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FSC®: A TOOL TO IMPLEMENT THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted **the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. This is intended to be a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” and “seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom” (UN, 2015). It sets as a priority the need to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions, which is seen as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

Achim Steiner, the former Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), described its importance as follows: “The 2030 Agenda represents a paradigm shift to replace today’s growth-based economic model with a new model that aims to achieve sustainable and equitable economies and societies worldwide and ensure greater public participation in decision-making … It is an agenda that aims to address the root causes of unsustainable consumption and production patterns and transform them to sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods that benefit all. A well-cared-for environment is crucial for sustainability and the survival of mankind.” (UNEP, 2016)

Governments and international institutions are expected to lead the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but the engagement of all actors in all societies is also expected and necessary to make it a success. In the view of the UN members, ‘partnership’ is the fifth ‘P’ which – along with people, planet, prosperity and peace – together summarize the scope of this new agenda.

At the core of this agenda are the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. These 17 goals, specified in 169 targets, cover the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social, and environmental – with a strong focus on quality of life, justice, and equality, as well as the sustainable consumption, production, and use of natural resources.

Halting deforestation and forest degradation, and practicing sustainable forest management are important for limiting climate change and its impacts, protecting biodiversity and freshwater supplies, providing raw materials for a ‘low ecological footprint’ economy, and protecting the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. The SDGs can be major drivers in efforts to halt deforestation and forest degradation worldwide, and to strengthen the positive contributions that forests play in the future of sustainable development. That is why the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) actively supported the formulation of the SDGs and the indicators that will help actors to focus their actions.

FSC is a partnership organization that brings together environmental, social, and economic interests (see Box 1) and FSC certification has become the world's leading scheme for promoting sustainable forest management, with a strong focus on mobilizing consumers through its chain of custody and labelling schemes. Started as a voluntary and market-driven tool, the FSC certification scheme is increasingly used by public authorities as part of their sustainable development agendas.

FSC certification can become a key tool in achieving a substantial part of the SDGs. Our most direct contribution will be to Target 15.2 (as explained in more detail later on), but the way we work, the practices followed by FSC-certified foresters, and the impacts we have on forest markets all make FSC an ally in achieving several of the SDGs. We have identified the 11 goals and 35 targets where FSC will make the most difference, as the rest of this article describes.

BOX 1. FSC: A ROBUST SCHEME WHICH DELIVERS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

FSC is an independent, nongovernmental membership organization that promotes the environmentally sound, socially beneficial, and economically prosperous management of the world's forests. FSC was initiated in 1990 and formalized in 1994 to help consumers and businesses identify products from well-managed forests. The entire organization comprises an international umbrella with some 850 members (organizations and individuals) and, currently, some 50 national organizations.

FSC sets standards for forest management, which include legal, environmental, social, economic, and monitoring requirements. Foresters who comply with these requirements can become certified and use this status in their communications and trade. The granting of certificates and the regular verification of performance is carried out by independent certification bodies, which are overseen by a specialized organization, Accreditation Services International.

To ensure that wood harvested in FSC-certified forests ends up in FSC-labelled products in a reliable manner, FSC has developed standards and procedures for companies active in the supply chain. The labelling of products as FSC certified is allowed only when all supplying companies in such a chain are FSC certified. As FSC recognizes the environmental advantage of recycled inputs, it has also developed a special standard for users to provide evidence of a product's recycled origins.

In 2015, the revised Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship were complemented with a set of **International Generic Indicators** (IGIs) to give more specific guidance about national FSC standard-setting processes. From 2016 onwards, these IGIs are being converted into national FSC forest stewardship standards (for more details, see Karmann et al., 2016)

FSC's governance is based on a three-chamber model, guaranteeing balanced, multi-stakeholder decision-making between environmental, social, and economic interests. At the national level, the same governance model is applied to FSC national organizations and standard development groups.

As of 2016, more than 190 million hectares of forest are certified to FSC standards (16 per cent of the world's production forests) in 81 countries, through 1,400 certificates engaging some 140,000 forest owners and managers, and 54,000 companies in 118 countries under 30,750 chain of custody certificates.

Goal 15. Life on land

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the governments of the world “recognize that social and economic development depends on the sustainable management of our planet’s natural resources” (UN, 2015). In support of this, Goal 15 focuses on the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems – such as forests, wetlands, drylands and mountains – by 2020.

Under this, FSC’s contribution will mostly be directed towards Target 15.2: “By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally.” From 2017, assessment of progress towards the global indicator for Target 15.2 – progress towards sustainable forest management – will include reporting on forest certification, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

FSC was founded to promote sustainable forest management globally and its certification scheme is now being applied in more than 190 million hectares, covering one sixth of the world’s production of industrial roundwood. Its standards have been developed and reviewed through balanced, multi-stakeholder decision-making processes, with the active involvement of world-leading environmental organizations (including WWF and Greenpeace), and representatives of workers’ groups and Indigenous Peoples, as well as researchers, foresters, and forest industries.

