
Two different IFF intersessionals

The Intergovernmental Forum on Forests will be meeting from 3-14 May in Geneva to continue working on the implementation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests' proposals for action and on other matters left pending. Among the different inputs this meeting will be receiving, we would like to focus on two intersessional meetings, one held in Costa Rica (on the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation) and another in Chile (on tree plantations), which have resulted in a number of conclusions and recommendations which will be considered by IFF3.

The Costa Rica meeting was the final stage of a process initiated by the NGOs and IPOs at IFF1, where they volunteered to implement one of the IPF's proposals for action, which "urged countries to support the convening, as soon as possible, of a global workshop on the international underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation, and their relationship to national underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation." With support from and direct participation of a number of governments and intergovernmental agencies, this initiative organized seven regional (Africa, Asia, CIS, Europe, Latin America, North America, Oceania) and one IPO workshops, all of which fed into the Global Workshop in Costa Rica.

It is important to emphasize that the above process incorporated the views of local communities and indigenous peoples' organizations, as well as those from national and international NGOs, governments and intergovernmental agencies, through their direct participation in the preparation of case studies and in the discussions which took place in the workshops. The report of the Global Workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation is the outcome of an extensive participatory process --a process which, in accordance with the IPF diagnostic framework, was founded upon more than 40 case studies and numerous additional submissions from all over the world. The process aimed to deliver to the international community solution-oriented approaches and concrete actions that can arrest current trends of deforestation and forest degradation. At the same time, such approach allowed all participants to enrich their knowledge about the direct and underlying causes leading to deforestation in very different contexts. This constitutes in itself a major step forward to begin to address the problem, given that those participants will now participate in the forest debate within their regions and constituencies with a better understanding of the issue.

The Global Workshop, held from January 18-22 in San Jose was hosted by the Government of Costa Rica and organized by an Organizing and a Steering Committee composed of UNEP, Corporation, intergovernmental agencies, governments, IPOs and NGOs. The workshop was successful in formulating a wide range of innovative actions. In addition, the workshop has uncovered underlying causes that are not part of the deliberations in the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests. Underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation, be it in tropical moist forests or the temperate boreal forests, often lie outside the forest sector. It must also be noted that several of the recommendations from the workshop are similar to those proposed in other fora, in particular, the IPF Proposals for Action, which highlights the fact that governments lack commitment to these proposals and to enforce existing laws.

A number of key points clearly emerge from the actions formulated by the San Jose workshop (see

full text in our web page). Full participation of local communities and other stakeholders in decision-making over management of natural resources at the national and international level is required if we intend to break the vicious cycle we are in. Also, it was stressed that forests are much more than just stands of timber. Forests provide valuable services, for example biodiversity, water, and spiritual meaning to individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

If we compare the above process with the Santiago de Chile "International Experts Meeting on the Role of Planted Forests for Sustainable Development" the difference is dismal. This was the traditional expert meeting, where some of the organizers (particularly Chile and New Zealand) had a very clear agenda: to further promote the expansion of industrial tree monocultures through the IFF process. The meeting was accordingly characterised by:

The predominance of foresters. The majority of the participants were government officials from forestry agencies, but also present were forestry consultants and corporation executives from Jaakko Poyry, Plantation Focus (New Zealand), Carter Holt Harvey, Westvaco Corporation, Sarawak Timber Association. This resulted in a biased approach to plantations, given that most of the participants' interest lie precisely in the promotion of plantations. Local community representatives --which could have provided opposite viewpoints from the receiving end of plantations-- were totally absent.

A biased agenda. The majority of presentations were clearly in favour of plantations. Although some NGOs (including the WRM) were invited, non of them was asked to make a presentation. The presentations were followed by group work, where each group had to answer a set of questions based on the presentation. For instance, after having heard that the world needs to produce more and not less wood and that 100 million hectares of new plantations would be needed to meet the global demand, the groups were asked to respond to the following question: "Does the world need an expanded area of forests? Is it realistic to plant 100 million ha of forests by the middle of the 21st century?"

A lack of critical thinking. Given the pro-plantations majority, the meeting did not promote discussions on the negative impacts of large-scale tree plantations. It is interesting to highlight that foreign participants were not aware that while the meeting was taking place, the Mapuche indigenous peoples were demonstrating in Southern Chile against those same plantations that were being presented as a model of social and environmental sustainability. Only the NGOs voiced their concern about plantations being a direct cause of deforestation in many parts of the world --including Chile-- as well as having a number of other negative social and environmental impacts.

A terminology leading to confusion. The insistence of using the term "planted forests" instead of "plantations" led to a generalized confusion. For Chilean and New Zealand delegates particularly, "planted forests" are large scale exotic tree monocultures aimed at wood production. For most African delegates, "planted forests" imply small community forests (using both native and exotic species) aimed at a number of environmental and social services and products. For the Danish representatives, "planted forests" are exotic tree plantations aimed at the creation of a tree cover to favour the future establishment of native tree species and thereby the recreation of their native forests. In such situation, a broad discussion on the different types of plantations and on their respective positive and negative impacts was impossible. This obviously served the purpose of hiding large-scale tree plantations behind the more positive community-based small-scale tree plantations. At the same time, the use of the term "planted forest" aims at publicising plantations as synonymous to forests, in a context of growing public support to the protection of forests. However, the discussion on whether the use of this terminology has a scientific meaning or whether it serves specific economic interests had no possibility of being addressed at this meeting.

Differing viewpoints. Within such context, it needs to be stressed that the strong-in-numbers pro-large scale plantation lobby was unable to achieve its objectives. The reason for this was the fact that not all delegates supported large scale tree monocultures. This led to the establishment of informal alliances with NGOs in the working groups and in plenary which finally watered down the conclusions and recommendations which the more fundamentalist organizers had aimed at.

In sum, the above-mentioned interessionals show two different styles regarding the forest issue. One approach --the Underlying Causes Initiative-- seeks the involvement of the main actors which might play a major role in forest conservation: local communities, indigenous peoples, NGOs, academia, governments, intergovernmental agencies. All of those actors are experts in different areas of knowledge, from the more local to the more global and their interaction results not only in a deeper understanding of the complex processes which affect forests, but also in real steps to addressing the problem. The other approach --exemplified by the Experts Meeting held in Chile-- seeks support from experts to "scientifically" justify pre-established motivations. Fortunately, not all experts are willing to play that game and this was clearly the case in Santiago, where, in spite of all their efforts, so few of the objectives of the plantation lobby were achieved. Two different styles, two different results.