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**Capacity Building for the Environment:
Forest Policy and Management in Southeastern Europe**

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Capacity Building for the Environment:

Forest Policy and Management in Southeastern Europe

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Abstract:

The article analyses the building of environmental governance in two post-socialist countries of Southeastern Europe, Albania and Croatia, with a focus on forest policy reforms. After the end of the socialist era the countries have rapidly adopted new policies and legislation directed at sustainable forest management. The main driver of policy reform is the European and international influence. Yet the developments in the countries cannot be adequately described as a mere adoption of Western-style methods and solutions, as suggested in arguments on the catch-up development of transition states. The capacities needed in post-socialist countries to deal with environmental issues differ from those in industrial societies. On the other hand, there is no essentialistic link between environmental problems and solutions to these

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problems in post-socialist countries. The outline of the policy reforms in Croatia and Albania reveals very different approaches to sustainable forest management and different paths in the post-socialist transition process. It is argued that capacity development in forestry in transition states needs to be based on country-specific socio-political, economic and cultural features in order to be successful.

1 Introduction

The building of environmental governance is one of the key challenges in the transition process of the post-socialist countries in Southeastern Europe. This holds true for the forest sector as well. Since the early 1990s, the transition countries in the region have rapidly adopted new forest policy and legislation. The perceived need for reforms has been related to new regulations in the area of land tenure, mainly the recognition of private property rights, and followed on the heels of legal reforms aimed at privatising various aspects of the economy. Sustainable development of forests is generally an express objective of the new policy. The past emphasis on economic values in forestry has been replaced by a broader outlook that recognises also environmental and social functions of the forest (Schmidthüsen et al. 2002, Jansky et al. 2004).

The main driver of policy reform is the European and international influence. Membership in the European Union is connected with the obligation to implement the EU regulatory regime and this is a powerful incentive for these countries to accept the environmental conditionality of the Union. Harmonisation of forest legislation of the transition countries with EU requirements is however not

necessary since forest policy is not a formalised policy area of the Union. Nevertheless, there exist European policy initiatives, such as the Resolution on a EU Forestry Strategy adopted in 1998, which emphasises the multi-functional role of forests and the importance of sustainable forest management (Hogl 2007). In addition, since the 1990s, a forest regime has evolved on the international level. Both the United Nations' international arrangements on forests (IAF) and the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) were directed at the promotion of sustainable forest management (Tikkanen 2007). International donor organisations also work to develop environmental governance capacities, as part of poverty reduction strategies in developing and transition countries. All these developments influence and shape the national forest policies in the countries of Southeastern Europe.

In spite of the surprising speed of the reforms, it should not be overlooked that legal reforms and the introduction of new policy approaches do not automatically imply changes in the actual management practices. What is crucial is the building of capacities to put new policy approaches into practice. The initial assumption after the collapse of state socialism in Europe that economic liberalisation and democratisation of the post-socialist countries would almost automatically alleviate environmental problems has proven too simplistic, though. It became clear that these proposed solutions too closely reflected Western European conceptions of environmental quality and democracy, rather than the concerns of the local population (Herrschel and Forsyth 2001). The resulting question that this article addresses is twofold: What forms of environmental governance need to be built in

the transition countries of Southeastern Europe? What kind of capacities are required for this task?

Capacity building in forestry is not only an issue in the post-socialist countries of Southeastern Europe. Sustainable forest management is an important objective in all transition countries. About one-fourth of the world's forests are located in transition countries, and in most countries forests constitute an important sector of the economies and often are critical for the livelihood of the people (Pachova et al. 2004:1). Effective strategies have to be developed to reconcile sustainable forest management and sustainable economic and human development in these countries. Hence, the importance of capacity building for these tasks also goes beyond the Southeastern European region.

The article is organised as follows: In the subsequent section, the theoretical framework of the study, the concept of capacity building for the environment, is presented. Section 3 outlines the current developments in forest policy and management in Southeastern Europe. Country studies on Croatia and Albania serve as illustrations of the development paths in different countries. The final section addresses the question of capacity building in forestry. It also draws some general conclusions for environmental capacity building in transition countries.

