

Implementing criteria and indicators in Europe

The pan-European C&I serve a useful purpose, but could be improved

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Indicator: Forest biodiversity conservation is an important component of the pan-European C&I set. *Photo: Fotolia*

In the wake of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, several international processes and initiatives developed criteria and indicators (C&I) as a policy instrument to evaluate and report on progress towards sustainable forest management (SFM). In Europe, the initiative to promote and commit to SFM is led by FOREST EUROPE, formerly known as the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE). A set of C&I for SFM in Europe (known as the pan-European C&I) was established in the 1990s and adopted at the third MCPFE in Lisbon in 1998. At the fourth MCPFE in Vienna in 2003, an improved set of six criteria and 35 quantitative indicators (describing forest status and changes) and 17 qualitative indicators (describing the national forest policies, institutions and instruments used to move towards SFM) was endorsed.

Until recently, however, insufficient information has been available on how the pan-European C&I have been used and what their real impact has been. Policymakers and administrative bodies, as well as professionals and the general public, want to know whether observed trends are sustainable, whether the policy systems in place are effective, and whether their efforts to implement the pan-European C&I have made a difference. This article reports on a study (the “CI-SFM” project) by the European Forest Institute that is the first effort to collect information on the implementation of the pan-European C&I in the 46 signatory states of the FOREST EUROPE process. The study concerns how and to what extent the C&I set has been used at the pan-European and national levels, investigates challenges and gaps in its implementation, and explores opportunities for further improvement.

Defining the pan-European C&I

The lack of a formal statement of the objectives of the pan-European C&I makes it difficult to define how the set is being implemented and to assess whether such implementation has been successful. Therefore, the study began with an analysis and conceptualization of the term “C&I implementation”. A working definition of the pan-European C&I was developed based on a review of relevant MCPFE resolutions and documents as well as the publications of other international C&I processes, and this working definition was used and tested in the course of the project. This process made it possible to develop an improved definition of the pan-European C&I for discussion, further revision and approval at the policy level, which should help give direction to future work.

The working definition includes five major applications of the pan-European C&I:

1. as a framework for dialogue and communication;
2. as a tool for monitoring and reporting;
3. as a tool for assessing progress towards SFM;
4. for use in forest policy; and
5. in the provision of information to other indicator sets and cross-sectoral data.

Methods used in the study

The information required to address the project objectives was collected through a literature review, interviews with experts inside and outside the forest sector, an enquiry on national and subnational assessments, regional workshops and a pan-European forum on implementing C&I. The working definition was used as a framework to collect and structure the information throughout the study.

This ensured a comprehensive and balanced approach, not favouring any application over another. The key findings of the report are based on the perspectives of the experts interviewed, the FOREST EUROPE national correspondents who completed the enquiry on national assessments, and participants in project events. Each group used different vocabularies and expressed different viewpoints, approaches and goals, thus providing important insights into the implementation of the pan-European C&I in each of the five applications.

Key findings

The pan-European C&I have served as a framework for dialogue and communication by providing stimulus and support for communication within the forest sector, especially in terms of setting and streamlining the forestry debate. In particular, the pan-European C&I have facilitated deliberation and consultation between policymakers and forest-sector stakeholders, thus promoting stronger stakeholder participation in forest policy processes. The results of the various analyses also signal that the pan-European C&I have been instrumental in defining the content of SFM, and they have provided structure to forest policy in the pan-European region.

However, the C&I set is considered complex, static and too focused on matters that are of interest only to the forest sector. This complexity creates barriers in communicating forest-sector issues to the general public and to other sectors (such as energy, environment and climate change) because the information and rationale embedded in the set is difficult to understand for non-forestry stakeholders. The lack and fragmentation of communication channels between forest administrations and relevant institutions, as well as the sporadic nature of C&I-based communication activities, appear to be other major limitations to broader outreach by the forest sector.

The pan-European C&I have served as an adequate tool for monitoring and reporting on SFM. Politically endorsed, the C&I have shaped and stabilized international reporting in the region, which is important for the long-term development of national forest inventories and other data collection and analysis systems, including those originating in other sectors (e.g. national accounts). The pan-European C&I have contributed conceptually and practically to improving the comparability of forest information among European countries by setting a common reporting framework, which also reflects the global structure of the seven thematic areas approved by the United Nations and applied in FAO's global forest resources assessment. The pan-European C&I have helped improve the availability and quality of information and promoted a broader understanding of forest-related information in European and national policymaking. In addition, the C&I approach has led to improved data availability and quality in areas that previously were not covered in forest-sector statistics.

However, there is broad consensus among experts and FOREST EUROPE national correspondents that the collection of large amounts of data, in particular those related to sub-indicators and other parameters, imposes a considerable and questionable burden on data-collection agencies while making it more difficult to achieve data completeness. There are also recurring challenges in ensuring acceptable data verification and validation processes and institutional challenges in monitoring and reporting relating to the maintenance and regularity of the applied monitoring instruments, capacity, education and training, and coordination among national and international data providers.

