
Malaysia: Local organizations withdraw from certification process

The process to review, discuss and improve the Malaysian Criteria, Indicators, Activities and Standards of Performance (MC&I) for Forest Management Certification has been subject to disapproval by several Malaysian non-governmental, community based and indigenous peoples' organisations. Though they have been part to the process, they have decided now to withdraw on the grounds that their participation has been somewhat constrained and misconstrued as giving consent and approval to the present MC&I.

The organisations sent a joint letter to the National Timber Certification Council, (NTCC) stating the reasons for their withdrawal. They highlight several matters that have not been answered or have been unsatisfactorily answered.

One of them refers to access to information. Indigenous and local communities find it difficult to understand the concept and process of sustainable forest management and certification due to the technical terms and lack of full information in local languages, which blemish the process. In order to carry out a fair decision-making process, the organisations claim that up-to-date and accurate materials and information in the local languages and appropriate forms should be available and distributed as widely as possible at the community level. Also sufficient time should be given for the communities to understand the issues before they can even make a decision, taking into account the geographical distance and isolation of groups, among other factors.

The objections on process issues include participation and representation: involuntary and unconsulted relocation of villages result in the loss of ownership and user rights and impoverishment of communities. They demand that participation must not be limited to just a few appointed leaders or members of the community. The entire village must be informed, consulted and involved in decision-making processes.

Communities see sustainable forest management as a means to ensure the continuity of forest resources for food, medicines, other daily needs and inheritance to the future generations. However, MC&I has not given due recognition to the rights of, and user rights on, the traditional territories of local indigenous and forest communities.

Focused on the rights to customary land and forests and livelihoods of the people who live in and around the forests, the civil organisations question a process which they consider is not meeting the requirements of either the ITTO Criteria and Indicators, or the Forest Stewardship Council procedures, and Principles and Criteria for Forest Management. Indigenous peoples have particular rights to land and use of forestland, which is different from other forest users. Since they are not "just another stakeholder" in forest management but the rightful stewards of the forest, they must be duly recognised and respected for indigenous values, knowledge and practice related to land and forest.

The civil organisations have decided to withdraw from the process until their demands on process and standards are well on the way to being met, and they strongly state that they do not endorse the MC&I as currently proposed by NTCC.

