

# Interview with Makoto Sekiyama

**Makoto Sekiyama is Director General for Foreign Affairs at the City of Yokohama, the host of ITTO headquarters. Mr Sekiyama has been in charge of ITTO-related matters on behalf of the City for seven years**



Photo: R. Carrillo/ITTO

## Looking back to the mid-1980s, why did Yokohama offer to host the newly created International Tropical Timber Organization?

The port of Yokohama is well known as Japan's gateway to the world. After opening in the 1850s it became an important destination, first for traders from the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western countries and later for merchants from China and India. It can be said that Yokohama was the city that started Japan's international business, and such an idea is still strong in the minds of our citizens.

In the mid-1980s, the City of Yokohama was aiming to build a dynamic international city, and efforts to add more value to it were visible in the building of international conference facilities in the new Minato Mirai district and the promotion of a good living environment for foreigners. At the same time, a new international organization [ITTO] was born with the mission of promoting the proper and effective conservation and development of tropical forests. This was an ideal that was very much in line with the city's vision, which was to be not only a hub of business and economic activity but also a contributor to the global environment. This was the motivation for Yokohama in hosting the ITTO headquarters.

## How has Yokohama benefited from hosting ITTO over the last nearly 30 years, and vice versa?

Hosting ITTO had a great deal of influence on the city's success in attracting offices of other international organizations in the 1990s, such as the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. This has added value to the city, just as the authorities had envisioned.

As you know, many participants come to the sessions of the International Tropical Timber Council and stay in Yokohama, and we hope that those visitors leave with a good impression of the city and encourage other people to visit it. The development of Minato Mirai had only just begun when ITTO arrived in Yokohama in 1986; now it is a landmark in Japan's national capital region. The city is proud to always mention ITTO in its public relations activities, and this effort paid off with the hosting of two major international conferences in 1994, soon after ITTO moved to Minato Mirai (in 1991): one of these was the tenth International AIDS Conference, and the other was the United Nations Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction. More recently, we hosted the fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development [TICAD IV] in 2008, the Economic Leaders' Meeting of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation [APEC] in 2010, and TICAD V in 2013, just to mention a few. It can be said that, thanks to this effort, more than 160 000 visitors have come to Yokohama to attend international conferences. This showcases our city around the world and gives pride to our citizens.

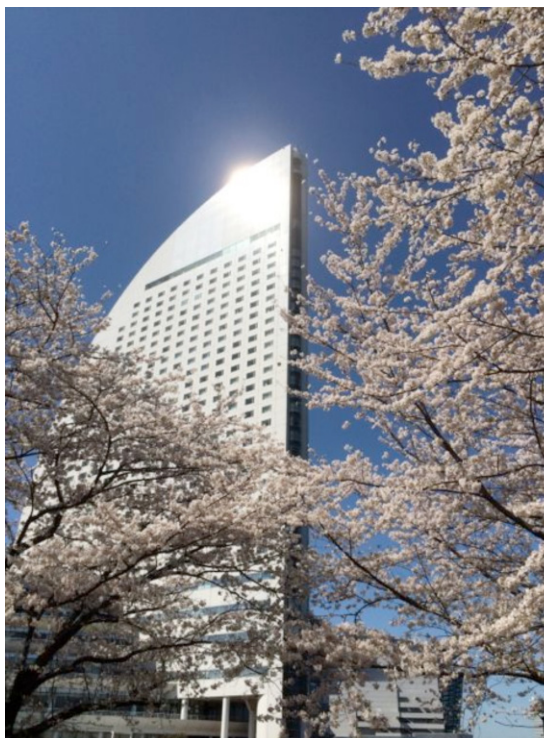
As for the benefits for ITTO, Yokohama takes pride in being a patron of ITTO and believes that the city is not only a sponsor but also a true stakeholder. We believe that hosting an organization that tackles the global issues around protecting and sustainably managing tropical forests is fully compatible with the vision of the city and its citizens.

In addition, I think there are benefits for ITTO in terms of reducing the operational costs of the headquarters for members because the city bears some of them, including the cost of hosting the sessions of the Council when they are held in Yokohama.

## How do you perceive the future role of ITTO?

Recently there has been a lot of talk about climate change and global warming. We know that ITTO's objective is the sustainable management of tropical forests, and even though it may not be evident at first, tropical forests have an important role to play in preventing, combating and mitigating the effects of climate change and global warming; indeed, forest conservation may be a key to solving the problem of climate change because of their capacity to act as carbon reservoirs. ITTO can speak out about this, and it can also empower people to conserve and sustainably manage tropical forests.

I can't help but wonder whether it is because of climate change that we lost so many lives during the recent landslide disasters caused by heavy rain in Japan this year. Therefore, I think that playing a role in protecting tropical forests and promoting sustainable forest management should be the focus of the future work of ITTO.



**HQ:** The Pacifico-Yokohama building in Minato-Mirai, Yokohama. Among other things, the Pacifico-Yokohama houses ITTO's headquarters.  
*Photo: R. Carrillo/ITTO*



**Minato Mirai:** The development of this district coincided with ITTO's creation and growth *Photo: Earth Negotiations Bulletin*

## How do you see the relationship between ITTO and the citizens of Yokohama developing in the future?

I recall clearly the international Children's Environmental Education Conference held in 2009, jointly convened by ITTO, the City of Yokohama and the Government of Japan, at which students not only from Yokohama but also from other parts of the world got together to learn about tropical forests. I think such events can have a great impact on the next generation, which will carry on the work of solving the problems of today. I hope ITTO continues educating future generations of Yokohama citizens, as well as of other countries and cities, and inspires them with knowledge of what they can do to conserve the global environment.

ITTO has always been involved in such educational activities in the city by giving lectures and inviting children to know more about its work, and I hope such activities will continue.