



## Reflections from the XIV World Forestry Congress

Held only every six years, this largest gathering of forestry expertise is looked upon from around the world to see what has changed, is changing, should change... The website proudly stated that “The XIV World Forestry Congress (WFC) aims to build a new vision – a new way of thinking and acting – for the future of forests and forestry in sustainable development at all levels.” However, the vision in the final congress declaration contained no really new perspectives, but rather it reconfirmed the evolving thinking on the role of forests and forestry. “Forests are more than trees”, integrated approaches and engaging/connecting with other sectors and actors are the way forward, and forests are an essential solution to climate change and in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The congress was well organized nonetheless, and offered a large platform, also for people who matter but who are not usually seen in the international arena, to also share their experiences so that others from similar contexts could learn from the successes and improve on their own situations. The crucial role of the youth in sustainable forest management was emphasized, and the congress gave younger people the opportunity to learn. The representation of farm forest producer organizations and the great advances made by community forestry, particularly in the Far East Asian countries and also in South Africa was impressive, and the need to facilitate the formation of an association of tree farmers and their linkage to international tree farmers’ associations became more apparent.

The title ‘Forests and People: Investing in a sustainable future’ gave an indication of the focus, and the event itself reflected this, but the formal, final Durban Declaration made only a passing reference to indigenous peoples and local communities, young people and gender equality. And it certainly did not reflect the concerted and well-organized efforts of those who live in and live off the forest and who made their voices heard. One senior analyst commented “this focus on producer organizations is unprecedented, compared to any previous congress”. Another yet more senior who has attended World Forestry Congress’s since the 1970’s concurred. “I see here a stronger voice of local communities, a stronger voice of the youth, and more emphasis on a multi-sectoral approach”. Though tellingly, he also added “but there is still no participation from these other sectors.”

However, from others in the Tropenbos International (TBI) delegation it was clear from the congress that the forestry sector today is becoming a more multi-disciplinary sector and the acceptance of the need to critically shift attention to coordination, integration and cross-sectoral approaches with shared objectives, to be able to implement policies regarding sustainable forest management. Multi-stakeholder engagement platforms must drive the dialogue with common interests and competing claims, ensuring accountability and transparency. There is a need to recognize and invest in capacity building of local communities, small forest holders, small and medium forest enterprises and effective forest farm associations to be able to engage in meaningful dialogue as partners in pursuit of sustainable forest management. We must work with local communities and not just for them, affording them the needed recognition to be partners in forest management governance





structures. There should be the enabling environment (political will) to adopt and integrate global and regional shared policies and best practices in localizing the sustainable forest management agenda through informed political leadership, inclusive decision making and improved inter-sectoral capacity collaboration. Investment in technology and innovative strategies must be a key priority, including value addition, products, skills and livelihoods development, partnerships and boosting local level income. With fuel wood, there is the need to identify the weak link in the commodity supply chain and strengthen it, and show commitment in transforming it from informal to formal, since the economic viability and environmental sustainability cannot be underestimated.

The issue of tenure security and clarity as a basis for local development and good land stewardship also received much attention, including the need to acknowledge local and customary arrangements as a sound basis, or as an alternative, in building security surrounding the use, control, ownership and management of land and other resources. And here, an issue remained unresolved, however, being what is 'good enough tenure' in specific contexts and specific purposes, as an improvement on 'good tenure' that has remained an ill-defined and rather elusive goal for so many years. It is clear that there is no one-size fits all approach, and formal title, registration or ownership may be possible, but that in practice this does not always mean that the holder has true security, given the overlapping of formal and traditional rights. Increasing attention to the importance of good governance and credible institutions is encouraging, but changing these for the better is something that does not occur quickly. We need to balance between the dilemmas that the problems need urgent solutions, and that the underlying drivers of sustainable changes in common understanding, mindsets, institutional structures and policies always take time. A real challenge is to find the real (political and societal) spaces and key entry points for change, as for these to have real impact, they must be done within a political economy marked by power imbalances, corruption and converging political and economic interests.

Policy implementation is often weak in many developing countries, and this warrants more attention and effort from civil society. Though to optimize the role of forests, forest policy should not be treated in isolation but be seen as part of a whole within coherent and integrated policies for sustainable development. But due to increasing urbanization, the average elected parliamentarian is no longer aware of forestry issues in their respective countries, so there is the need for stronger lobby and advocacy on these. There was a general call to make more people outside the forestry fraternity aware of the value and benefits from the forest, if we are to attract more investment funds into forestry, and "the need to take forestry out of the woods!"

The rather passionate appeal from the long-standing Republic of Congo minister of forests was noted, that in spite of the numerous international meetings on forests, forest governance has still not improved in many countries. He called for a rethinking of the structure of such meetings, and for more funding for forestry activities, especially those related to conservation. It was, however, pointed out that large international meetings on forests only provide frameworks rather than solutions, and that the solutions are to be found at national and local levels, and that "we need courage to admit that all these international agendas take time to mature."

