "environmental movement" of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the formation or strengthening of a new wave of natural resource-focused NGOs. Today, the NGOs dealing with forestry issues are extremely numerous and diverse, and these organizations need to be recognized as partners in the forestry development and conservation debate. Communication strategies aimed at informing and involving them as constructive partners must be developed.

The private sector and industry, partly through self-interest and partly in response to public awareness campaigns, are rapidly expanding their role to include forest conservation and management as well as utilization and value generation. In many areas, democratization, decentralization and market liberalization have permitted the profusion and growth of "new" local organizations, private owners, managers and industrial users. In Lithuania, for example, where as recently as the late 1980s there was one forest owner (the state), as of early 1995 it was estimated that there were 22 500 individual owners with an average holding of 6 to 7 ha.

Thus, efforts to identify "common denominators" for communication with the many stakeholders in world forestry are probably futile. Each has individual needs and interests, characteristics and cultural or organizational biases, etc. Clearly a dialogue with a local group interested in a particular forest area in Brazil will have different characteristics from a meeting of the heads of forest research institutions or the FAO Committee on Forestry. To be credible and to facilitate the formation of necessary partnerships and participation, any information dissemination and communication strategy must be inclusive and multidimensional and, while flexible, be rigorously pursued.

New priorities, new messages

Although foresters see familiar themes and can demonstrate clear traditions and antecedents for most of what is currently called "new", in some ways the content, or at least the emphasis, of the forestry dialogue is certainly changing. This shift in emphasis, and even the approach of the "new" dialogue, is perhaps most clearly and comprehensively stated in Agenda 21. Some of the "new" key words that dominate the dialogue include sustainability, diversity (both biological and cultural), integration and participation. It is not the purpose of this article to address the validity or legitimacy of these concepts but to acknowledge that forestry language and vocabulary is shifting and suggest how this might affect a communication strategy.

In addition to these new technical topics or subjects, communication itself has become more important and visible. Agenda 21 also contains elements of direct relevance to communication strategy (the form of the dialogue), especially in Chapter 36, Promoting education, public awareness and training, and Chapter 40, Information for decision-making. Chapter 36 promotes a multimedia strategy, stating that the United Nations system should "promote a cooperative relationship with the media, popular theatre groups and entertainment and advertising industries... such cooperation should also increase the active public participation in the debate on the environment...." Chapter 40 puts some emphasis on production of information in usable forms and on the use of "traditional information".

The nature and characteristics of the new forestry dialogue hint at communication strategies and approaches that are multidisciplinary, demonstrate concern for the social aspects of forestry, show a renewed concern for situation specificity, treat all interests as equal partners, encourage sensitivity to the "how" as well as the "what" of forestry information and recognize the importance of communication.

Changing communication and information dissemination technologies

The universe of communication and information technologies is evolving so quickly as to defy definition, much less comprehensive analysis, and is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. However, a number of broad observations can be made, some of which may be less than obvious at first glance.

[The voices of local people are becoming stronger in the forestry development dialogue](#)

The development of computer technologies and electronic networking, whether through telephone lines (including facsimile transmission), direct connections among computers (e.g. the Internet) or radio and television (including satellite-transmitted information), has dramatically expanded the horizons for forestry communication and access to the "global forestry library".

Computer-assisted production, printing and dissemination technologies have reduced the cost and, more important, the time constraints involved in communication through printed media. The advent of inexpensive desktop publishing equipment permits the development, testing, modification and dissemination of appropriate information materials at the grassroots level.

Radio and television can reach rural audiences with specially tailored messages in an attractive and cost-efficient format. For example, special efforts are under way in Brazilian Amazonia to provide isolated communities of indigenous peoples with portable transistor radios with which they can receive marketing information enabling them to derive more benefits from the sustainable harvesting of non-wood forest products.

At academic and scientific levels, the communication and information-sharing opportunities offered by electronic communication - particularly through the Internet or information superhighway - are exciting indeed. Conferences grouping hundreds of participants to discuss specific topics are an everyday occurrence and, although forestry still taps relatively little of the potential of the Internet worldwide, use is growing rapidly. The FAO gopher and World Wide Web home page have recently gone on-line and include, for example, data from the *World forest resources assessment 1990* and an experimental version of *Unasylva* as well as directories of forestry training and research institutions.

