

INTERLAKEN-UNFF Intersessional on Decentralization, Federal Systems and Forestry
– Tuesday 27 April 2004

Final version 23.4.2004

– check against delivery –

Opening Statement by State Secretary Philippe Roch, Director of the Swiss Agency for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (BUWAL)

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Switzerland, I would like to welcome you in Interlaken.

In Interlaken, as in many other places in Switzerland, human life would have never been and will never be possible without forests. They protect from avalanches and rockfalls. The forests are crucial for the watershed management of a river system that crosses the lowlands of this country and large parts of Europe. Timber has always been an important raw material and energy resource, and the forest was and still is an important working place. Just because of its ecological, economic and social importance, the search of balance in these forests always has been a challenge.

We meet here to discuss over the coming days on decentralisation in forestry. In the Bernese Oberland, as probably elsewhere, decentralisation and centralisation are two sides of the same coin. It is the way how these two key elements of any governance system interact that ultimately is determining the balance and the fate of the forest resources in all their aspects – economic, social and ecological.

In Switzerland, a very important disturbance of the ecological balance occurred in the 19th century, when large-scale clear-cutting of Alpine forests resulted in extensive flood disasters hitting most parts of the country and also this region.

In the region of Interlaken one important reason for the clear-cuts was a fundamental change in the governance system: For many centuries, sovereign rights to forests in the Oberland have been with the powerful city and Canton of Bern. The local communes did only have user rights. With the liberal winds of change in the 1830ies, these user rights were handed over by the canton as property rights to the communes and later also to private persons.

This process coincided – and this is the other reason for the clear-cuts – with powerful market forces generated by a high timber demand for a growing economy all over Europe. The gates to timber export were opened wide, but there were no sufficient legal measures and no forest service composed of competent specialists, yet.

The disasters that affected even the cities in the river valleys triggered the involvement of the federal government in the forest sector, eventually leading to the enactment of the first Federal Forestry Law in 1876.

The Federal Law itself, devised in a highly political climate, had to accommodate the legitimate interests of the self-determining Alpine cantons. The solution was a federal framework law that included three important overarching regulations, namely

- First, that forest areas could no longer be reduced in size;
- Second, that areas where timber harvesting took place had to be replanted within three years;
- and third, that owners of public forests were required to state proposed timber harvesting in a forest management plan.

To assist forest owners and to help to enforce such strong provisions, the Confederation provided compensations as an incentive for reforestation of protective forests. The federal law also obligated the cantons to employ trained foresters. This is how foresters not only grew in a role to enforce the Forest Law, but also to act as forest-management consultants to the local forest owners. Their scientific knowledge affiliated with local forest related knowledge, thus taking fully into account the cultural and biological realities of the different geographical areas.

The forest laws of the 26 cantons as the second legislative layer had to comply with the federal law, where it specifically addresses the particular needs of a Canton. The third legislative layer were the regulations established at the local level. They address the design of transparent community institutions for taking management decisions, distributing benefits, resolving conflicts, and defending community interests against selfish desires of outside forces and local elite.

Local capacities as well as decision-making power and accountability at the local level combined with the strong guiding provisions at the federal and cantonal level have proven to be critical in successfully preventing further degradation of the forest. Moreover, well into the 1970ies, sustainable forest management and timber production gave a significant stimulus to

the local economy and have also satisfied national and international demand for products and services.

Since enactment of the first federal law, the repartition of rights, responsibilities and duties had to be renegotiated during several revisions of the federal forest law. Federalism in Switzerland means an ongoing process of constantly finding a new equilibrium between the central state, its member states, and the public and private forest owners. The pace of this process is increased by the current pressure of globalisation.

This brings me to the global context. Key environmental issues such as forests, climate, water and biodiversity all are of a global significance. The multilateral environmental agreements and processes that aim at establishing governance at the global level can be viewed as another dimension of a federal legal system taking into account the global dimension. In this regard, UNFF is certainly to be much valued as a first important step to assume our common responsibility at the global level. There remains the important question on the future of UNFF and how the global focus can best be reflected at the national and sub-national levels.

Up to now, the development of the international forest regime has undoubtedly led to important changes in approaches to forests and people, and has made remarkable gains in the application of governance principles. Thus, after the adoption of the forest principles and chapter 11 of Agenda 21, a comprehensive set of non-binding recommendations and proposals for action has been developed under the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF). It is now the task of the UNFF, together with the members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF) to catalyse the implementation of these Proposals for Action and to foster further commitment to sustainable forest management. Let me highlight just three areas where the international process has been able to stimulate and enrich the work at the national level:

- First: National Forest Programmes have become the focal point to place the discussion of better forest governance at the country level;
- Second: Multi-stakeholder involvement, debate and consultation have become the norm and helped to increase transparency and accountability;
- And third, we can observe attempts to reorient forest management by increasing decentralisation and devolution to local people.

This last initiative is much needed at this moment: If we succeed to combine international and national guidance with a locally more relevant policy and to build institutional capacity all

the way along from the national to the local levels, can the goals of the global community be reached effectively.

I am convinced that the Interlaken Workshop on Decentralisation is very timely, because it will stimulate work at this cutting edge and link it to broader sustainable developmental issues. Isn't it interesting to see that an intergovernmental, global process like the UNFF is driving its agenda towards the search of solutions through local realities? Rio 1992 has taught us to think globally – Interlaken should guide us how to act locally.

Before I officially open the workshop, let me thank the various countries and organisations that have contributed to the realisation of this meeting. First of all the sponsors Great Britain, Canada and United States of America, who together with Switzerland financed a total of 80 participants from developing countries and countries in economic transition to come to Interlaken. I would also like to thank the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) and the Programme on Forests (PROFOR) of the World Bank who contributed technically and financially to the workshop. The great work of technical preparation done by the Centre of International Forestry Research (CIFOR) is highly appreciated. I particularly welcome the close collaboration between CIFOR and our Swiss based technical development organisation INTERCOOPERATION to combine scientific work and logistical arrangements. I would also like to express my special gratitude to the Forest Service of the Canton of Bern for preparing four interesting field trips you will enjoy tomorrow. Finally, I would like to thank our partner country, Indonesia, for initiating this process and hopefully for continuing in the important role of caretaker of issues in decentralisation in forest management and conservation at an international level.

On behalf of the Organising Committee, I declare the Interlaken Workshop open.