



IMPACT STORIES

Why Environmental NGOs Engage in Dialogue

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

The Forests Dialogue (TFD) was established in 2000 with the active leadership of several global environmental NGOs, including World Wildlife Fund (WWF), World Resources Institute (WRI), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and Conservation International (CI). At this time, relationships between the forest industry and the global NGO community were defined by friction. As founding partners of TFD, they helped create a platform that broke down the entrenched divisions between sectors and engaged governments, businesses, local communities, and Indigenous peoples, addressing issues around deforestation, sustainable land use, and climate change.

Today, these and numerous other local, regional and global NGOs engage with TFD, recognizing its value as a space for collaboration, trust-building, and incorporating multi-stakeholder strategy into their processes. TFD's inclusive approach provides them with direct opportunities to broaden their networks, to create agreement and collaboration with



WHY NGOS ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE

- ➔ Opportunities for Collective Problem-Solving and Exchanging Ideas
- ➔ Shape Organizational Strategies and Programs
- ➔ Ground Global Strategies in Local Realities
- ➔ Build Professional Networks and Skills
- ➔ Influence Other Stakeholders and Organizations



Indonesian Forest. Courtesy of TFD.

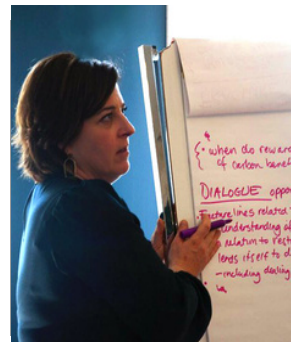
companies, to share their conservation practices and experiences, and to integrate more nuanced perspectives into their environmental strategies. This leads to more solutions that not only focus on ecological outcomes but also incorporate social and economic aspects within the forest sector.

TFD's model continues to be valuable to environmental NGOs, bridging relationships and trust across sectors and geographies. When asked their motivation to engage with TFD, representatives from environmental NGOs shared the following:

Opportunities for Problem-Solving and Exchanging Ideas

Kerry Cesareo, Senior Vice President for Forests and Freshwater, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and current TFD Steering Committee member, emphasized how relationships gained through

TFD have greatly supported her ability to perform her job. She said interactions with individuals on TFD's Steering Committee provided valuable



opportunities for collective problem-solving and idea exchange. This collaboration at multiple levels, whether addressing global forestry challenges or resolving specific bilateral issues, has

proven to be instrumental in establishing the trust required to work through new ideas and propose solutions. The ability to tap into these relationships, even outside formal Steering Committee settings, has created a strong global network that Cesareo sees as particularly strategic for her work at WWF.



Rod Taylor (right) in discussion at the Understanding Deforestation Free Dialogue in Mouila, Gabon

Rod Taylor, Global Director of Forests at the World Resources Institute, reflected on TFD's mode of dialogue, pointing to the value of TFD's application of the Chatham House Rule to establish a process that encourages the free flow of ideas and speaking openly. He reflected on a dialogue in Indonesia where a participant initially adopted a confrontational style but later engaged constructively:

"At first the participant presented as a combative outsider, but as the meeting progressed she adapted and embraced the spirit of dialogue."

– Rod Taylor, Global Director of Forests at WRI

This importance of providing safe spaces for dialogue with those holding opposing views is a hallmark of TFD's approach to collective problem-solving.

Shape Organizational Strategies and Programs

Chris Buss, co-founder of the Foundation for Farmers Organizations and Restorative Action (FFORA), former Head of the Forest Programme, Director of the Centre for Economy and Finance at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and TFD Steering Committee Member, reflected on the ways TFD dialogues shaped some of IUCN's key strategies. "The concept of Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) was enhanced, strengthened and disseminated in part due to the climate finance and REDD+ dialogues," he said. He added

that TFD provides a structure that enables NGOs to gain a wider stakeholder perspective on forestry issues, saying how TFD engagement offered



IUCN “grounded perspectives” from different sectors, including rights holders, private sector representatives, and other NGOs.