There is a strong link between forestry and many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and, especially goal 11 (sustainable environment), 12 (sustainable consumption and production), 13 (climate change) and 15 (sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystem, desertification and biodiversity conservation). The point was strongly made that sustainable



forests are a cornerstone for economic development, and that forests are the core of natural infrastructure that other sectors need to thrive, for people's livelihoods, and the global ecosystem. In discussing forests and resilience, governments provide guidelines, policies and laws, but civil society, local communities and the private sector, who are more on the ground and in the position to create resilience. Yet, they are often weak and require capacity and institutional strengthening, especially small and medium forest enterprises.

There was also greater attention to the importance of cross-sectoral policies, the need to engage with other sectors and actors beyond the forest sector, to see forests and trees in the context of the larger landscape, and to look at the influence of other sectors on forests not only in terms deforestation and degradation, but also how they can contribute to forest management, restoration and conservation, given their dependencies and impacts on forests. But in practice, this still appears merely rhetorical, as the reality is that most sectors are still going their own way. The congress was a clear example, being dominated by the usual suspects, and hardly any agriculturalists, financing institutions, water and energy actors or other outsiders, and even within the congress there was not a real connection between the larger companies present and the small local producers.

Forestry education should keep up with the changing times. Unfortunately, training of forestry students today is still dominated by older concepts and is in the hands of the old foresters. There is an urgent need to build lecturers' capacity by retraining, and to meet the needs of youth, and to invest in technologically appropriate and innovative education. On considering the crucial need and role of the youth in forestry, opportunities such as internship and support to fresh graduates are commendable, as offered by TBI Ghana for example – but how can such programmes be maintained in the light of the reduced core budgets? Investments could target the following areas among others: science and technology; innovation (especially in product development and efficient utilization), international collaboration; and capacity development especially middle level manpower. That many technical and polytechnic forestry institutions are being converted into universities was strongly condemned.

There was also much emphasis on new and emerging technologies such as (information technologies connecting people and improving access to real time, up to date info; remote sensing, DNA finger printing for tracking and tracing etc., but many of these clearly still need substantial investments and time to build the reference catalogues and to become operationally mainstream.

A special focus on wood energy was a highlight of this congress, and this was noted by all members of the delegation. Although the comment from a Scandinavian minister was cited, that solar panels would replace the need for wood fuel in 20 years, the general opinion was that it will remain the principal energy source for a large section of humanity well into the future. But many questions were posed and views diverged, regarding trends for industrial uses and demands, and whether future use/misuse accelerates deforestation and degradation, including biodiversity. Similar questions were asked of a new bio-based economy, holding promise but also risk, by increasing competition for the same resources for alternative uses. This is a crucial area, and what this congress did show was that much further debate, research and development is sorely needed.

A pleasant change for several TBI delegates was the lessening of discussions surrounding REDD+, carbon credits and markets, into a broader perspective on climate adaptation and mitigation including changing rainfall patterns





and water cycles. Although a good international market price for carbon is still considered a good contribution to halt deforestation, there is no answer as to what to do when this is likely to be well beaten when the revenue for fuel wood and other forest product uses exceed what can ever be obtained from virtual carbon.

Some other points of clear merit came out on the sidelines, and attracted TBI delegates' attention as areas for further work. These included issues of agricultural subsidies, nationally, regionally and internationally, including; 'perverse' taxes and subsidies on agro-commodities and energy, tax evasion by international companies, poor capacity of governments to collect national and local taxes, and also the mining and other sectors that compete with forestry in the emerging 'landscape approach'.

From rhetoric to reality is what one of the team thought was needed, noting for example there was talk of gender equality, so is 30% women's representation acceptable? And there was much talk of youth involvement, but besides a few special events and isolated presentations, there were actually rather few young people on the many panels. Four representatives of forest and farm producer organizations did present their views at the plenary session on Thursday 10th when all sub-themes reported, but were not given seats on the corresponding panel. And there was much talk about private sector involvement, but business presence was the exception rather than rule. Half of humanity are women, half are under 30, and three quarters are from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. But older white men were still dominant in Durban, when if we follow proportional representation, this group should have made up only around 6% of those present.

Regarding key messages and lessons learnt, one point raised was that 'the right information is very important in trying to influence policy'. To be able to influence policy, one also needs to identify and work with the right people, allies influential in political circles, including the media; any positions or policy options presented must be based on sound information; since different stakeholders may be affected differently by different options, there is also the need for consensus building and awareness creation. One needs to look for and capitalize on opportunities, especially in the timing of any interventions. Tropenbos International must also do the same.

And some final words of wisdom heard at the congress:

*"No one succeeds without failing; we learn more from failure than from success"*

*"People do not care about what you know until they know about how much you care".*

*"It always seems impossible until it is done".*

*"To go fast, go alone, but to go far, go with others"*



This infosheet is a combination of comments received from all members of the TBI delegation to the XIV World Forestry Congress.

The opinions expressed in this infosheet are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Tropenbos International.

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