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## The time of truth for the United Nations Forum on Forests

The Fourth Session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF 4) will be held from 3-14 May 2004 in Geneva. The session will consider implementation of the proposals for action of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) in five areas: social and cultural aspects of forests; traditional forest-related knowledge; scientific forest-related knowledge; monitoring, assessment and reporting, concepts, terminology and definitions; and criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management.

The first two items on the agenda are –or at least should be- at the core of forest conservation: forest communities' livelihoods and culture are dependent on forests and those communities hold the necessary knowledge to use them sustainably. The question is: what have governments done to implement those proposals for action aimed at strengthening communities' rights over forest management? For instance, how have they moved forward regarding the "recognition and respect for customary and traditional rights of, inter alia, indigenous people and local communities" and in providing them with "secure land tenure arrangements" as stated in IPF proposal for action 17a?

Indigenous peoples organizations and members of the Global Caucus on Community-Based Forest Management will be participating at UNFF4, trying to convince government delegates about the need to move forward in creating an enabling environment for sustainable forest management by local and indigenous peoples' communities. Those organizations' arguments were further strengthened by commitments made by governments at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development to carry out "actions at all levels" to "recognize and support indigenous and community-based forest management systems to ensure their full and effective participation in sustainable forest management." (article 45 h of the WSSD Report)

At the same time, another group of organizations will be presenting an "open petition for the UNFF" to establish a "global ban on genetically-modified trees". The petition states that "instead of establishing plantations of genetically modified trees, we should strive to restore the forest cover of our planet towards its former riches and abundance. Diverse, healthy and vital forests can best safeguard the ability of our living planet to adapt to the ongoing climate change. They also form the best basis for a diverse, healthy and vital forest economy, now and in the future." (<http://elonmerkki.net/dyn/appeal>).

The UNFF is defined as "an intergovernmental forum to develop coherent policies to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests." When it addresses the agenda item on definitions, will it define monocultures of genetically-modified trees as "forests" -as it has already done with other types of tree monocultures- or will it have the vision –and the courage- to exclude them as such?

The time has come for the UNFF to define if its work is aimed at conserving forests or at serving the interests of the powerful that continue destroying forests and promoting tree plantations. If the former, it should begin by acknowledging the rights and knowledge of forest and forest-dependent peoples to manage their forests and by promoting the implementation of an enabling environment for the spread

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of community-based forest management. If this were to happen, the UNFF will have played a central role in the conservation of the world's forests. If it doesn't and if it chooses to ignore the call to ban genetically-modified trees, it will have shown that it does not care about forests or forest peoples. The obvious question would then be: what's the use of having such a UN Forum on Forests?