2 Capacity building for the environment

The concept of capacity for the environment is broadly defined by the OECD as “a society's ability to identify and solve environmental problems” (OECD 1994:8). Capacity is determined and shaped by political actors and their decisions, the

dimensions and appropriateness of policy, availability of technical knowledge and expertise. Capacity-building, in turn, refers to efforts and strategies intended to increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness of a society's performance in environmental matters.

Capacity-building has been a key concept in the development studies literature since the 1950s. Since the mid-1990s, the concept has become linked to the efforts of the World Bank, the IMF and other international donor organisations to develop 'good governance', with the aim to reduce poverty in the poorest countries of the world. In terms of practical intervention, the building of capacity, as defined by international donors, includes various aspects of institution-building, development of state functions and the interactions between state, market and civil society (Grindle 2004:526). The more specific notion of 'environmental capacity-building' gained momentum after the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio 1992, and is now deployed more generally around discussions of sustainability and globalisation.

In developing and transition countries, a lack of capacity might include insufficient monitoring and reporting capacities, underdeveloped democratic structures and processes, as well as deficient implementation capacities. Such deficits produce insufficient policy outcomes in various environmental fields. It is however not only developing countries, but also advanced nations that face difficulties with regard to environmental capacities (Weidner and Jänicke 2002). The assumption of a catch-up development that transition countries would just need follow the predetermined path of the advanced nations is therefore mistaken. This also applies to the situation in

post-socialist societies. In the same way as environmental degradation is not endemic to socialist regimes, post-socialism cannot be understood as synonym for new market liberalism and democracy without any environmental problems. Also the capacities needed in post-socialist countries to deal with environmental issues might differ from those in industrial societies.

Our aim is to argue against generalising interpolations of Western experience and to make an attempt to appreciate different, and more local, approaches to the environment in the former socialist countries. In international policy initiatives, capacity-building has often become the code for the transformation of local knowledge, the disregard of existing capacities and the importation of rationalities based on Western discourses (Fagin 2008). Yet the virtue of the capacity concept is the stress placed on the preconditions for successful policy intervention and thus on the objective limitations of policy success. Analysis of capacity must look not just at the strengths and weaknesses of institutions, but also at the causes of (in)capacity. This opens up the view for a differentiated account of societal developing paths.

3 Forest policy and management in Southeastern Europe

Forests play an important role in the countries of Southeastern Europe. Most countries have a long tradition in forest management that dates back to the 19th century. During the socialist period, however, forest resources were heavily exploited. After the end of the regimes the countries face the challenge to adapt to the changes that occur from the political and economic transition which have a large impact also on the forest sector. This section outlines the changes in forest policy in

the post-socialist countries in Southeastern Europe since the early 1990s. After a general overview, closer attention is paid to two countries in the region: Croatia and Albania, as examples to illustrate the differences in the transition paths of the countries. The outline is based on a review of existing literature as well as on interviews with forest actors in the countries that the author conducted¹.

3.1 Forest policy reforms in Southeastern Europe

Since the early 1990s, the countries of Southeastern Europe have set out on a journey to transform their central planning regimes to open market economies and democracy. This resulted in policy reforms and the adoption of new legislation in forestry and in other areas of natural resource management. The aim was to establish a policy framework that effectively balances the economic, ecological and social functions of natural resources. Given the emphasis placed on development of the economic values of forests in the past, the acknowledgement of the environmental and social functions of forests in these states required particular attention. As a consequence, sustainable use of forests is an express objective of all new forest laws.

Forest management has traditionally been envisaged as a technical discipline exclusively within the competence of professional foresters. Management plans

¹ Semi-structured interviews of normally 90 minutes. The interviewees were either political actors (from the responsible ministries, administrative bodies, extension services, stakeholders, such as forest owners associations, international donor organisations) or academics that work on forest topics. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2008.

were usually prepared in a scientific manner by the administration and applied to their relative areas. This attitude continues to be reflected in the new management planning provisions. The preparation of forest management plans is explicitly required and the issuing of harvesting authorisations is tied to the existence of a plan. Furthermore, at least basic requirements were established for the harvesting of resources (Mekouar and Castelein 2002:6-7). This is an appropriate means of ensuring sustainable exploitation of timber resources. Yet from the point of view of integration of forestry with related sectors and with regard to public participation the technocratic management approach may be inadequate.

