

Interview with Michael Maue

Ambassador Michael Maue was part of the diplomatic corps of the Embassy of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in Belgium in the early 1980s dealing with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, including the first negotiation for an International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA). He served as the chair of the International Tropical Timber Council in 2009



Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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

During a Council session it is difficult to predict which topics will become controversial. Some of the issues we dealt with in 2009 were the approval of the Biennial Work Programme; accession of countries to the ITTA 2006; and the rotation of Council meetings between headquarters and producer member countries, an issue which took long hours of negotiation to resolve. Another important issue the Council dealt with was the focus of climate-change negotiations on forests as mitigation and adaptation options.

Describe the atmosphere of the Council at that time.

It's natural for delegations to put up their views during the discussions, and this can create controversy. Nonetheless, members are capable of talking over those issues informally in their hotels or during the coffee breaks. I think this is the regular *modus operandi* of delegates and it is how they always seemed able to come up with solutions. There will always be controversial issues between consumers and producers, but there has also always been collaboration, too. In the process there is tension, of course, but the negotiation does happen.

In the case of the Biennial Work Programme there was some controversy because members on both sides wanted to see that approved activities were funded, but at the end it is the relationships that develop between delegations that make it possible to arrive at decisions.

What were impacts of these achievements?

During my tenure, the major achievements were the adoption of the Biennial Work Programme 2010–2011 and the financing of several activities contained in it. It was a unique exercise due to the transition to the new ITTA, which gave rise to certain unique considerations.

The other major issue was the ratification of the ITTA 2006. Each member country has its own procedures and timing for ratification, so even though it was not possible to come to any decision or resolution on the matter, very compelling messages came from the Council and its members. It was clear that the threshold for the entry into force of the ITTA 2006 would soon be met.

The discussion on the hosting of Council sessions outside headquarters had a very big impact. It is in the interests of producer members to show consumers and donors how their generous contributions are working on the ground. During my tenure as chair, there was a lot of debate around the upcoming session in Guatemala and particularly the cost of hosting sessions outside Japan. I think this debate had a great impact on the *modus operandi* of the Organization. By itself, the concept of rotation has value, but now producer members also have to make budgetary commitments to host Council sessions and contribute financially to the work of the Organization.

What are the Council's major strengths?

The Council counts on the support of a well-qualified and well-resourced Secretariat to implement its decisions. The fact that ITTO has a Biennial Work Programme is a distinctive advantage that is not common in other international organizations; it guides the work of both the Council and the Secretariat.



In focus: A family poses next to teak seedlings in central Papua New Guinea. Ambassador Maue thinks the Council should focus more on its project programme. *Photo: H.O. Ma/ITTO*

Collaboration with other relevant organizations— such as FAO and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—is also an important strength of the Council; this allows and enhances the implementation of key activities. I believe it is important to continue such collaborative work because at the end of the day we live in a global village.

What are its weaknesses?

The main weakness of the Council is that it deals with too many issues, and during Council sessions these issues often require full days of discussions; prioritization may help us manage these debates. This is especially true for delegations that have only one or two delegates. Such delegations want to know what is happening and to exchange views, but when too many things are happening at the same time, it becomes a big challenge.

Another weakness is the small amount of time dedicated to reporting on the implementation of projects during Council sessions (which has been done in the interests of time). I believe more attention should be given to this because the project programme represents the way in which ITTO is investing its money. Donors want to know how their funds are being applied, and producer members are interested in developments in their fellow countries. In the end, this is what we want to achieve—international cooperation among the producers and consumers.

Finally, countries become members because of their interest in tropical timber. It's important that recruitment to the ITTO Secretariat reflects a regional balance of representation without compromising quality, experience and expertise. This balance is difficult to achieve when the staff is so small, but continued efforts should be made in that direction.

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

Let me say first that I am not a forester but a diplomat. Nevertheless, in my view the Council should place great emphasis on the conservation of forest resources and the contribution of tropical forests to the global environment. We all live on this one small planet, and deforestation can have impacts anywhere. In my own country, PNG, we are now experiencing sea-level rise, while other parts of the world are being affected by unpredictable weather. Therefore, the Council should secure funding and resources to collaborate with other relevant UN bodies, because climate change is already affecting every country, and in my view this is very relevant to the role of the Council.