

Getting a better handle on forest products in India

An ITTO-sponsored workshop starts a process aimed at improving India's forest-sector statistics

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Seized teak: Accurate statistics are a key to combating illegal logging in India and elsewhere *Photo: J. Blaser*

Strengthening the technical capacity of member countries to report accurately and consistently on their forest-sector statistics is one of ITTO's explicit objectives; each year, the Organization requests its producer member countries to submit data on their timber sectors via the Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire (JFSQ). Reliable data on the forest sector is fundamental to monitoring the transparency of the tropical timber trade. Moreover, the development of systems for collecting, maintaining and disseminating forest-sector statistics is essential for developing effective policies for sustainable forest management. In India, however, statistical reporting in the forest sector has been inadequate to meet both national requirements and its international reporting obligations through the JFSQ.

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To help improve the country's forest-sector statistics, India's Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) organized a four-day national workshop on forest products statistics, sponsored by ITTO, in New Delhi on 13–16 May 2008. The aim of the workshop was to improve the capacity of statistical reporting at the national level by:

- providing state forest departments and other stakeholders in India with an understanding of the country's international forest-sector statistical reporting commitments;
- improving the regional (ie within-country) coordination of reporting;
- improving the consolidation of national forest-sector statistics;

- finding solutions to problems relating to the collection, compilation and regular dissemination of forest product statistics; and
- clarifying roles and responsibilities for statistical reporting.

The workshop was designed to complement an ITTO-sponsored project—PD 291/04 Rev. 2 (M): *Establishment of a network to facilitate collection, processing and dissemination of statistics pertaining to tropical timber and other forestry parameters in India*—currently under implementation.

Workshop proceedings

An inaugural session opened by the Indian Minister of State (Forests and Wildlife) was followed by nine presentations from various states and union territories on the current status of the collection, analysis and dissemination of forest-sector statistics in India, the methodologies used in collecting and reporting production and trade data, and the uses to which forest products statistics were being put. The workshop was told that serious constraints to statistical reporting had been imposed by the changing role of forests in India from production to protection and the inability of reporting systems to accommodate these changes.

Representatives of ITTO and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization outlined the basic roles and responsibilities of a forestry statistical office and international reporting requirements for the JFSQ. The presence of representatives of the pulp and paper and plywood industries afforded the forum an opportunity for an exchange of views between the public and private sectors on forest-sector statistics. Working groups discussed constraints to the reliability and sustainability of forest product statistics in India and how to address information gaps in national and international

reporting and consolidate regional and national data. The workshop identified a number of important issues, including:

- the limited infrastructure and lack of trained personnel;
- the lack of priority given to statistics by state governments;
- the lack of communication on standardized statistical formats and collection methodologies;
- the lack of uniformity in statistical collection between states; and
- the lack of effective networking between forest departments and other agencies.

Other problems with forest-sector statistics are associated with India's large informal and non-timber forest product sectors, and the contribution of trees outside forests to the timber economy, none of which are adequately addressed in current national statistical surveys.

Workshop recommendations

Among other things, the workshop recommended that:

- existing information systems should be reviewed for the development of an effective forest-sector market information service. An information needs analysis should be carried out for data at the state/region/national and international levels;
- states and union territories should provide data in complete form and on time;
- relevant institutions, wood-based industries and their associations and other available validated data sources should be utilized in the development of a forest-sector data management system;
- the capacities of states and union territories to collect and disseminate data on the forest sector should be strengthened, including by the provision of the necessary hardware and software;
- a mechanism should be developed for assessing the contribution of non-forest areas to forest-sector production;
- responsibility for reviewing, planning and providing training in forest-sector statistics should be assumed by the MoEF and adequate steps taken to ensure the availability of high-quality, reliable data;
- a Directorate of Forest Economics and Statistics should be created under the MoEF for forest data networking as an outcome of a National Forestry Database Management System scheme;
- the allocation of funds to the forest sector specifically for the strengthening of forest-sector statistics in the states and union territories should be enhanced;
- capacity building is required to develop expertise at all levels;

- the states and union territories should provide copies of their annual administrative reports to the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and the MoEF;
- the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics at Kolkata should assist ICFRE by providing trade data on the forestry items specified under chapters 12 and 44 of the harmonized system customs classifications;
- statistical cells should be created in each state and union territory and should be adequately strengthened on a regular basis;
- studies are needed on the removals of fuelwood, fodder, etc, from forests and other areas in order to supplement the forestry database;
- there is a need for more effective dissemination of forest-sector statistics at the state level; and
- specific surveys are needed to estimate the consumption of forest products by industry (eg pulp and paper) and on the informal sector, which is not covered by existing national surveys.

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Conclusions

This workshop was the first ITTO-sponsored statistical workshop at a national level in India; an important outcome was the sensitization of state forest departments and other stakeholders on the importance of coordinating the collection of forest-sector statistics. The recommendations of the workshop have helped to guide on-going work under ITTO project PD 291/04 Rev. 2 (M) and will be useful in preparing a 'road map' for forest-sector statistics for India which, together with the development of the National Forestry Database Management System, is expected to provide comprehensive solutions to the problems of data management in India's forest sector.

ITTO can assist member countries in the development of statistical systems for national and international forest sector monitoring and reporting. For more information contact the ITTO Secretariat (maplesden@itto.or.jp).