Citizens in many countries increasingly demand the consideration of other public values related to forest management, such as values associated with local needs, recreation, tourism, and biodiversity. As a rule, however, the new forest laws do not provide for public participation or the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes. The administrative bodies in the post-socialist countries do not yet seem to have recognised the potential benefits of participatory management, and the value of reaching a broad consensus among affected parties as a means of facilitating implementation of decisions. The new provisions also remain silent on another component of public participation, the access to relevant information which may be available to the authorities. The tradition of paternalistic forest management is still prevailing (Mekouar and Castelein 2002:14-15). As for the integration of forestry with related sectors, such as agriculture, grazing, tourism and wildlife, this has not been addressed in most of the forest policy reforms. Forest administrations continue to follow a narrow approach focusing on technical forest management. Yet the integration of forest-related activities, such as agriculture and grazing, would all

the more be important as they already put the forests under strong pressures in some of the countries (ibid.:16).

The major reform issue in the post-socialist states has been the ‘privatisation’ of the forest sector. Typically, this has included a number of strategies, which have been pursued to different extents in the countries of the region: restitution of forest land to former owners and establishment of a regime for private forest management; harvesting of trees carried out by private entities; transformation of State enterprises carrying out forestry works; and liberalisation of forest produce prices (Mekouar and Castelein 2002:8-14, Herbst 2002:108-110). Yet the transfer of ownership and management tasks to private hands alone does not lead to a revitalisation of the economy. All of the above strategies require an adequate legal regime and institutions to safeguard sustainable management and public interest. Given the lack of professional experience and sometimes of financial capacity of many new forest owners, forestry administrations claim that appropriate management cannot be carried out by entities other than themselves. Excessively stringent rules, such as the imposition of detailed management plans prepared by the administration, may however discourage private activities and be difficult to implement. Hence, it is crucial to strike an appropriate balance between governmental control and encouragement of private initiative. Furthermore, private forest holdings are often very small and efficient and sustainable management is difficult. In organisation terms, it is therefore important to encourage the establishment of associations among forest owners.

Some specific capacity needs for forest policy development in the transition states of Southeastern Europe follow from the outlined reforms. Public awareness of the

multiple functions of the forests and their cross-sectoral linkages is an important driver in the attainment of sustainable forest management. Measures to foster such awareness are therefore of vital importance. In addition, the ability to monitor and assess the multiple functions of forests should be improved. In the context of open market structures particular attention should be paid to a better understanding of the forest policy implications of public and private forest ownership since this is crucial for the success of the reforms. This also applies to the acquaintance with forest policy tools of self-financed forest management (Pachova et al. 2004:10).

The establishment of provisions for sustainable forest management and the privatisation of the forest sector have been the major topics in forest policy reforms in the transition countries of Southeastern Europe. The topics are not specific to this region though. Other countries of the former Eastern bloc in Central Europe (such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic), in Eastern Europe (eg. Russia, Ukraine), as well as transition states in the Caucasus and Central Asia (eg. Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan) have had similar experiences on their transition paths (Jansky et al. 2004, Nilsson 2005). Nevertheless differences exist related to significant physical and structural diversity. The forest resources, the type of forest cover, landscape and biodiversity shape the country-specific priorities that forest policy has to address. The level of economic development and the socio-political and institutional structures in a state determine the level of existing capacities for developing and implementing the necessary forest policies. These two types of characteristics are correlated to a certain extent in the transition countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe (Pachova et al. 2004).

Rather than focusing on the common features of transition countries in their forest policy reforms, we want to emphasise the existing differences though. The transition countries of the former Eastern Bloc are not a homogenous category. For this reason, we now zoom in on the forest policy reforms of two countries of Southeastern Europe, Croatia and Albania, which presumably reveal numerous similarities regarding their forest reforms. In spite of that it will be shown that broad differences still exist.

3.2 Croatia

In the first half of the 1990s, numerous pieces of legislation were passed that deal with forest regulation, as well as sustainability and biological diversity of the Croatian forests. The most important act is the Law on Forests from 1990 that aims at the sustainable management of the Croatian forests, through enhancement of multipurpose and economically sustainable use of forests, and through protection of forests. The forests are subject to forest management plans which are to be approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management.