If the world of electronic communication offers exciting new possibilities, it is not without its risks - particularly that of confusing electronic technology and its aura of infallibility with the validity or interest of the message provided. There is still no substitute for direct personal dialogue with carefully tailored and tested messages, and the temptation of the "smoke and mirrors" approach of high-tech communication can result in attractive and cost-effective but technically worthless communications or information. In this regard, one aspect of change in communication and information opportunities that should not be underestimated is the development of physical communication infrastructure, e.g. roads and airplanes. Physical infrastructure development brings with it well-known and well-documented risks for forestry and forests (encroachment, excessive utilization etc.) but also dramatic and often undervalued opportunities for communication and information dissemination. Another is the "required social organization which allows stakeholders to make strategic use of modern communication media to demand services, seek information and make educated choices" (Richardson, 1995).

What are the ramifications of the technology revolution for a forestry communication strategy? The answer to this question is elusive. However, some general observations and hypotheses might be in order. As technology gets cheaper and more accessible to the individual (at least for many people in the world), both in providing and receiving information, it encourages information exchanges and dialogue that are less formal, more immediate, more decentralized, more "levelled" (more people have the possibility to be on an equal footing) and less proprietary (it becomes more difficult to "protect" information). For example, Richardson (1995) refers to the Internet as an "electronic common" and goes on to state: "The Internet is

immensely popular because it is inexpensive to use, has few restrictions on content and use and embodies a culture that promotes sharing, collaboration and mutual assistance."

It might be pointed out that organizations that already reflect these characteristics seem to be those that have made the greatest use of the new technology, i.e. universities and NGOs. Institutions that do not embrace these new technologies and institutional characteristics will probably find themselves lagging behind in, if not excluded from, the dialogue.

MOVING TOWARDS NEW STRATEGIES

Improved communication and information dissemination strategies for forestry are evolving at FAO. Such strategies will undoubtedly have to show a refined analysis of the characteristics of the diverse partners in forestry, the types of dialogue in which foresters engage and the advances in communication and information technology.

At the Organization level, the Department of General Affairs and Information has undertaken the process of developing a Corporate Communications Policy and Strategy for FAO as a whole. The Forestry Department is participating actively in this process, both in the definition of the overall policy and in the establishment of strategic elements specific to forestry. Moreover, departmental task forces have been established to make recommendations regarding improvements in internal and external communications and information dissemination. It is noteworthy that other divisions and departments within the Organization are also in the process of developing communication strategies, with probable but as yet unknown overlaps with and impacts on that of the Forestry Department.

Key concepts in the communication and information policy and strategy will be an open transparent approach; a commitment to participation, feedback and input; and overall flexibility. The value of communication and information dissemination within forestry development overall must be clearly stated in the formal policy. Communication must be viewed and defined not only as necessary but as desirable. Participation in the communication and information process must be fostered at all levels. Staff members are now being encouraged to consider the need to communicate the results of their work and that of their department, and will need to be provided with the time, technical support and financial resources necessary to assume this responsibility effectively and efficiently.

Feedback and input from the targeted recipients of all communications and information efforts should be planned into the effort from the beginning. Limited print runs of preliminary versions of important publications are being circulated for peer review and comment (e.g. the preview edition of the *FAO model code of forest harvesting practice*). A key element of a good communication strategy should be to incite the forestry community (including the staff at FAO) to listen better. Reactions and responses to all major Forestry Department publications are now being solicited through the professional press. Similarly, evaluation by the participants should be a part of all meetings, training and extension efforts. It should be pointed out that time and resources are required for "listening", just as they are for "talking".

The need for a formal, planned approach to information and communications must be harmonized with a commitment to flexibility. As stressed earlier in this article, the world of forestry (priorities, partners, approaches) is evolving rapidly and communication and information approaches must parallel this evolution.

CONCLUDING REMARK

In concluding, a word of caution may be in order. The development of an effective communication and information strategy is not a panacea and will not resolve all the challenges facing forestry development overall, particularly those confronting international forestry organizations such as FAO. An improved communication strategy does not and

cannot replace first-rate technical work and dedicated public service. Put simply, we must increase the effectiveness of our dialogue while continuing to ensure that we know what we are talking about.

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