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Reporting on the Committee's Programme of Work:

Urban forestry work

Urban Action and San Marino Action Plan Update

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

This document provides background information for the discussion on urban forestry work, including an update on ongoing activities and the implementation of the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Action Plan. It highlights important developments in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region, including data trends showing a decrease in urban canopy cover and policy developments such as the urban forestry commitments under the Inflation Reduction Act and the adoption of the new European Union Nature Restoration Law and its associated targets for urban forests. It includes an update on Urban Action activities by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, including the Trees in Dry Cities Coalition, the Trees in Cities Challenge, and the Informal Experts Network on Urban Nature.

Delegations are invited to review the information and nominate national focal points to contribute to an informal task force on the implementation of the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Action Plan. They are also invited to recommend ways forward for this informal task force.

The document is submitted according to A/78/6 (Section 20); ECE/TIM/2023/2-FAO:EFC/2023/2, para 98.



I. Background

1. Forests, trees, and other vegetation in urban areas make important contributions to the creation of resilient, healthy, and vibrant cities. They offer important nature-based solutions for sustainable and resilient urban development, including essential contributions to climate action, public health promotion, biodiversity conservation, food security and economic development. Evidence suggests that the many benefits of planning, establishing and sustainably managing urban trees and forests can be at least five times greater than the cost of doing so. Optimising the ecosystem services and benefits provided by urban and peri-urban forests requires a strategic approach to Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management (SUFM), implementing policies and programmes from the local to the national, regional and international levels.

2. Cities are on the frontline of establishing and sustainably managing urban trees, ensuring the right tree in the right place to deliver the desired benefits while leaving no one behind. This requires good planning and management capacity, including arboriculture expertise, backed by adequate resources. However, many cities face capacity and resources constraints, and many of the opportunities for urban trees as a nature-based solution for climate and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) require national action and support. National policies and programmes can enable, support and fund local efforts to sustainably manage and expand urban trees and forests. Aligning policy and action across levels of government is thus essential to efficiently deliver both local and national objectives.

3. The critical role of urban and peri-urban forests as a nature-based solution to deliver local, national and international goals has received growing attention in national policy and international processes at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and elsewhere in recent years (see Developments in the ECE Region). In November 2023, the ECE Committee on Forests and the Forest Industry (COFFI) adopted the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Action Plan (SMAP)¹ at its eighty-first session. The SMAP is structured to guide collective efforts to enhance urban and peri-urban tree and forest cover as a nature-based solution through a multilevel, multisector approach.

4. The five goals of the Action Plan are to:

(a) Raise awareness of the benefits of Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management and the need for sustainable resource management;

(b) Strengthen governance, policies, regulatory frameworks, and financing for Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management at the national, sub-national, and local levels;

(c) Provide guidance for, and enhance the development and implementation of, masterplans, management plans and good practices in Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management;

(d) Strengthen technical and human capacities for the implementation of Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management programs;

(e) Build inclusive partnerships for the development and delivery of Sustainable Urban and Peri-Urban Forest Management programs at different levels.

5. To implement these goals, the SMAP identifies specific actions and sets out how local, sub-national and national governments can contribute to collective efforts to plan and sustainably manage urban trees and forests to provide a multitude of health, biodiversity, climate and sustainable development benefits. It also identifies activities with a scope for action at the ECE regional level, and by private sector, financial institutions, academia, and civil society. This includes 26 activities with scope for action at the ECE Regional level, which are presented in Annex 1.

6. Successfully achieving the goals of the plan and delivering this nature-based solution while leaving no one behind now depends on promoting action at scale in the ECE region. As households, cities and national governments all seek to promote sustainable development

¹ <https://unece.org/forestry-timber/documents/2023/12/san-marino-regional-urban-forestry-action-plan>.

while addressing climate change, biodiversity loss and desertification, the urgency of action continues to increase.

7. This is recognized in the United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/320, Fostering sustainable forest management, including afforestation and reforestation, in degraded lands, including drylands, as an effective solution to environmental challenge, which was adopted on 13 August 2024. The resolution “Emphasizes the role of forests and trees outside forests in mitigating the effects of air, water and soil pollution, as well as their role as natural barriers against wind, sand and dust storms, preventing soil erosion and further desertification” and “recognizes the significant contributions of forests and trees outside forests in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, in particular in relation to poverty eradication and food security”.

