

International Conference on Managing Forests for Poverty Reduction

Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 3-6 October 2006

Statement by Emmanuel Ze Meka, Assistant Director, Reforestation and Forest management, International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), Yokohama, Japan

H.E. Mr. Hua Duc Nhi, Vice Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Viet Nam

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am most privileged to take the floor at this important conference on Managing Forests for Poverty Reduction. First of all, I would like to extend to you all the warm greetings of Manuel Sobral Filho, Executive Director of ITTO, as well as his best wishes for the success of our Conference. I also would like to express our deep gratitude and appreciation to the Government and the people of Viet Nam for their warm hospitality and the nice facilities made available for this important meeting.

Poverty covers a wide range of considerations and perspectives, from the denial to meeting basic needs, namely food, clothing, shelter, education and health care to the denial of human rights and opportunities. Despite its limitations, income poverty, which refers to limitations to meet the basic needs, might be appropriate for our discussions during this meeting. In this connection, It is estimated that about 1.2 billion people, or about 20% of the world population live with less than 1US\$/day, which has been defined as the poverty line, although this definition does not reflect the whole significance of poverty, as already mentioned. Poverty reduction/alleviation or eradication has been high in the agenda of the international community for quite sometime now, with a peak in 2002 when the Millennium Development Goals were stated and the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger identified as one of the Goals.

The majority of the poor live in the tropics where forest resources are abundant. Discussing this apparent contradiction of the coexistence of abundant forest resources and rampant poverty is indeed unavoidable. In spite of the recognition of the importance of poverty reduction, of the various debates surrounding it, and of some, but very limited, in number and in size, successful examples of forest management contributing to poverty reduction, some of which will be presented and discussed during this conference, the situation has not dramatically changed.

The question might then be raised whether the problem is tackled from an appropriate angle, whether we are the right track ? Poverty is a complex issue which requires many lines of action. However in connection with forest management, some strategic approaches may offer greater opportunities and few can be mentioned here.

Sustainability is the corner stone of addressing poverty reduction, as any unsustainable result will not solve the problem and may exacerbate the situation.

The economic potential of the forest should be maximized by taking into account all forest resources. Forests can offer many goods and services, including timber, NTFP and ecological services and an integrated approach to forest management, taking into consideration all these resources will offer more opportunities and have a greater impact on poverty reduction.

The world of today is dominated by the free market approach, marked with an increased displacement of funds, goods and human resources. The key word in this context is competitiveness, which requires innovation, technology and trained personnel. Managing forests for poverty reduction will need to take this context into account in building capacity among local communities in order to allow them to be equipped and play an active role in this new environment. Failing to do so will only restrict them to receive only crumbs of the proceeds of forest management. It is particularly essential that improved skills be provided in forest management, product development, production of valued added products, marketing and business management.

For example, NTFP can offer good opportunities for income generation in many countries, but their contribution to poverty reduction is limited because most of them are collected from the wild, their conservation and

conditioning for the market is not appropriate and communities involved have limited skills in marketing or in business management. Building local capacity and partnerships in the selection, genetic improvement, and vegetative propagation of NTFP, introducing appropriate technologies in processing and conditioning, and providing training in business management, including marketing, can greatly enhanced the contribution of NTFP to poverty reduction.

The local, national and international environments are to be supportive in order to allow the opportunities offered by sustainable forest management to be captured for the benefit of the poor. The poor is often the weakest player at the local and national levels: his political power is limited or non-existent and he has therefore limited influence on practices, laws, regulations and the different procedures that affect his condition; his financial capability is also limited as well as access to education and training. Although improved local organizations such as associations and cooperatives can offset some of these shortcomings, it is essential that national and local authorities create a supportive environment through reforms, in particular regarding access to forest and financial resources, as well to education and training. It is also imperative that local communities be empowered and their organization strengthened, that negative practices such as corruption be eliminated and good governance established, and that the negative role of the elites be reduced.

The international environment has also to be supportive. First and foremost access to markets has to be facilitated. Subsidies practiced by certain countries continue to detract the free market, as well as the introduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers, denying access to forest products produced by the poor. The successful marketing of forest products is essential to make effective the contribution of forest management to poverty reduction.

Access to appropriate technologies, in the form of transfer of technology through cooperation, is also a critical element. International aid agencies can play a critical role in this domain, as well as in strengthening the organization of poor communities. Unprocessed forest resources have limited impact in terms of employment and income generation.

The international community can also contribute to maximize the economic potential of forest, thus the potential of forest to contribute to poverty

reduction, in facilitating, through market and non-market mechanisms, the payment for environmental services.

The establishment of these favorable environments, at local, national and international levels, as well as the active involvement of capacitated local communities in forest management will certainly offer greater potential for the contribution of forest management to poverty reduction.

Before I close, I would like, once more, to thank on behalf of ITTO, the Government of Viet Nam for giving us the opportunity to discuss this pressing issue of managing forests for poverty reduction. I also would like to recognize here and value the friendly cooperation that has been established between ITTO, FAO, RECOFTC, and the other partners to assist in the organization of this important conference. I wish every success to our conference and sincerely hope that it will make an effective contribution to poverty reduction.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.