

New forest treaty agreed

The agreement under which ITTO operates is re-negotiated, with some new features added

A NEW TREATY has been agreed that will reinforce work to bring tropical forests under sustainable management and increase the role of the tropical timber trade in sustainable development.

ITTO, which was created in 1983, aims to both conserve tropical forests and assist countries to develop economically. The treaty under which it operates—the International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA)—is renegotiated periodically because of a built-in expiry clause and to take into account changes in global forest policies and the world timber trade.

More than 180 negotiators from governments and international organisations met for two weeks in January 2006 to finalise the agreement. It contains several changes that are likely to lead to significant improvements in the Organization's work.

The Organization's longstanding philosophy of using tropical forests in a sustainable way for economic development is stated explicitly in the new agreement. The two key objectives are:

"to promote the expansion and diversification of international trade in tropical timber from sustainably managed and legally harvested forests and to promote the sustainable management of tropical timber producing forests ..."

Related to the first objective, the Organization will, among other things, help improve the competitiveness of wood products relative to other materials, boost the marketing of tropical timber from sustainably managed and legally harvested sources, and share information on certification and other aspects of the international timber market.

In pursuit of the second key objective, the Organization will help countries to improve forest law enforcement and governance, address illegal logging and related trade in tropical timber, and undertake sustainable forest management and forest restoration. It will also strengthen the capacity of countries to gather and report data on the tropical timber trade and forest management.

The agreement acknowledges the role of ITTO in assisting countries to pursue sustainable development and alleviate poverty and encourages forest-dependent indigenous and local communities to achieve sustainable forest management.

ITTO relies for much of its work on funds contributed on a voluntary basis, up to now mostly by the governments of Japan, Switzerland and the United States. To help boost such contributions the new agreement creates a sub-account for thematic sub-programs, which, some donors say, will lead to greatly increased funding for specific areas of work. There are also changes to assessed contributions, with activities such as the production of the *Tropical Forest Update* and Market Information Service, which are currently funded through projects, and other communications and outreach activities to be funded 80% by consumer member countries and 20% by producers to a maximum of one-third the general administrative budget.

ITTO's Executive Director, Dr Manoel Sobral Filho, said that the new agreement will help ITTO build on its past sustainable development successes.

"People want neither poverty nor environmental degradation," he said. "ITTO believes that natural tropical forests can be both



Negotiators at work: Alhassan Attah (centre), Jürgen Blaser (second from left) and UNCTAD staff discuss the finer points of the agreement during an informal working group.

Photo: © M. Goldstick/ENB

conserved for future generations and put to economic use to alleviate poverty and contribute to national development. This new agreement articulates this belief and gives material support for it through innovative funding mechanisms."

Dr Sobral said that many people think the conservation of tropical forests and the development of the tropical timber trade are mutually exclusive.

"On the contrary, the one is essential for the other," he said. "Without conservation there can be no long-term trade. Without trade, the forests will be cleared for agriculture because, one way or another, the people living in tropical countries will continue to demand economic development.

"ITTO's role has been, and will continue to be, to help governments, companies and communities to improve the management of their forests and the marketing of their products."

The independent environmental news service the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* (ENB) reported the negotiations from start to finish and was upbeat about the outcome.

"Certainly, the new ITTA is born at a time when international cooperation on forests could use an infusion of new energy," it said.

According to the ENB, many activist environmental groups may not be willing to concede legitimacy to an organisation with overriding objectives that include promoting the expansion of the international trade in tropical timber.

"Yet the fact that the ITTO keeps chugging away, together with the increased potential that the new agreement brings to its work, may eventually make ITTO one of the most effective international organizations in pursuing the goals of both ending tropical deforestation and increasing the well-being of the people and communities that depend upon tropical forests."

The ITTA, 2006, is expected to come into force in 2008 and will operate for ten years, with the possibility of extensions of up to eight years. ITTO will continue to function under the ITTA, 1994, until the new Agreement is ratified.

For a detailed report on the negotiations go to <http://www.iisd.ca/forestry/itto/itita4/>.