



Regional Centre for Forestry and Rural Development

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Peja, Kosovo, July 5, 2015

STATEMENT

Local communities, drivers of forest management in the Balkan

REFORD (Regional Centre for Forestry and Rural Development) is a networking organization of private and communal forest owner and user associations from seven Balkan countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Srpska Republic-BiH.

REFORD highly appreciates the initiatives taken by the respective governments of the region and the various donors in developing forests, pastures and protected areas.

REFORD and its members at the meeting held in Peja, Kosovo on 3rd to 5th July 2015 reviewed the developments in forestry in relation to rural people, especially family forests. It shows that the **family forest** has yet remained an issue of concern. Forest degradation from illegal cuttings in the Western Balkan countries has deep roots in history. As long as the basic forest owner and user rights are not provided fully to the people, to sustainable manage their forest and fulfil the basic needs for firewood for heating as minimum to avoid the energy poverty in rural zones, this trend of illegality and degradation will continue. In the long historical battle between local population and forest administration, the final results show that the consequences are in forest mismanagement and degradation and the forest administration failed on the implementation of manifold used slogan on "forest protection".

Most families living in rural areas in the region are highly depended on forest resources. Legalizing them, with full rights, as owners or users of the forest – which they consider as their family's forest – provides them the opportunity to fulfil their needs for heating and cooking. It also gives the opportunity to increase their family incomes and guarantees the long term sustainability of forest development. Property rights issues in private and communal forestry, which are not solved yet, and lacking of funding support for forest owners and users associations for realizing public awareness raising activities, impact negatively in forest preservation, development and sustainable management.

In order to guarantee a long term solution related to family forestry (private and communal forestry), we, the Private and Communal Forest Organizations of the Balkan united in the Regional Network, called REFORD do recommend:

- Acceleration of the reforms related to land tenure, property and user rights in communal and private forests. Solving land disputes and property registration, further decentralisation of competences including support joint forest management with inclusion of local communities especially in degraded land and based on traditional rights;
- Full inclusion of forestry measures and activities within Rural Development programmes and policies in support of family forestry;
- Acknowledgment of and inclusion in policies and regulations of environmental services provided by private and communal forests (family forest) and application of payments for ecosystem services;

- A further enabling environment for family forest in forest and related legislations leading amongst other to less bureaucratic procedures to facilitate forest owners and users sustainable forest management and economic utilization;
- Proper inclusion of family forest (private and communal forests) in protected areas. Ensuring the right and obligations to the rural families and compensation for deprived forest utilization rights in protected areas;
- Support for non-governmental organizations of forest owners/users to further increase their capacities in education and awareness towards communities in rural areas, family forest owners and users.

We express our belief that putting the local communities as drivers of forest management is the right way to get the best solutions for forest development, employment and poverty reduction in rural areas of the Balkan region. We hope that our recommendations will become part of your political and development agenda.

Respectfully,

REFORD Organization (*Regional Centre for Forestry and Rural Development*) and its members;

National Federation of Communal Forest and Pastures of Albania

National Association of Private Forest Owners of Bulgaria

Croatian Union of Private Forest Owners Associations

National Association of Private Forest Owners of Kosovo

National Association of Private Forest Owners of Macedonia

National Association of Private Forest Owners of Montenegro

Association of Private Forest Owners of Srbska Republic

President of REFORD

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