

TFG Interviews Salil Shetty

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Tropical Forest Group recently sat down with Salil Shetty, Director of the United Nation's Millennium Campaign. The UN Millennium Campaign supports citizen efforts to hold their governments accountable for progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), an ambitious development blueprint signed by 180 Heads of State. The MDG's are lofty—eradicating extreme poverty by 2015 and ensuring environmental sustainability—and they have generated an enormous amount of institutional and diplomatic clout. TFG asked Mr. Shetty about the connections between tropical forests, global poverty, and other social issues.

TFG: In what ways do you believe that environmental stewardship supports the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's)?

Salil Shetty: The separation of environmental from social issues is a false separation. All of these issues—environment, democracy, security, and human rights—are all linked. Certainly, if you live in a remote forest in India or the Democratic Republic of Congo, such distinctions are meaningless. As you know, Goal 7 is specifically about environmental stewardship. But it is for the poorest people in the world that the goals are most relevant, and for those people the relationship between the environment and their livelihood is very direct—it's not a circular, complex or distant relationship because most poor people live off of natural resources. Many people rely on allied occupations, whether it be living off forests or living off trees, or other artisan livelihoods—and if you don't have a sustainable environment, and an environment that is thinking ahead rather than living for the day, then the goals are not going to be met.

If we don't get the 7th goal right, we cannot make it by 2015 and we certainly can't sustain it. The goals have always been seen as an entry point, so we have to look at it in a sustainable way, it's not achieving it for the sake of achieving it. We must make it last.

TFG: How are tropical deforestation and poverty in developing nations connected?

Salil Shetty: If you look at the connections between environment and agriculture, that's where you can find the most direct linkages because by definition poor people are people who live off the land, lands that are consistently getting worse and worse in terms of quality. You have the results of direct deforestation, such as erosion and runoffs, that affect people because they usually live on low lands that are affected by run offs. From another perspective, in India, 8% of the population—which comes to 80 million people—is indigenous. These people live off the forests directly so if we don't have forest protection policy sorted out they lose their livelihood. Unregulated forestry and logging is therefore detrimental to the poor communities—whether it's in Liberia or the Amazon or Tanzania. In addition, there are also direct connections between water management and forestry, and often we look at these as separate issues.

On a macro-level, climate change and Kyoto are central to these issues as well, because climate change affects the poorest countries and peoples the most. These issues can't be dealt with in a micro-way. The challenge is that the countries have to work together to deal with these environmental issues. Global warming is the same way, it's a macro-problem.

TFG: Tropical deforestation stands as the leading cause of biodiversity loss and the second leading cause of global warming. With this in mind, can you explain the social benefits of global investment in tropical forest conservation?

Salil Shetty: There's the whole discussion of what a private benefit is and what a social benefit is. I think that this is a win-win because a very large proportion of people in most countries—75% of the world population—live off the forests and the land, so tropical forest conservation creates not only a high social benefit, but also a high private benefit, particularly if you look at it from a long-haul perspective. Short term, there are maybe going to be trade-offs, and that's why you need active and thoughtful state and global intervention to deal with and compensate for losses, and to manage incentives and disincentives. The biggest social benefit, in my opinion, is that you'd achieve the MDG's, because then you'd have less people dying, less people sick, less women dying during childbirth, and so on. If you take the individual diseases and health issues listed in the goals, they are centrally related to peoples' income, their ability to access healthcare, etc. So that's why we've always been reluctant to single any one of the goals out, because you need to deal with each of the goals, they're all right. The environment needs a specialist type of approach and attention—but not in isolation of the other set of goals. They need to work together.

TFG: Do you see much tension in developing countries between the need to preserve forests and to the desire to develop them for economic gain?

Salil Shetty: The problem is that the discourse is set by the elites of these countries, because if you ask tribal indigenous people in these countries you won't find that tension because they see that relationship very clearly, because they live off the land. But if you're a macro-policy academic involved in discussion, that's totally different from when you ask people living off the land.

TFG: So you find that people that are living closer to the forests and the land they live off of are more in touch with the idea of protecting their resources?

Salil Shetty: I do not know if you're aware of the famous joint forest management principle that came from India in the first place—and it's now used quite widely in many forestry policies across the world. And there the logic was quite simple, to say that the people for whom the forest mattered the most are the people who are living off the forests, it's not the forest guards or the forest department who are most considerate of the forest. Indigenous people are the ones that need to protect the forests more than anyone else. Yes, there are some short-term trade-offs and all that, but if you look at it from the

bigger picture sense they're the last ones who want to destroy the forest. Often, when you bring in government officials with the logic, "we are protecting the forest for you," in reality what happens is the officials bring in the loggers and everyone else and they take the rights to the land from the indigenous people, along with the minor forest products that they live off entirely. The indigenous people don't actually chop the trees, they use the products of the trees to live. Wherever you have forests departments come in, they prevent these people from taking the products they need to live under a guise of regulation.

So I don't think that tension is there at that level—the local level. At the policy level, it is different. If you are the Brazilian government, you would say that you can't expect us to slow down our rate of growth just in order to protect the environment. And we have to deal with those realities.

It also deals with security, which is new to the discourse—environmental security is the same as human security, which is the same as national security. The argument becomes more complex when you start putting everything in one basket and everything is interlinked. But the fact is that if you go to a small village of forest dwellers, then everything becomes very simple and straightforward. In that environment you can't talk about human security as something distinct from environmental security it all comes together, and those tensions don't exist.

TFG: As a new organization, TFG is convinced that tropical forest conservation is vital to fighting global warming and providing sustainable livelihoods to many in developing countries. We believe this is an important aspect of goals such as poverty eradication and disease prevention. Can you offer any advice on how we and our members can best focus our efforts to contribute to the MDGs?

Salil Shetty: We are focused on what one can do, because there is the discussion and then there is the action. We feel that in the sense of policy discussion we've covered a lot of ground. It's not that the world doesn't know what needs to be done; it's just that we're not doing it. So I would very much hope that as an organization you focus on taking action. We need the policy discussion, but on the action side it's really getting our leaders to keep their promises. That's what our campaign is all about: you can't sign up to something and then do the opposite. In the context of the US this is particularly resonant. The US is the world's richest country, and a large section of the population of this country isn't aware of many important facts. The reason why the leaders get away with a lot of these things is because the general public doesn't know. Whenever we conduct surveys here we're shocked as to what the public perception is. People think their leaders are doing the opposite of what's happening in reality. You should strive to reach outside to get people aware of some of these basic facts. Spread knowledge, encourage action. Keep the chain of knowledge and action moving.