

The Third United Nations Forum on Forests as seen by an environmental NGO representative on the Canadian Delegation

Boris Romaguer, Ambioterra

From May 26 to June 6th 2003, I had the opportunity to be the environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) representative within the Canadian delegation at the third United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF-3) in Geneva, Switzerland. The general objectives of the Forum are to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. At this particular session, the Forum focused on: economic aspects of forestry; maintaining forest cover to meet present and future needs; and forest health and productivity. Other recurrent issues at UNFF-3 included improving participation of developing countries at future meetings and increasing official development assistance (ODA) in the forest sector.

Although I would have liked to have followed all these topics, I chose to focus on four specific issues: NGO participation at UNFF, plantations, a possible international forest convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). My strategies for these issues were to: insure adequate NGO participation in the expert groups at UNFF-4; highlight concerns over the promotion of large-scale industrial plantations; and assure that the UNFF does not take precedence over the CBD with respect to forest biodiversity. Concerning an international forest convention, since the issue was not officially discussed at this session, I chose only to report on the general mood about it. Also, being part of the Canadian delegation, I was in no position to lobby against an issue that is considered so important to the Canadian government but did make input directly to the delegation on this point.

NGO participation

The majority of UN processes have limited NGO participation, as the official participants are of course governments. The UNFF is no exception. While accredited NGO's are allowed to participate as observers and are allowed to make interventions, the governments are under no obligation to seriously consider their views. At the third UNFF, the NGO presence was unusually low. The few NGO's present included the World Rainforest Movement (WRM), Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) and Friends of Siberian Forests, most of which were accredited under Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). Other NGO's participated through the Finnish, British and Canadian delegations. The long and difficult process of becoming accredited by the Economic and Social Council of the UN may have contributed to the low presence of NGO's. However, the principal reason for the low turn out may simply be the reluctance and scepticism of many NGO's to participate in such a Forum that is perceived to be an endless process resulting in very little on the ground, and one for which there is no clear mandate. One of the NGO representative admitted that he attended the UNFF essentially for "damage control". A representative from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was present briefly as well as several from the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the latter being a permanent member of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). The CPF is an interagency partnership which supports the work of UNFF and fosters increased cooperation and

coordination to promote sustainable management of all types of forests. A notable absence was that of Greenpeace International.

Two contentious issues concerning NGO participation were the multi-stakeholder dialogue and the expert groups.

The **multi-stakeholder dialogue** (MSD) served as a meeting where major groups (ENGO, women, forest owners, forest workers, industry, farmers, indigenous peoples, academia, youth etc) could discuss with governments their concerns about how forests are to be managed and conserved. The multi-stakeholder dialogue actually turned out to be a multi-lateral monologue from both the major groups and governments. This provided an opportunity for governments to report on how wonderfully they are including major groups in the participatory process. The facilitator from the forest land-owners association was viewed by some NGO's to be more top-down and self-opinionated than many governments. A panel of major groups was formed by the UNFF secretariat to preside at the front of the MSD. The panel did have an ENGO and indigenous peoples organization (IPO) representative. However, they were not incited to participate other than to read out sections of the "major group synthesis paper". This synthesis paper turned out to be quite controversial as it tried to form a consensus among all major groups while failing to integrate NGO's/IPO's during its preparation. The MSD attempted in a way to form a "major groups block" to present to the "government block", which was naturally criticized by NGO's. Instead, a synthesis paper should give a synopsis of the papers presented by each major group as a distinct and independent contribution to the MSD.

Despite the flaws of the MSD, it remains a mechanism that, if effectively used and conducted, could provide the necessary space for NGO participation. Several delegates commented that the NGO's were insufficiently prepared for the MSD or the UNFF.

Another matter of contention was the extent of NGO participation in the **expert groups**. During the first week of UNFF-3, several "informal" and "informal informal" meetings (i.e. no non-governmental observers were allowed) were held to agree on the modalities of the expert groups on monitoring, assessment and reporting (MAR); financing; and a legally binding instrument (i.e. an eventual forest convention). A decision was adopted that the three expert groups would be composed of 6 governmental representatives from the 5 UN regions. In collaboration with other NGO's such as Forest Monitor, I lobbied delegates, particularly the EU, to strengthen NGO participation in the expert groups. We initially wanted one NGO and one IPO representative in each expert group. We were given the panel twice at EU coordination to explain why NGO participation was important and pleaded for greater NGO participation. Despite our efforts, no government proposed to increase NGO participation in the expert groups fearing that it would be rejected in plenary. Regrettably, as it presently stands, NGO's and IPO's will only be able to participate in these expert groups as observers and only during the first days of these 5-day meetings. As a last resort in securing participation in the expert groups, we requested the EU to include, in its nomination to the expert groups, representatives from NGO's or IPO's.

