

# Can national schemes meet international requirements?

**The Malaysian Timber Certification Council is striving for the international recognition of its certification scheme and says an international evaluation system is needed**

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**T**HE Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) recognises that a national scheme and the standard it adopts have to meet certain basic requirements if they are to be credible and acceptable to stakeholders and the international market.

In the case of forest management standards, various sets of internationally agreed criteria and indicators (C&I) for sustainable forest management (SFM), including those of ITTO, the Montreal Process and the Helsinki Process, have been formulated. It is recognised that these sets need to be further elaborated through the inclusion of standards of performance or verifiers—which should reflect local conditions in the country or region concerned—before they can be used for other purposes such as internal auditing or certification.

Similarly, in establishing a certification scheme, there is a need to determine the basic requirements of a credible scheme, taking into account local conditions.

With regard to standards, it should be kept in mind that C&I for SFM are intended to monitor trends towards the achievement of SFM. The assessment of forest management practices for the purpose of timber certification requires a standard containing standards of performance or verifiers that are clearly defined and have measurable threshold values. The certification standard should be balanced, pragmatic and achievable by the forest manager in line with current best practice in forest management under local conditions. This is especially important in the case of the management of tropical forests in developing countries. The set of C&I used for timber certification is therefore likely to be a subset of the C&I for SFM, particularly in the initial phase of implementing certification.

Despite efforts to take into account local conditions and to achieve a transparent and consultative approach during the process of formulating the standard, the fact remains that in the key markets there are a number of competing timber certification schemes, each with their own proponents and supporters. In such a situation, those national schemes that are market-oriented face great difficulty in gaining acceptance in these markets. This is because buyers and consumers will have strong reservations about accepting certified products from national schemes, especially those from developing countries, since they are unable to assess the credibility of any new certificate. Under such circumstances, national certification schemes may have no choice but to seek endorsement, recognition or compatibility with the better known and more widely accepted schemes in the market.

In the case of the MTCC, there are ongoing efforts to comply with the requirements of the Keurhout Foundation in the Netherlands under the Malaysia-Netherlands cooperation program in timber certification; meanwhile, the MTCC-Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) collaboration is aimed

at the development of a forest management standard for endorsement by the FSC.

## **International evaluation system**

There is an urgent need for an international system to evaluate different certification schemes in order to facilitate mutual recognition between credible schemes. It is recognised, however, that considerable work remains to be done before any agreement can be reached regarding the establishment of such an international evaluation system, especially with regard to what constitutes a credible scheme and which forum or organisation should undertake the task of establishing this system. The workshop convened by ITTO last April was a step in the right direction and built upon previous seminars and workshops convened by various organisations.

It is hoped that in the process of identifying the minimum requirements to be included in a scheme for it to be considered credible, the list of requirements should not be so demanding as to disqualify credible schemes, especially those from developing countries. In deciding the list, the need for continual review and improvement of the scheme and its standards should be a guiding principle.

## **Step-wise approaches**

The MTCC supports the idea of adopting a stepwise approach for developing country producers to recognise their progress towards SFM. The phased approach being taken by the MTCC in the implementation of its scheme can be considered to be one form of this stepwise approach.

The standard currently used for assessing forest management units is the Malaysian Criteria, Indicators, Activities and Standards of Performance for Forest Management Certification (MC&I), which is itself based on the ITTO Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Management of Natural Tropical Forests.

The MTCC plans to use a standard that is compatible with the FSC Principles and Criteria (P&C). A multi-stakeholder National Steering Committee (NSC) is currently revising the MC&I to make it compatible with the FSC P&C. An action plan has been adopted towards the formation of an FSC National Working Group (NWG) to advance the work of the NSC. The NWG, when established, will further develop a standard for submission to the FSC for its endorsement.

In summary, if certification is to achieve its intended purpose of improving forest management practices in the countries or regions where improvements are most critically needed, work towards an international arrangement for an evaluation system of certification schemes must be expedited, supplemented by stepwise approaches to assist and encourage developing country producers.