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STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGEMENT AND OPERATION OF FOREST CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS

23 NOV 2020

STUDY ON THE METHOD AND LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS IN THE FSC® (FOREST STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL®) FOREST MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATION PROCESS

FSC® FOREST CERTIFICATION

A TOOL FOR PROMOTING RESPONSIBLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

The effectiveness of this voluntary mechanism (i.e. forest certification), to promote responsible forestry practices that aims to facilitate the involvement of local communities and stakeholders in the development of management strategies and monitoring of their implementation, is directly proportional to the level of involvement of stakeholders/ affected parties.

In other words, FSC certification can make a difference when stakeholders/ affected parties engage in an appropriate way.

Certification creates the framework for a structured dialogue between forest managers and stakeholders/ affected parties. For a proper involvement, considerable efforts must be made by all parties 🌲 forest managers and certification bodies must support the increase in the capacity of stakeholders/ affected parties to engage actively, and 🌲 stakeholders/ affected parties must assume responsibility and effort to analyse all available information related to the management plan and the requirements of the certification standards; 🌲 increasing the capacity of foresters in the exercise of communication and addressing the interaction with stakeholders would also be very useful.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study is a monitoring of the method and level of involvement of stakeholders in the FSC forest management certification process, with a purpose of:

- identifying the main challenges related to the appropriate involvement of stakeholders/affected parties;
- identifying the best solutions to increase the capacity of stakeholders/ affected parties for an active and proper engagement.



OBJECTIVE:

A better functioning of forest management certification in Romania to promote responsible forest management.



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A TOOL FOR PROMOTING RESPONSIBLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

FSC® (FSC N002373) is a voluntary forest management certification scheme that is an important tool to promote responsible forest management and aims to ensure the implementation of environmentally sound forest management, which brings social benefits and is economically viable.

FSC forest certification is an independent and transparent system of evaluation of forest management against a rigorous social and environmental standard, based on a participatory process that allows and facilitates the involvement of various stakeholders.

Credible forest certification schemes cover much more than aspects of logging practices - they also account for the social and economic well-being of local communities, as well as transparency and inclusion in decision-making.

The current context in Romania, defined by the lack of a coherent vision on national forest policies, over-politicization, over-regulation, the lack of financial mechanisms to compensate owners who are subject to restrictions for the protection of environmental or social values or the lack of adequate infrastructure for forest management, creates major problems in the management of this extremely valuable natural resource, the forest.

Considering this context, it is important to manage our expectations and recognize that FSC certification ALONE cannot protect Romania's forests. A variety of forest policies and conservation strategies are therefore needed.

Although FSC is not the panacea to solve all the problems related to the current forest crisis, we believe in the effectiveness of voluntary mechanisms to promote responsible practices that ensure the involvement of local communities and all those interested, in the development of management strategies and evaluation of how to manage forests. This requires continuous improvements to strengthen the way FSC certification works. In this sense, the first and most important step is the path of active and proper involvement of all relevant stakeholders.

ADOPTED WORKING METHODOLOGY

The information was collected by applying (2) two questionnaires to capture both perspectives, with a view for an integrated analysis of the data obtained:

C1. Questionnaire addressed to organizations (forest managers) holding a valid FSC certificate for Forest Management (FM) /Chain of custody (CoC) (C1. Involvement of Stakeholders in the FSC certification process for Forest Management - Questionnaire for certificate holders - annex 1),

C2. Questionnaire addressed to all stakeholders/affected parties identified in the WWF database (C2. Involvement of stakeholders in the FSC certification process of Forest Management - Questionnaire for Stakeholders/Affected parties - annex 2).

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The sequence of activities in the information gathering phase was as follows:

- development of customized questionnaires for the two target categories;
- identification of FM/CoC certified forest management units (information taken from the FSC database);
- identification of relevant stakeholders/affected parties;
- sending questionnaires to target recipients;
- collection and centralisation of responses received;
- interpretation of results.

Questionnaires were applied online through the platform <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>.

MECHANISMS FOR INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS/AFFECTED PARTIES IN THE FSC FOREST MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATION PROCESS

Within the forest certification process, stakeholders, including civil society, are called to play an active role in establishing forest management strategies through:

- **Public consultation** process to involve stakeholders in key points of certification:
 - when developing standards;
 - when applying standards;
 - when checking compliance (in the audit process);
- **Complaints management system**, operating on the principle of "lowest level".