8. Similarly, the United Nations Secretary General’s Call to Action on Heat emphasizes the need to foster nature positive cities and climate-sensitive urban design and planning that mitigates the urban heat island effect and integrates nature-based and other passive cooling solutions to enhance the resilience of the built environment.

II. Developments in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Region

9. Data on canopy cover (the ground area of a city covered by tree or vegetation canopy) shows a decline in many countries across the ECE region over the last 30 years, with some exceptions (see Figure 1). Notably, the available data assesses canopy cover in “functional urban areas”, which includes commuting zones that typically include less densely populated areas that may be outside of the politico-administrative borders of cities. Thus, the canopy cover in urban cores is often significantly lower than the averages presented in Figure 1. This is an important caveat, because more densely populated areas are where urban tree cover can deliver many of its most important benefits to the highest number of people, such as reducing the urban heat island effect.

10. Care is warranted in interpreting the data, as historical urban density and local growing conditions will influence whether space is available and suitable for increasing urban forest cover in any given country. With this noted, it is clear that some countries have lower baselines of average urban canopy cover, at levels that may be far below the optimal canopy coverage considering the potential benefits that greater urban forest cover could deliver.

11. The importance of good planning and capable management of the urban-rural interface and the risks as well as the benefits of urban trees and forests has also been highlighted by disasters in recent years. For example, cities across the ECE region have been directly affected by forest fires that have entered the urban or peri-urban fabric, such as in Lahaina, Hawaii, United States (2023) and Athens, Greece (2024).

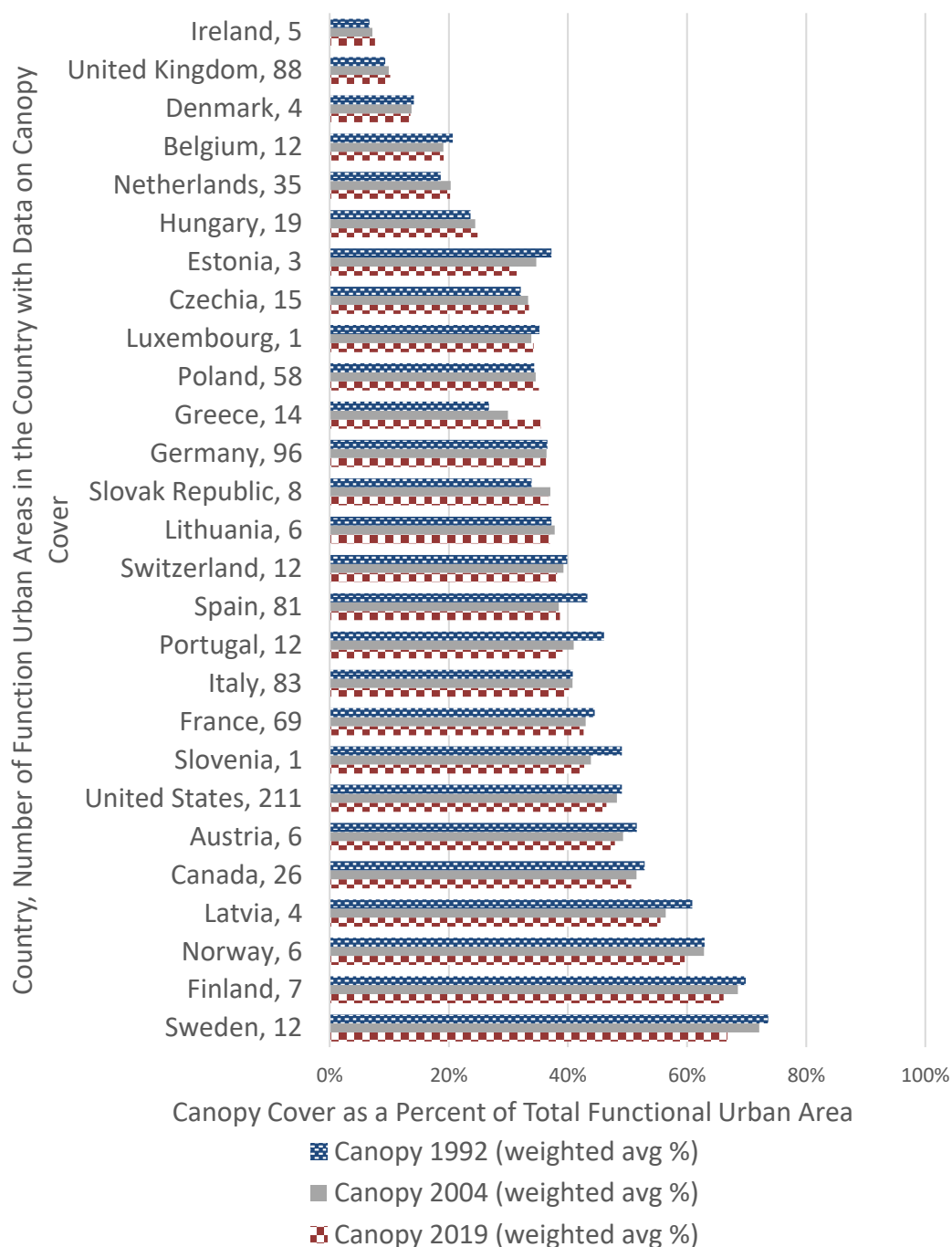
12. While the low and downward trend in urban canopy cover in many countries raises some concerns, there is also reason for hope. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in attention to urban forests by policymakers in the ECE region. Many cities are showing leadership, including over 80 that have submitted tree planting and sustainable urban forestry pledges as part of the ECE Trees in Cities Challenge, with over 12 million trees pledged to date. Similarly, national governments in many countries, for example Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, have developed plans, projects and targets to significantly increase urban and peri-urban tree cover.

