
The child of the Food and Agriculture Organization

The FAO holds major responsibility regarding monoculture tree plantations, having been the first international organization to actively promote -since the 1950s- the present plantation model. In spite of all the already known negative social and environmental impacts resulting from the Green Revolution in general and from its application in the forestry area in particular, the FAO continues being the main international body promoting such model and providing it with the necessary "expert" support.

The FAO is recognized by governments and professionals as the expert body on forestry, thus providing plantation promoters with the necessary "scientific" credibility to counter opposition. It provides the official definitions used worldwide in the forestry field. Although its definitions cannot resist any serious criticism, they are continuously being used by foresters because they are useful for their purpose of presenting forests and "planted forests" as being one and the same thing.

Amazingly enough, the FAO's definition of "forest" is different if applied to "developed" or "developing" countries. Additionally, in "developing" countries forests are divided into "natural forests" and "plantation forests", the latter resulting from afforestation in lands without forests as well as from the substitution of "natural" forests by exotic species. This definition ignores that tree plantations are not forests because they essentially differ in their origin, number and types of species, dynamics, uses and relationships to the other components of the environment. Nevertheless, the FAO seems to ignore these basic concepts and defines an area covered with trees -any trees- as being a "forest". The only case in which a plantation could be termed a forest -that in which an area originally covered by forest is reforested with trees and shrubs original to the area- is explicitly not included in the definition of "plantation forests"!

Another odd definition is that of "reforestation" as consisting in the "establishment of tree crops on forest land". This does not consider any difference between native or exotic species, and shows a very narrow approach to forests, looking at them as a mere source of wood (crop). Absurd as it may seem -within the current Kyoto Protocol thinking, carbon sink plantations could not be included in this category, because it would not be reasonable to classify them as crops; neither could all those plantations implemented for reasons other than harvesting wood.

Last but not least, the term "forest cover" used by the FAO is also incorrect, since it is based on the area covered by the tree canopy and does not consider the difference between forests and plantations. Under this definition, a country could completely destroy its forests and substitute them by tree monocultures without diminishing its "forest cover" or even increasing it -something which is already happening in many countries.

The FAO needs to do a lot of rethinking in the area of forests and forestry. One important step in that direction would be to open up and facilitate a discussion on its definitions, with the participation of major groups -particularly forest peoples' organizations- to come up with useful concepts regarding forests and plantations.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Organizations working at the international level:
 - Facilitate a discussion forum to exchange viewpoints on the issue
 - Influence FAO's Commission on Forests (COFO) to open up a discussion on its definitions
 - Highlight in other international fora -particularly the CBD- the problems caused by FAO's definitions
- Organizations working at the national level:
 - Highlight that FAO's definitions serve the purpose of confusing the public regarding plantations
 - Promote discussions on alternative concepts to FAO's definitions, involving all relevant actors and particularly forest and forest dependent peoples
 - Feed the conclusions reached in those discussions to the international discussion forum