Thus, the FSC forest management certification is also constituted as a platform for dialogue and dispute resolution, which aims to harmonize the management strategies adopted by the forestry administration with the legitimate social, environmental and economic interests of the stakeholders/affected parties.

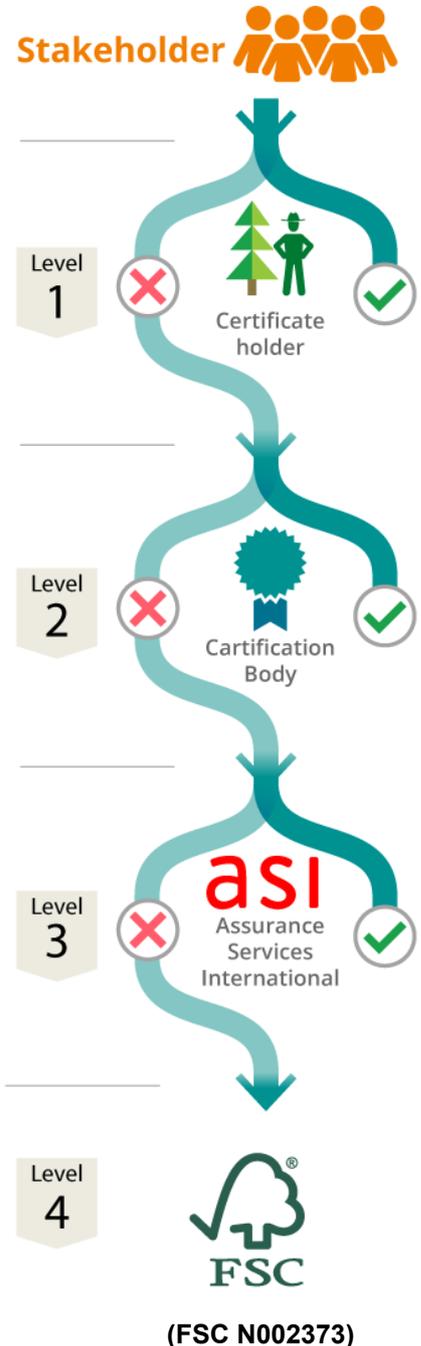


Fig. 1 The "the lowest level" principle means that disputes should always be addressed by discussions and negotiations at the lowest possible level. In the case of concerns related to a certified operation, the lowest level is the certificate holder.



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PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

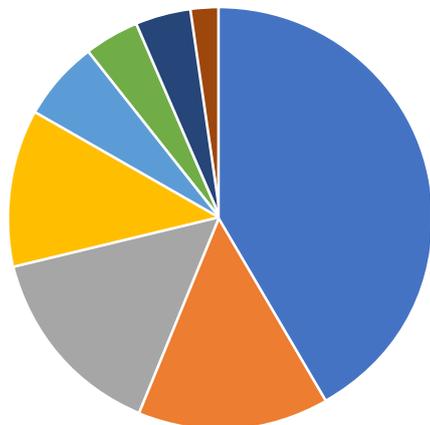
A. GENERAL INFORMATION

Questionnaire 1	Total no. of organisations surveyed:	Total no. of respondent organisations:
FM/CoC certificate holders	65	58

Obs. The percentage of respondents from the certificate holders' category (over 89% of the organisations contacted), shows their concern for improving the certification process, including with regard to the related public consultations.

Questionnaire 2	Total no. of organisations surveyed:	Total no. of respondent organisations:
Stakeholders/ Affected parties	65	54

Obs. The percentage of respondents in the stakeholder/ affected parties category is over 6% with various distribution by categories of interest.



C2.Q1.

Categories of respondent stakeholders/ affected parties

- economic operators
- protected areas managers
- local authorities
- environmental NGO
- forest owners
- educational institutions
- local communities
- employees

AFFECTED PARTY:

Any person, group of persons or entity that is or may be subject to the effects of the activities of a forest management unit (eg. local communities, indigenous populations, workers, forest dwellers, neighbors, downstream landowners, local operators, local businesses, property and use rights holders, including landowners, organizations authorized or known to act on behalf of affected stakeholders, etc.) - Source: STD-01 - 001 V5-0.

