

Out on a limb

ITTO's Fellowship Program – can we make it even better?

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Investing in sustainable forest management means investing in people, as well as forests. The ITTO Fellowship Program does that. Indeed it is the only Fellowship Program focused on building human resources virtually worldwide in disciplines related to tropical forests and the tropical timber economy. Looking back, there's no doubt the program has come a long way since it was launched in 1989 by the Committee on Forest Industry at the initiative of its Chairman, Dr. Marku Simula, and its Assistant Director, Dr. Manoel Sobral. But there may still be room for improvement.

The early years

My experience with the Fellowship Program began in 1997 when I was Vice-Chair of the Council, which meant I also chaired the Fellowship Selection Panel. At that time, the Council handled the program on a largely ad hoc basis. The selection panel (comprised of busy Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs) met over lunch and after hours on the margins of (the then) biannual Council and Committee sessions, with each panel member responsible for reviewing and evaluating a tall stack of applications. Had it not been for the excellent preparations and documentation by the ITTO Secretariat we would have been hard pressed to complete our task.

Despite the panel's informality, I was impressed by the breadth and vigor of the program, which in 1997 supported 59 grants to nationals of 17 member countries for a variety of activities in the field of tropical forestry. Most were short-term proposals of less than US\$5,000 to attend professional conferences, publish and disseminate technical documents, or participate in short-term training courses or internships. I was struck by the fact that with so little financial investment, ITTO could make a concrete contribution to developing the skills and expertise of aspiring and young professionals in producer countries.

With my new appreciation of the Fellowship Program's reach and impact, the United States made its first contribution of US\$25,000 in support of the program in 1997. Although a modest amount, it was to be the first of regular annual contributions which in 2010 totaled more than US\$1 million.

Establishing the Freezailah Fellowship Fund

In 1999, after completing my term as ITTC chair, I had the opportunity to chair the expert panel charged with reviewing the Fellowship Program and making recommendations for improvement. The panel's report led to Decision 4(XXVII) by which Council adopted a number of measures to enhance the functioning of the program,

including, *inter alia*, revised objectives and priority areas (based on the ITTA 1994 and Libreville Action Plan), streamlined application and screening processes, and setting an upper limit of US\$10,000 per fellowship.

The decision also established the Freezailah Fellowship Fund (in honor of ITTO's first Executive Director) as a sub-account of the Special Account to receive voluntary contributions earmarked for the Fellowship Program. The Freezailah Fellowship Fund (FFF) put the program on a new and enhanced financial footing within the ITTO.

Trends since 2000

In the last 10 years, the ITTO Fellowship Program has flourished under the able management of the Secretariat, providing a total of US\$3.1 million in fellowships to more than 500 recipients from 40 member countries to support a wide range of activities, some of which are highlighted in this TFU issue. As the Secretariat's Fellowship Impact Assessment Survey (page 3) shows, the program has been highly successful in helping to build human resources in tropical forestry and related fields, especially in producer countries.

At the same time, a look at the following trends over the last decade suggests there may be scope to further improve the effectiveness, efficiency and attractiveness of the program:

- **Funding base.** Since 1999, the program has enjoyed a sustained voluntary funding base of about US\$400,000 per year from the FFF. However, 95% of the funds have been contributed by Japan (75%) and the USA (20%). The remaining 5% has come from Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Sub-account B of the Bali Partnership Fund. Just as the Council has stressed the need to broaden its funding base for project and pre-project activities, it may be useful to explore ways to attract other donors to the Fellowship Program, which is open to and benefits all ITTO members.



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- **Award distribution.** Since 2000, a majority of the fellowship applications and 60% of the awards have involved nationals of seven ITTO producer countries: Ghana, Nepal, Cameroon, India, Colombia, Indonesia, Peru and the Philippines. This suggests there may be a need to raise awareness of and promote the program in other countries, with a view to generating fellowship applications from a wider field of ITTO members.
- **Program support and Secretariat costs.** About 25% of the US\$400,000 available in the FFF each year is used to cover program support and Secretariat costs related to processing the 300-400 applications received, as well as managing more than 100 ongoing fellowships. In order to maximize the funds available for fellowships from the FFF, it may be worthwhile to consider other arrangements for covering the operational and overhead costs of the program.
- **Short-term versus long-term activities.** Over the years, there has been a steady increase in applications (sometime half of all received) requesting support for post-graduate studies, which are “high price tag” awards compared with most short-term activity costs. In view of this trend, it may be useful to review the relative benefits of short- versus long-term fellowship activities, with a view to determining to what extent and at what level the ITTO program should continue to help finance advanced studies.

Making the program even better

With 10 years of experience to look back on and in anticipation of entry into force of the ITTA 2006, now seems a good time to take stock of the Fellowship Program's performance and accomplishments since the FFF was established and consider whether and how to address the above issues, as well as others that might emerge through a stock-taking process. To this end, I suggest Council convene a second expert panel as soon as feasible charged with reviewing the program and identifying ways to make it more efficient and effective, taking into account the relevant provisions of the ITTA 2006 and the results of the Fellowship Impact Assessment Survey. Going “out on a limb”, I offer the following ideas in this regard:

- In the new sub-account of the Administrative Account that covers “core operational costs” (ITTA 2006, para 17.2.b) include: (1) the full Secretariat costs to manage the Fellowship Program and (2) an annual allocation (e.g. \$100,000) for fellowship awards. This would spread the cost of program support, as well as a modest “core”

portion of award financing, across all ITTO members while maximizing the funds available for fellowships from voluntary contributions to the FFF, which would remain the main source of fellowship funds.

- In developing Thematic Program Documents for the new Thematic Programs provided for under the ITTA, 2006, include a small line item to support fellowship activities integral to each Thematic Program.
- Each year, award 1-2 fellowships for internships (perhaps of 6-12 months duration) with the ITTO Secretariat in Yokohama to introduce aspiring professionals to the ITTO and its work while enhancing the Secretariat's personnel capacity.
- Develop a web-based fellowship “alumni” network or association linked to the ITTO website to facilitate professional contacts among alumni, foster information sharing and the exchange of experiences and lessons learned, and raise awareness of the program and its benefits in member countries.
- Request ITTO members to take steps to increase the visibility of the program in their respective countries (e.g. through contacts in research institutions, secondary programs, field forestry, etc.) and report to Council on actions taken.
- Make Fellowship Program outreach a formal element of the responsibilities of ITTO regional officers.
- Review the program's current objective in light of Article 1 of ITTA 2006. Consider establishing a limited number of “priority areas” based on ITTO's operational Thematic Programs and reviewing these priorities each biennium.
- Consider the merits of continuing and perhaps increasing the budget limit for fellowships for post-graduate study.

In my view, the ITTO Fellowship Program is a great investment in young people and therefore in the future of tropical forests, including the sustainability of forest management, forest-based livelihoods and the tropical timber trade. It's also a great investment in the future of the Organization which will likely see many delegates from among its former fellows. That said, I believe more can and should be done to increase the value of the investment for grantees and individual member countries, as well as increase the return on the investment to ITTO.