Preparations for First Forest Forum

The organisational session of the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) met in New York on 12 February 2001, to develop the Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPOW) in advance of the first UNFF meeting in June 2001. The aim of the Meeting was to set the framework for the discussions to be held in June. Items on the agenda included the election of the UNFF Bureau, organisational matters, consideration of all options and proposals for the location of the UNFF secretariat, and progress towards the establishment of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF).

The supporting CPF would focus more on implementation of the Programme of Action (POA) as proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF).

The one-day organisational session was followed by four days of informal consultations, from 13-16 February, which dealt with the UNFF’s multi-year programme of work.

Background

On 18 October 2000, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted resolution E/2000/L.32, outlining an international arrangement on forests and establishing the UNFF as a subsidiary body of ECOSOC (see Environmental Policy & Law, Vol. 30, No. 6 at page 274), with the goal of promoting internationally agreed actions on forests at the national, regional and global levels.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Forests preceded the UNFF secretariat, and progress towards the establishment of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). The supporting CPF would focus more on implementation of the Programme of Action (POA) as proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF).

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Organisational Session

UNFF Bureau: The session elected the Bureau and agreed to the duration of Bureau membership. Ambassador Mubarak Hussein Rahimtalla (Sudan) was elected UNFF Chair. Ambassador Shamat Hidayat (Indonesia), Alexey Kormienko (Russian Federation), Gustavo Suarez de Freitas (Peru) and Knut Oistad (Norway) were elected Vice-Chairs. Knut Oistad was also appointed Rapporteur.

The EU called for yearly election of Bureau members; retaining the same Bureau for the first and second years; and rotating chairmanship. The G-77/China supported annual rotation of the Bureau members to allow for equal regional representation during the first five years. These matters were addressed again later, in the course of the informal consultations through bilateral and informal discussions.

On 16 February, delegates adopted a proposal deciding that: 1) Following the closure of a regular session the Forum will hold the first meeting of its subsequent regular session, with the sole purpose of electing the Chair and other Bureau members. 2) The members of the Bureau shall hold office for a term of one year. 3) Provisions of paragraph 5 of ECOSOC resolution 2000/35 (regarding travel expenses) apply only to the substantive part of the Forum’s sessions.

Broad consensus was reached on: the role of the CPF; commitment to implement the Plan of Action, focusing on action, targets, timetables, actors and financial provisions; issues to be addressed in future – use of valuation and criteria and indicators; forestry reporting requirements to be streamlined; the importance of multi-stakeholder dialogue; and raising the profile of forests in the political arena.

However, there was no clear consensus on all elements for the Organisational Session. In particular, the provision for ad hoc expert groups linked to CPF activities; the outcome of the UNFF regarding monitoring and assessment; linking international trade with sound forest management and certification systems; high-level links to Earth Summit 2002; and timing of debate around a Forest Convention.

Secretariat: The most contentious topic during the organisational session was the secretariat’s location. Costa Rica, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and Switzerland had all submitted offers to host the Secretariat. Bilateral negotiations on the topic continued throughout the week to ensure the issue would not go to a vote and thus set a hostile tone for the UNFF at its first meeting. A face-saving compromise was achieved, linking the secretariat’s location with the venues for the UNFF meetings. The UNFF Secretariat will be in New York. The first and fifth substantive session of the UNFF will take place in New York and the three intervening sessions in Switzerland (Geneva) and Costa Rica (San José). Any ministerial segment held between these sessions would take place in San José. The United States delegation noted that the venues were not on a regional basis, and expressed concern that this would inhibit the involvement of local experts.

Earth Summit 2002: The UNFF Secretariat proposed
holding a high-level segment in 2002 in order to gain min-
isters’ endorsement of the POA to prepare a message for
the Rio+10 Summit. Although many delegations approved
this proposal, several others were not supportive. While
Norway supported the proposal, Costa Rica, the US and
New Zealand preferred holding the high-level meeting in
2003 to avoid an already full international agenda in 2002.

Forest Convention: Some delegations supported estab-
lishing a working group on legal arrangements early in
the UNFF programme. Others felt that the discussion con-
cerning a convention should be avoided initially to pre-
vent distracting delegates from more pressing issues.

Collaborative Partnership on Forests: Broad consen-
sus was reached on the role of the CPF. Most delegations
agreed that the CPF should be a high-level partnership,
both informal and of limited size. The FAO proposed that
the CPF be limited to 12 international forest-related or-
ganisations, but relevant international and regional insti-
tutions, non-governmental organisations and the private
sector could also be involved in specific programmes,
expert meetings and consultations.

Informal Consultations
During the informal consultations, delegates addressed
seven aspects of the MYPOW. These related to:
– Facilitation and promotion of implementation.
– Monitoring, assessment and reporting.
– Enhancing cooperation and policy and programme
  coordination.
– Fostering international and cross-sectoral cooperation.
– Fostering a common understanding of sustainable for-
est management and addressing forest policy issues
  and emerging areas.
– Strengthening political commitment.
– Review of UNFF to take place at the fifth substantive
  session.

Summary of Informal Consultations
The Chair noted that the Summary was intended to
facilitate the Secretariat’s drafting of the Secretary-Gen-
eral’s report. Many delegates opposed text stating that
consensus had been reached on many issues, noting that
it was erroneous in the context of a non-negotiating fo-
rum. However, the Chair pointed out that the final Chair’s
summary would not commit anyone to a specific course
of action and invited comments for a revised Chair’s sum-
mary.

At the resumed organisational session on the afternoon
of the final day, it was announced that for the Secretary-
General’s report for UNFF-1, two documents would be
produced, one which addresses the MYPOW and another
which addresses the POA. An informal briefing on the
documents will be organised prior to UNFF-1.

The key message of the Environmental Outlook, is-
issued by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD) is that governments from OECD
countries* need to take action urgently to change their
policies in a number of clearly identifiable areas, in order
to prevent irreversible damage to the environment over
the next 20 years. The Outlook is a pioneering 20-year
projection of OECD environmental problems that identi-
fies realistic priorities for addressing the main challenges.

Using an economy-based vision of developments to
2020, the Study identifies the drivers of environmental
change (the economy, population, globalisation, etc.), the
specific sectors that put the greatest pressure on the envi-
ronment, and the resulting environmental impacts. Based

* Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland,
France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxem-
bourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak
Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.