STAKEHOLDER:

Any person, group of persons or entity that has expressed an interest in, or is known to have an interest in, the activities of a management unit (e.g. conservation organizations, e.g. environmental NGOs; labor organizations (labor rights), e.g. trade unions; human rights organizations, e.g. social NGOs; local development projects; local governments; national government departments operating in the region; FSC national offices; experts on particular issues, e.g. high conservation values) - Source: STD-01 - 001 V5-0.



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B. SUMMARY PRESENTATION OF DATA OBTAINED

B1. Public consultations:

Question number 1 (Q1) from the questionnaire addressed to certificate holders (C1):

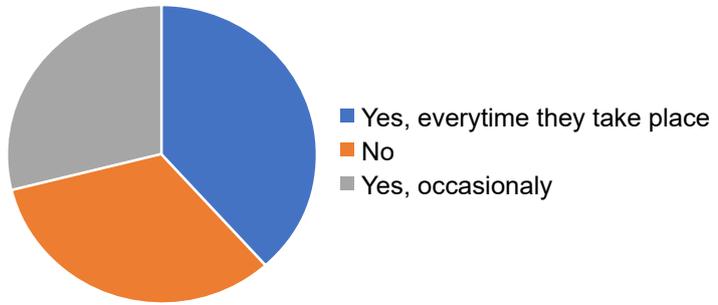
What is the total number of stakeholders /affected parties identified and included in the public consultation program (constantly invited to public consultations)?

The average of stakeholders /affected parties identified and included in the public consultation programme (constantly invited to public consultations) is 25 per forestry administration. Given the multitude of categories of stakeholders / affected parties, we consider that this average is below the optimal level.

A significant percentage of stakeholders are not included in the public consultation programme (they are not constantly invited/involved in meetings organised for public consultations).

C2.Q2

Are you invited to the public consultation meetings organized by the forestry administration within the FSC forest management certification process?

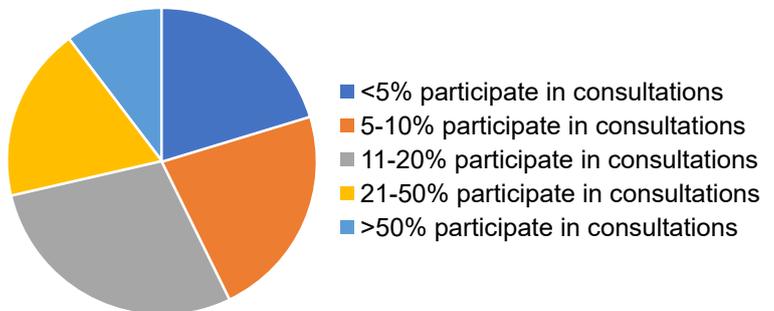


C1.Q2

How do you assess the overall interest shown by stakeholders /affected parties towards the public consultations you organize?

Obs.

In more than 70% of cases, the level of participation of stakeholders/affected parties in meetings organized for public consultations is below 20%, thus noting a low interest in this process.

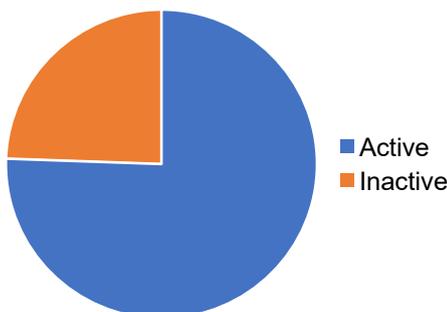


C2.Q3

Do you **actively participate*** in these consultations?

*Active participation

means that stakeholders/affected parties submit comments/ suggestions/ feedback or express their agreement (as appropriate) regarding forest management activities.



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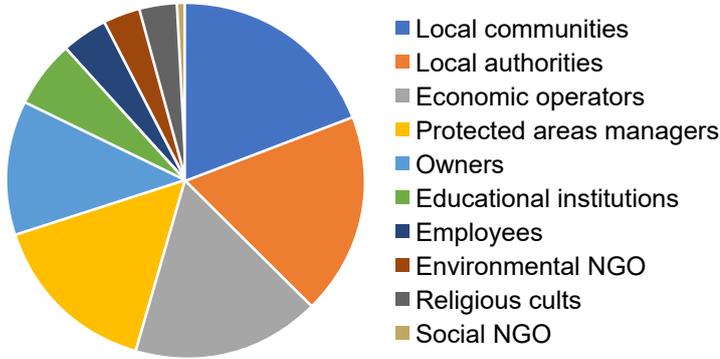
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C1.Q3 What are the main categories of stakeholders /affected parties that actively participate in public consultations?



