
[How does the FAO Forest definition harm people and forests? An open letter to the FAO](#)

This open letter, calling on the FAO to revise its forest definition, will be sent to the FAO next March 21 when the International day of Forests is commemorated.

If your organization has not yet signed, we invite you to support the letter. Please send an email to fao2017@wrm.org.uy and include your organization's name and country.

[Signatures as of March 16, 2017](#)

How does the FAO Forest definition harm people and forests?

In September 2015, during the XIV World Forestry Congress, thousands of people took to the streets in Durban, South Africa, to protest against the problematic way in which the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), insists on defining forests (1). The FAO definition considers forests to be basically just “a bunch of trees”, while ignoring other fundamental aspects of forests, including their many other life-forms such as other types of plants, as well as animals, and forest-dependent human communities. Equally, it ignores the vital contribution of forests to natural processes that provide soil, water and oxygen. Besides, by defining ‘forests’ as only being a minimum area of land covered by a minimum number of trees of a minimum height and canopy percentage, FAO has actively promoted the establishment of many millions of hectares of industrial tree plantations, of mainly alien species, especially in the global South. As a consequence, only one particular sector has benefitted: the tree plantation industry. Industrial tree plantations have been the direct cause of many negative impacts on local communities and their forests; which have been well-documented (2).

The protest march that took place in Durban in 2015 had people holding up banners saying *Plantations are not Forests!*, and ended in front of the venue of the World Forestry Congress, which was organised by the FAO. In response to a call from civil society leaders at the march, a WFC official left the Congress building to receive a petition that had been signed by over 100,000 individuals and groups from around the world. The petition called on the FAO to urgently change its forest definition and to define forests by their true meaning. But once again, the FAO did not change its definition.

Nevertheless, something new did happen: Unlike the silence in response to previous demands for the FAO to change its flawed forest definition, this time FAO reacted to the protest, and sent a letter in response. One point in the FAO letter is particularly interesting. It stated: “*There are, in fact, over 200 national definitions of forests that reflect a variety of stakeholders in this matter...*”, and goes on to say, “*...to facilitate the reporting of data..., a globally valid, simple and operational categorization of forests is required*” in order that it can “*enable consistent comparisons over longer periods of time on global forest development and change*”. In writing this, the FAO attempts to convince us that its role

is merely one of harmonizing the 200-plus different definitions of forests that different countries have.

But is it really true that the existing FAO forest definition did not influence the way the 200 national definitions of forests were formulated in the first place? And is the FAO correct when it claims that the many different national forest definitions are a result of the reflections of a variety of stakeholders in these countries, again playing down its own influence?

We believe the opposite to be true. First of all, FAO's forest definition was adopted a long time ago, in 1948. According to a recent joint analysis by different authors of forest concepts and definitions, *"FAO's definition, agreed on by all its [UN] members, is the first to be used by all countries for harmonized reporting; the definition adopted by FAO remains the most widely used forest definition today"* (3).

A good country to use as an example to see if the FAO definition is being used, is Brazil, the country with the highest forest cover in the global South, and according to official sources, almost 8 million hectares of industrial tree plantations, mostly eucalyptus monocultures. In its 2010 (4) publication *"Forests of Brazil"* the Brazilian Forest Service (SBF), under the national government Ministry of Environment and responsible for forest-related issues *"... considers as a forest the woody vegetation types that come closest to the forest definition of the Organization of the United Nations for Food and Agriculture (FAO)."* As a logical progression from basing its definition on what FAO already defined, it states that *"Brazil is a country... of natural and planted forests"*, where *"planted forests"* refers to the 8 million hectares of mostly eucalyptus monocultures. How the Brazilian government defines a forest is therefore not the result of a process that *"... reflects a variety of stakeholders in this matter"*. On the contrary, it is rather a result of what the FAO had already determined.

