
[Shopping carbon in forests: the wrong road to Cancun](#)

For many years now the world expansion of the pulp and paper business has been increasingly covering millions of hectares of land with large scale monoculture tree plantations. Mainly disguised as “forests” these “green deserts” have encroached on vast territories and rich ecosystems mostly in the global South.

FAO has greatly contributed to the distortion when it included tree plantations in its definition of forests under the category of “planted forests”. Other UN bodies –like the Conventions on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Climate Change (UNFCCC) have adopted the FAO’s definition.

But for communities whose land, soil, water resources, livelihoods and culture have been seriously impacted by monoculture tree plantations, and for environmental and social groups who are aware of the rich biodiversity of the forest and the barren life of an industrial tree plantation, the difference between both is crystal clear.

Strong voices have been growing denouncing that “tree plantations are not forests”. Recently the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC) – a large world professional society on tropical forests - has released a resolution urging the UN to change its definition of 'forest' covering tree plantations (see article in this same issue).

The importance of a true and genuine definition of forest is crucial for the future of the world’s forests, which means the future of a large part of terrestrial biodiversity and eventually of life on Earth including human beings.

However, forests have been increasingly subject to exploitation by corporate interests which look at the rich complexity of forests through very reductionist eyes. For forest peoples the forest not only provides them food, clothing, medicines, fuel and livelihoods but is also the schoolhouse of their children and the resting place of their ancestors. Meanwhile, for big logging, oil, mining, pharmaceutical, or pulp and paper companies, this biodiversity-rich ecosystem becomes just a source of a single profitable component - either wood, oil, gold, diamonds, biogenetic resources.

The reductionist approach to forests has recently moved to an even less tangible “product” called carbon. As a result, forests have become synonymous of “carbon stocks” that could be traded in the global carbon market through a mechanism called REDD (“Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation”). REDD has thus become one of the main topics being discussed by governments at the UN Convention on Climate Change.

Several rounds of climate talks are now taking place in an effort to reach an agreement at the upcoming Climate Change Conference that will take place in Cancun, Mexico by the end of the year. However, up to now the main results of those negotiations refer to guidelines for carbon reporting and assessment and eventually “creative” accounting that could allow polluting countries not only escape any reduction obligation but also increase their emissions without having to account for them.

On the other hand, real proposals for addressing climate change are being ignored, such as those agreed upon at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in April 2010 in Bolivia.

The People's Agreement strongly stresses that "The definition of forests used in the negotiations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which includes plantations, is unacceptable. Monoculture plantations are not forests. Therefore, we require a definition for negotiation purposes that recognizes the native forests, jungles and the diverse ecosystems on Earth."

Rejecting "the illegitimate 'Copenhagen Accord' that allows developed countries to offer insufficient reductions in greenhouse gases based in voluntary and individual commitments" and "market mechanisms such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and its versions + and + +", the agreement calls for the next Cancun Conference on Climate Change to approve "an amendment to the Kyoto Protocol for the second commitment period from 2013 to 2017 under which developed countries must agree to significant domestic emissions reductions of at least 50% based on 1990 levels, excluding carbon markets or other offset mechanisms that mask the failure of actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions."

The government of Bolivia presented a submission to the UNFCCC Secretariat incorporating the main content of the People's Agreement and pushing for key proposals to be included in negotiations. However, the new text produced by the Secretariat does not include any of those proposals.

Forest peoples themselves are also making their voices heard. The Baka, Bagyeli and Bakola Communities in Cameroon, where the government is seeking funding from the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility to establish projects under REDD, have recently stressed their mistrust on REDD projects (see article in this same issue).

While the dominant global development paradigm is being challenged by the present climate crisis, its driving forces are reluctant to change. That is how "solutions" for climate change are devised that imply carbon trading and offsetting and the use of markets as financial mechanism for programs and actions. Those business incentives for big companies not only fail to promote a shift in the processes and actors that are at the root of the climate crisis – particularly large corporations – but also contribute to keeping "business as usual" and distract from taking the urgently needed measures of cutting fossil-fuel emissions at source.

Within such context, shopping carbon in forests is clearly the wrong road to Cancun.