

Major Group Workers and Unions
MSD Contribution
April 18, 2007

On behalf of the Major Group, Workers and Unions, I thank the Chair and the Bureau for giving us this opportunity to address the Forum.

In the time allotted I would like to call the delegates attention to an omission or gap in the current NLBI draft.

A careful reading of the current draft of the NLBI would lead the reader to assume that trees destined for commercial use plant themselves, prune themselves, harvest themselves, drive themselves to the mills, mill themselves, and then present themselves to consumers for use. The reader would come to this conclusion because in the 24 pages of substantive text there is not a single reference to workers, the forest workforce, or any of the work accomplished by forest workers to create the economic wealth that the document so desperately seeks to encourage and protect.

Since there are no references to workers it is not surprising that there are no references to the ILO's core labor standards or the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This is odd since practically all the member states participating in this Forum are members of the ILO governing body and as members are obligated to honor and enforce the four labor conventions codified in the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

While labor standards are absent, calls for poverty reduction, support for the MDG's, and a demand for equitable benefit sharing are featured prominently. Yet without a direct reference to the ILO Declaration or its core labor standards these calls for social standards have a hollow ring. If SFM does not include demands for decent work that pays wages that enable workers to escape poverty then equitable benefit sharing can not occur. When private sector investors seek to undermine and evade their commitment's to safe and decent work by out sourcing work and converting their forest workers into "independent" contractors they contribute to a cost shift to the public sector that makes the loss of public revenues from illegal logging pale by comparison. Poverty will not be reduced, benefits will not be shared equally and the MDG's will not be achieved as long as 75% of the forest workforce is forced to engage in informal and or contract work while doing the exact same jobs as regular workers. Such arrangements decrease employment stability, reduce public tax revenues, encourage unsafe work, and keep wages artificially low. What benefits accrue to communities if the workers are not paid enough to send their children to public schools, can not afford health care, or in some cases can not even feed themselves? This is not a model that is socially sustainable.

The document cites the important role of private sector activity in seven different sections yet not once does it cite the need to protect the workers who create the wealth. There are no citations requiring the transfer of environmentally sound technology to be socially sound. There are no citations that trade in forest products produced under conditions of dangerous work, relying on child or forced labor should be constrained.

To the contrary there are several portions of the text that call for unfettered trade of forest products except where fiber is derived from illegally harvested timber. The reader gets the distinct impression that trade has primacy and that the trade of forest products is more important than the condition of work that makes it possible. It seems clear that the economic and environmental pillars of SFM are more equal than the social pillar.

Yet, there appears to be a consensus that poverty is an important contributor to deforestation and a significant barrier to the preservation of forests. Likewise it seems that there is general agreement that empowering vulnerable social groups is a pre-requisite to obtaining the four global objectives. The ILO core labor standards are the minimum social standards for empowerment. Insuring that forest workers, contractors, and indigenous peoples have the right to form and join associations for their mutual protection and the right and ability to bargain with employers is an important step towards empowerment. Eliminating child labor and forced labor permits labor markets to begin to provide greater social and economic benefits for all.

Unfortunately, requiring the ILO labor standards does not guarantee that the global objectives will be met. What is guaranteed is that the failure to require the ILO labor standards insures that the global objectives will not be obtained. The presence of free and independent social institutions, like unions, that can exert countervailing power against the abuses caused by unregulated markets not only grants legitimacy to all social partners but also guards against all forms of human rights violations.

On behalf of the forest and wood workers of the world, we call on the member states to correct this omission in the current draft of the document.

Thank-you