But the influence of the FAO's forest definition goes beyond just determining national forest definitions. In these times of climate change, the FAO's definition has been the main point of reference to define what a forest is under the UN climate change convention (UNFCCC). By adopting the FAO's narrow wood-based definition, the UNFCCC has also promoted a view of forests being an area of land containing only trees. For the UNFCCC, it's mainly the trees in a forest that matter because of their capacity to store carbon as they grow, and not forest-dependent communities. Such affected communities are most negatively impacted by restrictions placed on their use of forest resources by *"forest carbon offset projects"*, also often referred to as REDD+ projects (5). A forest definition only focused on trees opens the door to including *"planted forests"* – read: industrial tree plantations – a completely false way of *"reducing deforestation and forest degradation"*, as an option under the climate change convention through which carbon can supposedly be sequestered from the atmosphere and permanently stored. In practice this is just another money-making opportunity for the tree plantation industry, and a major threat to communities affected by the trend of expanding *"carbon sink"* tree plantations.

Following the latest UNFCCC negotiations, countries have recently been revising their forest legislation, in the hope of attracting so-called 'climate finance'. Unsurprisingly, the definitions used are largely based on the FAO's forest definition. In Mozambique, for example, at a workshop on REDD+, a consultant proposed a new forest definition for the country. Just like the FAO's definition, it is also based on the presence of trees saying that a forest is an area with *"...Trees with the potential to reach a height of 5 metres at maturity.."* Also in Indonesia, the Ministry of Environment and Forests submission to the UN Climate Conference in 2015, stated that it had *"...adjusted the FAO forest definition..."* in order to define its forests. Once again a definition that defines and values a forest only through its trees, and that divides *"forests"* into a number of different categories including *"natural forest"* and something called *"plantation forests"* (6).

The FAO's forest definition also influences the actions of the financial and development institutions promoting wood-based activities such as the industrial logging of forests, industrial tree plantations, and REDD+ carbon offsets. The main example is the World Bank (WB) which as part of the United Nations conglomerate has been partnering with the FAO for decades in a number of forest-related initiatives. They again joined forces in one of the most ambitious plans launched during UNFCCC COP 21 in Paris, the so-called African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100) (7). AFR100 aims to cover 100 million hectares of deforested and so-called "degraded" lands in different African countries with trees. The World Bank will make US\$ 1 billion available for this plan. But to understand what the World Bank views as "reforestation", it is crucial to see how the Bank itself defines a forest. Unsurprisingly, its definition is also borrowed from that of the FAO, describing a forest as "*An area of land...with tree crown cover of more than 10% that have trees...*" (8) . By defining forests in this way, the World Bank opens the door wide for tree plantation companies expanding their large-scale monoculture tree plantations over community territories in Africa to be part of the ambitious "restoration" plan it is promoting together with the FAO and other partners. The AFR100 proposal strongly resembles the failed Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) from the 1980's, which was also dreamed up by the World Bank in collaboration with the FAO.

Final remarks

There is an urgent need for the FAO to stop misrepresenting industrial tree plantations as "planted forests" or "forestry", because national governments, other UN institutions, and financial institutions, as well as the mainstream media will then follow its inappropriate example. This deliberate confusion of tree plantations with forests is misleading people, because forests in general are viewed as something positive and beneficial. After all, who could be opposed to "forests"?

Above all, the FAO should take full responsibility for the strong influence its "forest" definition has over global economic, ecological and social policies. The 2015 petition that was presented to the FAO in Durban states that it portrays itself in its founding principles as being a "neutral forum where all nations meet as equals". To live up to this claim requires, among other things, that the FAO must urgently revise its forest definition from one that reflects the preferences and perspectives of timber, pulp/paper, rubber, and carbon trading companies, to one that reflects ecological realities as well as the views of forest-dependent peoples. In contrast to the existing dominant influence of wood-based industries over the FAO, a transparent and open process to establish new and appropriate definitions for forests and tree plantations must also engage effectively with those women and men who directly depend on and therefore protect forests.

