

Report from the United Nations Forum on Forests

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From May 3 to 14, 2004, governments from around the world met in the hallowed halls of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland for the fourth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF4). The meeting covered the following thematic issues:

- Social and cultural aspects of forests;
- Traditional forest-related knowledge (TFRK);
- Forest-related scientific knowledge;
- Finance and transfer of environmentally sound technologies;
- Monitoring, Assessment and Reporting and Criteria and Indicators

Day 1 of UNFF4 opened in plenary with governments lauding their progress and success implementing the IPF/IFF Proposals for Action. With over 270 Proposals for Action to implement (and on a voluntary basis), the Global Caucus on Community Based Forest Management presented a statement to the plenary, urging governments to implement our top five IPF/IFF Proposals for Action relevant to community based forest management ([see](#) box).

UNFF4 featured a (supposedly) new and improved attempt at a 'multi stakeholder dialogue' (MSD). The MSD was intended to give each major group 3-minutes of airtime, followed by a moderated discussion. Working with the NGO and Indigenous Peoples major groups, the Caucus put together statements for the major thematic issues including Social and Cultural Aspects of Forests, Traditional Forest Related Knowledge and Capacity Building and Partnerships.

However, any improvement in the MSD seems very small in terms of actual participation: What good is a multi-stakeholder dialogue unless the comments of indigenous peoples, community representatives, and other members of civil society are actually incorporated within the resolutions of UNFF? As Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB) reports: "*The fact that the resolution on social and cultural aspects of forests included merely a weak reference to indigenous peoples only served to reinforce the perception that UNFF does not reflect the concerns of civil society*" (Vol. 13(116), 10). In many respects, the MSD is the smoke and mirrors clouding the reality of 'participation' at UNFF – it enables the illusion of participation while the real negotiations go on as usual by government elites articulating traditional forestry and forest-trade arguments. UNFF 5 (10-21 May 2005) will review its' effectiveness for making demonstrable difference in sustainable forest management on the ground. It is telling that this review will completely exclude input from members of civil society. We can only hope to comment from the sidelines after the entire review is done!

Doubt and skepticism about the utility of the UNFF therefore linger and loom. After many days of discussions, resolutions could not be adopted. Disagreements occurred on several fronts, over references to indigenous and local communities rights within discussions of traditional forest-related knowledge (TFRK). As reported in ENB: "*The EU, opposed by Canada, reiterated the importance of reference to the rights of the indigenous and local communities, with the US adding 'interests'*" (Vol. 13(116), 105). As Canadians, this lack of support for indigenous rights OVER THEIR OWN KNOWLEDGE is particularly disheartening. As was suggestions by the United States to facilitate increased "access" to TFRK, when 'access' by US corporations has largely meant biopiracy!

A resolution was reached on the social and cultural aspects of forests, highlighting the role of forests in poverty eradication, and the need for effective participation of all relevant stakeholders. But as noted above, indigenous and NGOs at UNFF expressed concern that the sole reference to indigenous peoples, "was lacking in substance" (ENB Vol. 13(116), 10). And as usual, the oh-so general resolution says everything and nothing all at once, encouraging "countries to explore options for decentralization of decision making on SFM" and at the same time encouraging "countries to promote the role of the private sector" (Vol. 13(116), 6). Hey, here's an idea: let's decentralize forests to private corporations! Oops, that's already a reality... Resolutions on Monitoring Assessment and Reporting and Criteria and Indicators emphasized everything under the sun, but most importantly - that all reporting would be voluntary! Further details on the resolutions can be found in the ENB summary (www.iisd.ca/forestry/unff/unff4/) and on the UNFF web page (www.un.org/esa/forests/index.html).

While there were positive outcomes from Caucus participation at UNFF such as collaboration with the Indigenous Peoples Alliance, networking, and a crash-course on international relations - the official program was ultimately disappointing. As ENB reports: "*One point of clear consensus in Geneva was that UNFF has failed to deliver on its stated aims, and that continuing the arrangement in its current form is neither politically viable nor desirable*" (Vol. 13(116), 11). As UNFF approaches its 5-year review, it will need to figure out "*how to jumpstart the political will of governments*" to actually "*induce action on the ground*" (11). But as many Caucus members know, relying on the

government is not always one's best strategy – results will come from civil society, in particular, when local communities and Indigenous Peoples assert their rights and assume their responsibilities to manage, use and control their forests.

The Global Caucus on Community Based Forest Management first emerged in Bali during the lead-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The common vision in the Caucus is for local communities and Indigenous Peoples to assert their rights and assume their responsibilities to manage, control, and use their forests in ways that are socially just, ecologically sound, and economically viable. Updates on the Caucus are currently available at <http://www.forestsandcommunities.org> Join our online discussion group by sending a note to: globalcbfm@yahoogroups.com Note: Views expressed above are those of the authors and not necessarily shared with all members of the Global Caucus on CBFM.

Top 5 IPF/IFF Proposals for Action

Selected by the Global Caucus on Community Based Forest Management

17 (f) "... to elaborate systems, including private and community forest management systems, for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating national forest programmes that identify and involve ... a broad participation of indigenous people, forest dwellers, forest owners and local communities in meaningful decision-making regarding the management of state forest lands..."

29 (c) "... to formulate policies aiming at securing land tenure for local communities and indigenous people, including policies ... aimed at the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of forests"

40 (b) "... to collaborate with indigenous people and forest-dependent people who possess TRFK [Traditional Related Forest Knowledge] to promote an internationally acceptable understanding of TRFK, and to identify, respect, preserve and maintain TRFK, including innovations and practices that are relevant for the conservation of forest biological diversity and the sustainable use of forest biological resources"

66 "to use national forest programmes, ... or other relevant programmes to involve indigenous and local communities and women to participate in the formulation and implementation of measures that aim to protect their rights and privileges in relation to forest lands, traditional forest-related knowledge and forest biological resources..."

115(d) "...to support land tenure policies that recognize and respect legitimate access and use, and property rights in order to support sustainable forest management and investment, recognizing that institutionalizing tenure is a long-term and complex process which requires interim measures to address urgent needs, in particular of local and/or indigenous communities"

The complete list of IPF/IFF Proposals for Action can be found online at www.un.org/esa/forests/pdf/ipf-iff-proposalsforaction.pdf