

Out on a limb

The TFU goes out on a limb with Dr Manoel Sobral Filho, who completes his distinguished term as ITTO's Executive Director in November 2007

TFU: You've been involved with ITTO since its inception in the early 1980s. What were some of the highlights of your career?

MSF: Well the first would have to be joining the Organization as one of its first Assistant Directors in the late 1980s. I was lucky to be servicing the Forest Industry Committee for my first decade or so at ITTO, during which time some of the Organization's landmark activities arose. These included the genesis of ITTO's Objective 2000, which still provides a framework for the work of the Organization, and development of the ITTO Fellowship Program under which more than \$5 million in small grants have been disbursed to deserving candidates throughout the tropics.

The ITTO Fellowship Program was one of the Organization's first initiatives and it has proved to be its longest-lasting. As you know, the ITTO fellowship program sponsors young and middle-level professionals working for government, research institutions, civil society and the private sector to pursue professional development opportunities and improve their career prospects. The ITTO fellows are thus a cohort of dedicated forestry professionals that will help lead the forestry sectors in their countries over the next few decades. By now, ITTO has sponsored close to a thousand people from over 40 countries through its fellowship program. The Organization should be proud to have made a difference to the careers of so many young foresters.

Another highlight of my career with ITTO has been watching the Organization evolve through its work in policy development. When ITTO was created back in 1983, there were no international policies on forest management anywhere, let alone in the tropics. ITTO has led the way with its Objective 2000, a series of guidelines and policy frameworks, its criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management, and other important milestones. Even more importantly, it has worked with governments and other stakeholders to improve these policy initiatives, where they needed improving, and to start implementing them at the national and field levels. It has certainly been professionally rewarding for me to be actively involved in ITTO's evolution in policy development.

However, policies alone are not enough to change things in the forest. Another

highlight of my work with ITTO has been the degree to which I have been able, through projects and other activities, to observe countries actively implementing these policies. This was brought home to me in yet another highlight of my time with ITTO, the survey published last year of the status of forest management in the tropics. It found that forest policies in the tropics are evolving in line with ITTO's policy work, and it found that forest management is improving.

I take great heart from this, because it shows that our work has not been in vain. Of course, most of the improvement is due to the efforts of the member countries themselves and the hundreds of thousands or millions of people

involved in the forestry sectors there, but

I believe that ITTO has played an important role as well. In fact, many of the forest areas now under SFM are, or have been, the focus of ITTO projects, strengthening the link between international policy development, ITTO project work, and improvement on the ground.

Finally, any list of highlights has to include my participation in negotiations toward the three International Tropical Timber Agreements (1983, 1994 and 2006), the first as a delegate, the second as Assistant Director and the most recent as Executive Director. The negotiations of the ITTAs shaped the Organization we have today and I was

extremely pleased to have been able to participate in these seminal events and contribute, however modestly, to their successful outcomes.

Any disappointments or regrets?

Well, I regret that I was unable to further widen the donor base for ITTO more effectively to increase funds for the Organization's long term well-being. While I leave the Organization in excellent health, its potential has not been fully tapped and we still rely too much on a few donors that have lately been unable to continue to fund ITTO at historical levels. Over the last twenty years we have established an effective model for how an international agency can assist members in the pursuit of forest conservation and sustainable forest-based development. We now know that, given additional resources, this model can be scaled up to a point where it will make a huge positive impact across the tropics.

With increasing concern about global climate



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change and the role of tropical forests in the carbon cycle, exciting and challenging times lie ahead for ITTO and its partners. I hope and trust that members will maintain and even increase their support in coming years. I am delighted that the efforts we have taken to broaden the Organization's funding base are already starting to pay off. Recently, about US\$6 million has been pledged by donors who have either never before contributed or whose contributions had previously been in decline.

Apart from this, I honestly regret to leave all of my friends and colleagues from the Council and the Secretariat, but I know I will see most of you again.

You alluded to the possibility of carbon markets becoming important for ITTO. Where do you see (or where would you like to see) ITTO 10 years from now?