Obs. Most of the involved parties who participate actively are the affected parties who have contractual/ collaborative relationships with certificate holders (economic operators, authorities, forest owners). It is worth noting that stakeholders, including civil society (when invited) gets too little involved in an active way.

There are relatively few stakeholders/ affected parties included in the certification process, of which the vast majority do not get involved, and when they do, they do not all actively participate. The lack of participation may be due, among other things, to the general low interest of local stakeholders, the lack of a consistent exercise in this regard, inadequate contact (i.e. as form /time), or their insufficient information regarding the real legitimate benefits they can obtain through this process.

In this context, we need to manage our expectations of the impact that certification can have, which is fundamentally based on the involvement of stakeholders/ affected parties.

B2. Complaints management system

Complaints/Notifications registered in 2018:

C1.Q4 Addressed directly to the certificate holder	C1.Q6 Addressed directly to the competent authorities/ certification bodies	Total complaints/ notifications
43	28	71
~60.5%	~39.5%	100%

Obs. A significant number of complaints/notifications are addressed directly to the competent authorities/ certification bodies, without prior notification of certificate holders. Thus, it is noted that the principle according to which disputes that can be resolved in a timely manner, out of court, in collaboration with stakeholders/affected parties should primarily be addressed from the first level (i.e. forest administration) is not known or adopted.

IMPORTANT

The Register of notifications and complaints, a basic element in the dispute resolution process, is checked during the audit process, with the auditor having the obligation to verify how the notifications / complaints were handled/resolved. The audit report is published on the [FSC® website](#), ensuring decision transparency.



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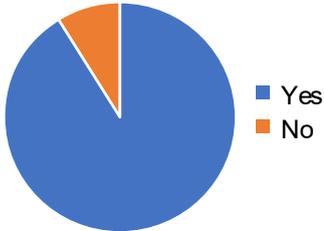
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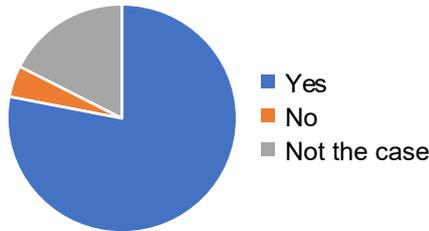


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C2.Q4 Do you consider that your complaints / notifications have been taken into account by the Forestry Administration?



C2.Q5 Do you consider that your complaints /notifications have been taken into account by the certification body?



Obs: In the vast majority of cases expressed by respondents, complaints/notifications are resolved at the lowest level by the certificate holder. A similar situation is also found in the case of complaints/notifications addressed to certification bodies.

Thus, the dispute resolution mechanism works, helping to harmonize the legitimate interests of stakeholders/ affected parties, only if it is used correctly.

B3. Challenges & solutions in the public consultation process

Challenges

Question number 7 from the questionnaire addressed to certificate holders (C1),

What are the main challenges related to the involvement of stakeholders in the public consultation process?

(presented in the order of prioritisation as reflected in the questionnaire):

1. Low level of understanding of how stakeholders/affected parties can contribute to streamlining the management plan so that it reflects their concerns, desires, expectations, needs, rights and opportunities - (35 votes);
2. Low level of understanding of the provisions of the management plan (set of documents, reports, records and maps describing, justifying and regulating the activities undertaken, including statements of objectives and policies) - (29 votes);
3. The amount of information related to certification is significant, and understanding the requirements of the standard and procedures is difficult - (28 votes);
4. Low confidence in certification schemes in general - (26 votes);
5. Disinterest manifested by stakeholders/affected parties - (26 votes);
6. Proposals of stakeholders /affected parties for adapting management decisions are not supported by relevant arguments - (18 votes);
7. Improper use by the stakeholders /affected parties of the dispute resolution mechanism, in breach of the principle that disputes should always be addressed through discussions and negotiations at the lowest possible level, before resorting to formal procedures - (11 votes);



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Question number 6 from the questionnaire addressed to stakeholders /affected parties (C2):

What are the main challenges related to the involvement of stakeholders in the public consultation process?