The pan-European C&I have made a limited contribution to assessing progress towards SFM by providing time trends for a first assessment step. Two assessment prototypes were presented as pilots in the *State of Europe's forests* reports published in 2007 and 2011. Despite the progress and the two pilot approaches, however, there is a clear notion that assessment procedures based on C&I are hindered by their structural and conceptual shortcomings. Thresholds and trade-offs for individual indicators have not yet been developed.

In general, there is an acknowledged need for a well-developed and approved assessment methodology that allows a balanced approach to the use of the pan-European C&I in assessing progress towards SFM. To respond to this need, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)/FAO is leading an effort which builds on the experience gained in the pilots presented in *State of Europe's forests*. Through a transparent process, UNECE/FAO has developed a method that will be applied on a pilot basis in the next edition of *State of Europe's forests* in 2015.

A clear political commitment to support the assessment of SFM would give this effort more impact. The Pan-European Operational Level Guidelines (PEOLG) have certainly influenced certification schemes, notably the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (usually known by its acronym, PEFC) by providing reference frames and stimulating assessment procedures both within countries and at a regional level. Thus the pan-European C&I, on which the PEOLG is based, have had an indirect influence on forest management.

The pan-European C&I have facilitated the development and adaptation of national policy instruments, in many instances serving as a reference framework for forest-related policies. The C&I set is perceived as providing a comprehensive framework for multifunctional forest management. By means of its implicit normative power, an increased political commitment to accept and support C&I and integrate them into national policy instruments has been observed. For example, the C&I concept is included in many national forest programs and in some cases has been integrated into national legislative and policy instruments.

Also, by shaping the debate on SFM at the national level, the pan-European C&I have supported new modes of governance in national forest policymaking, at least indirectly. In broader terms, the pan-European C&I are now an accepted tool to stimulate and promote SFM and implement policies at the national level. However, there is wide variation in the methods and quality of adaptation of the pan-European C&I at the national level. The pan-European C&I process provides little guidance for national implementation. Its non-legally binding nature also does not ensure the wide implementation of the C&I in national forest policies, programs and laws, although the incentives are tangible in the countries where they have been considered. Some indicators might be used on a selective, interest-driven basis, but that does not allow the complexity of SFM to be addressed. The study shows that operational linkages between the policy and forest management unit levels are scarce, yet strong linkages are essential for assessing the compliance of forest operations with policies as well as the impact of policies at the operational level.

The pan-European C&I have generated only limited information of intersectoral relevance. Data collected according to the pan-European C&I or national/subnational C&I sets based on the pan-European C&I have rarely been used in other sectors or in more general indicators for assessing change in societies and economies. Collaboration and attempts at harmonization among C&I processes in forestry (e.g. the Montreal Process, the ITTO C&I process and FAO's global forest resources assessment) exist, particularly for the assessment of SFM, and communication is ongoing on conceptual questions. There are few examples of linkages between processes in different sectors (i.e. sectors other than the forest sector) at the national, European Union or pan-European levels. In many cases, however, forest-sector data are not considered relevant by the "non-forest" processes, or they are not expressed in a form applicable for use. One of the reasons for these reservations is the use of concepts and definitions that are only partially harmonized with those of other sectors. In summary, other sectors are reserved in their responses to forest-sector issues and there are communication deficits (in both directions) on intersectoral data needs.

Despite the progress that has been made in various approaches for implementing the pan-European C&I, improvements are needed if they are to be considered as powerful tools for promoting SFM at the subnational, national and pan-European levels. The CI-SFM team made a number of recommendations to enable such improvements, which are listed below; detailed descriptions of the recommendations are available in the full report.

Recommendations for C&I implementation at national and subnational levels

1. Review implementation at the national and subnational level
2. Promote smart use of C&I
3. Develop capacity in the field of C&I
4. Develop or enhance the use of C&I at the subnational level
5. Use C&I indirectly to improve practice at the forest management unit level

Recommendations for implementation at pan-European level

1. Formulate objectives for a revised set of pan-European C&I
2. Revise the pan-European set of indicators
3. Develop harmonized methods for assessing the sustainability of forest management at the national and subnational levels using C&I
4. Develop understanding and use of the qualitative indicators
5. Develop subsets of indicators or composite indicators to address specific policy issues
6. Build bridges to other sectors

Conclusion

The recommendations listed above seek to address barriers to C&I and to strengthen the process for developing and using them—not only as a tool for monitoring and reporting, but also for policymaking at the national and pan-European levels. A number of the proposed actions require further investigation to better capture and understand the complexity of the indicators and to help build capacity for more effective implementation. The recommendations support the work of FOREST EUROPE, particularly its work program in relation to the further development and improvement of SFM and its tools, and they provide a sound basis for targeted exchange at the political and scientific levels.

The full report on which this article is based is available at: www.efi.int/files/attachments/publications/efi_c-i_report_implementing_criteria_net_final.pdf. More information on the CI-SFM project can be obtained at <http://ci-sfm.org>