

The second part of a United Nations negotiating conference made progress on—but didn't conclude—a successor to the International Tropical Timber Agreement, 1994

THE UNITED NATIONS Conference for the Negotiation of a Successor Agreement to the International Tropical Timber Agreement, 1994 (ITTA, 1994), Second Part, was convened at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, on 14–18 February 2005. It was attended by over 180 representatives of governments and organisations.

Despite a renewed call against procrastination made by the President of the Conference, H.E. Ambassador Paraños, delegates were generally aware of the time-line for the negotiating process, with many preferring to play a waiting game, particularly with respect to the core issues of finance, scope and organisational matters. A few delegations ventured to make their first crack at the financial issues with some imaginative and radical proposals. Considerable time was spent on 'ventilating' these proposals but the overall response was cautious, exploratory and non-committal. The Conference made progress in cleaning up the draft text of the successor agreement through two working groups and several contact groups, albeit on matters considered less contentious, including the preamble.

Objectives

Delegates devoted considerable attention to the formulation of 'overarching' objectives, although there was no agreement on whether these would eventually be included in the new agreement. The ITTA, 1994 contains 13 specific objectives but no overarching objectives. Of these 13, many have been reformulated in the proposed new agreement. Examples of draft specific objectives that are mostly unbracketed (and therefore—in principle—agreed) are:

Developing and contributing towards mechanisms for the provision of new and additional financial resources and expertise needed to enhance the capacity of producer members to attain the objectives of this Agreement;

Improving marketing and distribution of tropical timber [and tropical forest products] [and timber products] exports from sustainably managed and legally harvested sources, including promoting consumer awareness [and encouraging information sharing on private voluntary market-based mechanisms];

Promoting better understanding of the contribution of non-timber forest products and ecological services to the sustainable management of tropical forests and cooperating with relevant institutions and processes to this end;

Encouraging members to recognize the role of forest-dependent indigenous [peoples] and local communities in achieving sustainable forest management and develop strategies to enhance the capacity of these communities to sustainably manage tropical timber producing forests; and

Identifying and addressing relevant new and emerging issues.

Draft specific objectives that remain completely bracketed are:

[Strengthening the capacity of members to [address illegal logging and related trade in tropical timber, including through] improve forest law enforcement and governance [and exchanging statistical data on trade];]

[Promoting the certification of tropical timber producing forests;].

Financial accounts

The issues of assessed financial contributions (for the administrative budget) and the distribution of votes proved to be sources of contention at the Conference, with the tabling of a number of new proposals throughout the week. While these proposals generated plenty of discussion, agreement proved elusive.

A proposal tabled by the USA to change the ratio of the distribution of votes and, correspondingly, assessed contributions from 50:50 to 60:40 for the consumer and producer groups respectively took many delegates by surprise. In fact, it challenged one of the key elements of many commodity agreements, which is the equal voting power of the producer and consumer groups. This proposal was ultimately counterbalanced with a proposal from the producer group, which called for an 80:20 ratio for assessed contributions while maintaining the 50:50 distribution of votes.

The issue of voluntary funding for projects is also unresolved; for some producers, project funding is a key reason for engagement in ITTO's work. However, the producer proposal to increase voluntary contributions to 20 times the level of administrative-account funding was perceived by many consumer members to be unrealistic.

Another issue where compromise proved elusive was on the obligation of members to submit timber statistics. The producer group called for the deletion of a paragraph on measures that could be taken by Council in case of the non-submission of such statistics by members, arguing that it went against the cooperative spirit of the article and the Agreement. One consumer member said the penalty for data non-submission was not overly severe compared to other international organisations that also require members to submit data.

This Second Part of the Conference was useful in zeroing in on core issues, but delegations and the Conference bureau will have to redouble their efforts to address such issues and achieve a break-through at the next meeting. A third round of negotiations will take place on 27 June–1 July 2005.

Compiled by the ITTO Secretariat, drawing on the summary written by the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (<http://www.iisd.ca/vol24/enb2457e.html>)