(presented in the order of prioritisation as reflected in the questionnaire):

1. The amount of information related to the management plan (set of documents, reports, records, maps, including the stated policy and objectives) is significant and difficult to understand - (33 votes);
2. The amount of information related to certification is significant and it is difficult to understand the requirements of the standard and procedures - (27 votes);
3. Low level of confidence in the performance / intentions of the forest administration - (25 votes);
4. Inadequate organization and communication of public consultation meetings - (23 votes);
5. Low level of confidence in certification schemes in general - (17 votes);

Solutions:

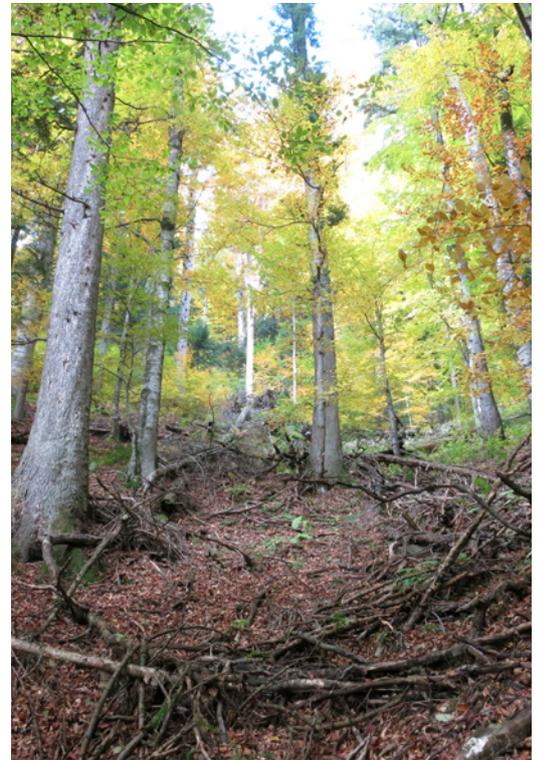
Question number 8 from the questionnaire addressed to certificate holders (C1):

What do you consider to be the solutions for increasing the level of involvement of the IF, so that it is active and constructive, in the public consultation process?

(presented in order of prioritization as the result of the questionnaire):

1. Allocation of optimal resources for public consultation meetings (appropriate organisation) - (30 votes);
2. Communication of public consultation meetings using appropriate channels, specific to each category of stakeholders/ affected parties (via e-mail, telephone/fax, face-to-face meetings, etc.) and concentration of efforts to obtain confirmations of participation (eg. notifications/reminders) to increase participation - (27 votes);
3. Organization by the forestry administration of trainings (during public consultation meetings) on the role of stakeholders/ affected parties in the FSC certification, accompanied by informative materials (e.g. website, brochures) - (26 votes);

THE LOW LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING AND TRUST OF STAKEHOLDERS CAN BE (PARTIALLY) EXPLAINED BY THE IMAGE OF FORESTRY CREATED IN THE SOCIETY AND THE WAY THE FORESTERS ACT/ INTERACT WITH THE PUBLIC OVER TIME.



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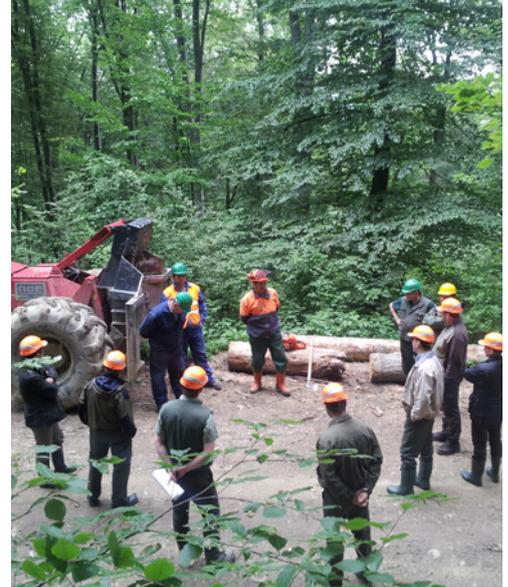
4. Organization by the forestry administration (during public consultation meetings) of instructions on the specific requirements of FSC certification - (26 votes);
5. Organization by the forestry administration (during public consultation meetings) of instructions on the provisions of the management plan and its implementation - (25 votes);
6. Appropriate identification of relevant stakeholders/ affected parties and regular updating of their records - (24 votes);
7. Organization by the forestry administration of some instructions regarding the FSC complaints and notifications procedure, accompanied by informative materials (ex: website, brochures) - (12 votes).