Since **inter-sessional meetings** tend to be more permeable to NGO participation and since their deliberations must be considered at the sessional meetings, we also pushed for a meeting initially proposed by the executive secretary of the UNFF on “Traditional Forest Related Knowledge livelihoods and the social and cultural aspects of forests”. This meeting would resemble the inter-sessional that was held in Leticia, Colombia in 1996. This proposal, referred to as Leticia-2, is presently being considered and the exact dates and location still remain to be determined, though Equator has already firmly proposed to host it toward the end of 2003.

The potential for an international forest convention

Canada has been pushing for a forest convention ever since the Forest Principles were signed at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The official Canadian justification for promoting such a convention is that all other multi-lateral environmental agreements (MEA) have up until now failed to force governments to sustainably manage their forests. The Canadian delegation claims that for the sake of saving the forests, only a strong legally binding convention specifically on forest would force governments to take SFM seriously.

If the Canadian delegation insists so much on a strong convention, one may wonder why it has not promoted such a mechanism within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which already exists, is legally-binding, and has formulated a highly detailed work plan for forests adopted by the Parties. Indeed, the CBD whose objectives are to conserve as well as to sustainably and equitably use biodiversity, has been a key player in promoting SFM. In 2002, the CBD approved its expanded work programme on forest biological diversity at its sixth COP, not to mention that the vast majority of biodiversity is found in forests. Having the forest protocol within the CBD would not be unfeasible especially given that the CBD has already successfully developed a protocol within its framework, such as the biosafety protocol whose entry into force is imminent. Furthermore, funding for a forest protocol if done under the CBD would be assured since the convention is permanently financed by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF).

Although many NGO's were in favour of a forest convention at the time of the Earth Summit, their position has changed. At the moment, most NGO's are no longer as enthusiastic about a forest convention as they believe that the present political atmosphere is not favourable to an environmentally-based convention. They fear that if a forest convention is to be agreed upon now, it would be done so at the lowest common denominator. Many believe that the forest convention would principally promote the financial and commercial interests of its proponents.

NGO pessimism concerning an international forest convention was confirmed at UNFF-3. All the NGO's representatives that I encountered at UNFF-3 were critical or at very best, neutral, concerning a forest convention. Several NGO representatives that I encountered suspected Canada was promoting a forest convention in order to impose its forestry standards abroad and to discredit the work programme on forest biological diversity of the CBD. Throughout UNFF-3, Canada made sure that the CBD was not

promoted over the climate change or desertification conventions. Some NGO's believe that Canada was trying to undermine the CBD so that the UNFF could take over the leading role in terms of forests.

Delegations were also not very keen in promoting a forest convention. Even Nordic delegations, which are traditionally Canada's allies, have become lukewarm about the idea. Although the official Canadian position has consistently been to promote a forest convention, it did not openly push for it at this session. It seems unlikely that an international legally binding agreement on forests will be reached in the near or medium future.

Forest plantations

Another issue that I focused on at UNFF-3 was forest plantations. Plantations, or planted forests as the UNFF likes to refer to them, have been proposed as a manner of producing a large amount of timber on small areas hoping that this extra timber will off-set the increasing demand for timber and thus alleviate some of the pressure on natural forests. My preoccupation at UNFF-3 was to make sure that large-scale industrial plantations were not promoted at the expense of natural forests or forest dependent /indigenous peoples.

Some NGO's present at the UNFF-3 were extremely sceptical of plantations arguing that negative impacts far outweigh their potential benefits. They insisted that a clear distinction between forests and plantations needed to be made. Other NGO's however adopted a more compromised approach toward plantations by regarding them as already a reality and unavoidable. These NGO's believed that plantations, if properly done, can be a sustainable activity within a forest landscape mosaic. Nevertheless, they recognize that a maximum target is required to avoid plantations from becoming too extensive.

