

### Keywords:

Sustainable forest management, reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+), free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)

## OVERVIEW

### IIED Natural Resources Group

#### Project name:

The Forests Dialogue (TFD)

#### IIED project leader:

James Mayers

#### Time frame:

2000–2014

#### Cost:

In recent years IIED has contributed about £30,000 to TFD's annual budget of around £500,000

#### Objective:

Contribute to sustainable land and resource use, the conservation and sustainable management of forests, and improved livelihoods by helping people engage and explore difficult issues, find collaborative solutions, and make positive changes.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

The Forests Dialogue tackles contentious problems in sustainable forest management through open-ended multi-stakeholder dialogue. Since 2002, 57 dialogues have been held in 27 countries, organised in topical initiatives that aim to resolve conflicts and develop practical solutions. These initiatives attract substantive participation from industry as well as NGOs and local forest groups. TFD has published influential consensus statements and guidebooks – on REDD readiness, consent for land deals and investment in locally controlled forestry, among others – and a new independent evaluation reports impacts on international thinking and practice over a range of difficult forest issues.

## THEORY OF CHANGE

TFD works by identifying sensitive but pressing debates in the forest sector, often characterised by entrenched conflicts and harsh criticism of corporate practices or policy frameworks. The dialogues create a safe space where stakeholders can come together with a shared willingness to explore solutions, rather than attack positions and defend interests.

# From dispute to dialogue

## Entrenched arguments give way to collaboration in The Forests Dialogue

Supply chains tainted by illegal timber, rival certification schemes vying for buy-in, anaemic investment in small forest enterprises, alleged land grabs. The forest sector has had its share of controversies since the 1990s, and many debates have derailed into accusations and defensiveness. The Forests Dialogue (TFD) emerged in the early 2000s with what was then a radical approach: tackling intractable issues through open-ended dialogue among industry, NGOs and other stakeholders.

Today there are many more platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue on forests. But TFD still stands out, according to a recent independent evaluation.<sup>1</sup> The programme has a knack for picking ripe questions. And despite their bare-bones structure, TFD dialogues have helped change international thinking and practice about issues such as plantation management and reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD).

TFD partly grew out of IIED research on the pulp and paper industry, which highlighted the need for stakeholders to talk to each other. By early 2014, 57 dialogue events had taken place as part of 14 topical initiatives, meeting in 27 countries. The programme is hosted by Yale University and steered by a committee including the World Resources Institute, IUCN, the World Bank, IIED, Weyerhaeuser, Kimberley-Clark and Fibria, as well as labour and social development organisations.

## A practical approach to tough conflicts

Many TFD participants face criticism of their corporate or institutional practices. Environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace have attacked forestry companies, while the World Bank has been accused of selling short the needs of local communities and indigenous peoples. Particularly in early dialogues on illegal logging, plantations and certification, corporations and their critics started from deeply entrenched positions. TFD managed to move into this difficult space and begin a conversation about changing practices to benefit all sides.

Each TFD dialogue begins with a review of ground rules and principles. In these invitation-only meetings, participants are asked to leave behind the constraints of their organisations and share their own personal views. Crucially, the dialogues observe 'Chatham House rules': while TFD reports on discussions, no statements are attributed to individuals, allowing people from 'high places' to speak freely.

Also key is commitment to practical solutions. TFD does not predefine the intended outcome of initiatives, but each one drives towards agreement on next steps and new practices, and each evolves through several dialogues as stakeholders build trust and understanding. In its initiative on investing in locally controlled forests, for example, TFD facilitated nine dialogues in nine countries over four years, each meeting bringing fresh perspectives. In

Participants are given no blueprint for the final outcome, but they commit to search for consensus and practical next steps. In this way, TFD has helped public discourse move to a more mature phase of engagement and agreement.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- TFD's initiatives evolve iteratively over multiple stakeholder dialogues, without a predefined outcome. This allows participants to build trust and to develop consensus and solutions that were not previously recognised.
- Conflicts between institutions are driven by, and ultimately resolved by, individuals. TFD succeeds by enabling participants to share their personal views under safe ground rules that set aside institutional constraints.
- Dialogues have greatest impact when they bring the right people together during a critical policy window. Getting key individuals from the private sector to the table, together with rights holders, NGO staff and other stakeholders, has proven to be catalytic in improving practices.

## PARTNERS' VIEW

*Through TFD we have been able to reach out widely and engage with actors we would not normally interact with. We have been able to get the private sector to take seriously a range of issues like land rights, indigenous peoples, conflict resolution, FPIC and human rights.*

NGO leader

<sup>1</sup> Blomley, T. 2014. *Evaluation of The Forests Dialogue from 2000 to 2013: Final Report*. The Forests Dialogue, New Haven.



This research was part-funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government.



Participants of TFD field dialogues met with communities involved in forest-based businesses.

'field dialogues', a TFD staple, participants met with communities involved in forest-based businesses. Other meetings examined themes like financial investment or farm forestry. Gradually, TFD diagnosed confusion among different types of investment, which has kept small-scale enterprises from receiving appropriate support. The initiative produced a guide and resource book in 2012 on how to develop better investment deals for local forestry.

## The right people at the right time

TFD has greatest impact when dialogues intersect with decision points in an ongoing policy process. A good example is the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) initiative, where field dialogues culminated in a 'learning dialogue' during the World Bank's internal policy review in 2013. This helped create new consensus on FPIC — formerly seen as an impractical demand from fringe NGOs — and the World Bank has begun to forge concrete action. Likewise, dialogues on REDD after the 2007 Bali Climate Conference quickly moved beyond carbon sinks, and now the broader concept of REDD+, which includes conservation and sustainable forest management, is standard in climate negotiations.

TFD has outsized influence at these critical moments because conflicts between institutions are driven by, and ultimately solved by, individuals. Getting the right people in the room is essential, and the recent evaluation recognises TFD's skill here, particularly with forestry corporations and forest community groups. It is rare to see substantive private sector participation in other multi-stakeholder platforms,

but TFD attracted companies early on by choosing controversies that affect branding and bottom lines. In the last few years, TFD has drifted more towards NGO favourites like REDD and has lost some corporate players. But dialogues in 2014 on genetically modified trees and the '4Fs' (food, fuel, fibre and forests) are expected to draw companies back in.

As one participant said, TFD has been able to 'pick up subjects when they are hot and drop them when they are warm'. When issues have cooled to the point of consensus, other institutions can take them forward — IIED recently launched projects in Mozambique and Myanmar based on the new guidelines for investing in locally controlled forests.

At the same time, IIED wants to repurpose TFD-style dialogue processes. Our programme on artisanal and small-scale mining, for example, is setting up a learning platform based on TFD, and lessons from the dialogues are also being applied in the China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform. TFD's experience shows that frank discussions can resolve conflicting agendas and reveal new paths. It's a model that deserves to be spread widely.



## Knowledge Products

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