

Interview with Alhassan Attah

Alhassan Attah has served ITTO in several capacities, including as a delegate of Ghana, chair of the Committee on Economic Information and Market Intelligence, a member of the Expert Panel on Project Appraisal, and chair of Working Group I in the negotiation of the International Tropical Timber Agreement [ITTA] 2006. He was chair of the International Tropical Timber Council in 2005



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

What were the major challenges the Council dealt with during your term as Council chair?

There were a number of issues. We had embarked on a process to negotiate a successor agreement to the ITTA 1994, so the potential for a polarized membership was quite strong, and I thought that keeping members of the Organization together was critical. An issue also arose in which two countries, Mexico and Papua New Guinea, both offered to host the 40th session of the Council in 2006. Negotiating a compromise between those two member states was one of the challenges I faced. They were both producers, but we could not quite reach an agreement in the session in Congo (Brazzaville), so as chair of the Council I was tasked with resolving it. It was an issue that had the potential to polarize the Organization, particularly among the producer group in keeping a united front in the negotiation of the successor agreement.

There was also considerable discussion at both Council sessions in 2005 on phased approaches to certification. This concept had met significant resistance from key forest certification bodies but, in hindsight, it has become a flagship approach, particularly when one considers that a number of those certification bodies have now adopted a phased approach.

Describe the atmosphere in the Council at that time.

Negotiations over the Mexico/Papua New Guinea impasse were somewhat tense—but even so, there was plenty of goodwill on both sides. One of the key aspects of my term was a strong willingness on all sides to compromise and to reach decisions that were acceptable to all, and of course I appreciated the support of the member states and everybody involved in doing this. Overall, I would say that

the atmosphere was very collaborative. It allowed us to prepare for the negotiation of the ITTA 2006, and I would say that the collaborative approach taken by member states was instrumental in reaching an agreement on that. There was movement on both the consumer and producer sides. Much was happening in the international landscape at the time, including a major debate on the role of forests in climate change that was highly polarized. This had an impact on what we were doing at ITTO, so to reach compromises and to succeed in bringing some of the non-consumptive aspects of forests [such as environmental services, and the role of indigenous and local communities in achieving sustainable forest management—SFM] into the ITTA was a big achievement of the parties. It was encouraging to see countries make these compromises.

What were the impacts of the Council's achievements during your term as chair?

The Council's work on the phased approach to certification has had a significant impact. It gave member states an opportunity to discuss legality as a first step in the certification process, and in my view this later gave grounds for the approach that is presently being adopted by the European Union [EU] and partner countries as the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade/Voluntary Partnership Agreement (EU FLEGT/VPA) process. So it appears that ITTO's work on phased approaches provided the foundation both for the EU as a key importer, and partners in producer countries, to look at approaches other than certification systems that were acceptable in the trade. The EU FLEGT/VPA process is, in my view, a phased approach because you look first at legality—how strong are the systems for monitoring the forest and providing evidence of legality—but drawing strongly on some of the

social elements with the view to providing a platform in which member countries can later move more towards the ultimate, which is SFM certification.

I would say that ITTO's work on phased approaches allowed a discussion on alternative approaches to certification and therefore did not exclude producers from the markets. So, to me, this was an important outcome of the Council's deliberations and the strong support it gave to phased approaches to forest certification. Over time, it also allowed certification bodies to consider other models and to introduce variants of the schemes—so now you have chain-of-custody certification and forest certification. Today you can find firms in the tropics who do not have SFM certification but who still pursue and obtain chain-of-custody certification.

In terms of the more general impacts of the Council, its policy development work—such as its various guidelines and criteria and indicators—has been very strong, and this has been important in demonstrating to the world that a major effort is underway to improve tropical forest management. The publication of the *Status of Tropical Forest Management* reports has created awareness of member countries' efforts on SFM.

The ITTO Fellowship Programme is another very strong aspect of its work. Many people in member countries, including me, have benefited from ITTO Fellowships, and you can see tangible benefits on the ground in member countries. Many people in very senior positions today—particularly in tropical timber producer countries—have benefited in the past from ITTO Fellowships. So a lot of the policy changes that are occurring now in member countries is because of the capacity that has been built up through this process and the Freezailah Fellowship Fund. The Fellowship Programme has also promoted the sharing of experiences and is presently creating a network of ITTO Fellowship alumni.

Sharing the lessons learned from the many ITTO projects, such as through the webpage and the *TFU*, is helping to inform people and to keep ITTO and tropical timber visible in people's minds. More than 400 million dollars has been spent on ITTO projects and policy work, so clearly a lot of effort has been made, and this is visible when you go to member countries. The fact that the Council sessions were hosted in the various producer member countries in the past has given a lot of visibility to the Organization's work, and it has helped engage stakeholders and enabled the greater sharing of experiences; it has helped build a kind of family within the tropical forest community. This is one of the strengths; it creates opportunities for strong networks for sharing knowledge on tropical forests. ITTO does studies that inform its policy work, and this in turn has informed the policy work of member countries. So clearly I would say it has made a big impact.