The FSC forest management standards place strong requirements on forest managers to prevent deforestation, avoid forest degradation, and maintain biodiversity and ecosystem functions. Only those forest managers that meet these standards are granted FSC certificates, and this certification only remains in place for as long as they are met.

Applying the principles of FSC in forest restoration and afforestation projects can direct them towards the creation of multi-functional forests, with benefits beyond the borders of the project; certification can also add to the economic perspectives of such projects. In conclusion, forest certification schemes – such as those put forward by FSC – are valid indicators for Target 15.2 that can be applied worldwide, and which are transparent and verifiable.

FSC’s role goes beyond Target 15.2, however, and is relevant to most other targets under Goal 15. For example, FSC certification plays a role in the conservation and restoration of forest ecosystems (Target 15.1). A study from the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala (Hodgdon et al., 2015) confirmed that FSC-certified areas do this much better than legally protected sites in the same national park. FSC certification, or relevant requirements derived from its Principles and Criteria, can also be used for the afforestation of degraded lands and soils (Target 15.3), mountain ecosystems (Target 15.4), and natural habitats (Target 15.5). FSC-certified forest managers must deliver on preventing the “poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna” (Target 15.7) as well as avoid/minimise the use of alien species (Target 15.8). And FSC certification is not only focused on better policing of forest management units, but also on prevention of degradation by offering better livelihood opportunities for neighbouring and affected communities near to certified forests (Target 15.c).

Goal 1. No poverty

FSC’s contribution to the fight against poverty is modest but relevant. In some cases, smallholders and community foresters can gain additional income and security by applying for FSC certification. Some poverty-reducing benefits are directly laid down in the FSC requirements; others depend more on the market and whether customers of foresters are prepared, or able, to pay extra for products and/or agree to fair, long-term contracts.

FSC’s contributions to poverty reduction are often more substantial in situations where people live in certified forests. FSC rules require the payment of reasonable, ‘living’ wages,¹ training, the protection of forest workers, and agreements with local populations that guarantee they share in the benefits of forest management. This can

include the construction and running of schools and/or hospitals, which increase access to education and health care – two elements that contribute to poverty.²

More specifically, FSC contributes to Target 1.5: “By 2030 build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.” This is because FSC certification maintains or improves the resilience of forests and ensures cleaner, more stable water flows from these forests. This is important to more than 2 billion people for whom the forests are an important part of their livelihood.

Goal 2. Zero Hunger

It is well known that forests are key to protecting biodiversity and to mitigating the effects of climate change. However, their contribution to alleviating hunger and improving nutrition has been somewhat neglected. So while Goal 2 focuses on agriculture, FSC can still contribute, in particular to Target 2.4. on sustainable food production systems and resilient agricultural practices.

A total of 805 million people are undernourished worldwide and malnutrition affects nearly every country on the planet (FAO, 2014). And as population estimates for 2050 reach over 9 billion, issues of food security and nutrition now dominate many academic and policy debates. Despite impressive productivity increases, there is growing evidence that conventional agricultural strategies fall short of eliminating global hunger, as well as having long-term ecological consequences.

Forests can play an important role in complementing agricultural production to address Goal 2 of zero hunger. For example, forests and trees can be managed to provide better and more nutritionally balanced diets, greater control over food inputs – particularly during lean seasons and periods of vulnerability, and especially for marginalized groups – and deliver ecosystem services for crop production (Vira et al., 2015).

Goal 5. Gender equality

FSC defines gender equality as women and men having “equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development” (FSC, 2015). As such, FSC contributes to Goal 5 in several ways. Since the early versions of the FSC Principle and Criteria, FSC requires adherence with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) core conventions, including Convention 111 on discrimination (occupation and employment). In the latest version of the Principle and Criteria, criterion 2 incorporates, in detail, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in forest management requirements:

- 2.2: The Organization shall promote gender equality in employment practices, training opportunities, awarding of contracts, processes of engagement, and management activities.

This criterion is further elaborated in several of FSC’s IGIs:

- 2.2.1 Systems are implemented that promote gender equality and prevent gender discrimination in employment practices, training opportunities, awarding of contracts, processes of engagement, and management activities.
- 2.2.2 Job opportunities are open to both women and men under the same conditions, and women are encouraged to participate actively in all levels of employment.

¹ The living wage requirement is being introduced in 2016 for all new forest management certificates.

² For examples of the social benefits of FSC certification, see: Cerutti et al. (2014) and Krummenacher (2013).