Question number 7 from the questionnaire addressed to stakeholders (C2):

What do you consider to be the solutions for increasing the level of involvement of the IF, so that it is active and constructive, in the public consultation process?

(presented in order of prioritization as the result of the questionnaire):

1. Organization by the forestry administration (during public consultation meetings) of trainings on the provisions of the management plan and how to implement it - (28 votes);
2. Organization by the forestry administration (during public consultation meetings) of trainings on the specific requirements of FSC certification - (28 votes);
3. Organization by the forestry administration of trainings (during public consultation meetings) on the role of stakeholders/ affected parties in the FSC certification, accompanied by informative materials (e.g. website, brochures) - (26 votes);
4. Allocation of optimal resources for public consultation meetings (appropriate organisation) - (23 votes);
5. Organization by the forestry administration of some trainings regarding the FSC complaints and notifications procedure, accompanied by informative materials (ex: website, brochures) - (12 votes).



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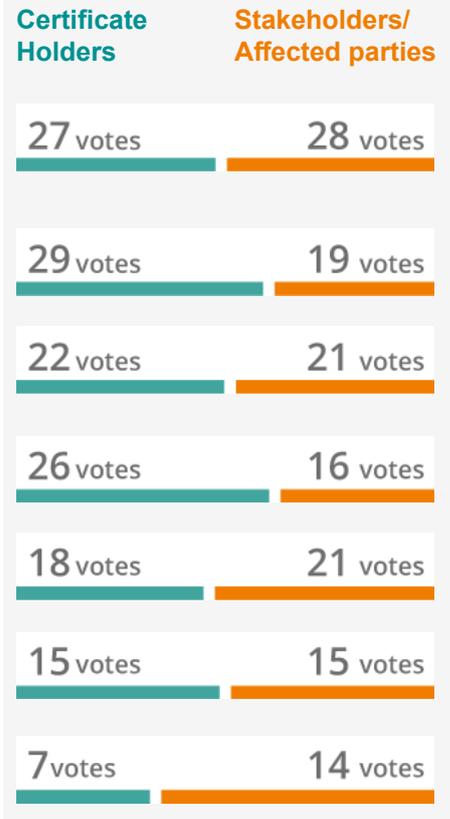
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C. POSITIVE ASPECTS ACHIEVED THROUGH THE CERTIFICATION PROCESS (C1.Q9, C2.Q8):

(presented in order of prioritisation as shown in the questionnaires)

1. Effective monitoring of compliance with national and european legal provisions, respectively raising awareness of illegal practices, to prevent them (compliance/legality);
2. Respecting employees' rights and improving working conditions, with the effect of reducing the frequency of accidents at work (care for human resources);
3. Identification, preservation and/or improvement of High Conservation Values (HCV);
4. Improving the relationship with local communities, through the support provided in their socio-economic development (care for local communities);
5. Maintaining, improving and/or restoring ecosystem services and environmental values (environmental care);
6. Strengthening trade relations with operators, as well as opening to new markets / new customers (image, marketing);
7. Efficiency of the management plan and its implementation (increasing the quality of forest management and streamlining administrative tasks).

QUESTIONNAIRE VOTES



Most respondents (> 75%) confirm the positive impact on forest management achieved through the certification process. For most, certification is primarily a tool for compliance and prevention of illegal practices. Care for the environment and the protection of high conservation values are also recognized.



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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FSC forest certification is perceived as having a real, positive impact in supporting responsible forest management in Romania. For a better performance (in the sense of increasing the efficiency of these voluntary mechanisms), it is essential to increase the level of involvement of the stakeholders/affected parties over the course of the entire process of: (i) the development of management strategies, co-ordinated by the forest administration, (ii) the mechanisms for the settlement of complaints and notifications, (iii) the independent process of evaluating/auditing achieved by the certification body. The efforts of forest managers must be sustained, complemented by the efforts of all relevant stakeholders /affected parties.

