

# COFO 2005: how is it special?

*D.A. Harcharik*

*Honoured guests, record attendance and a full agenda set the stage for an influential event in the world of forestry.*



**Deputy Director-General David Harcharik invited COFO participants to share suggestions for improving FAO's work on forests and forestry**

**David A. Harcharik** is Deputy Director-General of FAO. He was previously Assistant Director-General, Forestry Department.

**I**t is my pleasure to welcome you to this seventeenth session of the Committee on Forestry (COFO). I am especially pleased to see such large attendance. This, I believe, is evidence of the importance you attach to forests and to the work of this committee.

COFO is special this year. Very special. First, because we are honoured and absolutely delighted that the Prime Minister of Finland, His Excellency Mr Matti Vanhanen, has accepted our invitation to participate.

Second, because we have the great and unique privilege to have with us today Nobel Peace Prize laureate Madam Wangari Maathai. She will be formally introduced by the Director-General.

And finally, because COFO this year immediately follows the Third Ministerial Meeting on Forests, which, as you know, took place yesterday. It too was extremely well attended. His Excellency Denis Sassou Nguesso, President of the Republic of the Congo, addressed the opening session, setting the tone for discussions that followed.

Together, the Ministerial Meeting and COFO offer an exceptional opportunity to advance the international dialogue on forests, but perhaps more importantly, to provide real substance for action plans and programmes for the sustainable management of trees and forests in all countries of the world, especially those afflicted by poverty and food insecurity.

You have a very full agenda. This is not surprising for a committee of senior forestry officials and experts that meets only once every two years. Besides discussions in plenary, you can choose

among twenty side events to attend, on topics such as forest law compliance, forests and climate change, invasive species, and the links between forested areas and violent conflict.

Over the course of the week, you will have an opportunity to consider a number of major issues. In the interest of time, I will highlight only a few. One relates to the tragic earthquake and tsunami which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in countries in the Indian Ocean. In addition to the loss of life, the tsunami is also having devastating consequences on the livelihoods of millions of people, particularly in the agriculture and fisheries sectors. However, the forestry sector too is affected, as many coastal forests have been damaged, and many forest workers have lost their livelihoods. FAO has responded by sending additional advisers to the region to help assess the overall impact on the forestry sector and to assist countries with rehabilitation efforts. Last week, for example, our regional office in Bangkok brought together some 50 representatives from affected countries, international organizations and NGOs to examine ways to better coordinate rehabilitation efforts related to forestry. We are now reviewing a suggestion to establish a regional partnership that would facilitate an integrated approach to coastal area management and livelihoods.

## **MOVING COMMITMENTS INTO ACTION**

At the Ministerial Meeting yesterday, ministers renewed their commitment to achieve the Millennium Development

Goals. At this COFO session you will seek ways to put this commitment into action. We foresters know that forests, and trees outside forests, contribute importantly to the eradication of poverty and hunger and to environmental sustainability. What may be obvious to us, however, is not always clear to others. Our challenge, as I see it, is to increase awareness of these contributions and to convince higher authorities to include forestry in national development goals. So far, this is not happening to any great extent, and surely the time has come to question why. What more should we be doing? Why is it that reference to forestry is absent in poverty reduction strategy papers? And why is it that poverty alleviation is rarely mentioned in national forest programmes? I hope that you will give serious consideration to these questions.

Forests also contribute to the MDGs in more indirect ways. Sustainable forest management, for example, can provide a more secure source of fuelwood, thus allowing women and children to spend less time collecting it. The hours saved allow mothers to engage in activities that can generate income and increase the chances of children attending school.

Forests also provide natural medicines and a supplementary source of food, especially during lean seasons, and thus help to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health.