This exposure to diverse viewpoints allowed IUCN to

develop “strong reference points underpinned by real conversations,” ultimately helping the organization reflect and incorporate these insights into its strategies mentioned above. Buss emphasized the value of TFD’s efficient production of background papers and summaries, which offered real-time insight and established a robust framework for meaningful, ongoing collaboration.

Ground Global Strategies in Local Realities

Cesareo values TFD’s field dialogues for bridging big-picture strategies with local realities. She explained that scalable solutions often encounter challenges on the ground, requiring adjustments based on local needs. Referencing the Ecosystem Restoration initiative as an example, she explained how field dialogues help identify these gaps between global strategies and local realities, promoting adaptive management and engaging directly with those affected. The dialogue discussions led to the conclusion that definitions and priorities of what restoration

entails are context dependent, shaped by the unique circumstances of each place. It shows how the conversations held during dialogues not only refine solutions but also ensure their relevance and impact by seeing how an issue manifests at a specific place, creating a richer understanding. This localized approach, as Cesareo called attention to, is where meaningful solution finding truly begins.

Similarly, the [TFD Guide to Investing in Locally Controlled Forestry](#) played a pivotal role in redefining the paradigm around forest management by centering the perspectives of rightsholders. Buss still refers back to this guide to use in his work currently, as it challenged traditional investor frameworks, which often viewed local people as mere labor, by promoting a shift where local communities are seen as resource and rights owners seeking investment into their assets. Field dialogues were integral to this reframing, as participants experienced the realities of locally controlled forestry firsthand. Buss found value in these dialogues since they expose stakeholders to on-the-ground challenges, like navigating remote areas or understanding local interactions, which are often overlooked in conference settings.

Taylor also voiced how field visits can help participants gain an understanding of essential on the ground context that help avoid overly simplistic or inaccurate conclusions drawn from theoretical frameworks alone. He’s found the insights gained through field dialogues to be especially helpful when developing internal strategies or reviewing position pieces. Recalling his experience in the Understanding Deforestation Free dialogue in Gabon, “You go to the field, and you see it with your own eyes. It helps. Otherwise, you risk ungrounded decision-



Group Discussion at the Field Dialogue on FPIC in the Democratic Republic of Congo

making, where the most beautiful and logical argument wins out, despite being far away from the realities of the field.” He further elaborated, “And I think the beauty of TFD is that it tests simple Silver Bullet solutions. You can learn how far off the mark they are, either in the debate or on the field trip.”

Build Professional Networks and Skills

Buss shared that TFD’s dialogues allowed participants to build valuable partnerships in settings designed to create open, informal relationships. “Being able to link up with the Steering Committee, and in the dialogues themselves, you meet a lot of partners and networks,” he explained. He attributes TFD’s unique ability to form these relationships acting as a “neutral convener and open space.”

“Having four or five days with people in the field, and then in a workshop environment, was incredibly valuable...It created relationships that were less formal.”

– Chris Buss, co-founder of the FFORA

Similarly, Taylor emphasized the “soft impacts” of TFD for steering committee members, discussing how it can help young professionals build networks and learn the contours of debate on complex issues. “This internal value—building a network and learning how to participate in a genuine dialogue — should not be overlooked,” he said, discussing the unique opportunities TFD offers to create long-term relationships.

Influence Other Stakeholders and Organizations

TFD's ability to convene diverse stakeholders has created a platform where organizations can dialogue on pressing issues that shape global and organizational policies and commitments. For instance, Cesareo discussed how the 2014 TFD Scoping Dialogue on Understanding Deforestation-Free exemplifies how TFD facilitated meaningful dialogue between NGOs and companies on the challenges of certification schemes and deforestation standards.

This exchange of ideas led NGOs and companies to collaborate on improved guidance and tools to support the implementation of deforestation-free commitments.

Buss added that REDD+ concepts, which initially centered on reducing emissions solely from deforestation, were expanded to include forest degradation and landscape restoration. TFD dialogues on REDD+ provided “momentum and understanding,” as Buss described, with diverse stakeholders coming together to collectively shape and reinforce ideas.

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