



## **Delegates meeting at the United Nations fail to agree on the future of the international arrangement on forests**

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**T**HE EAGERLY ANTICIPATED fifth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) was held at UN headquarters in New York on 16–27 May 2005. Established in 2000 as a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, the Forum—together with its secretariat and the Collaborative Partnership on Forests—constitute the international arrangement on forests (IAF), the main objectives of which are to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests and to strengthen political commitment to this end.

While the session was the Forum's fifth regular annual meeting, with a full agenda drawn from its multi-year program of work (2001–2005), all eyes were on the consideration of three related agenda items:

- review of progress and consideration of future action;
- review of the effectiveness of the IAF; and
- the consideration of, with a view to recommending, the parameters of a mandate for developing a legal framework on all types of forests (ie a convention on forests).

The consideration of these three key and contentious agenda items would have a direct bearing on the future of the ongoing process on forests. This has already passed through a number of phases, from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests and—currently—the UNFF, at a tortuously slow pace. It had also rekindled the acrimonious debate on a convention on forests, which began long before UNCED but is yet to be resolved.

The three key issues were packaged with other items of the agenda in an elaborate and hectic schedule comprising plenary and working-group sessions, a panel discussion and a host of side-events. A high-level ministerial segment and policy dialogue was also held over two days in the session's second week.

## **The review process**

At the end of the session's third day, delegates were provided with the first drafts of the two principal outputs envisaged by the session's elected officials (collectively known as the Bureau): a ministerial declaration (to be agreed by ministers at their high-level segment), and a decision on a strengthened IAF. These drafts were a result of a game effort by the Chairman, Manuel Rodriguez Bacerra (Colombia), and others in the Bureau to integrate and synthesise the wide range of competing views and proposals advanced by the delegations. The Chairman's draft text of a decision

on a strengthened IAF contained global goals with the following time-bound quantitative targets: doubling the area of forests under sustainable management;

reducing by half the people in extreme poverty among those dependent on forests for their livelihood; and reducing by half the global rate of deforestation and forest degradation by 2015. How would these be achieved?

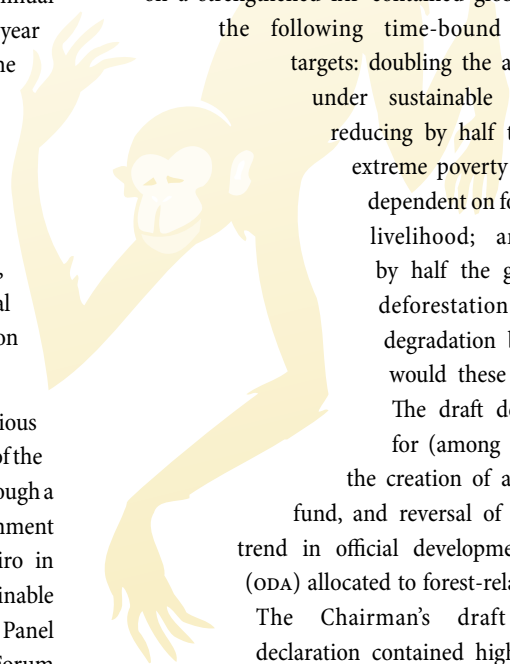
The draft decision called for (among other things): the creation of a global forest fund, and reversal of the declining trend in official development assistance (ODA) allocated to forest-related activities.

The Chairman's draft ministerial declaration contained highlights of the draft decision to strengthen the IAF and a message concerning the contributions of forests to the implementation of the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.

## **Negotiations on the Chairman's texts**

Progress within the two working groups convened to negotiate these texts was painfully slow and, ultimately, minimal. It was delayed by a request for more consultation time made by the Group of 77 and China. Indeed, the lack of consensus within this group and the time it spent in coordination meetings resulted in many of its members subsequently negotiating on the basis of their own national and regional positions. Cohesion among developed countries on the key aspects of the draft decision and declaration was also lacking.

Against this background there was no consensus on the issue of a legally



binding framework, and delegations were equally far apart on their views concerning a strengthened IAF based on a non-legally-binding arrangement. Many developed countries held strongly to their position on global goals with time-bound quantitative targets, monitoring, assessment and reporting, and other relevant proposals that would bring more focus, substance and credibility to the IAF. Conversely, most of them were opposed to time-bound quantitative targets for financial resources which, together with other aspects of means of implementation, were priorities for most developing countries. Hence, an impasse was reached.

