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Towards more versatile use of forests and wood

Finland's National Forest Programme and the forest sector's innovation activities should focus on developing versatile forest-based value chains and find ways of promoting them. The effort to diversify the value chains relating to the use of forests and wood could also function as a means of combining different ideas of the forest sector's development emphases in the future.

The Future Seminar on 1 November 2007

The Forest Sector in the Future seminar was held in Helsinki on 1 November. The results and conclusions of the second stage of the Future Forum on Forests and the presentations held by invited experts functioned as a wake-up call for the participants and encouraged them to discuss the ways of developing forest use policies and the sector's innovation activities.

The seminar was built around extremely topical issues. The National Forest Programme is currently in its final stage of preparation and the flagship of the national innovation system, Metsäklusteri Oy, has just begun its operations. Both will have an essential role in preparing for the structural changes in the forest sector.

View beyond the problems of wood availability

Expert data gathered by the Future Forum on Forests reveals that the problems of forest industry branches focusing on printing and writing paper can no longer be explained by booms and recessions typical of the industry. In the long run, the current production structure of the forest industry no longer guarantees the forest sector such certainty of success and continuity that we have gotten used to. It is wise for the forest sector to start preparing for the eventual structural change both by developing new, wood-based biomaterials and wood products, and by diversifying the value chains based on forests and wood.

In the draft version of the National Forest Programme 2015, an important goal is to ensure the availability of wood to the industry that processes it. Moreover, ensuring the availability of sufficient workforce resources to the procurement of wood and forest energy can be seen as a central issue in maintaining the overall

production in the forest sector.

Unbalanced focus on these foreseeable problems in the forest sector's near future, although important as such, yields a risk that forest policy will not provide sufficient support for the long-term development. In the long run it is necessary to diversify the utilisation of forests and wood resources and to develop new value chains relating to the use of forests and wood.

If the diversification of livelihoods pertaining to forests and wood resources was set as a long-term and cross-sectoral goal in the National Forest Programme 2015, the programme would simultaneously function as a guideline in preparing for the structural revolution of the Finnish forest sector. Moreover, the diversified development of livelihoods could become a common emphasis for all who have different opinions on the forest sector's development.

Various ways of diversification

New wood and forest-based value chains can be created e.g. in packaging, information management, wood products industry, chemical bioprocessing, heat and energy production, nature services, tourism, wellness and health products, know-how, carbon capture and storage, and landscape and nature protection. There are many ways to create these value chains.

Metsäklusteri Oy is one way of diversifying and renewing the production of the industries within the forest cluster. The R&D coordinated by Metsäklusteri Oy can, among other things, be effective in developing new products from woody biomass and wood fibres, and in finding new applications for the existing products.

In addition, the wood products industry could develop new composite products and system solutions in

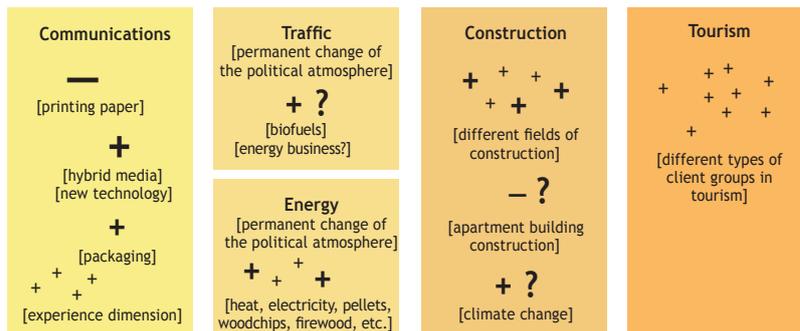


Figure 1. Business opportunities in different value chains relating to the use of forests and wood evaluated in a report by the Future Forum on Forests. The most promising value chains in the future are marked with symbol “+”, and the less promising ones with symbol “-“. (Peltola 2007).

Peltola, Taru. 2007. Metsäalan arvoketjujen elinkeinomahdollisuudet. (“Business opportunities of forest sector value chains.”) The publication (in Finnish) is available at www.metsafoorumi.fi/dokumentit/arvoketjut.pdf

construction that would increase the use of timber in construction targets, and that is just to mention a few examples. Mechanical processing of wood combined with energy production could yield new production solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises. The further development of wood sales services and timber markets is required to increase the availability of high-quality raw material for SMEs within the wood products industry.

The development of services can increase the number of enterprises that are committed to using forests and wood in a whole new way. This is especially true if service companies are able to support the development of their clients’ businesses better than public service providers.

Indeed, flexible and customer-oriented service companies may well be the key factor in diversifying the value chains relating to forests and wood. The important thing is that whoever needs the service (enterprise, forest owner) also receives it, regardless of the service provider.

However, exploiting the new business opportunities will not happen without conflict. Indeed, with more and

more utilizers of wood and forests, the traditional wood-using industries will have to compete with other businesses for the available raw material, research resources and development investments.

The role of research and education in the development

Experts with more knowledge and skills on the forest sector’s new business opportunities are needed in the development of ways of diversifying the use of forests and wood. This calls for extending the field’s university education, which at the moment is narrowly focused on the traditional forest sector and its starting point lies in meeting the sector’s current needs.

The narrow focus of university degree programmes and research projects leads to a paradoxical situation: research and education would play the stagnant role of a preserver of current development instead of acting to change it, despite the fact that research and university education have been reformers of society and business throughout the history.

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