Following the analysis and interpretation of the collected information, it is found:



There are shortcomings in how relevant stakeholders/ affected parties are identified and their involvement in the public consultation programme.

Certificate holders should focus their efforts to ensure that all relevant stakeholders/affected parties are included in the public consultation programme. Particular attention should also be paid on how to contact/engage stakeholders/affected parties, through appropriate communication channels for each relevant stakeholder/ affected parties' category.



The notification and complaint procedure is a reliable, functional mechanism

Conflict resolution is achieved in over 90% of cases at the lowest level (between the stakeholder/ affected party and the forest administration). The dispute resolution mechanisms supported by FSC works and help to harmonize the legitimate interests of stakeholders/affected parties.

Stakeholders should address any concerns/ notifications/complaints primarily to the certificate holder, according to the "lowest level" principle, which means that disputes should always be addressed through discussions and negotiations at the lowest possible level.

Stakeholders /affected parties are therefore encouraged to adopt this principle and formal procedures should only be adopted as a last resort precisely in order to streamline the dispute resolution process.

It is also very important in this respect that stakeholders/affected parties get involved early, precisely to prevent the negative impact that certain management measures could generate.



The procedure of consultation of stakeholders/ affected parties by the certification bodies within the audit process.

Evaluation of the forest management in relation to the requirements of the national standard for forest management is confirmed to be a reliable and functional mechanism in resolving controversies resulting from forest management activities.

Around 95% of the stakeholders/affected parties surveyed consider that their complaints/notifications have been considered by the certification body. The audit plans should continue to pay particular attention to the resources/time allocated to the consultation of stakeholders/affected parties, and subsequently to the assessment of any registered complaints/notifications.



Low interest of stakeholders/affected parties in public consultations.

In order to facilitate an active and constructive involvement of stakeholders/ affected parties in the public consultation programme, it is recommended that certificate holders provide, during the public consultation process, adequately explained information on  the role of stakeholders/ affected parties in the forest certification process,  the requirements of the respective FSC Forest Management Standard,  the summary of management strategies and objectives.

Also, the level of confidence in the performance / intentions of the forestry administration can only be raised by increasing the degree of transparency in the establishment of management strategies and objectives, monitoring of results and making available relevant information to stakeholders/ affected parties, in compliance with confidentiality clauses.



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- Stakeholders in FSC® Forest Management Certification- A guideline for stakeholders
- [Processing Complaints in the FSC Certification Scheme FSC -STD -20-006 \(V3-0\) EN](#)
- [FSC National Standard for Forest Management](#)

ANNEX 1 - C1, QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CERTIFICATE HOLDERS

List of questions:

1. What is the total number of stakeholders /affected parties identified and included in public consultation program (constantly invited to public consultations)?
2. How do you assess the overall interest shown by stakeholders /affected parties towards the public consultations you organize?
3. What are the main categories of stakeholders /affected parties that actively participate in public consultations?
4. What is the number of complaints / notifications / appeals registered in 2018?
5. How many of these have been solved satisfactorily by the forestry administration?
6. How many controls did you have from the authorities / certification bodies, as a result of other complaints / notifications then those sent directly and in advance to the organization and registered in your own register?
7. What are the main challenges related to the involvement of stakeholders in the public consultation process?
8. What do you consider to be the solutions for increasing the level of involvement of the stakeholders /affected parties, so that it is active and constructive, in the public consultation process?
9. What do you consider to be the positive aspects obtained through the certification process?
10. Do you know such concrete cases / situations that deserve to be promoted at national level in the form of success stories?

ANNEX 2 - C2, QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CERTIFICATE HOLDERS

List of questions:

1. Please select the stakeholder category you belong to:
2. Are you invited to the public consultation sessions organized by the forestry administration within the FSC forest management certification process?
3. Do you actively participate in these consultations?
4. Do you consider that your complaints / notifications have been taken into account by the Forestry Administration?
5. Do you consider that your complaints /notifications have been taken into account by the certification body?
6. What are the main challenges related to the involvement of stakeholders in the public consultation process?
7. What do you consider to be the solutions for increasing the level of involvement of the stakeholders /affected parties, so that it is active and constructive, in the public consultation process?
8. What do you consider to be the positive aspects obtained through the certification process?



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