

Countries debate the merits of a new agreement

PrepCom II has prepared the ground for some intriguing negotiations in 2004 to create a successor agreement to the ITTA, 1994

THE second session of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom II) for the Negotiation of a Successor Agreement to the 1994 International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA, 1994) was held 10–12 November 2003, in Yokohama, Japan. Approximately 100 participants attended the session, representing member countries, potential members, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations.

Over the course of three days delegates reviewed the draft working document of the successor agreement with a view to clarifying the elements therein, posing questions and presenting their views on the text. In the end, delegates produced a final draft text that will serve as the basis for discussion at the United Nations Conference for the Negotiation of a Successor Agreement to the ITTA, 1994, to be held 26–30 July 2004 in Geneva.

In spite of an earth tremor that shook the ground beneath their feet in the concluding hours of PrepCom II, delegates nevertheless retained the solid footing they had established for themselves throughout the session. In the end, delegates were successful in forging a working document that will serve as the basis for negotiations at July's UN Conference in Geneva. Insofar as PrepCom II allowed a space for countries to clearly articulate their concerns and negotiating positions and register these in the draft working document, the session can be deemed a success. However, characterising PrepCom II as such is not to gloss over the fact that country positions are still quite divergent on issues such as financial arrangements and renaming the organisation.

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Finances

On the heels of the introduction of a biennial work program and the move to biennial budgeting, PrepCom delegates proposed major changes to the ITTA's financial provisions. Under the current structure, project and policy activities are funded primarily through voluntary funds. It is argued by some producing and consuming members that funding for these activities should come from stable, assessed member contributions instead of unpredictable voluntary contributions.

As a result, delegates tabled several proposals for funding under the new ITTA. Two of them envision assessed contributions from members for biennial work program policy and project work. Some involve linking assessments to gross domestic product (GDP), per capita GDP, or the United Nations scale of assessments. While this latter option would substantially increase the resource base of the Organization, it is unpalatable to many countries.

Additionally, actors have demonstrated a common commitment to streamlining ITTO, and much debate

focused on ways to enhance the efficiency of the Organization. Some donor countries insisted on reducing costs by cutting the number of Council meetings to one per year, while producers opposed this outright and later countered with a proposal for allowing special sessions conducted at the request of caucuses. The outcomes of these decisions will play a major part in determining if the Organization will have a sound resource base that would fully support the Agreement's objectives.

Renaming ITTO

Even though the scope of the agreement may not drift far from ITTA, 1994, there may be a major change in how delegates view the Organization's future role in the international policy domain. There were a number of interventions made by delegates to rename the Organization as the International Tropical Forest Products Organization or the International Tropical Forest Organization. Such requests were in line with the intention to modify the scope of the Agreement and reflect efforts to move sustainable forest management policy higher up on the international political agenda, and to change the nature of the forest debate. Changing the name of the Organization is also an opportunity for the membership to refashion the Organization's scope in order to keep up with changing times while at the same time ensuring that the Organization maintains its original purpose.

Clearly, the negotiations provide an opportunity to improve what is already a strong agreement and what some have called the flagship commodity agreement. At the same time, disagreements among ITTO's membership remain to be solved. Several participants have also indicated that the negotiation process has been slow and have suggested that a single negotiating conference may not suffice to complete the negotiations as scheduled. In any case, PrepCom II's accomplishments, namely the production of a sound and thorough working document for the UN conference, bode well for the negotiations in July.

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