

Interview with Rob Busink

Rob Busink did his Masters thesis on tropical timber in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development integrated programme of raw materials, and he has been a member of the Netherlands delegation to the International Tropical Timber Council since 2009. He is Council chair in 2014



Photo: R. Carrillo/ITTO

What are the main challenges the Council will face at its 50th session?

Time management will be a challenge for all of us, especially the chair. We have several issues on our agenda, and I think the main one will be the appointment of a new executive director [ED] for the Organization. That's an important decision. Last year we had extensive discussions about the profile of the new ED and now we have six candidates in a short-list. It's also about how you look at the future of ITTO and which ED will fit best for that.

We also have a challenge related to resource mobilization. When you see the ambitions of ITTO, especially in our new Strategic Action Plan and the Biennial Work Programme, and you see what we think is needed in terms of finance and what is available, there is a big gap. We had a discussion two years ago on how we could increase funding for ITTO, but the challenge is still there.

Third, a report on the impact of governmental procurement policies on tropical timber markets will be discussed in the Committee on Economics, Statistics and Markets and also in the Council plenary. This issue came up almost four years ago, and it's complex and divisive. On the one hand, producers expect clear conditions for market access in consumer regions, but various consumer governments have policies to promote the consumption of forest products from sustainable forest management. Now there are also policies on banning illegally harvested timber from the market—in the United States there is the Lacey Act; in the European Union there is the EU Timber Regulation; and recently Australia also enacted a law. So I imagine that, for many countries, this could be very confusing and the report should give us more insight on the impacts.

We will also have to discuss the revision of staff rules and regulations. Another important issue is ITTO's regional presence—its regional offices. Members have been invited to make submissions on the roles and functions of the regional offices.

We have many important issues, so it will be a challenge to manage our time. I expect everybody will be constructive and cooperative because ultimately we strive for the same goals, which are a sustainable tropical timber trade and sustainable forest management.

How do you perceive the atmosphere of the Council?

I have now attended several Council sessions, and I can remember that one—in which governmental procurement policies were debated—was quite tense, even adversarial. But in recent sessions I think we have moved on, especially in discussing the Strategic Action Plan, and I think gradually we have established a more constructive and collaborative atmosphere. Perhaps everyone is realizing that we need to collaborate to have a strong organization, strong policies and, as a result, a strong tropical forest sector.

Actually, we have a basis that could lead to an adversarial relationship within the Council, because we have two categories of country: on the one hand the producers of tropical timber and on the other hand the consumers, and of course producers and consumers have different interests. But the situation is dynamic, evolving and complex: some consumer countries are also producing tropical timber products. China, for example, is regarded as a consumer country but it is also producing many tropical timber products. Some producer countries are also big

tropical timber consumer countries; for example, most of the tropical timber produced in Brazil is being consumed in Brazil. So ultimately we are all parties in the forest value chain, and our common interest is in sustainable forest management and a sustainable supply of tropical timber in the long term. Maybe we are realizing this more and more and this is contributing to a more collaborative atmosphere.

What are the major strengths and comparative advantages of the Council?

The Council's strength is that you have all the governments of the producers and consumers, the main actors, around the table. I think the International Tropical Timber Agreement was the first raw-material agreement that also took the sustainability of the resource seriously into account. The work to promote sustainability is a strength. It's related to so many aspects—the social aspect, the biodiversity aspect, the economic aspect; we take them all into account in the Council.

Another strength is the strong relationship between ITTO and other organizations, as expressed in the memoranda of understanding we have with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora and the Convention on Biological Diversity. I also very much support ITTO in starting to work more closely with the World Bank, which plays a very important role in sustainable development.

One of the main challenges I see for ITTO in general and also at the national level is in making forestry an integral part of national sustainable development policies. Forests are not regarded as a politically attractive issue; when you talk about climate, biodiversity or sustainable energy you get a lot of attention, but most politicians are not aware that in all those issues forests can and do play a very important role. So we need much more work on political influence; if we can increase that influence, the challenge of resource mobilization could also be more easily resolved.

What are its weaknesses?

As I mentioned, a strength of the Organization and the Council is the broad scope of its work, but that strength is also a weakness, because we can lose focus. We have a broad vision, but the danger is that it is too broad.

The lack of active participation by the private sector is another weakness. We need much more involvement by the industry, and the Council should promote to a greater extent the role ITTO can play in tropical timber markets. What we see in the long term is a growing need for raw materials that are environmentally friendly, and tropical timber from sustainably managed tropical forests fits that

profile. ITTO could work more closely with the private sector to, for example, help secure the raw-material supply. We also need to look at ways in which ITTO's work can have a greater impact on wider sustainable development policies. One of the problems with the Council—and this is not unique to it—is that our discussions stay quite isolated. They need to be integrated more in national policies to increase the influence of the forest sector in general.

What do you see as the future role of the Organization?

ITTO is a unique organization. It is the only legally binding agreement on forests (in this case tropical forests) at the global level, which covers all the different aspects. It focuses on tropical timber, but in the context of sustainable forest management—the social, economic and ecological aspects. We have a unique concept; tropical forests are the forests most in danger; we have all the people around the table; and we have a very broad view. Therefore, I think ITTO could play an important role in solving some of the big challenges we face in the near future. We can encourage sustainable tropical forest management, help supply local and international communities with wood fibre, including biofuels, and make progress on the role of forests in climate-change mitigation and adaptation.

Next year is very important because we will discuss the review of the international arrangement on forests, and ITTO is one of the components of that arrangement. The raw-material supply will become an increasingly important issue, and timber is a raw material that can solve many environmental problems. ITTO should therefore be much more active in the various fora and make much more noise about what it can do to help solve international problems. ITTO can continue to encourage cooperation between producers and consumers in changing timber markets; help bring REDD+ into being; encourage the development of bioenergy; and help make payments for environmental services more operational. ITTO can also help in creating sustainable trade chains for commodities that contribute to deforestation, and encourage the development of plantation forests to meet future needs for tropical timber.