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Economic Commission for Europe**Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry****Seventy-eighth session**

Geneva, 4-6 November 2020

Item 6(a) of the provisional agenda

Reporting on and implementation of the 2018-2021 Warsaw Integrated Programme of Work and related decisions: Review of 2020 activities and activities planned for 2021**Supporting Economic Commission for Europe member States in building capacity on urban forestry****Note by the Secretariat***Summary*

This document provides background information for item 6(a) of the annotated provisional agenda for the Seventy-eighth session of the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry.

It provides more information about the Joint Section's current activities on urban trees and forests, bringing attention to the relevance of these activities for achieving the targets of key international and global agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Forest Goals of the United Nations Strategic Plan on Forests 2017-2030. The document also includes information about the "Trees in Cities Challenge" and suggestions on how to advance urban forestry.

Delegates are invited to refer to this background document and to advise the Joint ECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section (the Joint Section) on the future direction of work in this area. The Committee is invited to:

- (a) Recognize the importance of urban trees and forests for meeting the goals of key international and global agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as their contribution to climate change mitigation;
- (b) Advise on future work of the Joint Section with respect to urban trees and forests and consider including this topic in the Integrated Programme of Work 2022-2025;
- (c) Strengthen the "Trees in Cities Challenge" initiative by connecting it to other relevant processes and initiatives at global, regional and local levels and introduce it to relevant audiences;
- (d) Strengthen urban resilience and post COVID-19 recovery through urban greening initiatives.



I. Background and introduction

1. The majority of people call cities their home. Cities occupy less than 5 per cent of the world's landmass, yet they host more than half of the world's population, a figure which is expected to increase to 70 per cent by 2050. Urban areas account for 74 per cent of Europe's population and 82 per cent of North America. Urban growth is often unsustainable, resource intensive, and can result in degraded natural resources and various environmental hazards. Cities often suffer from air pollution, as well as degraded lands and watercourses.
2. Unfortunately, urban green space (forests, parks, riparian areas, trails shade trees) continue to be low on many agendas. Urban forestry is often underfunded, understaffed and often not fully integrated into existing plans for sustainable urban development.
3. Many key global agreements reference urban forestry, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (goals 3, 11, 13, and 15) and the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 (goal 1, with a reference to the contribution of forests to climate change mitigation and adaptation; and goal 2, with a focus on forests and trees in the urban context). The responsibility of coordinating and monitoring these agreements are split between several United Nations (UN) entities and other international and non-governmental organizations, making it difficult for stakeholders to identify and decide upon appropriate partnerships or access support for the management of urban forests and green spaces. Better coordination among entities, including UN bodies, is needed.
4. The Joint Section has been supporting the potential for urban forestry to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through: press releases, the Forest Information Billboard, the International Day of Forests 2018 (focused on forests and cities), and promotional videos. However, this area will need more concrete work to be specified in the 2022-2025 Integrated Programme of Work. This should also take into account the need to include concrete steps to support member States in post COVID-19 recovery, through ensuring the availability and accessibility of urban green spaces, whose value and importance were felt particularly acutely during the period of lockdown.

II. The “Trees in Cities Challenge” initiative – launch, progress to date and future activities

5. The ECE's portfolio of work on cities and sustainable urban development has grown substantially since “the International Day of Forests 2018” and “the Day of Cities” (a side event to the Commission Session held on 8 April 2019). “The Day of Cities” brought together over 50 mayors and deputy mayors from 33 ECE member States who shared their vision for sustainable urban development in the ECE region. The mayors in attendance stressed the importance of green urban spaces for reducing the effect of heat waves, air pollution, and the general improvement to the lives of urban inhabitants. They also expressed interest in any support that the ECE could provide.
6. The ECE Executive Secretary launched the “Trees in Cities Challenge”, in recognition of the importance of this topic, at the UN Secretary-General's Climate Action Summit held on 23 September 2019. This global campaign invites mayors and urban authorities to make a concrete pledge to expand their urban green areas, improve the management of urban forests and trees, and help raise the awareness of urban forestry, as a nature-based solution to climate change that can be locally implemented. More information about this campaign is available at: <https://treesincities.unece.org>. The Forests, Land and Housing Division is overseeing this campaign due to its relevance for the work of the Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry and the Committee on Urban Development, Housing and Land Management.
7. The following cities have confirmed the participation of their mayor in “the Trees in Cities Challenge”: Podgorica (Montenegro), Victoria (Canada), Bonn (Germany), Malaga (Spain), Vancouver (USA), Tirana (Albania), Helsingborg (Sweden), Turin (Italy), Sofia (Bulgaria), Tbilisi (Georgia), Ashgabat and other Turkmen cities (Turkmenistan), Nof Hagalil (Israel), Athienou (Cyprus), Barcarena (Brazil) and Mexico City (Mexico), Kfar Saba

(Israel). The mayors of these cities have pledged to plant almost 11 million trees by the end of 2020, improve coordination among local entities in charge of planting and managing urban forests, as well as build capacity for collecting data on urban trees and forests.

