



## FORESTS

### International negotiations on forests

**Intergovernmental Panel on Forests set up in 1995**

**Intergovernmental Forum on Forests set up in July 1997**

**United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) set up in October 2000**

**UNFF secretariat at** Two United Nations Plaza, DC 2-12th Floor, New York, NY 10017, USA

### Problem

The world is divided into two groups: those who want an international legally binding convention on the management of forests and those who do not. After more than ten years of negotiations, the issue remains controversial and refuses to die out.

At Rio, Southern countries such as India opposed a convention on forests because it would impose the Western model of forest conservation on Southern countries. Indian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) pointed out that a global convention on forests would undermine the rights of forest communities to manage their forests. Systems of management were as diverse as the types of forest in the world, they said. The lines of opposition have become blurred post-Rio, with the US joining the opposition and Southern countries such as Malaysia, the third largest exporter of logs, joining the demand for a convention.

One thing is now clear, however. The North wants a convention to protect its timber trade interests, not the forests of the world. Countries like Canada and Finland want a uniform international definition for 'sustainable forestry', and for 'green' wood, which would give their industry an advantage in the global timber market.

### Forest diplomacy

Pre-Rio negotiations centred on the need for a convention for managing the world's forests. Proponents of the convention push a system of legally sanctioned global criteria and indicators to define 'sustainable forestry' to lay down a global definition of 'green' wood. This would allow them to meet WTO requirements of eco-labelling on the basis of a multilateral agreement. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) ended with the adoption of a set of non-legally binding forest principles. In 1995, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) was set up for two years to look into a number of forest issues, including the possibility of a forest convention. The IPF was replaced by an Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) in 1997. The IFF was no less pre-occupied with the convention issue. It held three meetings in three years, dominated by debates on 'sustainable forestry' and 'green' forest products.

Unwilling to let the issue die out, timber lobbies prevailed on governments to keep the convention issue alive on the global agenda by creating a United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF). At its final meeting in New York in early 2000, the IFF recommended the creation of a UNFF, finally set up in October 2000 for a period of five years as a subsidiary body to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). One of the functions of the UNFF is to provide a forum to clarify issues on financial assistance and technology transfer. It is not clear, however, how UNFF, which is neither an organisation nor an institution, will address financial provisions.

The global non-governmental community has reacted with cynicism to UNFF. Many predict that it will produce little, despite assertions that it is "dif-



ozone depletion

hazardous waste

prior informed consent

right to information

commission on

sustainable development

climate

biodiversity

desertification

persistent organic pollutants

forests

trade and environment

multilateral agreement

on investment

global environment facility

institutions for environment



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ferent! The first organisational meeting of UNFF, though, saw strained attempts to focus on implementation issues and to stay away from the controversial area of forest convention. But the issue is likely to come up again in the run-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

### Variety of forest fora

Meanwhile, the forest issue made an appearance in other global negotiations. UNFF is among other things meant to enable cooperation and coordination on forest related issues among relevant international and regional organisations, institutions and instruments.

Both IPF and IFF relied on the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to show the way on traditional forest related knowledge (TFRK) systems. They called for close cooperation and coordination between the work of the CBD and the implementation of IPF and IFF proposals for action on TFRK.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Kyoto Protocol allows industrialised countries the use of forests as sinks both domes-



tically, and in developing countries through the use of the Clean Development Mechanism.

Global forest policy was also a hot topic in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other related debates. No consensus was so far reached on whether fixed global criteria to define 'sustainable forest management' (SFM) accompanied by certification and eco-labelling schemes constitutes good management or simply constitutes unjustified obstacles to market access. WTO rules do not allow eco-labelling or certification of green wood unless they are multilaterally agreed upon.

### Challenges ahead

The forest negotiations are global negotiations without substance, and more importantly, without a mandate. The single reason why the issue of forests has remained on the global policy forum is the obsession of a few countries to get a legally binding convention, against the will of most others who believe that forests are community resources. For the third time, a new forum has been set up, but no breakthrough has been achieved in addressing the key and underlying aim of somehow getting around the objections to the convention.

If a forest convention materialises, forestry of local people would be pitted against large plantations of the forest industry. For opponents of the convention, the challenge is to fight a centralised system that will undoubtedly define criteria for 'sustainable forestry' on the basis of business interests.

Thus the South will have to continue to insist that any global criteria scheme for sustainable forestry must include, as an indicator, the involvement of local communities. Current certification and indicator schemes do not insist that 'sustainable forestry' also involves management practices of local communities.



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