
Improvements in forest-related international processes

The issue of forests is being addressed by three major international processes: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) and the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Until recently, the three processes appeared to be moving in different and not too positive directions, but there are now some signs that the situation might be improving.

The recently held meeting of the CBD's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) was in this sense a welcome surprise. The main theme of the meeting was forest biological diversity and the aim was to produce a programme of work to ensure the conservation of that biodiversity. In the end, participants agreed on a number of "elements for an expanded programme of work on forest biological diversity", to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties. Most of those elements point at the right direction, including local peoples' rights, participation, equitable sharing of benefits, sustainable use, capacity-building and many other relevant issues.

It is of course true that biodiversity experts by no means represent their governments' thinking on biodiversity conservation. However, the SBSTTA's recommendations will form the basis for the discussions of the upcoming Conference of the Parties (April 2001), and government delegates will find it difficult to dismiss their own experts' recommendations.

Another important result is that SBSTTA decided to establish closer links with the UNFF process in order to ensure that both processes move in the same direction. As a first step, a CBD-UNFF meeting will be organized in Ghana next January, including NGO/IPO participation. It is hoped that this meeting will be particularly useful to ensure that the UNFF takes biodiversity on board in a much more significant manner than the fora that preceded it --the Intergovernmental Panel and Forum on Forests (IPF and IFF).

Additionally, experts appear to have begun to understand that large scale monoculture tree plantations are not only not forests, but that they are themselves a major cause of biodiversity loss. They are therefore increasingly less keen to promote them as part of the solution, even when they appear to be still unwilling to openly oppose them.

At the Climate Change Convention level the situation is conflicting with biodiversity conservation, given that the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in fact promotes large scale tree monocultures as "carbon sinks". However, a decision adopted this month by the Seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on "land use, land-use change and forests" clearly establishes the principles governing activities within the Kyoto Protocol, among which the requirement "that the implementation of land use, land-use change and forestry activities contributes to the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources." This means that large scale tree monocultures could be out of the CDM if proven to be detrimental to biodiversity or to the sustainable use of natural resources ... which they always are.

All the above positive news are of course still only on paper and in far too many cases have very little in common with what governments are actually doing at the ground level. In fact, at times these

international processes appear to be more akin to "virtual reality" than to true reality. At times, it is difficult to repress the overwhelming wish to shout out when delegates from governments that are well-known for widespread forest destruction take the floor and describe all the allegedly positive actions they are carrying out to protect forests, which everyone there knows is untrue.

In spite of the above and in spite of the many shortcomings of these processes, it is important to acknowledge that international processes and agreements eventually lead to action and, in the worst case scenario, may at least provide local peoples and organizations with more tools to protect their rights and their forests. For this to happen, it is important that the actual texts agreed upon are positive. We therefore believe that what has happened this month --particularly at SBSTTA-- contains many positive elements that may lead to much needed action to protect the world's forests.