### High-level segment

The uneasy mood surrounding the negotiations had its effects on the high-level ministerial segment. As ministers and high-ranking delegates delivered their statements on the key agenda items in plenary and participated in two roundtables, negotiations on both of the Chairman's drafts continued within a single contact group, which took over the work of the two working groups. Acknowledging that little progress was achieved on the Chairman's draft elements of a ministerial declaration, a small group was formed on the second day of the high-level segment to specifically negotiate the declaration.

Finally, a draft ministerial declaration was delivered orally to the plenary by the Coordinator and Head of the UNFF Secretariat, Pekka Patosaari, but was not adopted. Instead the Forum adopted a subsequent proposal made by the Chairman to replace the draft declaration with a Chairman's summary of the high-level segment. Ministers and high-ranking officials then began to depart amidst a sense that their presence had not been fully utilised, particularly in securing a breakthrough in the negotiations. At UNCED in 1992, ministers in charge of forests met all night long and successfully removed all brackets to the *Forest Principles*, thus paving the way for their adoption.

With the ministerial declaration lost, the negotiations of the revised Chairman's draft decision continued on a pessimistic note. At 8 pm on the second-last day the Chairman presented a new draft. The text was fully bracketed, meaning that nothing within it had been fully agreed. However, it did contain provisional agreement (*ad referendum*) on the following:

- goal 1 on reversing the loss of forest cover worldwide;
- goal 2 on enhancing forest-based economic, social and environmental benefits and the contribution of forests to the achievement of internationally agreed development goals;
- goal 3 on increasing significantly the area of protected forests and the area of sustainably managed forests and increasing the proportion of forest products from sustainably managed forests;
- goal 4 on reversing the decline in ODA for sustainable forest management and mobilising significantly increased new and additional financial resources;
- countries making all efforts to contribute to the above goals through voluntary national measures, policies, actions or specific goals; and
- encouraging countries to periodically submit national reports to the UNFF on a voluntary basis beginning in 2007 on progress in the achievement of the above global goals.

On the final day it was decided to suspend the negotiations and to convene a sixth session of the UNFF in February next year.

### Outcome of the session

The outcome of the fifth session of the UNFF clearly fell short of expectations; there was no agreed decision on the review process, and no ministerial

declaration. Most members expressed disappointment over an outcome which, ironically, they were principally responsible for.

Certainly, forest-related issues are extremely complex and contentious and have defied earlier attempts at international agreement. It is no coincidence that the UN *Forest Principles*, the first global consensus on forests, are non-legally binding and, even so, their adoption at UNCED required a last-ditch effort by a strong-willed chairman and extended ministerial negotiations. For the same reason the post-UNCED process has dragged on at a snail's pace for more than a decade, with very little to show.

The magnitude of the task surrounding the review process at the UNFF's fifth session was, therefore, well known. Yet it was packaged in an ambitious agenda and had to compete with other items and events for time and attention. Preparations and documentation for the session, while elaborate, did not facilitate the review process sufficiently. Political will was amply expressed in statements and interventions made at the session, but not commensurably demonstrated during the actual negotiations. Ministers came to deliver statements highlighting achievements and reiterating commitment, and left without providing the leadership needed to overcome the deadlock in negotiations. Major groups were upset with a revision of the format for the high-level segment; some came out with seething criticisms of the UNFF and IAF, and a few signalled their intention to abandon the process. Last but not least, the ambience and efficiency of the session were affected by constraints in interpretation, translation and other logistical arrangements, including the lack of a room conducive to tough and protracted negotiations.

### Picking up the pieces

The outcome of the fifth session and its implications are a cause for concern. Forests are perceived to be in a state of crisis, but solving this crisis is a task that seems increasingly to be sidelined in the international discourse. In the absence of a comprehensive international arrangement, be it legally or non-legally binding, the issue of forests continues to be nibbled away at by existing international instruments in ways that may be inconsistent with the holistic approach agreed to at UNCED.

With only a few months until the sixth session, the onus is squarely on the Forum's bureau to map out and implement a strategy that will salvage the review process and bring it to a conclusive end. There is clear merit in a focused agenda, with preparations geared towards the effective facilitation of the review and the negotiations to be carried out. The outcome of the fifth session doesn't give much to go on, but some momentum might be built around the goals agreed *ad referendum* and some of the ideas on a strengthened IAF.

In the midst of threats by some to abandon the UNFF, members have opted to give it another try. Some are praying for a miracle to happen. The essence of international cooperation is a willingness to compromise; the solution to the deadlock may be found somewhere between the call for strict global goals with time-bound quantitative targets, and the cry for new and additional financial resources and predictable funding. Determination, perseverance and the political will to compromise are the prerequisites for a credible and satisfactory outcome to the review of the IAF.