Certification is definitely not the right path to follow

For many years now, WRM has stressed that it is unacceptable to certify large-scale industrial monoculture tree plantations. The main target has been the FSC, because it portrays itself to the world as the most reliable and respected label for wood products, and also because its members include numerous non-governmental organizations.

The FSC has already certified millions of hectares of monoculture tree plantations and continues to do so. One example is the certification scheduled for this February/March of Chikweti Forests of Niassa, a company that has caused major problems for peasant farmer communities in the province of Niassa, in northern Mozambique (seewww.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/161/Mozambique.html).

Overall, the communities that are directly affected unanimously agree that it is impossible to certify large-scale monoculture tree plantations. For many years they have experienced first hand the damage and destruction caused by these plantations. Some of these communities were able to talk about their experiences in a recent film made by two Belgian journalists about the FSC certification of Veracel Celulose (read more in the article on Veracel and the FSC in this issue of the bulletin). Mapuche indigenous communities in Chile are also suffering the impacts of plantations, as described in another article in this edition, which notes that the main problem is that certified companies have no interest in changing their "model" of production, which "large-scale, monoculture, expansive and exclusive."

Nevertheless, the subject of the certification of monoculture tree plantations continues to divide activists, NGOs and consumers in the industrialized countries, where the majority of paper products are consumed. Many say they recognize that there are problems, but that the FSC is still the best option, because at least some things in a certified company are a bit better. But is this really the right path to follow?

It is worth remembering how the idea of certification first arose. To do this, we would need to go back to the 1980s in Europe, when the environment emerged as a major political issue. Back then, European NGOs organized a wide-scale boycott on tropical wood, as they believed that the trade and consumption of tropical wood was causing the destruction of forests around the world. It was also around this time that it became clear that the exploitation of natural resources in the countries of the South to supply the North and its patterns of production and consumption was causing irreversible damage, such as global warming, a phenomenon that will affect everyone everywhere, but will particularly affect the poor.

One outcome of the global concern over the environment was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – more commonly known as the Earth Summit – held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where one of the topics of discussion was the need to make production more "sustainable". From that point on, instead of accepting their responsibility and radically changing their production patterns, companies began to propose their own style of "sustainable production". The problems identified were, almost miraculously, transformed into "opportunities" for a new cycle of growth, but now in a "sustainable" way. For companies that promote the spread of large-scale

plantations, certification was the perfect solution, because they could define their practices as “sustainable”, increase the value of their products, and ease the concerns of consumers worried about the global environment – all without affecting their plans for expansion and, above all, their profits. On the contrary, certification means that they can charge even more for their products.

Governments and some NGOs provided their backing for this “positive message” that it was possible to “ecologically modernize” the means of production. First came certification for wood products (FSC) and subsequently, throughout the years, for other monoculture plantation products, thanks to organizations like the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS). As certification gained force, so did the idea among consumers that it’s okay to consume now, as long as the products consumed are “sustainable” and “certified”. Boycotts became a thing of the past.

But while an ever larger number of monoculture plantations were being certified, ever greater criticism began to be voiced as well. It is interesting to note that these criticisms did not come only from the South, but also from the North. Numerous NGOs have now pulled out of the FSC, such as the German environmental organization Robin Wood. Even a recent study published by the European Commission (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/integration/research/newsalert/pdf/226na6.pdf) recognizes that the FSC has not necessarily reduced deforestation, although this is an argument frequently used by those who defend FSC certification.

Meanwhile, a project for young people from Belgian and Finnish organizations, called Fair Move, recently focused on the issue of labels and certifications as a topic for discussion and reflection. They wanted to know if the labels currently used on the market, such as the FSC label, are really reliable. It’s good to know that young people are questioning a label which for more than 10 years (!) has guaranteed “sustainability”.

Other labels, such as the one for “sustainable” soy, have also been targeted for criticism. One example is an open letter recently published in a Belgian newspaper by a group of activists from Belgian organizations, addressed to Dutch NGOs that participate in the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS). The activists state in their letter that “a label from the RTRS for industrial soy does nothing relevant for human beings or for the environment. It deceives consumers who buy products with the RTRS label, in Belgium as well. And it offers a means of greenwashing for corporations like Monsanto, Cargill and Unilever.”

The criticisms of labelling schemes like the FSC lead us back to a discussion of an issue that was pushed to the background by the practice of certification: excessive consumption patterns. There is an urgent need to reduce paper consumption and to encourage recycling and regional production on a smaller scale with a greater diversity of tree species and benefits for local communities.

The FSC does not question the need for countless disposable products manufactured with trees from certified plantations to enhance people’s well-being. And the certified companies are of course even less likely to question it, since they are primarily concerned with increasing their sales and profits. Half of the paper consumed in the world is disposable, in other words, not really sustainable and questionable in terms of improving “quality of life”. Moreover, it would be impossible to universalize the Western pattern of consumption, even if the products are certified. Nevertheless, companies continue to promote consumption, even introducing new products, now called “sustainable”, as if excessive consumption had not led to grave problems, such as global warming. And if all of this were not enough, the FSC is also certifying monoculture plantations that are meant to serve as carbon

sinks, thereby colluding in the false solutions put forward to fight global warming, as noted in the article on the company Plantar in this issue of the WRM bulletin.

In conclusion, our first task, which leads us back to the reason for devoting some articles of this bulletin to the subject of certification, is to alert readers and to encourage NGOs and consumers in general to take a stance on this issue. What is needed is a critical assessment of what certification has actually achieved over the years: the weakening of the struggles of local communities for their rights and natural resources and the strengthening of corporations that promote excessive consumption as a means of boosting their own profits. The time has come to pursue new paths that do not include certification.