13. One example of increased attention at the policy level is the European Union (EU) Nature Restoration Law, which entered into force on 18 August 2024. It sets targets including “no net loss of green urban space and tree cover by 2030, and a steady increase in their total area from 2030”². Furthermore, under this new law, EU Member States must develop national

² For the purposes of this requirement, “Member States may exclude from those total national areas the urban ecosystem areas in which the share of urban green space in the urban centres and urban clusters exceeds 45 % and the share of urban tree canopy cover exceeds 10 %” (EU Nature Restoration Law, Article 8, para 1).

restoration plans which, inter alia, “shall determine and map urban ecosystem areas” and monitor “the area of urban green space and urban tree canopy cover within urban ecosystem areas”, with a requirement to set and comply with urban green space and urban canopy cover target to be defined at the national and EU level.

Figure
Weighted Average Canopy Cover in Functional Urban Areas



Note: “A functional urban area (or metropolitan area) is composed of a city plus its surrounding, less densely populated spatial units that make up the city’s labour market, its commuting zone. This commuting zone generates a daily flow of people into a city and back (home to their dwelling).” (European Union/FAO/UNHabitat/OECD/The World Bank. 2021. Applying the degree of urbanisation: a methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons, 2021 edition).

Source: adapted from UNECE, 2024. Sustainable development in the UNECE Region: Facing a Headwind in 2024. Available at: <https://w3.unecce.org/sdg2024/>. Developed using data from OECD.Stat, 2023, Land cover in functional urban areas.

14. Another example of increased attention by policymakers is the United States Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which earmarked approximately USD 1.5 billion to significantly expand support to urban and community forestry efforts at the national, subnational and local levels. This represents 30% of the \$5 billion in funding the act made available to the United States Forest Service. The funding had an important focus on equitable access to urban forests and their benefits, prioritizing disadvantaged and overburdened communities. Notably, the United States Forest Service reported receiving funding proposals totalling USD 6.4 billion³, far exceeding the USD 1.5 billion available, an indication of the strong interest in urban forestry and demand for financial support.

15. There have also been efforts to develop international standards. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative launched its Standards for Urban and Community Forests in 2022. This standard is intended for use by local governments, as well as the private sector and civil society.

16. However, despite this progress, much work remains to be done to develop tools and knowledge, build capacity, enhance the enabling environment, and implement this nature-based solution at scale. For this to be done systemically, in many countries there is a need to develop or strengthen multilevel legal and policy frameworks, establish or update institutional mandates, and better integrate urban trees and forests into planning, budgeting and action across sectors and levels of government.

