

Research – a strategic domain to achieve Sustainable Forest Management

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Research has always been considered as an important instrument to assist the decision making in forest-related issues. Ways and means to carry it out have changed over the years. In short, firstly, state institutions (including universities) had full responsibility. Then, different companies launched their own applied research centers. More recently, other research organisations, linked to international networks, joined the research community. Financing sources reflect these facts and, lately, European Union's financed research projects became a common reality. The objectives of each of the parts involved are not necessarily coincident. And the needs of the end-users have often not been fulfilled.

In general, forest related laws reflect the importance that the Government has attached to research. Recalling: the Forest Policy Act (August 1996) recognises that "the knowledge generated by scientific intervention constitutes one strategic element to the process of decision making", underlines that "forest research institutions should favour research actions which reinforce the sustained intervention capacity of the forest sector and assure the transmission of the generated knowledge" and highlights the stakeholders' participation in the definition and implementation of the research projects. The Sustainable Development Plan of the Portuguese Forest (March 1999), which includes the National Plan of Forest Research, puts forward that, underlying the emerging needs and concerns of the forest sector, are different demands to research, stressing that innovative and holistic approaches to concepts such as multifunctionality, multiple use or sustainable management, require a broader range of research paths and multidisciplinary teams.

Finally, recently launched, the Program of Action for the Forest Sector (March 2003). It presents a Vision: to look at forests, *lato sensu*, as a mobilising national project, it should be assumed beforehand that forest resources are abundant and managed in a sustainable way, being able to contribute to rural development, supplying a successful industry, taking into account the social implications of decisions and improving crucial natural resources, such as water, land, atmosphere and biodiversity. Steps towards the accomplishment of those conditions will have to be taken, meaning that all parts involved should have one main objective: develop efforts to achieve Sustainable Forest Management (SFM). To do so, the most appropriate instruments should be used and existing or new tools should be adequately applied.

This Program of Action foresees actions in different domains considered crucial to its implementation. "Research and Development" is one domain. It clearly states that research should give answers to concrete problems of the sector. Research priorities should focus on subjects that have immediate practical applicability. Some of those priority areas are: the forest decline, the development of planning strategies and protection methods against fire, the role of forests as Carbon sinks, the genetic potential of forest species, their technological use and assessment of potential uses and the sustainability of the forest management. Estação Florestal Nacional, the State forest research and development institution, in close collaboration with Direcção-Geral das Florestas, the National Forest Authority, will act as focal point both in the co-ordination of the forest sector-society inputs and in the dissemination of information. Institutional ways to assure the participation of the private sector in the definition of the forest-related national research and development programs should be established.

To promote SFM we already apply several tools, namely Criteria and Indicators (specifically those considered in the context of the Ministerial Conferences on the Protection of Forests in Europe). The Portuguese Standard for sustainable forest management (SFM systems – application of the pan-European criteria for SFM) has also been approved. And the National Forest Authority would like to reward – upgrading - those forest-related projects (financed by community/public funds) that foresee actions leading to the promotion of SFM. But knowledge and information are still missing in several Criteria. Many indicators need further clarification and research. In addition, Portugal has to fulfil obligations in terms of international reporting on a variety of forest-related subjects and information on particular indicators is still unavailable. Furthermore, our Mediterranean ecosystems imply specific research projects.

The identification of the main information needs, the correspondent definition of priority research areas, the allocation of funds, the co-ordination among all interested and involved agents, the compilation, systematisation along with the dissemination of information, always avoiding duplication of efforts, are needed, in order to "allow" Research to fully play its role as a strategic domain to achieve Sustainable Forest Management.