- 2.2.3 Work typically carried out by women (nurseries, silviculture, non-timber forest product harvesting, weighing, packing, etc.) is included in training and health and safety programmes to the same extent as work typically carried out by men.
- 2.2.4 Women and men are paid the same wage when they do the same work.
- 2.2.5 Women are paid directly and using mutually agreed methods (e.g. direct bank transfer, direct payments for school fees, etc.) to ensure they safely receive and retain their wages.
- 2.2.6 Maternity leave is no less than a six-week period after childbirth.
- 2.2.7 Paternity leave is available and there is no penalty for taking it.
- 2.2.8 Meetings, management committees and decision-making forums are organized to include women and men, and to facilitate the active participation of both.
- 2.2.9 Confidential and effective mechanisms exist for reporting and eliminating cases of sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender, marital status, parenthood, or sexual orientation.

FSC requires those that are developing standards to investigate the legal situation related to gender quality and the gaps between that and what FSC requires. These developers then need to set requirements to bridge that gap, such as (additional) training, alternative payment and assignments methods, flexible working hours, paternity leave, day care, etc. In this way, FSC will contribute to Target 5.5 on equality in decision-making, and Target 5.a on access to economic resources, ownership, etc.

Goal 6. Clean water and sanitation

FSC, with its ecosystem approach, contributes, within the scope of certified areas, to Target 6.4 on efficient and sustainable water use, Target 6.5 on integrated water resource management, and Target 6.6 on the protection of water-related ecosystems. Indicator 6.7 of the FSC Principles and Criteria in particular focuses on protecting and restoring “natural watercourses, water bodies, riparian zones and their connectivity. Foresters are obliged to avoid negative impacts on water quality and quantity, and mitigate and remedy those that occur.”

Other criteria in FSC Principles 2, 5, 7, and 10 indirectly contribute to maintaining water quality in forests, through training for forest workers related to manoeuvring machines, waste management, forest road construction, etc. In addition to these requirements, which are valid for all FSC certificate holders, FSC currently elaborates specific requirements for forest managers that use FSC certification as specific evidence for payments for ecosystem services, including watershed services. These will further contribute to Goal 6.

Goal 7. Affordable and clean energy

Wood is an important source of energy. Globally, 2.6 billion people depend on wood energy, with a large proportion of these living in developing countries. At least 80 per cent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa use wood energy for cooking and sterilizing water, and the lack of alternative energy sources, combined with the growth in urban population is driving up the demand for wood energy. For example, it is estimated that the use of charcoal in towns and cities in Sub-Saharan Africa rises by 3.3 per cent every year (Onyango, 2015).

Besides these traditional uses, the use of wood energy for industry is increasing again, as it is an energy source that can reduce the climate impacts of energy production. FSC certification can be used to ensure that wood energy is effective as an alternative to fossil fuels, and avoids adverse impacts. FSC recognizes that carbon capture and storage is an important component of forest ecosystem services – one that is paradoxically both central to climate stability, and threatened by increased demands for carbon-neutral bio-energy.

FSC is now developing new tools that will show businesses and investors that these natural benefits are being preserved and will reward participating FSC certificate holders for doing so. This means FSC certification is not only a reliable tool for promoting sustainable forest management, but also a step towards the sustainable production of bio-energy that will help to minimize greenhouse gas emissions. This contributes to the Target 7.2, to increase the share of renewable energy by 2030.

Goal 8. Decent work and economic growth

The FSC system is a model in which the use of wood as an environmentally and socially sound resource actively contributes to sustainable economic development. In terms of resource efficiency (Target 8.4), FSC foresees that the use of wood will increase, replacing unsustainable materials such as concrete, steel, and oil. However, sustainably managed forests cannot deliver limitless volumes of resources. Therefore, waste minimization in the production process, efficient use, and the re-use of waste are necessary. All of this is supported by the FSC scheme. For example, FSC has created a special label for products made of 100 per cent recycled materials, and accepts reclaimed materials as equivalent to wood from certified or controlled sources.

Furthermore, FSC supports the SDG targets on employment, decent work and equal pay (Target 8.5); the eradication of forced labour and child labour (Target 8.7); and the protection of labour rights and ensuring safe and secure working environments (Target 8.8). FSC's Principle 2 is dedicated to workers' rights and employment conditions, which includes specific criteria and indicators to ensure the application of the ILO's core conventions, gender equality on the work floor, health and safety practices, 'living' wages, training, conflict resolution, workers' engagement, and damage avoidance and compensation.

Goal 12. Responsible consumption and production

FSC is a tool to promote sustainable consumption and production. On the production side, it requires management practices that maintain the resource base while harvesting forest materials and providing services. With its claims and labelling system, it offers an opportunity for manufacturers to source from sustainably managed forests. For consumers, it provides a choice in terms of sustainably produced materials for construction, wood panels, floorings, furniture, paper, etc. In this way FSC contributes to Target 12.2 on sustainable management and efficient natural resource use, Target 12.6 on company reporting on sustainable practices, and Target 12.8 on information and awareness.

