
Comments on the IPF's proposals for action on tree plantations

The IPFs proposals for action contain a number of items which refer to tree plantations, which the WRM believes should be further reflected upon by the IFF in view to their implementation. Paragraph 22 states that:

"Both sustainably managed natural forests and forest plantations, as components of integrated land-use that takes account of environmental and socio-economic concerns, fulfil a valuable role in meeting the need for forest products, goods and services, as well as helping to conserve biological diversity and providing a reservoir for carbon. The costs, benefits and disbenefits of different types of forest management, including forest plantations, need to be appraised under different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions. The role of forest plantations as an important element of sustainable forest management and as a complement to natural forests should be recognized."

Few human productive activities are good or bad per se, and most impact on people and the environment. Depending on a number of issues, their advantages can in some cases outweigh their drawbacks, while they can be basically negative in others. The above paragraph clearly incorporates this approach by stating the important role that plantations can have, while taking into account "environmental and socio-economic concerns" and the need to appraise plantations "under different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions."

The WRM believes that representative existing examples of plantations need to be appraised to determine how they benefit or disbenefit local populations, which type should be promoted in which situations, by whom they should be implemented, and how.

First, there are many types of tree plantations, ranging from agroforestry systems to large-scale industrial plantations. Some have been beneficial, while others have had strong negative impacts. Most of the negative impacts --on people and the environment-- have been documented in large-scale plantations: deforestation, displacement and loss of livelihoods of local peoples, erosion and nutrient depletion, biodiversity loss, water shortages, etc. On the other hand, positive impacts have been recorded in some agroforestry systems which have been carried out by local communities.

Tree plantations are therefore neither positive nor negative per se and their impact in one way or the other will depend --as paragraph 22 states-- on the "different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions."

The IPFs proposals for action contain another very important element in paragraph 58 (b ii), which also needs to be considered for implementation of these proposals:

"(ii) To plan and manage forest plantations, where appropriate, to enhance production and provision of goods and services, paying due attention to relevant social, cultural, economic and environmental considerations in the selection of species, areas and silviculture systems, preferring native species, where appropriate, and taking all practicable steps to avoid replacing natural ecosystems of high ecological and cultural values with forest plantations, particularly monocultures . . ."

The above is an important step forward in that it correctly addresses one type of destructive forestry model --large-scale exotic tree monocultures-- which in many cases have replaced "natural ecosystems of high ecological and cultural values with forest plantations, particularly monocultures." At the same time, this paragraph provides clear guidance on the steps that should be taken before implementing plantations:

- social, cultural, economic and environmental considerations should be addressed in the selection of species, areas and silviculture systems
- native species should be preferred
- monocultures of exotic species should be avoided.

The WRM believes that if these guidelines are taken into account, they will result in a radical change in the currently predominant plantation forestry model, based on a few exotic species (particularly eucalyptus and pines), planted as large-scale monocultures, which are having dramatic negative impacts on local communities and on local environments.