We are certainly hearing a lot of talk about the potential for carbon markets to play (and possibly pay) a role in tropical forest conservation. There are a lot of new acronyms floating around, the ideas behind most of which need to be further developed. I sincerely hope that the talk about millions or even billions of dollars for REDD (reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation) in tropical forests or other schemes can be realized. Certainly ITTO can play a role in the development of these ideas but we need to remain pragmatic and realize that despite the early promise of other schemes to save the tropical forests (e.g. eco-tourism, bio-prospecting and natural medicines, etc.), tropical timber remains today the single most important source of revenue and development opportunities for the majority of tropical countries. ITTO's experience in promoting the sustainable production and trade of tropical timber should be a valuable input to the on-going discussions on climate change and forestry in the tropics.

There is one area that I believe has great potential for tropical countries and that is the production of biofuels. Given tropical countries' comparative advantage in producing biomass and relatively cheap land and labour costs, I believe development of biofuel industries holds great promise. I also believe that ITTO and others should devote more research over the next decade to the potential of cellulosic biofuel from tropical tree species. ITTO could also play a key role in helping to develop sustainability guidelines and standards for this emerging industry based on its work with tropical timber. In short, I think tropical timber will still be important in 10 years time, but I hope that ITTO can be instrumental in helping to develop other sustainable paths to development for its producer member countries.

Some observers see development of biofuel industries in the tropics as a threat to tropical forests.

The development of any industry can be a threat to conservation and sustainability if it is poorly planned and implemented. And probably some areas of tropical forest will be converted to biofuel plantations, just as some areas have been converted to soy beans in my home country. My point is that this is one component of the various alternatives emerging from the carbon market discussions that has serious potential for tropical countries and where there are already existing markets. ITTO needs to work with its member countries that want to take advantage of these markets so that they do so in a way that is consistent with the principles of sustainability that the Organization is based on.

Any advice for your successor?

Have a good sense of humor! Seriously, I know Mr ZeMeka will do an excellent job. My main advice is to continue to value the excellent staff in the Secretariat. One of my biggest difficulties was recruiting and retaining qualified staff, especially internationally, so it is important to try and keep morale high to keep turnover at a minimum. I know all of the senior staff will support the new ED 100%.

What are your plans? Will we see you at ITTO in the future?

I have so many plans I can't summarize them all here. I have been away from my country for over 20 years and during that time there have been remarkable developments there, I really look forward to re-establishing contacts in Brazil. I have a six year old son who is also very happy his father's coming home!

Regarding seeing me at ITTO, I'm not sure. Given the discussions on frequency and duration of Council Sessions that will take place at the November ITTC session, I may make an effort to attend the May Session in Ghana just in case that is the last of ITTO's iconic 'outside' Council Sessions. My eventual attendance of any future Sessions will be as an observer and friend of ITTO.

Any final comments?

I'd like to thank a group of people whose role in the Organization might sometimes be taken for granted but cannot be over-stated. The Secretariat is small by most intergovernmental standards, but it must be ranked as one of the most efficient on the planet. Not only is it blessed with talented individuals, it is also dedicated to the Organization. Council delegates see how hard the Secretariat works during Council sessions, but many of its staff work even harder between sessions. To them all, I give a special thank you. When I leave Yokohama in a few weeks' time, I will leave behind many friends and valued colleagues.

It is my respect and high regard for the people in the Secretariat that moves me to nominate what might seem a relatively minor reform in the Organization as one of my proudest achievements as Executive Director. That is my work with the Council to remove the unfairness in the Secretariat's Pension Fund by extending its benefits to Japanese staff members, along with my decision to modernize the management and investments of the overall Pension Fund. This has, I believe, greatly increased the welfare of a very dedicated group of people.

I rate this achievement so highly because for the long-term health of the Organization it is essential to look after the people who tend it on a daily basis. I hope that ITTO stands for decades to come and becomes even more effective in its work. With the new ITTA set to come into force and the welfare of the Secretariat safeguarded, I have great faith that it will.