

Youth Statement of the Seventh Mediterranean Forest Week

This statement contains the main challenges and recommendations presented by youth who participated in the Mediterranean Youth Dialogue of the Seventh Mediterranean Forest Week (7MFW) on 22 March 2022.

Five key themes and topics arose from the discussion, which was guided by four questions. Under each of these topics, recommendations are included to be considered for the high-level segment of the 7MFW.

1. Inclusive participatory and decision-making processes at all levels

We, the youth in the Mediterranean region, face a lack of inclusion, participation and representation in policy dialogues and decision-making processes. There is a generalized gap between politicians and youth, and a lack of decentralized governance where youth can participate. Our expertise and scientific contributions within this sector are often not taken into consideration in policymaking, project designing, and law implementation. In addition, gender and age gaps define the forest sector, which should be more inclusive, diverse and representative. It is highly male dominated and not easily accessible by younger generations. We recognize the risk of “youth mainstreaming” practices where the role and involvement of youth is “tokenized,” and youth representatives are asked to speak but are commonly not given access to collaborate with high-level officials and decision-makers.

We therefore recommend:

- Multisectoral support to be given to existing (and to support the creation of) youth committees, networks, and organizations where youth can contribute, lobby, and be consulted for inputs.
- Governments to build trust and ensure communication with youth representatives, youth-led organizations, youth networks, civil society and citizen assemblies composed by youth to increase youth consultations, involvement, and participation in policy-making processes in the forest sector.
- Governments to increase the accessibility of public sector initiatives for youth, and to involve young people in projects and activities in the forest sector.
- Governments to promote and support decentralized governance where youth can participate.
- International organizations, the private sector, civil society, and governments to properly recognize youth as agents of change.
- State and non-state actors to make bigger efforts to reduce the gender and age gap in the forest sector by employing and supporting activities including young people and women.

2. Economic and financial resources and opportunities

We, the youth, face a lack of decent employment opportunities and financial support in the forestry sector. This limits a smooth transition from education to the world of work, and the socio-economic integration of young generations into Mediterranean societies. The scarce financial opportunities for entrepreneurship and research are often accompanied by difficulty in accessing such support due to a lack of information and excessive bureaucracy.

We therefore recommend:

- Multisectoral collaboration and private-public partnerships that can provide decent youth employment opportunities and increase the financial attractiveness of forest restoration efforts through the creation of green jobs.
- Multisectoral collaboration to provide quality technical vocational education and training opportunities for youth that combining on-the-job training and off-the-job learning (such as traineeships, internships, mentorship programmes and other capacity building activities and specialized trainings) on sustainable forest management practices to ensure a smooth entry into the workforce for youth.
- Governments to include forestry professions in aid mechanisms, as well as grants and overall support to competitions and boot camps to develop youth start-ups and projects in the forest sector.

3. Education programmes, capacity-building, and training opportunities for youth on forestry

We, the youth, identify a lack of academic university programmes on forestry in the region. Existing programmes often lack to prepare us, the youth, to enter the workforce and to develop our careers in the forest sector. Furthermore, there is a gap in knowledge exchange between academics and research organizations, and forest-based industries in the private sector and in decision-making processes. Outside of the academic sector, we also identify a lack of technical training and capacity building opportunities in the forestry sector, and a lack of information and communication on such opportunities.

We therefore recommend:

- The academic sector to build programmes that are accessible to youth and that prepare them on technical knowledge but also on socio-economic and global political economy perspectives of the forest sector.
- The academic sector to provide career guidance for students to ensure a smooth transition into the world of work in the forest sector.
- Multisectoral collaboration between governments, the private and academic sectors to create and promote capacity building, and training opportunities in the forest sector for youth that prepare youth to acquire technical skills and tools enter the workforce.
- Governments, the private and academic sectors to ensure the exchange of best practices and knowledge-sharing experiences among and with youth.
- Primary and secondary education to raise awareness to younger generations to introduce the benefits and opportunities of careers in the forest sector, both in rural and urban areas, as well as to expose the challenges and issues related to climate change and unsustainable forest management practices.

4. Mediterranean youth in the rural – urban divide

We, the rural Mediterranean youth, encounter greater challenges in accessing educational and professional opportunities. There is a large gap between rural and urban zones, which encourages rural abandonment and migration to urban areas. This also causes the loss of intergenerational knowledge of forest management practices and traditions within our local communities, and simultaneously, the loss of biodiversity conservation practices. In addition, we face mobility challenges as forest and rural areas are difficult to access without proper public infrastructure and/or private transportation.

We therefore recommend:

- Governments to recognize, consult and involve local organizations composed by local youth into decentralized decision-making mechanisms.
- The private and the academic sector to provide more opportunities for rural youth and in rural areas.
- Governments and the private sector to support local and rural communities in their integration into the forest sector.
- Governments to develop public transport systems to increase the accessibility of rural and forest areas.

5. Communication and transparency of information about forestry issues

We, the youth, are often excluded from transparent communication processes regarding local forest management practices and decisions. In addition, many young people are unaware and unengaged in environmental issues that affect their local ecosystems. This missing connection is also due to an absence of information from trusted sources. There is a lack of communication on international forest-related issues at a socio-cultural, economic and political level that limits our knowledge on global forestry issues, such as on land grabbing of local communities and Indigenous Peoples ancestral domain, as well as on wildfire vulnerability of local communities.

We therefore recommend:

- All local and regional stakeholders to improve communication and information sharing on forest management practices to reach youth and promote youth engagement.
- State and non-state actors to create and promote advocacy campaigns to raise awareness on environmental issues and on sustainable development and forest management practices that recognize local practices.
- State and non-state actors to use modern dissemination outlets, such as social media and podcasts, to reach more of the youth audience and allow for easier and quicker outreach and communication.
- State and non-state actors to raise awareness for global forestry challenges such as land rights of local communities and indigenous peoples as well as forest fire management.
- The private sector, governments, and the civil society to respect the traditional and ecological knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, to consult and include them in decision-making processes and to ensure free-prior and informed consent when liaising with them.

Conclusion

We, the youth, acknowledge the collaborative nature of these recommendations and we call upon key sectors and stakeholders (governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the scientific community, the academic sector, and the private sector) to provide an enabling environment for us to unlock our potential in the forest sector.

We call for better communication and coordination among all actors to consider, value and include us, the youth and our networks, associations and organizations, as essential partners. We call for more open and decentralized spaces that encourage and respect youth participation and dialogue, so that we can contribute to improve the status quo, and solve the five challenges presented above.