
To UNFF or not to UNFF

There is an increasing and worrying gap --in international processes-- between stated objectives and actual action. This was clearly perceived during the recent Climate Change Convention conference in the Hague, where the actual mandate --to find solutions to climate change-- was mostly absent in the discussions.

A similar situation is occurring within the UN process to address the issue of deforestation. Governments agreed that this was a very serious problem that needed to be addressed. They subsequently created the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, which after a number of meetings came up with more than a hundred Proposals for Action for addressing the problem. The assumption was that governments would immediately begin to implement the proposals that they themselves had agreed upon. Mistake. In fact, almost nothing happened.

The only two things that actually happened were both driven by NGOs and Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPOs), with support from a few governments, a few people from the IPF secretariat and some representatives from international organizations.

The first one was the "Underlying Causes Initiative". One of the IPF proposals for action was to organize a global workshop on the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation. For NGOs and IPOs, this was obviously the crucial issue: to first understand and then to remove the underlying causes leading to deforestation. But NGOs and IPOs went much further: they carried out detailed country research, organized regional and IPO workshops and finally organized the global workshop in Costa Rica. What happened with all those findings within the IPF's successor, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests? They were shelved.

The second important thing that happened was a process to assess actual implementation of the IPF's proposals for action. This was also carried out by NGOs and IPOs, which were able to detect how little was being done regarding implementation at the country level. In many cases, government officials in relevant offices weren't even aware of the proposals for action and when they were, they had little to show on actual implementation.

After four sessions, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests' work was finalized and the process seemed to have moved more backwards than forward. A new body was then created --the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), which will hold its first meeting next February. But the future is gloomy, particularly after the so-called 8-Country Initiative, which took place in Bonn from 27 November to 1 December 2000 to discuss "Shaping the programme of work for the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF)."

For anyone interested in forests the issue can be summarized as follows: 1) deforestation is a problem 2) it needs to be addressed 3) governments have agreed on a number of proposals for action 4) those proposals need to be implemented 5) implementation needs to be monitored and reported 6) implementation, monitoring and reporting need to be participatory.

Those simple facts were put forward time and time again by NGO/IPO delegates in Bonn. But time and time again they were rejected by government representatives. Instead, they spoke about "harmonization of criteria and indicators", definitions of "sustainable forest management", channelling of funds and other issues having little relationship with implementation, monitoring, reporting, and participation.

If this is how they will shape the work of the UNFF, then little can be expected from this process. We hope that reason and public pressure will make governments change their minds and that they will shape the UNFF in a way which may lead to the conservation of the world's forests. That is their mandate. Whether they like it or not.