
The Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity: any hope?

The Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity will be meeting for its fifth time in Nairobi, Kenya, from 15-26 May, to work on a number of issues in which forest biodiversity is high up in the agenda. However important this convention is and however open it has been to civil society participation -as compared to other international processes- it is important to stress that it does not seem to be having a real impact on the conservation of biodiversity, not because of its own misdoings but because of actors and processes outside its scope. There are a number of reasons for this, among which we wish to highlight some:

- The lack of political will to implement international commitments. Since the 1992 Earth Summit, government delegates have been busily participating in numerous social and environmental processes and happily signing all sorts of agreements. With some notable exceptions, delegates have gone back home and their government has done little or nothing to implement those commitments. In the case of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests and its Proposals for Action, an NGO/IPO-led research confirmed the lack of implementation of those proposals in a large number of countries which participated in the process. (see <http://www.forestpolicy.org/>)
- The lack of coordination between different international processes, which appear to be separated by a wide gap which only civil society organizations seem able to see. Such is the situation, for instance, regarding the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which sees trees as carbon -sinks or reservoirs- and not as the basis for the conservation of forest biodiversity. Within such narrow view, many climate negotiators would happily agree to the planting of millions of hectares of tree monocultures as a "solution" to the greenhouse effect, while most biodiversity negotiators would rightly see this as the worst possible approach.
- The prevailance of global and national policies oriented to benefit transnational corporation's interests, for whom biodiversity conservation is either an obstacle to profit-making (e.g. the pulp and timber sector) or something to be robbed and patented (e.g. the biotechnology and pharmaceutical sectors). Local peoples -the true conservators- stand in their way and become the victims of the takeover and destruction of nature by TNCs.
- The predominance of a market-oriented approach, where biodiversity is worthless unless it has a price tag attached to it and unless such price tag is equal or superior to other possible profitable activities.
- The separation of production from biodiversity conservation. As most people working at the biodiversity convention level would agree, protected areas are very useful, but they won't be able to achieve their purpose if they constitute mere islands within a sea of biodiversity destruction. However, national policies appear to be going in that direction, converting entire landscapes into seas of agricultural and tree monocultures, while thinking that biodiversity conservation can be achieved by preserving some representative areas.

Within the international governmental processes related to the environment, the biodiversity convention can and should take the lead to ensure that the conservation of biological diversity is adequately addressed in all other processes. We hope that this Conference of the Parties will reach positive agreements regarding biodiversity in general and forests in particular. However, given the past and present record of international processes related to the environment -and their lack of implementation- people concerned with biodiversity conservation need to continue working actively both inside and outside those processes in order to generate sufficient pressure to make the current market-driven disaster move in a different and positive direction.