
The Intergovernmental Forum on Forests: a foresters' forum

The Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) was established in 1997, being its first task that of promoting and monitoring the implementation of the 135 Proposals for Action agreed by the International Panel on Forests (IPF).

The IPF's proposals for action contain a number of contradictions in relation to plantations, which reflect the different interests at stake among the governments involved in the process, and the presence of a strong pro-plantations lobby within the Forum.

On the one hand, the IPF's proposals contain some positive aspects, such as stating that social, cultural, economic and environmental considerations should be taken into account in the selection of species, areas and silviculture systems, that native species should be preferred, and that monocultures should be avoided.

However, at the same time, the IFF considers that "plantations of fast-growing trees have good and cost-effective results in terms of soil protection", and that they "fulfil a valuable role ... helping to conserve biological diversity", even when exactly the opposite has been proven true. It also adheres to the plantation promoters' view that "the role of forest plantations as an important element of sustainable forest management and as a complement to natural forests should be recognized."

Such contradictions need to be underscored, and to stress that the main role of the IFF is to implement existing agreements to protect forests and not that of promoting large-scale monoculture tree plantations, which are in many cases a direct or indirect cause of forest destruction.

Perhaps one of the main problems which the IFF faces lies in the fact that governments tend to see it as an expert body on forests, thereby requiring the presence of foresters. We believe this to be the wrong approach. Decisions on forests are political and should include social, economic and environmental considerations. Foresters do not play a major role in these arenas, except for being the implementers of forest policies. Given the type of training foresters receive, few of them are in a position to have a broad overview of the whole scenario -where power plays a much larger role than forestry technical knowledge- while at the same time they cannot be neutral regarding their own corporate interest and their relation with either the state or the forestry corporations.

The above may explain the contradictory positions on plantations stated above, as well as the strong pro-plantation lobby from countries such as New Zealand, Australia and Chile, which organized an incredibly biased "expert meeting" on plantations within the framework of the IFF last April in Santiago, with the obvious aim of further promoting plantations. However, the IFF was not created to assist the plantation industry, but to protect the world's forests and it needs to be re-orientated in that direction as well as held responsible if it finally does not comply with the clear mandate it received.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

-- Organizations working at the IFF level:

-
- Stress that the IFF's mandate is forest conservation and not plantation promotion
 - Compile and disseminate concrete examples involving forest destruction related to plantations
- Organizations working at the national level:
- In accordance with IPF proposals for action, promote participatory discussions on forest conservation - with the effective participation of forest and forest-dependent peoples- to feed into the implementation of those proposals
 - Include the plantations issue in such discussions, providing examples of their negative impacts on people and the environment
 - Identify government officials participating directly in the IFF and try to influence them on the issue.