Prior to UNFF-3, an inter-sessional expert meeting was organized in Wellington, New Zealand on "The role of planted forests in sustainable forest management". The outcomes of this meeting were presented as an official document at UNFF-3 but were hardly discussed during the plenary. Instead, most discussion took place at a side event, which presented the findings and recommendations of the meeting. Since I did not personally attend the meeting in New Zealand, my comments are based only on this side-event and the documents that came out of this meeting.

The expert meeting concluded that promoting the multifaceted role of plantations could contribute to sustainable forest management provided it recognizes the ecological, social, cultural and economic contexts within which they function. That is to say, plantations must not replace existing natural forests nor adversely affect the livelihoods of forest dependent or indigenous peoples.

At the end of the side-event, one delegate questioned why natural forests should not be replaced by plantations. Another delegate accused those who objected to the replacement of indigenous tree species by commercial species of "botanical xenophobia". Nonetheless, the panel of the expert meeting maintained their positions stating that

concern of natural forest substitution by plantations came not only from NGO's but from governments as well.

Overall, I found the outcomes of the meeting more progressive than I had anticipated given that it was sponsored by many pro-plantation governments (ex. Chile, New Zealand, Malaysia etc). However, the meeting failed to describe exactly how sustainable plantations are to be implemented. Much was said about which types of plantations are desirable but not on how to make sure they are conducted sustainably. The meeting also failed to address the issues of perverse subsidies in the plantation sector as well as assessing the role of plantations in terms of Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM) of the Climate Change Convention. Most importantly, the meeting failed to acknowledge that one of the main causes of deforestation is the ever-increasing demand for timber and that presently, the area deforested continues in parallel with the increase of area devoted to plantations. Plantations may increase the percentage of wood in the market coming from non-natural forests but if the rate of increase of the global demand for wood surpasses that of the wood provided by plantations, then deforestation of natural forests will continue unabated.

Concerning plantations around the world, an excellent document was released at UNFF-3 entitled "Fast-Wood Forestry: Myths and Realities". It was prepared by CIFOR, WWF, IUCN and Forest Trends; and provides a good overview of the environmental, social and economic issues relating to plantations.

Plantations were also discussed during the multi-stakeholder dialogue, where WRM cautioned against large-scale monoculture tree plantations and caused a brief debate. During the plenary, several delegates (e.g. Chile and New Zealand) described plantations as desirable in certain circumstances.

UNFF versus CBD

Since the vast majority of biodiversity is located in forests, one would expect the CBD to take a leading role in international forest policy. This may be true if the principal objective of SFM is biodiversity conservation. However, many other CPF members, such as the FAO, insist that there are many equally important attributes that a forest should be managed for. Although they acknowledge the vital importance of biodiversity, other attributes of forests such as its economic and social contributions must be considered and these contributions, they believe, can not be solely addressed by the CBD. That is why they believe that other processes such as the UNFF and UNFCCC are essential for forests. Although officially these processes are to mutually complement and collaborate with the CBD, their mandates in reality overlap. Hence, the unofficial competition between the CBD and these other processes, particularly the UNFF. However, what the proponents of a strong UNFF fail to see is that the CBD is not only about biodiversity conservation. Indeed, its second and third objectives (i.e. the sustainable use of biodiversity and the equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources) address these social and economic dimensions of forests. Also, the multi-functionality of forests is further addressed through the ecosystem approach of the CBD.

A representative of the CBD approached me on several occasions to express concern that the Canadian delegation was not sufficiently promoting the CBD at the UNFF, which is surprising considering the extent to which Canada has invested in the CBD (i.e. hosting the secretariat of the CBD, nominating Canadian officials to expert groups, etc.). The response from the Canadian delegation is that the UNFF should work in collaboration with the CBD but not necessarily more so than with other forest-related conventions (i.e. climate and desertification conventions). An unofficial proposal was made to integrate the CBD target of having a substantial reduction in biodiversity loss by 2010 into the UNFF. However, this proposal was immediately rejected.

