

Interview with Katharina Kühmayer

Katharina Kühmayer attended her first Council session in 2002. She was Austria's chief negotiator for the International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA) 2006, and she was elected vice-chair of the Council in 2007 and chair in 2008



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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

There were two major issues. An overarching one was the entry into force of the ITTA 2006, which, as chair, I urged member states to ratify as soon as possible. The other major challenge was finding a solution to the issue of the frequency and venue of future Council meetings. I was the first chair to preside over a new regime in which the Council changed from two sessions per year, rotating between a spring session in a producer country and the November session at headquarters, to a single session per year.

Of course, the way in which Council went about things had to be adapted to this new regime. We had a meeting in Accra, Ghana, in June, which I chaired; this was an informal meeting, but nevertheless it was important because we were in this transitional stage to the new regime. Because it was informal, the fear was that member states would perhaps forget what positions, conclusions and agreements had been taken there. So it was my task to remind people at the Council session in November 2008 that there had been agreement in Accra and that we were not in a position to renegotiate everything. And the Accra meeting was important because the thematic programmes had been generally supported, the idea of a pilot phase of the thematic programmes had been endorsed, the functioning of the committees had been discussed and reviewed, and the main issue, on the frequency and venues of future sessions, had been thoroughly examined.

Describe the atmosphere in the Council at that time.

There was some tension and sensitivity, because nobody really knew how the Accra meeting would be perceived.

We had to deal with the change from two Council sessions per year to one, and there was a lot of scepticism. Would it work? Would we have enough time? Would enough delegations attend the Accra meeting and accept the new system? It was sensitive; one could feel it. But nevertheless and foremost, as at all Council meetings I have attended, there was good collaboration, and we all had a spirit of compromise to reach our common goals.

Describe the major achievements of the Council under your leadership.

The most important achievement was to agree on the approach for one Council session per year, with alternation between a producer country and headquarters. It was under my chairship that we found this agreement and paved the way for the new system, which has now been in progress for some time. We also approved the Biennial Work Programme and the thematic programmes pilot phase, so there were a lot of important decisions.

I'm not a forester, I'm a lawyer, so I was always most involved in the organizational, operational and financial issues of the Council, and generally I left the forest issues for those who are experts in that field. However, in this period the Council was very much focused on these organizational discussions because we had to find a way to a financially sustainable future for the Organization. We didn't know whether the thematic programmes would succeed. We had indications from some member states that they strongly supported the idea, but we didn't know if others would accept it, so in that sense I think it was an achievement to establish the thematic programmes. Looking back now from 2014, I wish we had had more time to focus on the core forest issues at the Council. On the



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other hand, it was absolutely necessary to deal with those operational and financial issues, so we did what we needed to do.

What are the Council's major strengths?

The members and the Secretariat are its great strengths; it's all about the people who are devoted to the Organization, who are devoted to forest issues, to climate issues, to developing-country issues, who are involved in timber trade. ITTO has more members than ever—69, which shows the strength of the ITTA. It's still the sole international legally binding instrument in the forest sector, and that really makes it a different species from other organizations. The Council always works in a collaborative spirit, taking nearly all its decisions unanimously, and it's got a family feeling about it. It's a good atmosphere, really; people have become friends and are part of a family. Also, the Council has a good mixture of policy work and project work, which takes the work to the ground level. It's very special.

What are its weaknesses?

Nobody is perfect, right? Wherever people are involved there are weaknesses, and the Council is constituted of people. I would prefer not to talk about weaknesses, but I would like to make an appeal and give one piece of advice. The appeal would be to member states in general—and some in particular—to really seize the opportunity of being part of this very special forum by making themselves heard, to raise their voices and to say what is important to them and to highlight the problems they want the Council to address. This is a forum where you need to raise your voice. I would encourage member states to take full advantage of that great possibility.

My advice to future chairs would be to do justice to the Council agenda. Sometimes one could get the impression that the work being done in the margins of the Council is taking more and more time and the Council itself has less and less time. There are so many subgroups, and friends-of-whomever groups, and I would hope that the Council can deal more with the core issues and have sufficient time to discuss the big issues in the plenary.

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

For the future it will be important to make good use of the time in Council sessions and to focus to the greatest extent possible on core matters—to do what the ITTA intends us to do. Take the Annual Market Discussion, for example. This is so important, but sometimes it is virtually squeezed into a lunch time. A balance needs to be found between financial issues, policy work and impact on the ground. The Council and its members should take full advantage of the tools provided by the ITTA to deal with the issues around sustainable forest management and a sustainable trade and to not be distracted by internal issues. If they do that, I look forward to a bright future for the Organization, and to another 50 Council sessions.