Notes:

- 1 - "Land with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares (ha). The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 meters (m) at maturity in situ."
- 2 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/tree-plantations/>
- 3 - Chazdon, R.L., Brancalion, P.H.S., Laestadius, L. et al. *Ambio* (2016). doi:10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y. When is a forest a forest? Forest concepts and definitions in the era of forest and landscape restoration (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y>)
- 4 - http://www.mma.gov.br/estruturas/sfb/arquivos/livro_portugus_95.pdf
- 5 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>
- 6 - http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/seasia/Indonesia/pdf/FREL_Report.pdf
- 7 - <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/about-afr100>
- 8 - <http://tinyurl.com/hsb6cwy>

Sign-ons March 16, 2017

Abibiman Foundation in Ghana
Acción Ecologica
Acción por la Biodiversidad
Africa Europe Fair and Justice Network
African Women's Network for Community management of Forests (REFACOF)
Aliança RECOs – Redes de Cooperação Comunitária Sem Fronteiras
Alianza Biodiversidad
All India Forum of Forest Movements.
Allure Marketing
Ambiente, Desarrollo y Capacitación
ARA
ARBA (Asociación para la Recuperación del Bosque Autóctono)
Árboles sin Fronteras
ARPENT - Association pour la Restauration et la Protection de l'Environnement Naturel du Tonnerrois
Asoc. Conservacionista YISKI
Asoc. Lihuen Antu
Asociación Amigos de los Parques Nacionales (AAPN)
Asociación Comunitaria Soluciones
Asociación de Usuarios del Agua de Saltillo AUAS, A.C.
Asociacion Ecologica del Oriente, Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Asociacion ecologista rio mocoreta
Asociación Ecologistas en Acción Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
Asociación Geográfica Ambiental
Asociación Qachuu Aloom "Madre Tierra"
Asociacion Red de Coordinacion en Biodiversidad
Associação dos Geógrafos Brasileiros, Seção Local Três Lagoas (AGB/TL)
Attac France
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance
BankTrack
BCMTY.org Chile
BCMTY.org New Zealand
Berggorilla & Regenland Direkthilfe
Biodiversity Conservation Center,
Biofuelwatch, UK/US.
Biowatch
Blog Combate Racismo Ambiental
Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS)
Botshabelo Unemployment Movement
Brainforest
Brighter Green
Bruno Manser Fund
BUND - Friends of the Earth Germany
Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD)
Censat Agua Viva.
Center for Food Safety

Centro de Investigación, Validación y Transferencia Tecnológica para el Desarrollo Rural, Ac
Centro Internazionale Crocevia
CETRI - Centre Tricontinental
Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat
Climate change awareness kenya
Coalition Against Land Grabbing
COECOCEIBA-Amigos de la tierra Costa Rica
Colectivo VientoSur
Comité Nacional para la Defensa y Conservación de Los Chimalapas
Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN)
Conselho Indigenista Missionário
Construisions Ensemble leMonde

Consumers Association of Penang
Cork Forest Conservation Alliance
Crescente Fértil
Denkhausbremen
Diálogo 2000 - Jubileo Sur Argentina
Dogwood Alliance
EcoNexus
Edenvale RiverWatch
Environmental Association for Latin America
European Civic Forum
FASE Espírito Santo
Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH)
Finance & Trade Watch (Austria)
Flemish Centre for Indigenous Peoples
Focus on the Global South
Forest Observatory
Forests of the world
Forum Carajas
Fórum Mudanças Climáticas e Justiça Social
Forum Ökologie & Papier
Fossil-Free South Africa
Friends of the Earth Interantional
Friends of the Earth Sweden
Friends of the Siberian Forests
Fundación Azul Ambientalistas
Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunal Integral
Fundacion Recysol
GeaSphere
Geografía Viva
Global Forest Coalition
Global Justice Ecology Project
GRAIN
Great Ape Project
Greenpeace International
GroundWork
Grupo de Investigación de Suelo y Agua (GISA)
Grupo de Trabalho em Assuntos Agrários (GT Agrária - Seção Rio-Niteroi) da Associação dos Geógrafos

