

United Nations Forum on Forests

Report on the Second Meeting

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The United Nations Forum on Forest (UNFF) was established in 2001, continuing the international forest policy dialogue begun in the process leading up to the Rio Summit in 1992. The mandate of the UNFF is to oversee implementation of several hundred proposals for action that had previously been agreed to by the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF, 1995-97) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF, 1997-2000) and to promote collaboration between various UN agencies and instruments dealing with forests. In 2005 it is expected to consider/recommend the parameters of a mandate for developing a legal framework on forests.

The second meeting of the UNFF took place in New York City from March 4-15, 2002. I attended the first week as an ENGO advisor to the Canadian delegation, selected by the Canadian Environmental Network. This report is a summary of some of the key issues of interest to ENGOs in Canada. I have been selective about what to include in the interests of brevity.

The meeting was somewhat unfocused, with an unclear purpose. The IPF and the IFF had already agreed to several hundred proposals for action, and there was general agreement that the UNFF should not generate more proposals for action, but rather facilitate implementation of existing proposals. But there was little clear agreement on what the UNFF could actually *do* in this regard, other than rhetorical statements of support and encouragement. This meant that the discussions of substantive issues – deforestation, forest degradation, forest restoration and the protection of fragile ecosystems – came up with little in the way of new insights or commitments.

Then there were the usual tensions familiar from previous international forest policy discussions. Developing countries sought increased financial commitments, Canada reiterated its desire for a forest convention, and the United States resisted anything that might result in international decisions not under their direct control. The meeting culminated in a ministerial segment, but Canada sent a parliamentary secretary in place of Herb Dhaliwal.

Process Issues

Much of the debate focused on procedural matters, including:

- Terms of reference for three Experts Groups to be established; dealing with
 - a) monitoring, assessment and reporting;
 - b) finance and transfer of environmentally sound technologies; and
 - c) parameters of a mandate for developing a legal framework.
- Criteria for review of the effectiveness of the international arrangement on forests; and
- Cross-sectoral collaboration and harmonization.

These are important issues, since they will shape the international forest policy dialogue in the years to come. But they are primarily procedural rather than substantive, and in any case progress was agonizingly slow. Negotiations broke down on the terms of reference for the three experts groups, so the whole matter has been deferred for a year until UNFF3.

Links to the Convention on Biological Diversity

There was some discussion (and a great deal of speculation in the corridors) about the linkages between the UNFF and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), given that the major topic to be addressed at the upcoming Sixth Conference of the Parties of the CBD will be an expanded work programme for forest biodiversity. The European Union supported the development of a strong work programme by the CBD, while Canada called only for “organized complementarity” between the UNFF and the CBD, which I understand to be diplomatic baffle for “lots of talk and no action.” The final Ministerial statement invites the CBD to support, as appropriate, the implementation of IPF/IFF proposals for action, and to encourage effective cooperation and coordination.

Ministerial Message to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)

The main output of the meeting was a “UNFF Ministerial Declaration and Message to the WSSD.” Besides the usual rhetorical flourishes, the statement invites the WSSD to:

- a) advance SFM as a critical means to eradicate poverty;
- b) endorse SFM as an international political priority;
- c) urge developed countries to make concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7% of GNP as ODA;
- d) call for immediate action on domestic law enforcement and illegal international trade in forest products;
- e) promote the means to achieve sustainable timber harvesting;
- f) call for initiatives in regions of the world suffering from poverty and high deforestation rates;
- g) create and strengthen partnerships and international cooperation to facilitate the provision of increased financial resources and technology transfer; and
- h) call on countries to accelerate implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action.

Basically, this is pretty weak stuff, limited for the most part to restating the obvious. Countries have already committed to implementing the IPF/IFF proposals for action, and ministers have already reaffirmed that commitment, so what is the point of inviting the WSSD to call on those same countries (i.e., themselves) to accelerate implementation? Why don't they just do it?

Canada's role

In general, Canada's contribution to the meeting was somewhat inconsistent, calling for implementation of the IPF/IFF proposals for action but opposing actions (such as a global initiative on forest restoration) that would accomplish this. Canada called for stringent criteria to assess the effectiveness of the UNFF in 2005, and at the same time set the Forum up to fail these criteria. It almost appeared as though Canada would prefer to see the UNFF fail, thereby strengthening arguments for a forest convention. If so, this seems

to me like a threadbare strategy, with little likelihood of success but the certainty of wasting a lot of time, energy and resources in the mean time.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the Canadian negotiators showed openness and flexibility in seeking to reflect ENGO views in Canadian interventions. Canada called on the WSSD to focus attention on the consequences of consumption and productive patterns on sustainable development, including using concepts such as “ecological footprints.” Canada supported opening up the Expert Groups to include participation from major groups. The negotiators were also persuaded to drop some of the more objectionable comments that were in the draft interventions.

One day was set aside for multistakeholder dialogue, and in order to contribute to that dialogue I prepared an intervention that was approved in advance by the Canadian delegation, and which I delivered on behalf of both the CEN and Canada. The intervention referred to the need for arms-length delegate selection processes to ensure credibility and accountability and outlined the eight strategic priorities for further action that were the outcome of the CEN Forest Caucus workshop in December 2001.

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. The CEN Forest Caucus should continue to monitor developments at the UNFF, including the progress of the Experts Groups, when they are eventually formed.
2. The CEN Forest Caucus should pay particular attention to the upcoming Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, since the proposed elements of the CBD’s work programme on forest biodiversity are generally stronger than (but consistent with) the proposals for action arising out of the IPF and the IFF.
3. It will be important to prepare a sign-on platform prior to the CBD COP6, so that ENGOs in Canada can clearly signal to government their expectations for a strong work programme on forest biodiversity.

Official documents can be obtained from the UNFF website at <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/forests.htm>. The Earth Negotiations Bulletin has a summary at <http://www.iisd.ca/linkages/forestry/unff/unff2/>. Forest Caucus members are also welcome to contact me for further information at vonmirbach@sympatico.ca.