8. The majority of the participating cities belong to the ECE region (there is also a city from both Brazil and Mexico). There are considerable disparities between ECE member States when it comes to the sustainability of urban growth, including urban green cover, as well as the attention and resources dedicated to them.

9. There has been a noticeable shift towards planting more trees in cities and towns throughout the ECE region. However, many challenges persist, including the lack of guidelines for planting and management of urban forests, the lack of government support, insufficient funding, and a lack of knowledge of the benefits of urban trees and forests.

10. Some of the main achievements of the “Trees in Cities Challenge”, as highlighted by participating cities, include raising the awareness of the full array of benefits of urban forestry; encouraging better coordination among municipal authorities; stronger community involvement, including the process of selecting, planting and maintaining trees. Stronger support and greater interest in the process coming from the national level has also been cited. Stronger support at the national level, including funding for concrete tree-planting activities and maintenance of urban forests, is required.

11. In addition to the “Trees in Cities Challenge” and the ongoing awareness- raising campaign, activities such as preparation of policy briefs and promotional material directly targeting cities, as well as the creation and maintenance of small-scale online databases that would help cities keep track of their own and other cities’ activities, are expected.

12. It should also be noted that the “Trees in Cities Challenge” contributed to the visibility of the work of the Joint Section, as a whole. The press release announcing the launch of the “Trees in Cities Challenge” was the most read press release from the Joint Section in 2019 (908 unique views). The promotional video for the campaign had 3,000 unique views within 9 months of its launch, and promotional content related to this campaign is regularly reposted and shared on ECE social media platforms.

III. Benefits of urban forests and their relevance to the implementation of key international and global agreements

13. Future work on urban forests and green urban spaces in the ECE region could strengthen the Joint Section’s ability to support member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially goals 3, 11, 13 and 15, the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030 as well as the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. This can be done by strengthening ECE member States’ capacity to unlock some of the many benefits of urban trees and forests, including:

(a) **Climate change mitigation and decrease in air pollution.** Tree canopy cover can help alleviate the urban heat islands effect and absorb fine particulates in the air. A mature tree can absorb up to 150 kg of CO₂ per year and dramatically cools the air, reducing the need for air conditioning by up to 30 per cent. In their letters of pledge to the “Trees in Cities Challenge”, the cities of Tirana (Albania), Torino (Italy), Victoria (Canada) and Sofia (Bulgaria) all noted these attributes.

(b) **Increasing and preserving local biodiversity.** Increasing the connectivity and functionality of urban landscapes and ecosystems can help preserve fauna and flora biodiversity, by providing habitat, food and protection to plants and animals. Biodiversity protection and restoration of urban landscapes is one of the main objectives identified by Mexico City in their pledge.

(c) **Contributing to local food security and use of wood energy,** by providing fruits and nuts for consumption as well as wood for cooking and heating. In their letter of pledge to the “Trees in Cities Challenge”, the city of Nof Hagalil (Israel) noted that the municipality will plant fruit trees such as oranges, clementines, grapefruit and lemon trees in

order to encourage healthy and organic food choices for its population, while falling fruit can serve as an organic source of food for animals.

(d) Improving the health and quality of life of urban inhabitants. The city of Barcarena (Brazil), for example, outlined the beneficial impacts of urban forests on the quality of life in the city as one of key goals in their letter of the pledge to the “Trees in Cities Challenge”.

(e) Increasing urban resilience to extreme weather events and landslides. Some cities, including the city of Podgorica (Montenegro) highlighted managing the effects of natural disasters as one of their goals in their letter of pledge to the “Trees in Cities Challenge”.

IV. Points for consideration

14. Based on the information presented, the Committee is invited to:

(a) Recognize the importance of urban trees and forests for meeting the goals of key international and global agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as contributing to climate change mitigation;

(b) Advise on future work of the Joint Section with respect to urban trees and forests and consider including this topic in the Integrated Programme of Work 2022-2015;

(c) Strengthen the “Trees in Cities Challenge” initiative by connecting it to other relevant processes and initiatives at global, regional and local levels and introduce it to relevant audiences;

(d) Strengthen urban resilience and post COVID-19 recovery through urban greening initiatives.
