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As a result of the growing concern about climate change, forests appear to be once again high on the international agenda, particularly in relation with their role as carbon reservoirs. There is broad agreement that forests can help to either mitigate –if conserved- or worsen –if destroyed- the looming danger of climate change. However: is it all really about forests?

Perhaps the best –worst- example for responding to the above question is the World Forestry Congress, recently held in Argentina. At the meeting, forests and monoculture tree plantations were treated as synonymous. Such stance, coming from forestry experts, helps to provide support to companies involved in converting true forests into fake forests, biodiversity into monocultures, nature into profits.

A “planted forest” is a forest: that is the message that the world is receiving from the World Forestry Congress. If this message was given as a “true-false” exercise to school children, most of them would have no doubts in replying “false”. But –with some few exceptions- the world’s forestry “experts” appear to think otherwise. Therefore, a forest can be wiped out and substituted by a eucalyptus, pine, oil palm, rubber or whichever tree plantation and nothing will have changed.

To make matters even worse, part of the Congress’ agenda was focused on the need to “improve” forests through the use of genetically engineered (GE) trees, in spite of the fact that GE trees could wreak havoc on the world’s forests. In line with the WFC, future monoculture GE tree plantations would also considered to be “forests”, thus making the forest definition even more absurd ... and dangerous.

The same issue of defining forests as plantations came up at the Climate negotiations on REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation in Developing Countries) held a few days earlier in Bangkok. The fact that the UN Convention on Climate Change also considers that plantations are “forests”, provided a good excuse to European Union delegates to block language aimed at preventing conversion of forests to plantations. This led to an abrupt end of the negotiations, because most other delegates became aware of the danger of channeling REDD funding for the replacement of tropical forests with pulp or oil palm plantations.

Also linked to climate change and to the definition of plantations as forests is the production of tree ethanol from tree plantations and agrodiesel from oil palm plantations as “green” alternatives to fossil fuels. Such fuels could result in the destruction of extensive areas of forests, that would be converted to monoculture tree plantations. As the definition of forests now stands, nothing would have changed, as long as “forest cover” is maintained.

The absurdity of all the above –and the vested interests behind- is becoming increasingly clear –and recently even to REDD negotiators. The process for excluding plantations from forests is still of course long and difficult, but a growing number of social organizations, peasant movements,

indigenous peoples organizations, human rights activists, academics, foresters and the public at large are joining under the banner of “plantations are not forests”. Local communities that initiated the process through their struggles against tree monocultures are no longer alone.