

New UN Forum on Forests

At its session on 18 October 2000, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established an intergovernmental body called the United Nations Forum on Forests, to promote internationally agreed actions on forests at the national, regional and global levels.

The Council took that action by adopting, without a vote, a draft resolution (document E/2000/L.32) submitted by its President, Makarim Wibisono (Indonesia). The Forum's objectives will be the promotion of management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests and the strengthening of political commitment to that end.

Bagher Asadi (Iran), who had chaired a final round of informal consultations on 18-22 September, introduced the draft text. At the end of a long week, he said, they had succeeded in resolving all difficulties, including the membership of the new body. The document before the Council contained the text of the draft resolution, which had been approved by consensus. Agreement had been reached

on the establishment of the UN Forum on Forests as a subsidiary body of the Council composed of all Member States of the United Nations and of the specialised agencies, with full and equal participation, including voting rights.

He explained that the new body would initially meet annually, for a period of up to two weeks, with a high-level ministerial segment to be held for two to three days. The sessions of the Forum might be held at venues other than UN Headquarters in accordance with established United Nations rules and practices. Bagher Asadi noted that the distributed document contained wording from the draft text approved on 22 September 2000 in informal consultations. Due to the negotiated nature of the text of the draft resolution, the original text as distributed by the Council Secretariat was the valid one.

During discussions on the draft, the representative of France said that he – and the European Union in general – were not in favour of adopting a text that had not been

translated into all official languages. The text did not correspond exactly to the one negotiated during the September informal consultations. He would like to be able to ensure all negotiators that the exact text as originally negotiated would be used.

They were being asked to take a decision on a text which was available in only one official language, he continued. On that point of principle, "if a decision were not taken today, it would lead to new delays in the start-up of the Forum's work." In that regard, he would be willing to make an exception, but would like to note his dissatisfaction with that procedure. It should in no way constitute a precedent.



Courtesy: Radev/Grünstift

The representative of Costa Rica said that it was important for her delegation to have the text in Spanish. However, because of the importance of the issue of forests, she would, exceptionally, not have a problem adopting the text, even though it was not in Spanish.

The representative of Nigeria, speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 developing countries and China, said that he would be in favour of adopting the draft and awaiting the texts to be issued. If there were any variance, he would request an amendment. He too, realised the importance of the issue, and would support the text's adoption.

The Council President said that, with the support of the delegations, the draft would be reissued for technical reasons. It would reflect the document agreed upon by the Council. Following this statement, the Council adopted the text on the establishment of the United Nations Forum on Forests.

The representative of France spoke on behalf of the European Union and associated States in explanation of the position. He said that while the Forum would play an important role in the sustainable development of forests, the creation of a subsidiary body with universal membership set a regrettable precedent, and for that reason the European Union had only reluctantly agreed to the adoption. He hoped the decision would not create a precedent and would remain an exception. Despite the reservations

expressed, his country hoped the work of the new body would be productive.

The representative of Nigeria, speaking on behalf of the G-77/China, said that the process leading to the adoption of the resolution had been difficult. The Group firmly believed that the right decision had been taken when universality of the Forum had been approved. That would allow all States to be represented at the Forum. The delegate also endorsed the view that the location of the venue of the Forum would be decided at the first organisational meeting at the intergovernmental level. The proposals made in the discussions should be taken into consideration. The group of negotiators had been tremendous, he said. They had all contributed to the decision. His delegation was prepared to support all the efforts of the new body.

The representative of Costa Rica agreed with the statement by the representative of Nigeria and said that the results of the negotiations had been produced by the commitment of the coordinator of the discussions. Those negotiations had culminated in the creation of a new structure for consultations.

According to the text, the principal functions of the new body will include promotion of international cooperation on forest-related issues, and implementation of the Intergovernmental Panel/Intergovernmental Forum on Forests proposals and other agreed actions, as well as the mobilisation of financial, technical and scientific resources towards that end; and monitoring and assessment of progress at all levels. The new international arrangement will also strengthen political commitment to the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests through ministerial engagement, liaison with international and regional organisations and instruments, and promotion of action-oriented dialogue and policy. Also by the terms of the resolution, executive heads of relevant organisations of the UN system and other relevant international and regional organisations, institutions and instruments will be invited to form a collaborative partnership on forests to support the work of the Forum and enhance coordination among participants.

The United Nations Forum will work on the basis of a multi-year programme of work, drawing on the elements reflected in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Forest Principles, Agenda 21 and the Intergovernmental Panel (IPF) and Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) proposals. It should maintain close links with the Commission on Sustainable Development. The Council also recommends that the collaborative partnership on forests should build on a high-level informal group, such as the Inter-Agency Task Force on Forests.

The text contains a request to the UN Secretary-General to establish a compact secretariat to assist the Forum to carry out its functions related to the international arrangements on forests. The Council recommends that the General Assembly decide on the funding for the United Nations Forum and its secretariat in accordance with the established budget procedure.

Funding for the new body and its secretariat is to be

provided from the regular budget of the United Nations, within existing resources, resources of organisations participating in the partnership and extrabudgetary resources provided by interested donors. It will also call on interested donor governments, financial institutions and other organisations to make voluntary financial contributions to a trust fund to be established for the United Nations Forum. The programme budget implications of the draft resolution are contained in document E/2000/L.33.

The UN Secretary-General has stated that he considers the current staff resources of the secretariat will eventually need to be strengthened. It is assumed that the compact secretariat would continue to be strengthened through secondments from international and regional organisations and voluntary contributions.

The Forum is the first new subsidiary body of ECOSOC established since the Commission on Sustainable Development was created in 1992. An informal meeting on the Forum will be held from 27 November to 3 December 2000. The Forum will then hold its first organisational

session from 12-16 February 2001, and its first substantive session from 25 June to 6 July 2001. It will meet annually thereafter. Costa Rica has indicated its willingness to host the secretariat, and a decision on its location will be taken at the first organisational meeting.

The Forum will adopt a multi-year programme of work and develop a plan of action during its organisational session. It has been tasked with promoting international cooperation on forest-related issues, implementing earlier proposals from the IPF/IFF, mobilising necessary financial, technical and scientific resources, and monitoring and assessing progress. Within five years the Forum will also consider the prospects for developing a legal framework on all types of forests, including financial provisions. The Forum will consider recommendations made by expert groups on the establishment of mechanisms on finance, technology transfer and trade. It will promote action-oriented dialogue and policy in order to strengthen the management, conservation and sustainable development of forests. (MJ)

