

Getting the most out of Annual Meetings

Annual meetings can be very predictable affairs, with their large plenary sessions and rigid agendas. But in September 2005, CIFOR decided to do things differently. 'We're going to give you space and opportunity to talk about the things that really concern you, that worry you, that excite you,' explained Director General David Kaimowitz in his welcoming speech at CIFOR's HQ in Bogor.

The objectives of the five-day meeting –Working Together to Make a Difference– were to improve understanding about CIFOR's future, provide a range of forums for discussion and interaction, and increase understanding of CIFOR's global programmes and regional strategies. This was achieved by adopting a radical new knowledge-sharing approach, already piloted at several other centres supported by the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR) with help from the CGIAR Knowledge Sharing Project.

The meeting began with a 'Knowledge Fair' featuring workshops, presentations, poster displays and videos related to research

conducted by CIFOR and its partners. Most of the next two days was devoted to Open Space, during which the rhetoric of institutional democracy was made a reality. There were six different Open Space sessions, with the topics for debate being chosen by participants. The third innovative approach was Peer Assist, which enabled small groups to come together to share experiences and solve problems. The week concluded with 'Fiesta Friday', a dinner-dance with a Latin-American theme.

'The meeting exceeded all my expectations in terms of creating a renewed sense of excitement about CIFOR and the work we do,' says Michael Hailu, Director of CIFOR's Information Services Group. His enthusiasm was reflected in a survey conducted at the end of the week. The vast majority of participants welcomed the new approach, which they considered more enjoyable and inclusive than the standard annual meeting. The main conclusion was: Let's have more of the same in future, please.

Knowledge Fair

Knowledge Fair set the scene for the week by giving participants a wide range of choice. They could look at presentations, videos and poster displays, or attend workshops covering a variety of topics, all proposed and presented by CIFOR staff. 'It was very important for me to find out about research carried out by other scientists,' explained Mathurin Zida, who had recently joined CIFOR's Dry Forest Programme in Burkina Faso. 'I learned a lot during the Knowledge Fair and gained a better global vision about what CIFOR is doing.'



Open Space

Open Space allows individuals to choose a topic and invite anybody interested to join a discussion and debate. During a period of just 10 minutes on the second morning, 27 people came up with 29 separate topics, ranging from the managerial to the scientific, from the broad and philosophical to the very specific. 'I liked the way people could put things on the table and discuss them in a very open way,' said Marieke Sandker, a young Dutch scientist who had just joined CIFOR. Eighty-five per cent of participants said they would like to use the Open Space approach again.



Peer Assist

Peer Assist is a process which brings together a small group to help one person solve a particular problem with which he or she is grappling. This was a novel approach for most CIFOR scientists, and many said they would use it in the future. For example, Daniel Tiveau from CIFOR's Burkina office – his question was, 'How do you live up to the expectation of national partners?' – said that although his group didn't come up with much he hadn't already considered, he liked the exercise. 'I would like to try this process with a scientific problem next time,' he said.