Good governance: Alhassan Attah thinks ITTO's Thematic Programme on Tropical Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade should be scaled up. *Photo: Bosques Sociedad y Desarrollo*

What are the Council's major strengths?

The two groups, producers and consumers, have equal voting power, which inevitably leads to consensus decisions. You could say this is a weakness but it's also a strength, because it means that to make any sort of progress, both sides have to agree. Also, no country feels weak because it does not carry a large vote. Each issue might involve a time-consuming discussion; despite the divide of producers and consumers, however, the Council has almost always managed to come up with some level of compromise that has moved debate forward. That is one of the strengths, because if you cannot find consensus there will be winners and losers, and when that happens it can really polarize an organization. So I think, looking back, the Council's ability to compromise and to reach decisions by consensus has been one of its key strengths.

Another strength has been the Council's willingness to encourage collaboration with other organizations, such as the United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat, the role ITTO plays in the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, and the memoranda of understanding with the Convention on Biological Diversity and other organizations. Clearly, the Council has shown leadership in reaching out to other organizations, engaging with them, and drawing out the synergies. This has been a key strength.

The Council's policy work—reflected in the various guidelines, the criteria and indicators, and others—is another key strength, and this has been complemented by its ability to take forward policies by providing support for their implementation through projects.

The Council has also generated important information through its statistics on the tropical timber trade and market information. This work has generated considerable knowledge, which of course accrues to the member countries and the forest sector. For some countries, the



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

cost of generating this information in isolation would be too high, and the ITTO process allows us to do this collaboratively and cost-effectively. If you read the various trade journals you see extensive quotes from ITTO's Market Information Service. Also, the Council's willingness to harmonize its reporting requirements with those of other intergovernmental agencies, such as FAO, has been important. Lastly, the training in project formulation provided by ITTO has not only benefited ITTO, it has helped member countries engage in other processes in the forest sector, such as REDD+, and helped provide member states with the capacity to design and develop projects.

What are its weaknesses?

The main weakness of the Council has to do with financing. First, there has been a general decline in the level of funding for projects in the Organization. Additionally, some member countries have defaulted on their contributions, and this has caused difficulties for the Organization. This, for me, is the Council's main weakness.

What do you see as the future role of the Organization?

It still has an important role to play, and the ITTO Strategic Action Plan 2013–2018 sets the direction. Perhaps the key area for the Council, which is coming out strongly now and which is highlighted in the Strategic Action Plan, has to do with forest law enforcement, governance and trade. The Council should strongly engage member states in improving forest governance in their countries. With improved forest governance you will get better forest practice and you can make better progress towards SFM. Communities in forest areas will benefit, governments will optimize forest revenues, and the forest sector will contribute more to the economy and in that respect also give more visibility to forestry. ITTO's Thematic Programme on Tropical Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade could be scaled up to ensure there is strong engagement by the member states and sufficient funding to support the work. Timber legality is a key issue in the markets now. The EU Timber Regulation and similar regulations in other countries require that only timber from legal sources is traded. I think the Council should focus on this issue—by developing policy, providing

financial support and encouraging member states to improve forest governance.

The Council could also help promote trade in domestic markets. Most tropical timber producer countries have focused on exports, to the neglect of their domestic or regional trade. A number of tropical timber producer countries have fast-growing economies, and therefore the demand for wood in those countries is growing. As a result of their focus on the export trade, however, domestic markets have been neglected, and the informal sector is filling that gap. The informal sector tends not to be compliant with rules and regulations that promote sustainability, and therefore all the good work that has been done in terms of managing the forest could be undone. So, clearly, developing domestic markets in producer countries could be helpful.

ITTO should also continue to work to its strength in forest-sector statistics and market information—it should further strengthen this aspect of its work.



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

Building capacities and human resources in member states is an area that ITTO should continue to strengthen moving forward because in this way you can really have an impact on the ground. The Council should continue to develop capacity in forest management, and it should also make a considerable effort to strengthen capacity in further processing in those countries where processing lags behind. Many tropical timber producers continue to export primary products, including to emerging markets. But a lack of capacity in further processing is a gap that has been there for all these years, and because our focus has been on the forests, we have perhaps neglected markets and industry. Moving forward, these are areas we should look at.

Lastly, the Council should address the funding issue. It should work on a few key priority areas where it has particular strengths. This will help ensure that the membership has a continuing interest in participating and contributing.