In 2003, the Croatian government launched the National Forest Policy and Strategy (NFPS). It was part of a series of strategies and legal amendments in the area of environmental, agricultural and regional planning within the process of adjustment for the accession to the European Union. The NFPS contains more than one hundred strategic activities that are crucial for adjustment of the sector to conditions in European countries, among others regarding the economic viability and competitiveness of the forestry sector.

Forest management

At present, the state owns 78 % of the Croatian forests, 22 % of forests are private-owned. Whereas the private woodlots are under the responsibility of the respective owners, the state forest is managed by a Forest Enterprise, called “Hrvatske Šume”.

The State Forest Enterprise was founded in 1991 as a public company. Later the enterprise was restructured from a public company into a Limited Trading Company, founded by the Republic of Croatia (Posavec and Vuletić 2004:211). *Hrvatske Šume Ltd.* is organised as follows: Apart from the direction in Zagreb the Enterprise operates 16 regional forest administrations and 169 forest offices. In addition, 14 forest companies (mostly for forest works that require larger and special equipment) belong to the organisation (Hrvatske Šume 2008).

The regional branches are the most important level of forest management. Here the management plans for each of the 650 management units are prepared, which then need to be approved by the Ministry. Each management plan covers a 10-year-period. They are translated into annual operational plans, prescribing for example the amount of wood for cutting and the necessary silvicultural works. Moreover, a business plan for each unit is set up. In general, the implementation of the management plans is high. Departures from the plans mostly result from unexpected events, such as storms and forest fires. Compliance with the management plans is supervised by the Forestry Inspection, a body attached to the Ministry, through a system of internal as well as public control.

The administration of the Croatian state forests follows the so called “model of self-financing forestry” (Martinić 2000:87). Administration tasks are performed by a

company that is engaged not only in forest works but also in the marketing of the timber and timber products. The transformation of the Enterprise into a Limited Trading Company was an attempt to transfer a post-socialist State enterprise into a commercial enterprise. *Hrvatske Šume Ltd.* hence pursues a double objective: to successfully manage the state-owned forests as well as to conduct an economically sound business (Posavec and Vuletić 2004:213-14).

The economic performance of the Forest Enterprise is considered satisfactory. About three thirds of the business income stem from sales of wood assortments (Posavec and Vuletić 2004:220). However, the selling of the wood is, for the most part, carried out under non-market conditions at administratively regulated fixed prices. Buying rights for wood are distributed according to certain criteria and by applying a pricelist, approved by the Ministry of Economy. The wood price is fixed annually, depending on factors, such as the volume and structure of the wood production and quality parameters (*ibid.*). As a consequence, the Forest Enterprise is hardly able to adapt to a constantly changing market. The fact that the production is largely determined by the legal regulations on forest management, does not make it any easier. On the other hand, the Forest Enterprise was able to take advantage of the sustainable management practices as quality standards. In 2002, *Hrvatske Šume Ltd.* received the Forest Stewardship Council certificate for the forests under its management. Currently, national forests certification standards are in process of development.

About one-fifth of the Croatian forests are in private ownership. Presently, the number of private owners is nearly 600,000, and the average size of the private holdings is 0.7 ha. In many cases, these forests are highly degraded due to over-

cutting, with a growing stock that is considerably lower than in state forests. According to the Law on Forests, the private owners are required to manage their forest properties sustainably. They are also obliged to provide for protection and reforestation measures. If the private owners do not carry out the appropriate measures and activities, the Forest Enterprise becomes responsible for the implementation of these measures. However, due to a lack of funding and financial supports, an estimated 95 % of the private forests do not have any management plan at all (Martinić 2000:84).

For that reason, the Forest Extension Service was established in 2006, a public institution that deals with private forests in Croatia. Organisation building was driven by a public debate in the course of the passage of the National Forest Strategy and the new process of certification in the state forests. Demands by the private forest owners, among them a number of owners of larger properties (e.g. the church), were to increase the activities in their forests, for example with regard to the opportunities for private owners to market timber and other products.

The overall objective of the new institution is to improve the management of the private forests, through organising the development of management plans and through giving advice and professional education to the forest owners. The Service also performs administrative tasks, such as selection of trees for felling and providing the necessary documentation. Finally, the Service also organises the selling of wood via tenders.

