SEMAFOR pilot study: results
38th session of the Joint ECE/FAO Working Party on Forest Statistics, Economics and Management

Kit Prins 23 March 2016
Overview

• Background and process
• Results by indicator
• Results by country
• Lessons learned
• What next?
Background

- Criteria and indicators
- State of Europe’s Forests
- Pan-European data collection
- What about « assessment »?
  - « traffic lights »
  - SoEF2011 experimented with parameters and thresholds
- Need for:
  - Credibility
  - Objectivity
  - Concern for different situations
SEMAFOR process

• Method developed with small group of ToS, approved at Rovaniemi 2013
• Parameters and thresholds agreed, widely circulated
• Datasets compiled, mostly from pan-European enquiry, sent to all
• Dialogue with national correspondents (17 participating countries, quite good coverage), especially when thresholds exceeded
• 17 country sheets, general tables by indicator
• First discussion, Engelberg November 2015
• Discussion Paper, March 2016
SEMAFOR method

• All indicators considered, 3 types of parameter
  – Context (includes also policies and institutions)
  – Assessment (with thresholds)
  – Background

• All parameters scale-neutral: %, ratios (e.g. m³/ha, €/ha) direction of change etc.

• If threshold exceeded (assessment parameters only), correspondents asked to comment on:
  – Accuracy
  – Significance
  – Policy response

• Country sheet with context and assessment indicators, and comments by correspondent, agreed.
SEMAFOR results, by indicator
Indicator template

Indicator 1.1: Annual average percent change in forest area in most recent ten-year period (any negative change)

• Result
  – “Almost all countries showed moderate growth in forest area..
  ..(Specific mention of results for countries where threshold exceeded, including explanation from national correspondent)

• Comments on the indicator
  – Discussion of significance of results and potential problems interpreting data
Overview of assessment indicators

- Thresholds (17 countries, 20 assessment indicators = 340 assessment observations: see Table 1):
  - 232 observations below thresholds (68%)
  - 60 exceeded thresholds (but mostly NOT a threat to sustainability when seen in context)
  - 48 No data

- “Problem » indicators: 1.1 (change in FAWS), 2.1 (at risk of eutrophication), 4.2 (natural regeneration), 4.9 (protected forest area)

- “Overall therefore, taking account of the indicators recorded, the explanations given and level of thresholds agreed for the pilot study, there is no evidence of significant areas of concern with regards to sustainable forest management in the seventeen countries which participated in the pilot study.”
SEMAFOR results, by country
Template by country

Country X

• Context
  – Neutral, quantified text on context indicators, including policies and institutions

• Assessment of sustainable forest management
  – *In many areas, developments are better than the internationally agreed thresholds*: (neutral, quantified text, mentioning most assessment indicators)
  – *Data not available for x parameters*: ....
  – *In x cases, recorded data exceed the international thresholds*: ...(for each, parameter data are accompanied by correspondent response)
Lessons learned from the pilot study
Feasibility of the SEMAFOR approach to assessment

• It has been possible to collect and analyse accurate and meaningful information on the vast majority of the parameters chosen.

• These data provide a comprehensive description of the state of sustainable forest management in the participating countries.

• The SEMAFOR approach could be applied, without excessive expense, if it were decided to move beyond the pilot phase and apply the method to all the countries in the region.

• Experience of dialogue with national correspondents has been extremely positive.

• After dialogue, practically no « areas of concern » remained.

• Is it possible to assess sustainability? Thresholds are key.
Desirability of common thresholds

• Arguments in favour:
  – Credibility, impact, transparency, clarity
  – Could be used to set and monitor international commitments
  – Without them, the « assessment » process is essentially descriptive, and everything is relative or subjective

• Arguments against:
  – Make it difficult to take account of national circumstances
  – Encourage a lowest common denominator approach, hinder ambitious and specific goals
  – Infringe national sovereignty (not applicable if thresholds used as part of agreed international process)
  – Indicator-specific thresholds ignore tradeoffs and balance of SFM

• In SEMAFOR, the existence of the thresholds provided a major stimulus, to supply data and to reflect on what the real significance of those data is.
Values of the thresholds

• In the pilot study, the thresholds were sometimes arbitrary, and often not very challenging

• There was little discussion beforehand of the thresholds (despite open invitation to participate)

• If the SEMAFOR approach were to be applied officially, in whatever context, it would be necessary to have a formal and detailed discussion of all the parameters and all the thresholds.

• Is there a bias towards the status quo? (use of « any negative change »)
Alternatives to common thresholds?

• Are there other approaches to maintaining transparency, objectivity and credibility, while taking account of differing national circumstances?

• One way forward would be a transparent and participatory process to set national thresholds in common SEMAFOR framework, and thus address (perhaps) the problem of credibility.

• Other processes (climate change, biodiversity) use the concept of progress towards nationally set targets.

• All these approaches require a carefully structured process of goal/threshold setting if they are to be credible.

• A process which did not reach consensus, or was not sufficiently ambitious in its outcome, would be counterproductive.
Impact of SEMAFOR results

• SEMAFOR results are detailed, comprehensive, objective, comparable and transparent, but complex, and without clear conclusions as to sustainability of forest management at the national level.

• As they stand at present, the SEMAFOR results are unlikely to have an impact on the perceptions in society as a whole of the sustainability of forest management in Europe.

• The impact of the results would probably be increased if there was a clear sustainable/unsustainable judgement at the country level. However, experience with the SEMAFOR approach has shown that such a judgement would be, at best, superficial and, at worst, misleading – unless there was a much stronger consensus on thresholds.
Next steps for SEMAFOR
What next?

• Pilot study now complete: any last minute corrections by 30 April, please.
• Feedback now and over next months
• Decision on assessment approach, if any, at joint COFFI/EFC session in 2017
Thank you
(especial thanks to Roman, Florian, Alexander Kretov, and, above all, the 17 national correspondents)

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