
The fox in charge of the hen house

Ten years ago, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, initiating a process that will be continued in the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), that will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August through 7 September.

Differently from the expectations raised ten years ago by the Rio conference, nothing enables us to foresee that this new summit will lead to serious commitments to address the forest crisis. The clauses referring to forests in the Draft Implementation Plan agreed on at the last WSSD preparatory meeting, may be qualified, in the best case, as pathetic. Among them, it is worth mentioning that:

*** Not a single reference is made to the underlying causes of deforestation**

Anyone involved in the forest issue knows that "poor management practices" are not the causes at the root of forest destruction and degradation. When they exist, these practices are in fact a consequence of other, underlying causes --e.g. foreign debt, imposition of economic policies geared towards exports, transnational investments, international trade, excessive consumption by the countries of the North, unjust land tenure patterns, etc. In spite of the fact that all these causes have been identified by the governments and international agencies which have engaged themselves to address them, the draft work plan ignores them completely. On ignoring the central problem in diagnosing the disease, the plan already starts off by being totally inadequate to address the problem of forest conservation.

*** Insistence is placed on the promotion of tree monocultures, defined as "planted forests."**

The draft work plan insists on calling plantations, "forests" and on assigning them the same social and environmental benefits as forests. However, the truth is that large-scale tree plantations generate poverty, increase inequality, affect food security, deplete water and soil resources, and drastically reduce biological diversity, only to mention a few of their more evident effects. For this reason, the simple fact that the draft plan insists on calling them "forests" is another bad sign regarding its suitability for the conservation of forests.

*** Insistence is placed on the solution of technology transfer and assignation of financial resources from the North as part of the answer.**

As if the problem could be solved by pouring in more money and more technology! In most of the cases it is precisely due to the availability of financial and technological resources from the North that the forests of the South are being destroyed. It would be much more appropriate to table the major issues --the continuous flow of financial resources from South to North and the appropriation of knowledge and technology from the South by the North-- as a way of establishing suitable conditions for the conservation of forests in the South.

*** It promotes the direct involvement of transnational companies in the process**

In comparison with this, the problems mentioned in the preceding paragraphs take on relative importance. Briefly, the work plan promotes "partnerships" (of transnational companies with governments and civil society organisations), which in fact means placing the solution to the problems in the hands of those who most destroy: transnational corporations. The draft work plan hopes that they will provide financial resources, technology transfer, trade and other "benefits" that would supposedly result in sustainable forest management.

Thus, by the stroke of a pen, the transnational corporations have gone from being part of the problem to becoming a central part of the solution. The fact that the corporations themselves are one of the main causes of social and environmental destruction is overlooked. At the same time that civil society organisations are increasingly calling for them to be controlled and made legally accountable for the impacts of their activities, the WSSD opens the door wide to them. Although governments are experts at both being foxes and being chickens --and therefore knowledgeable about both species-- in fact what they want to do is to put the fox in charge of the hen house!

In sum, the official documentation of the WSSD is in line with the post-Rio process. Over the past ten years, promise after promise made at the Earth Summit has been broken. The draft work plan for the WSSD goes even further: it does not even promise anything. As a result, to achieve something positive regarding forests at this Summit will depend almost entirely on the capacity of civil society organisations to achieve the introduction of substantial changes in the plan under discussion.