III. Update on urban action and the implementation of the San Marino Action Plan

17. The ECE secretariat has implemented specific activities as well as broader initiatives to engage local and national governments, as well as private and civil society stakeholders in collective urban action and implementation of the San Marino Action Plan. This includes support to strengthen systemic, multilevel and multisector approaches, through outreach and engagement, capacity building, guidance and knowledge products, and collective action, as presented in the following paragraphs.

18. In 2024, elaboration of a guidance document on **urban food trees**, with technical and strategic recommendations based on an extensive set of case studies.

19. Engagement of additional cities in the **Trees in Cities Challenge and the Informal Experts Network on Urban Nature**. Total pledges under the Trees in Cities Challenge have reached over 12.5 million trees from more than 85 cities. In addition to meeting and peer learning exchanges, the Informal Experts Network on Urban Nature has substantively advised and contributed to activities such as the work on urban food trees.

20. Organization of the high-level **COP28 side event "Trees in dry cities: luxury or a fundamental climate and SDG solution?"** which brought together distinguished ministerial delegates, local governments, development banks, and research institutes, among others. Building on this event, ECE and partners established **The Trees in Dry Cities Coalition ("The Coalition")**, a multilevel action initiative facilitated by ECE in collaboration with local and national governments, international organizations and financial institutions, non-governmental organisations, and experts from all sectors. It champions the power of urban trees and nature as a nature-based solution for cities and towns in drylands. It operates on a multi-level approach, working to align policy and systemic action across local, national, and international levels, in accordance with the San Marino Action Plan. The Coalition seeks to:

(a) Promote knowledge exchange and best practices on urban tree management, particularly in drylands;

(b) Inform policy by providing data and research for integrating urban forestry into national climate strategies and SDGs;

³ United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, 2024. Urban and Community Forestry Program. Accessed 14 August from <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/urban-forests/ucf>.

(c) Advance global efforts for urban forestry in dry climates through joint messaging campaigns, collaborative events and actions, and development of tools and knowledge products through a joint implementation plan developed during the first three meetings of the Coalition.

21. Stakeholders from all levels (local, national, international) and sectors (public, private, civil society) are invited to join the Coalition and its activities. The first three meetings of the Coalition were held between March and June 2024, and resulted in an action plan of activities led by different members of the Coalition:

(a) Organization of outreach and capacity building events at major international events such as UNFCCC COP29, UNCBD COP16, and UNCCD COP16⁴;

(b) Elaboration of communication materials with joint messages developed by the Coalition;

(c) The elaboration of guidance on integrating urban forests into national policies;

(d) The elaboration of guidance on integrating urban forests and ecosystems into national plans under the Rio Conventions;

(e) Develop a factsheet on building back better with urban trees in arid ecosystems in post-conflict and post-disaster contexts;

(f) Organize peer exchanges on trees in dry cities (e.g. best practices for water reliability);

(g) Compilation of Funding Concepts for Trees in Dry Cities as a Nature Based Solution.

22. The proposed activities are planned for implementation in the remainder of 2024 and 2025, and all member States are invited to join the Coalition and contribute to the implementation of these activities.

IV. Review and conclusions

23. Despite some negative trends in urban forest cover over the last 30 years, today, urban forestry is receiving greater attention and interest at the local, national and international levels. Strong engagement by local and national governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, civil society and academia in the Trees in Dry Cities Coalition, Trees in Cities Challenge and Informal Experts Network on Urban Nature, and discussions at related meetings, indicate the importance of this outreach and the growing demand for support across sectors and levels of government and a strong interest in collective action.

24. Local and national governments across the ECE region are setting goals and targets with increased ambition. In this context, there is significant scope for increased collaboration at the ECE region level to support efforts to deliver on these goals and targets. This includes a need to promote more systemic ECE-wide cooperation in the implementation of the San Marino Action Plan (see Annex 1), backed by adequate resources.

25. The need for an integrated and sustainable forest planning and management perspective across the urban-rural interface would be an area worthy of additional attention at the national and ECE regional level.