One of the main obstacles to sustainable forest management in the private Croatian forests is the small size of the woodlots, resulting from the fragmented ownership

structure. The plots needed to be integrated into larger units in order to ensure a sustainable management. The Forest Extension Service therefore aims to foster the organisation of the private owners. Until the end of 2007, 17 associations of private owners were founded, and the establishment of a national association of private owners is planned. For the Forest Extension Service, the associations are the most important partners for co-operation and the Service tries to establish good working relations with them.

Towards sustainable forestry?

The outline of the Croatian forest policy developments revealed the sector's position half way between a socialist-style planning approach and a market approach. Sustainable management practices are achieved through state regulation and a well-functioning administration. The rigidity of the forest management planning system demands strict adherence to the plan and does not leave room for any learning or reflexivity at the lower levels. The economic orientation that came with the conversion of the Forest Enterprise into a Limited Trading Company is not fully realised yet. Here might be some potential for learning processes (when using the market mechanism in favour of sustainability goals, e.g. with the FSC certificate). Yet the marketisation can also have the reverse effect: the subordination of environmental goals to economic interests. The situation gets difficult however when it comes to private forests. A wide lack of forest management raises the question of capacity building from scratch. How can sustainable forest management be organised in private forests? What kind of incentives, e.g. subsidies, would be

needed to foster good management practices? Under which conditions could learning processes be initiated – among the forest owners, and their associations, as well as other stakeholders?

3.3 Albania

Forest resources in Albania have been heavily exploited in the past decades. A considerable loss of forest area already took place in the 1960s, as a result of the government decision to clear forest for the creation of agriculture land. Forest depletion has continued since then, mainly because of persistent poverty in rural areas. Since 1990 Albanian society has undergone a fundamental transition, marked by changes in production structures, high unemployment, and unprecedented emigration. The forest sector has suffered much more from this transition than other sectors. The level of resource exploitation and the minimal investment into the sector have left the resource base in a very vulnerable condition. At the same time, the state of the forests is closely linked with the socio-economic well-being of the Albanian people. Therefore, and also under pressure of international political and donor organisations, the Albanian government was urged to take action to halt forest degradation.

The main piece of legislation to achieve the sustainable management of the country's forest resources is the "Law on Forests and the Forest Police" from 2005, which aims at "environmental conservation and the production of wood material and other forest products" (Agalliu et al. 2007:19). Based on the poor condition of the forests, the Albanian government designed a strategy for the forest and pasture

sector (DGFP 2005), which aims to ensure “the management, [and] sustainable and multifunctional development of forestry and pasture resources” (ibid.:7). Several priority objectives for the next 10 years were outlined, including the halt of all commercial logging for a period of at least 10 years; protection and rehabilitation of forests and pastures through the increase of investments and incentives of private and collective initiatives; and further attention to other socio-economic functions and services and the multiple use of forest and pasture (Ibid.:14-5). One consequence of the strategy is the limited possibility for timber production. The Albanian forest economy will therefore not be able to contribute much to the development of the wood processing industry, at least for the next 10 to 20 years. The restoration of the ecological functionality of the forests is given priority.

Forest management

Approximately 50 % of the population live in rural areas, and this fact has created strong relations between the local communities and forests. For long, forests have been the main source of community employment and incomes. At the same time, however, this has put great pressure on forests, which have suffered from degradation, resulting from unregulated and intense wood-harvesting to satisfy household needs for fuel, timber and livestock fodder. For that reason, the areas close to rural communities are particularly degraded.

In 1994, the World Bank has launched a project to support better resources management, monitoring and control (World Bank 2004). Significant investments were made to improve the infrastructure of the Forestry Service through community

participation. The Albanian Forestry Project aims at achieving a sustainable increase in the productivity of forests and pastures and at empowering local governments. Poverty reduction, through improvement of forests in order to generate incomes from natural resources and employment, is the overriding objective of the project.

Evaluation of the World Bank project revealed a positive impact on poverty alleviation. The communal forest and pasture management component in particular, with its targeted interventions in rural areas, has contributed significantly to reducing poverty in vulnerable areas (World Bank 2004:7, 11-12). This success has set off broader policy reforms by the Albanian government to decentralise forest management tasks and responsibilities (see below).