I mention these few examples to make a point. The Millennium Development Goals remind us that social and economic development crosses all sectors. It includes human rights, health, education, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and the environment, among other dimensions. There is, thus, a clear and strong case for working in partnership across sectors. FAO has established and led many partnerships, and we have participated in many more. But there is a need to constantly strive to make partnerships stronger and more effective, to find more innovative ways to partner, and to identify areas of potential future collaboration. It was precisely for these reasons that Mr El-Lakany met with civil society groups this past Sunday. And I am delighted to welcome so many of our NGO colleagues to this COFO session.

It is also heartening to see members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests with us this week. They will have a major role in the side events I

mentioned earlier. As you know, FAO contributes significantly to the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and to the global forest dialogue within the United Nations and in other fora. We are committed to continuing and strengthening this support.

In addition to these international efforts to reinforce national implementation of sustainable forest management, there are many examples of effective regional cooperation. Sometimes it is easier for a smaller group of countries to identify common issues and to pool their collective capacity to implement solutions. This week, the chairpersons of FAO's six regional forestry commissions will report on the collective activities and accomplishments of countries within their regions.

The second item that ministers addressed yesterday was how to enhance international cooperation on forest fire, most of which is caused by human activity. Uncontrolled fires burn hundreds of millions of hectares of forest every year; they take lives, destroy property and can devastate economies. Wildfires are especially devastating to poor people because the forest resources on which they depend may suffer irreparable damage, leaving them more destitute than ever. COFO can and should take action to mitigate such disasters, and we look forward to hearing your views on how we can improve fire management, notably in the areas of prevention, preparedness and control.



*The direct contribution of forests and trees outside forests to the eradication of poverty and hunger and to environmental sustainability are well known to foresters, but need to be advocated to others*



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*Sustainable forestry also contributes indirectly to many Millennium Development Goals, for example by providing a more secure source of fuelwood, thus allowing women and children to spend less time collecting it, increasing the chances that children can attend school*

#### GUIDING FAO'S WORK

Another item on your agenda is the shaping of an action programme of work for FAO in forestry. As we strive to maintain a comprehensive programme that responds to the many needs of member countries, we again seek your advice on priorities. In particular, you will have the opportunity to advise us on four key areas: forests and bioenergy; forestry sector outlook studies; monitoring, assessment and reporting on forests; and support to the international arrangement on forests.

In real terms, the budget of the Forestry Department is significantly smaller than it was ten years ago. Other departments have suffered the same fate – a situation that makes the setting of priorities paramount. Therefore, your views on the essential activities of our forestry programme over the next two years, and in the medium term, will assist us in making some difficult decisions, knowing that we will not be able to meet all expectations.

We will also inform you this week of the outcomes of the XII World Forestry Congress hosted by Canada in Quebec City in September 2003, and we will hear presentations from countries that have indicated their interest in hosting the next World Forestry Congress.

Before closing, I would like to men-

tion a few examples of how we assist countries to address their needs for forest information, technical support and policy advice. Through the Global Forest Resources Assessment, we compile global data on forest resources, but we are also working with countries to help strengthen their capacity to assess themselves their national data sets. Similarly, through the National Forest Programme Facility, we are collaborating with nearly 40 countries on their forest policy and planning processes.

The information issue, though, presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, the capacity to produce and access information, and to monitor, assess and report on sustainable forest management is weak in many countries, and this hinders decision-making. On the other hand, technology today produces information in abundance, to the point where it can overload us if not managed properly. Over the years FAO has produced information on nearly every facet of forests and forestry, and information continues to be a major component of our programme of work. As you consider our work programme, it would be most helpful to us to have your views on how our information could be better packaged to meet your needs.

#### CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude where I started. This COFO is special, and in many respects, unique, because of the large number and high level of participants. In addition, the agenda is absolutely packed with timely and important issues. There should be something here of interest to everyone, so I hope that each of you takes home some new ideas and information of relevance to your own work. In addition, I ask you to share your suggestions freely as to how to improve FAO's work on forests and forestry and how we can serve your needs better. I can assure you that we welcome and value your advice, and we do our best to follow it.

Once again, a very warm welcome to you all. Thank you for your attention. ♦