
IFF: enough is enough

NGO and Indigenous Peoples Organizations' representatives at the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests shared a common feeling in Geneva last May: that of frustration. At its third session, the IFF discussions seemed to be going nowhere; even worse, at times they appeared to be moving backwards. After a number of meetings, NGOs and IPOs decided to present a common statement to the IFF plenary, which began by saying:

"In the seven years since the Rio Earth Summit, a great deal of dialogue on forests has taken place. At the same time, over 100 million hectares of the world's forests have been lost or degraded. While dialogue has some value, non-governmental and indigenous peoples' organizations are extremely disappointed and frustrated with the lack of impact on the ground from the IPF/IFF process. For whatever reasons, governments seem either unwilling or unable to take substantive action to solve the world's most pressing forest problems."

The above is the true and sad picture of the situation, characterized by numerous agreed commitments (from the 1992 Earth Summit onwards), innumerable "talk-shops" and no real action to address the continuing destruction of the world's forests. Governments definitely show that they are "either unwilling or unable" to address the problem -probably even more unwilling than unable.

The statement declares that, "Two years ago, the IPF Proposals for Action were added to these commitments. If these were all implemented and complied with, we believe that significant progress could be made. Unfortunately, little compliance or implementation has occurred."

This was particularly clear in Geneva, where government delegates seemed more willing to discuss new issues or rediscuss old ones, simply because they had almost nothing to report on implementation in their respective countries. It looked as if they were trying to forget that the IFF's mandate is to carry out three main tasks, the first of which is to promote and facilitate the implementation of the IPF Proposals for Action and to review, monitor and report on progress in the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forest.

Within such context, the NGO/IPO representatives attempted to bring the process back to the pressing realities of deforestation and forest degradation, by putting on the table a number of concrete demands for the coming period:

"Our organizations have a set of very clear expectations of what needs to be done to rescue the world's forests, indigenous peoples and other forest-dependent peoples from the many clearly identified threats they continue to face. We feel it is our responsibility to judge whether effective progress is made between now and IFF 4 against these expectations.

Beginning immediately, each country should initiate a process at the national level, with the full participation of all major groups, to develop and implement a national strategy and plan for implementation of, and compliance with, all IPF proposals for action, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and other forest-related international agreements. This strategy must include:

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- 1) a comparison of existing government programs, directly or indirectly related to forests, with the IPF proposals for action and other international commitments, to identify any gaps in effective implementation and compliance, and possible contradictions between these commitments and existing government programs;
 - 2) a step-by-step timetable for implementation, review, and reporting;
 - 3) identification and initiation of mechanisms by which all interested major groups, government agencies, and other parties will be involved in the implementation process, including in monitoring and reporting roles, and by which these parties will have access to all information they need to participate effectively. In addition a list of all parties currently involved in the process, and the nature of their involvement; and
 - 4) a description of any new programs that have been, or need to be initiated to achieve the effective implementation of these proposals and agreements, and a clear plan and timetable for initiating such programs.

At IFF 4, we will ask each country to present a report on its progress."

Given that "the IFF process has not led to action, it has been dominated by narrow economic interests, has used outdated procedures for major group participation, and has often ignored or duplicated the work of existing agreements and initiatives", the NGO/IPO statement attempts to remind governments that their task is to implement existing agreements to protect forests. And to tell IFF delegates that enough is enough.

Note: the full statement is available in our web site under Tropical Forests-NGO/IPO statements.