
United Nations Forum on Forests: Was Anyone Listening?

The Fourth meeting of the United Nations Forum on Forests took place in Geneva. Government delegates spent two weeks pretending to address the problems that affect forests, but the truth is that the few things that deserve mentioning happened outside the official meeting rooms (see section on UNFF below).

The International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, the Global Caucus on Community Based Forest Management and a group of organizations which presented an open petition for the UNFF to establish a global ban on genetically-modified trees, did the best they could to put the real issues on the table, but deafness prevailed and only some few government delegates appeared to be listening.

Even worse: they didn't even seem to listen to each other. There was almost no dialogue or debate: monologues prevailed. Each one said whatever they had been instructed to say, regardless of what the previous speaker had expressed. No one questioned reports presented by governments on how well they were implementing agreements for forest conservation, when they and we know that forests continue to disappear at an alarming rate.

Perhaps the following example on the lack of dialogue and debate will serve to illustrate the above. The social and cultural aspects of forests was one of the major agenda items of UNFF 4. A researcher from the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) presented the official UN paper on that topic. The presentation highlighted some of the issues that indigenous peoples' organizations and their allies have been insisting on for years, among which: the need of secure land tenure for traditional knowledge holders, the loss of traditional knowledge resulting from the eviction of indigenous peoples from protected areas and the lack of decision making power on forests by indigenous peoples.

The following step should have been to open up the floor for an open discussion based on that presentation, aimed at finding common grounds to move forward on so important issues -or at least to clearly identify the existing differences. But nothing happened. Thank you very much Mr. speaker and now let's continue our dialogue of the deaf.

It is sad that these things have to be said about a United Nations process, particularly in a world increasingly dominated by a superpower -itself dominated by super-corporations. However, it is not the fault of those who criticize the UNFF process if the process itself does nothing to get its act together and to begin to address the real issues.

One quick look at the contents page of this bulletin is enough to see what the real issues are and where the solutions lie. It is clearly useless to organize Multi Stakeholder Dialogues in distant northern cities such as Geneva, while the voices of the real stakeholders –or, indeed, the rights-holders- who live in and around the forests are not even heard in their own country. It is clearly useless to make official presentations on the implementation of agreed upon commitments for forest conservation while other officials –North and South- implement policies that result in the

disempowerment of local peoples and in the destruction of forests.

Perhaps a small ray of hope about the usefulness of this process lies in the support that the UNFF secretariat and some governments are giving to an international expert meeting on traditional forest related knowledge being organized by the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests. The meeting will take place next December in Costa Rica, hosted by the government of this country.

The question will then be: will the UNFF listen –truly listen- to the voice of the real experts –the people that live in the forests?