Conclusion

After two weeks of negotiations, the resolutions that were adopted on the economic aspects, forest health and productivity, and maintaining forest cover were almost mere reiteration of existing IPF/IFF proposals for actions (PfA), leaving up to governments to decide on how to implement these proposals. It was almost as if the officials at UNFF-3 after having negotiated for so many years, had eventually forgotten about the PfA. The final resolutions were so watered down and compromised that they resembled principles coming out of an elementary forestry textbook. Granted that the United Nations Forum on Forests is not an implementing agency and should not be judged as such, it was nevertheless disappointing that so little was discussed concerning the actual implementation of the PfA. Indeed, UNFF-3 serves as a reminder that the PfA have still not been implemented.

As for the recurring topic of finance and environmentally sound technology transfer, the negotiations focused on whether SFM in developing countries should be conditional on getting new resources. I.e., developing countries will commit themselves to managing their forests sustainably if and only if they are guaranteed more ODA. One delegate from a developed country reported feeling blackmailed by the developing countries. At the end, the developing countries did not succeed in getting “new and additional resources”.

Concerning the four issues on which I focused on, my overall contributions in influencing them were modest indeed. NGO participation remains low and it is highly unlikely that the expert groups will have an NGO or IPO representative. The UNFF still has a lot of progress to make in order to become a fully transparent and participatory global framework for policy implementation. Plantations will go ahead no matter what the NGO's may say. Besides, they have already been agreed upon at the climate change convention. All we can hope for is that they are at least done somewhat more sustainably than our present agricultural model. Concerning the idea of an international forest convention, the mood at the moment is certainly not favourable. As for the CBD and UNFF, the “collaboration” will continue, though if the CBD does not start taking bolder moves such as for example assuring the implementation of their forest biodiversity work programme, the UNFF may progressively be viewed by governments as the leading international forest process.

At this meeting, I was able to witness the extent to which forests have lost ground as an international priority. Even within the environmental sector, preoccupations about forests seem secondary to water and climate change issues. Given the low priority of forests in the international agenda, one proposal to make forests a priority again would be to mainstream forests through development policies such as poverty reduction strategies and the Millennium Development Goals.

If by UNFF-5, international commitment to protect forests is still lacking, regional initiatives may be the only other alternative in implementing the PfA. In fact, regional implementation teams were proposed by Australia at the first week of UNFF-3 but were eventually turned down by the second week by countries weary of interventionist initiatives. Although likely to continue to encounter oppositions, such regional initiatives could be more effective than the present international processes, which have achieved so little on the ground.

With regard to my participation specifically within the Canadian delegation, I was pleasantly surprised by the other members of the delegation. They were, by in large, very helpful and receptive to my suggestions and ideas to the extent to which they were aligned with the official Canadian position. Our debriefings and preparations were done in a transparent manner and I was truly treated as another member of the delegation. In comparison with the other delegations with whom I liased with, I believe we were one of the best-prepared delegations. Our delegation was composed of professionals competent in forest, biodiversity and development matters and we were the only delegation to have both an NGO and youth representative. Being in a delegation having such an important and controversial role in international forest policy was a most edifying experience.

All in all, very little was concretely achieved at UNFF-3 in terms of increasing the commitment by government to better protect and manage forests. However, no matter how slow and tenuous the process may be, it is better than no process at all. At least at UNFF, governments are talking to each other about the alarming state of forest destruction and degradation. Of course, it is now time for them to implement what they actually agreed upon.

Recommendations

1. Acknowledge that the UNFF is a parallel international forest process to the CBD and the Canadian Environmental Network (CEN) should be prepared to follow it as long as the Forum seeks to implement the PfA rather than further negotiating them.
2. Depending on the funds attributed, insure that an NGO and an IPO representative are present within the Canadian delegation for the next UNFF. Since traditional forest-related knowledge will be an important issue at UNFF-4, the presence of an IPO representative will be particularly important.
3. Select the NGO and/or IPO representative at least two months in advance of the meeting in order to allow for adequate preparation.
4. Allow for the NGO representative to take the microphone at certain occasions such as the multi-stakeholder dialogue on behalf of the Canadian delegation,

- provided that her/his intervention has been approved by other members of the delegation beforehand.
5. Construct the strategy of the NGO representative in collaboration with other NGO's working on forest issues in advance of the meeting, particularly international NGO's such as FoEI, Greenpeace International, IUCN, WRM, WWF and Environmental Liaison Centre International (ELCI).
 6. Improve coordination between NGO's and IPO's working on forest issues at the national and international level and streamline their preoccupations to the representatives well before as well as during international forest meetings such as the UNFF and the upcoming World Forestry Congress.
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