Brasileiros (AGB)
Grupo ETC
Grupo Guayubira
Grupo Semillas
Guardianes del Iberá
Human Rights Law Network
ICCA Consortium
ICRA International
Indigenous Environmental Network
Instancia de Consenso del Pueblo Maya Q'eqchi'-Poqomchi' de Alta Verapaz "K'amol B'e"
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Imani, Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Instituto Socioambiental
International Center for Technology Assessment
International Tree Foundation
Intipachamama
Jubileo Sur Americas
Just Forests
Justica Ambiental / FoE Mozambique
Kalpavriksh
La Asamblea Veracruzana de Iniciativas y Defensa Ambiental (LAVIDA)
Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, AC
Maiouri Nature Guyane
MEFP
Mesa Coordinadora De Jubilados y Pensionados de la República Argentina Filial Chaco
MLT – Movimento de Luta pela Terra
Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)
Movimento Amigos da Rua Gonçalo de Carvalho
Movimento Camponês Popular
Movimento Mulheres pela P@Z!
Movimiento Colombiano en Defensa del Territorio y afectados por Represas "Rios Vivos"
MST- Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
Nature and Youth Sweden
Naturvernforbundet - FoENorway
Núcleo de Pesquisa Estado, Sociedade e Desenvolvimento na Amazônia Ocidental- NUPESDAO
Oasis Earth
Observatório dos Conflitos no Campo (OCCA)/UFES
OFRANEH
Oilwatch Latinoamérica
OLCA - Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales
Orang-Utans in Not e.V.
OPIROMA - Organização dos Povos Indígenas de Rondônia, Noroeste do Mato Grosso e Sul do Amazona
Otros Mundos AC/Amigos de La Tierra México
Pacific Institute of Resource Management
PAPDA - Plateforme haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif
Partner Südmexikos e.V.
PGU (Personal-Global-Universal): Towards Equitable Sustainable Holistic Development
PLANT
Pro Natura – Friends of the Earth Switzerland
Programa Universitario Diversidad Cultural e Interculturalidad - UNAM oficina Oaxaca

Protect the Forest
Proyecto Gran Simio (GAP/PGS-España)
Proyecto Lemu - Epuyen - Chubut
PUSH
Rainforest Foundation
Rainforest Relief
RECOMA - Red Latinoamericana contra los monocultivos de árboles
Red Argentina de Ambiente y Desarrollo
Red de Acción por los Derechos Ambientales (RADA)
Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad
Red de Mujeres Rurales de Costa Rica
Red de Semillas "Resembrando e Intercambiando"
Refopar(Reforestemos Paraguay)
Reforest the Earth
Regenwald statt Palmöl"
Robin Wood e.V.
Russian Social Ecological Union
Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia)
Salva la Selva
SAVIA - Escuela de Pensamiento Ecologista
School of Democratic Economics, Indonesia
Siempuu - Foundation for Social Movements' Cooperation sr.
Solidarity Sweden - Latin America
SOS Forêt du Sud
Swedish foundation Naturarvet
Synchronicity Earth
Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity
Terra Australis Co-Op Ltd
Terra Nuova - Centro per il volontariato Onlus
The Bioscience Resource Project
The Corner House
The Gaia Foundation
The Indigenous People of Mariepsko
ThiSaBi
TimberWatch
Transnational Institute
Unión Universal de Desarrollo Solidario
Universidade Federal de São João Del Rei
Verdegaia
WALHI/Friends of the Earth Indonesia
War on Want
Woodland League
World Rainforest Movement
Zo Indigeous Forum (ZIF)
ZZ2