



## LETTERS

*Unasylva* welcomes correspondence from its readers, particularly on substantive issues. *Unasylva* reserves the right to print letters to the editor in the journal and to edit for reasons of length.

31 May 2005

To the Editor:

I groaned aloud at reading the cover title of *Unasylva* 218, "Catalysing regional action". Your title exemplifies what has been wrong in the entire FAO approach in Third World countries, at least on this side of Africa for the past 30 years or so.

It is understandable that in order to economize, FAO has to have regional offices, for its own administrative purposes. The trouble comes when FAO staff use a regional approach for field activities.

I cannot emphasize enough that every Third World country in Africa differs from its neighbours and that, because such-and-such has worked in one country, there is absolutely no guarantee that it can be used successfully in an adjacent country. The attempts at "regionalization" are some of the reasons for FAO's (and most other donor agencies') poor record in forestry. I am sure of the advantages of using locally based NGOs for locally conceived programmes.

Within a region with like forestry characteristics, forestry officials can – and should – agree on common forestry approaches, common standards, cross-border activities, etc. These are all technical issues. But there has never been any sense in trying to coordinate regional field activities on any but very general terms. A country may have indeed ratified a particular regional forestry agreement, but whether it allocates enough of its scarce resources to implementing that agreement depends on the country's priorities at the particular time.

Yours faithfully,

**David May**  
Maseru, Lesotho

Douglas Kneeland, Chair of the *Unasylva* Editorial Advisory Board, replies:

FAO agrees that most forestry issues must be addressed by countries, not regions. The overview article by R.M. Martin in *Unasylva* 218 stressed that "the focus is on national action" and that regional approaches complement national action. The cornerstone of FAO's field programme in forestry is support to national forest programmes. Indeed I am surprised at Mr May's impression that the FAO field programme is primarily regional in nature. For every FAO regional forestry project in Africa, there are more than ten country projects.

We agree that local NGOs have much to offer. The innovative

National Forest Programme Facility, hosted by FAO, emphasizes support to local NGOs and promotes bottom-up solutions to national problems.

While we agree that countries are responsible for taking effective action to manage their forests, we also suggest that the Regional Forestry Commissions provide an important forum for countries to share information and to learn from each other. It is up to countries to explore areas where collaboration makes sense. At the end of the day, the most important benefit of regional approaches is to strengthen national approaches.