A further objective of the project, to take the initial steps in the transition of the forestry sector to a market economy turned out to be less successful. The initial privatisation of harvesting and wood processing enterprises proved difficult since the majority of private companies owned minimal and outdated equipment. Meanwhile, a system of issuing licenses to private companies undertaking activities in the sector of forests and pastures exist. Most of the licensed companies employ a small number of people and possess some equipment that used to belong to state forest harvesting enterprises. In addition, the World Bank project was able to introduce a number of market-based mechanisms, such as wood-auctions (World Bank 2004:7). The largest challenge for the establishment of a market for forest products and work processes however is the substantial reduction of illegal logging activities. For that reason, the decentralisation of forest management is regarded as key to improve forest governance. A new World Bank project was launched in 2004

to develop and expand the community-based approach to forest and pasture management.

Decentralisation and devolution

Before 1992, all Albanian forests and pastures were state property. The restitution to previous owners began in 1996. In 2001, 81 % of the forest land was state-owned, 18 % was community-owned, and only 1 % was in private ownership (Dida 2003:sec. 6.2). Traditionally the concept of land ownership played only a minor role. Forests and pastures were normally used on the basis of common law, i.e. the user rights were with the families and were inherited over generations. Like this, the Albanian situation differs significantly from the ownership structures in other countries in the region, including Croatia. This is also the reason why the communities play such important role in forest management in Albania.

After the success the Communal Forest component of the World Bank project, an official decision was made to continue the transfer of state forests to the local governments, as new policy approach to sustainable forest management. The decentralization process aims to accomplish the transfer of forests and pastures in use to 218 communities and municipalities, accounting for 40 % of the Albanian forests. Until 2002, the transfer already included 56 communities. Management plans have been worked out for all communities involved. The transfer of forests to the rest of the communities was officially approved in February 2008.

The process of transferring forest management to the communities is conceived as a procedure to increase awareness and responsibility of the local actors. Community

boards have been installed, composed of representatives of the local government, stakeholders (user associations, local people), and the forest service. They collectively deal with the formulation of management plans and make the necessary decisions. The World Bank, as the international donor organisation, accompanies the transfer process. One obstacle however is the lack of a developed participation culture in Albania (Prifti and Hasko 2003:248). For that reason NGOs, such as the Netherlands Development Organisation SNV, also support the capacity building in the local government.

At this point, the transfer process is underway, with still many unresolved questions. Considerable debate is about how far the devolution process should go. Is the transfer of *user* rights to the communities, which deal with the allocation of rights and duties, the best way to secure sustainable management? Or should *property* rights also be given to the communities and eventually to the local people? It is argued that private ownership is be the best way to increase the individual interest in natural resources management and to induce sustainable income generation activities. Others however argue that private ownership leads to a fragmentation of the forests that contradicts sustainable management. Therefore, as is argued, collective ownership at community level with individually granted user rights is the better alternative.

Overall, the crucial question is whether it will be possible to establish local governance to manage the community forest. The potential for learning processes among the local government and the stakeholders exists. The difficulty however is the enormous pressure to succeed. This in turn might produce also counter-productive results, such as an opportunistic attitude vis-à-vis the international

donors, e.g. the establishment of pseudo organisations. Like this, the building of capacities for forest management would not be achieved.

4 Conclusion

This article reviewed the current developments in forest policy and management in Southeastern Europe. In the broader context of forest policy development the specific challenges these post-socialist countries face in the transition of their natural resource policies were revealed. The countries have important commonalities in their socio-economic, political and institutional structures, in existing or inherited policies of natural resource management. The adoption of Western-style methods and solutions, suggested in arguments on the catch-up development of transition states, fail to acknowledge the diversity and specificity of the post-socialist societies. On the other hand, there is no essentialistic link between environmental problems and solutions to these problems in post-socialist countries. The outline of the policy reforms in Croatia and Albania revealed very different approaches in the pursuit of sustainable forest management and different paths in the post-socialist transition process, resulting from country-specific socio-political, economic and cultural features. Hence, in spite of existing commonalities, capacity needs for forest policy development in the transition states differ in terms of both nature and scope. To be successful, capacity development initiatives need to be situated at the interface of both.

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