With regards to Target 12.7 on sustainable public procurement, FSC appreciates that more and more public authorities require sustainable sourcing in their purchasing policies, and recognize that FSC claims and labels provide evidence of this. FSC actively promotes such procurement practices and will, in the coming years, focus particularly on promoting this in Latin America. Public procurement can be an important driver for sustainable forest management if it gives clear signals to forest managers and manufacturers that certification will become and remain the preferred option. Public procurement is also one of the six elements of the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns (Target 12.1).

As mentioned, FSC promotes and rewards, through certificates, the re-use of wood materials; this contributes to Target 12.5 on waste reduction. Lastly, FSC's presence in a number of developing countries, in the form of FSC national organizations and/or certificate holders, contributes to Target 12.a on capacity-building in developing countries for more sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

Goal 13. Climate action

Forests play an essential role in climate regulation. Together with oceans, forests are the key ecosystem that removes carbon dioxide (CO₂) – the most damaging greenhouse gas – from the atmosphere. Carbon is stored in both trees and forest soils, and the world's forests contain roughly as much carbon as the atmosphere. The Paris Agreement on climate change, agreed in December 2015, highlights that importance of forests in tackling climate change, and calls on all countries to conserve and enhance their carbon reservoirs and sinks in forests.

In terms of carbon in wood products, FSC's certification scheme for forest management, its chain of custody control standards, and its outreach to consumers through its labels, all contribute to mitigating climate change by promoting sustainable forest management, and by promoting the recycling of used wood materials. FSC gives special attention to protecting the function of forests as net removers of CO₂ from the atmosphere. FSC has also started to develop new tools that reward the preservation of valuable ecosystem services, including carbon storage, in responsibly managed forests.

In terms of forest soils, FSC only grants certificates to foresters that manage infrastructural development, transport activities and silviculture so that water resources and soils are protected (criterion 10.10), i.e. contrary to many agriculture practices, FSC does not accept significant disturbances to forest soils. Application of the precautionary approach to control the erosion of vulnerable soils and slopes, and protect water catchments, is included in the high conservation value 4 of FSC Principle 9, which covers critical ecosystem services. In this way, FSC contributes in particular to Target 13.1, on resilience.

Goal 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions

For FSC, the enforcement of relevant laws is the basis of sustainable forest management. It is reflected in FSC Principle 1 and elaborated in specific requirements regarding legal rights to harvest and harvesting activities, environmental and social requirements, and customary rights. In particular, FSC focuses on free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) for local people and Indigenous Peoples.

With regard to corruption and bribery, FSC requires forest managers to publicize a non-bribery commitment (neither paying nor receiving bribes) and, depending on the situation, take specific measures to ensure their non-involvement in corruption. In this way, FSC contributes in particular to Target 16.3 about the rule of law, and Target 16.5 to reduce corruption and bribery.

Moreover, FSC, through its governance system and stakeholder engagement in political decision-making at international and national levels (including in the development of national standards and in preparation for certification decisions), is an example for other multi-stakeholder-based certification schemes (see Gulbransen, 2008, and the statement by Dr Kessel in Meidinger et al., 2003). FSC requires the establishment of conflict-resolution mechanisms for each certified forest management operation, as well as for each certification body.

Through its FPIC requirements, especially in politically difficult countries, FSC expects its certified entities to establish more inclusive and better governed institutions for negotiations between local populations and logging companies; better managed and more effective benefit-sharing mechanisms; and innovative ways of dealing with problems related to infringements of customary uses. In this way, FSC contributes to Targets 16.6 and 16.7. An example of this can be seen in the swisspeace report (Krummenacher, 2013) about a forestry concession in the Congo basin.

Goal 17. Partnerships for the goals

FSC supports legal and commercially viable forest management practices, which contribute to increasing national incomes through fees and taxes. FSC assists in the implementation of legislation in the USA, the European Union, and Australia that aims to close down markets for illegally harvested timber, an activity that often contradicts sustainable development.

FSC also assists in improving the image of tropical timber in Northern markets, where consumers are concerned about the negative environmental and social impacts of producing such timber. In this way, FSC contributes to Target 17.1, on domestic resource mobilization, and Target 17.11, on increasing exports from developing countries.

Lastly, the way FSC is composed and works contributes in particular to Target 17.17 on the promotion of civil society partnerships (Karmann et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant to group certification, where smallholders work together under one forest stewardship certificate; this cooperation can range from an administrative connection to joint training and management activities, in some cases supported by a wood-processing company.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by these contributions to 11 goals and 35 targets, FSC is clearly a significant instrument for achieving the SDGs. Indeed, FSC is a relevant partner for all who seek to take action – based on legal and customary rights, and the engagement of all interested parties – to support sustainable natural resource management and the achievement of social and economic objectives.

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