26. ECE member States are thus invited to provide the Committee with a brief update on national efforts to promote urban and peri-urban forestry and the implementation of the San Marino Action Plan, and to identify their priorities for expanded cooperation at the regional level.

⁴ The 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP29), the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD COP16), and the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP16).

V. Points for Consideration

27. The following points are submitted for consideration by the Committee.
28. The Committee:
 - (a) Requests member States to submit a nomination of a national focal point for an informal task force on implementation of the San Marino Action Plan to the Secretariat;
 - (b) Invites member States to provide in-kind and financial support for the implementation of the San Marino Regional Urban Forestry Plan;
 - (c) Invites member States to join the Trees in Dry Cities Coalition;
 - (d) Invites member States to promote participation in the Trees in Cities Challenge and Informal Experts Network on Urban Nature by local governments and experts.

Annex

List of actions in the San Marino Urban Forestry Action Plan with scope of action at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe regional level

1. A.1.1. Compile and disseminate information on the essential benefits provided by urban forests, related to, among others, climate action, public health, food security, biodiversity conservation, and economic development.
2. A.2.1. Identify, develop, and disseminate methods to value the economic, environmental, and social benefits of SUFM.
3. A.2.2. Identify and communicate emerging market and non-market opportunities (e.g., including payments for ecosystem services) provided by SUFM.
4. A.2.3. Conduct local, national, and regional evaluations of the economic and other values of SUFM to guide planning and investment.
5. A.3.1. Awareness raising and information provision, including from research and well-documented case studies, that emphasise the importance of successfully establishing trees and managing them over the long-term to ensure ensuring that they reach maturity.
6. A.3.2. Promotion of successful long-term management of urban forests which results in healthy and mature trees that provide high levels of ecosystem services.
7. B.1.1. Develop and provide guidelines for developing national SUFM policies.
8. B.3.1. Identify key actors in urban forest governance and clarify institutional mandates and responsibilities – including mandates and responsibilities at the level of specific institutions.
9. B.3.2. Integrate SUFM objectives into existing and relevant policies and coordination mechanisms (cross-sectoral, across levels of governance, and both state and non-state), considering their socio-ecological and economic linkages to rural areas. For example, related to climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk reduction, water management, public health promotion, tourism, biodiversity conservation, food security, and economic development.
10. B.3.3. Where needed, develop new coordination mechanisms for urban forest governance at the national, sub-national, and local level of governance, as well as for transboundary collaboration including linkages to rural areas.
11. B.4.1. Provide guidance on budgeting and financing SUFM.
12. B.4.3. Develop and replicate SUFM financing instruments to mobilize additional finance and meet specific needs.
13. C.1.1. Develop guidelines and tools for conducting urban forest inventories and monitoring.
14. C.2.1. Develop guidelines for preparing urban forest master plans at the local (e.g. city) level.
15. C.2.2. Develop standardised national metrics and performance indicators for urban and peri-urban forest management.
16. C.3.1. Carry out joint research activities that support urban forest planning and management.
17. C.3.2. Compile and disseminate examples of both good and unsuccessful practices and technologies in SUFM.
18. C.3.3. Foster the implementation of good practices and technologies in SUFM.

19. D.2.1. Initiate and strengthen networks of SUFMM experts and affiliated professionals at the regional and national level that support knowledge exchange, collaboration, and capacity building.
 20. D.2.3. Organise conferences and events that help build communities of practice and knowledge.
 21. E.1.1. Foster the development of cross-sectoral partnerships and collaboration between governance levels for SUFMM, including meaningful community stewardship and considering and reflecting linkages to rural areas.
 22. E.1.2. Strengthen public-private partnerships and collaboration for SUFMM, including the engagement of businesses and landowners.
 23. E.2.1. Ensure that SUFMM programs address and prioritise environmental equity aspects and that their benefits are inclusive also of the most vulnerable groups in society (such as low-income groups, people with disabilities).
 24. E.2.2. Foster inclusive partnerships and opportunities for participation in SUFMM decision-making and activities, including community stewardship.
 25. E.3.1 Align international efforts and actions.
 26. E.3.2 Avoid duplication of the same actions and financing at the international level and exchange learnings.
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