
What FAO's definition conceals

As it does every two years, FAO has published its report "State of the World's Forests 2007" (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/009/a0773e/a0773e00.htm>), where "progress towards sustainable forest management" is examined. Although it admits, "Deforestation continues at an alarming rate of about 13 million hectares a year," the report's overall conclusion is that "progress is being made" and it adds: "but it is very uneven."

It would seem that the serious state of forests today and of the environment in general cannot be acknowledged: the mass deforestation of mangroves to give way to shrimp farms; the vast stretches of land granted in concession to agro-industry (for industrial tree or crop plantations); mining; hydroelectric dams; industrial logging – all these activities imply degradation and/or destruction of forests with the consequent social and economic impacts on local communities. Practically none of this appears in the FAO report. Nor are the underlying causes of this destruction identified.

The report states that some regions "especially those with developing economies and tropical ecosystems continue to lose forest area, while lacking adequate institutions to reverse this trend." In the case of Africa it is stated that "the ability of institutions to implement sustainable forest management is limited, owing largely to the overall unfavourable social and economic situation."

In this respect, it is timely to quote what Assitou Ndinga of the Democratic Republic of Congo said on the external factors affecting the decisions of national forestry administrations: "Globalization and the insertion of Central African countries in increasingly dense networks of international links have positive but also coercive effects that weaken their commitment with the forest ecosystem cause. This is due to western hegemony and to the culture of international relations sociology in the western countries and to the African people's scant feelings of nationalism." He also added that official western diplomacy "is usually at the service of the forces which, in the past, caused the weakening of the structures and impoverishment of the region; forces whose primary concern is personal interest but that orchestrate the power of their own State and international conventions" (see WRM Bulletin N° 107).

To this lack of acknowledgement of the dimension of forest loss and lack of delving more deeply into the causes of this loss is added another shortfall: the definition including industrial tree plantations as a forest subcategory, that of "planted forests." This definition contributes to legitimize the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, concealing the poverty, social exclusion, and environmental destruction it has left in numerous countries in the South. FAO erroneously and confusedly addresses the concept of forest cover, equalling it to forests and including in it plantations, thus resulting in an underestimation of the degree of forest destruction and in making the severity of the tree plantation problem invisible. Furthermore, the data provided by FAO regarding tree plantations conceal not only the nature of the problem and its true magnitude – regarding the percentage of area occupied in the affected countries – but also those responsible for it, the mechanisms for appropriation of natural assets, and the impacts on people and the environment.

We are not implying here that FAO is the only actor in the conversion of vast stretches of ecosystems

– grasslands, forests, paramos – into “green deserts” of homogeneous tree plantations. It is undeniable that the driving forces behind expansion are fundamentally the major economic interests. And among them, the world paper pulp industry seeking cheap raw material to supply the North’s wasteful consumption. However, FAO has been instrumental to the process in its capacity as “expert” agency, actively participating in international processes (such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development) and its guidance, promotion and legitimization is being taken as a starting point at different international fora and proceedings.

As a way of showing the derivations arising from the definition of tree plantations as forests, we will provide some comments on the following sections of the report: Planted forests, Forest tenure, Forest landscape restoration, and Forestry and poverty reduction.

FAO’s “planted forests”

The section headed under the title of “Planted forests” (page 88) shows a table identifying the 10 countries with largest area of “planted forests” 2005, among which the United States, Russia, Japan, Sweden, Poland, Finland together with Brazil, India, China and Sudan.

Beyond our absolute discrepancy with the outrageous idea that an ecosystem can be “planted” the table is exceedingly misleading. FAO’s definition of “planted forests” matches “forests with planted components” – as would be the case of Finland or Sweden – with “plantations for production” generally with exotic fast-growing species, defining the large-scale monoculture tree plantations advancing on the territories of the countries of the South and which remain invisible in FAO’s statistics.

For over 10 years now we have been carrying out a Campaign on this issue, based on evidence provided by indigenous and peasant communities, social and environmental organizations, academics, research workers and affected persons and others who are sensitive to the issue. We have hundreds of articles and books gathering complaints and endeavouring to give a voice to those who are ignored and wrecked by the corporation power.

Research carried out in South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and testimonials gathered in these and other countries such as Malaysia, India, Australia, Kenya, New Zealand, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Ghana and others report the serious past and continuing negative impacts monoculture tree plantations cause in these countries.

However, only two of the above-mentioned countries – Brazil and India – appear on the FAO list, while in all the others tree plantations are made invisible. The over 2 million hectares in Chile, the 3 million hectares in Indonesia, the million and a half hectares in South Africa, the 5 million hectares in Brazil and the hundreds of thousands of hectares planted with trees in dozens of countries in the South would seem not to exist. However, they do and their negative impacts have already been documented.

At the same time, the FAO table hides the percentage of territory occupied by plantations in each country or region and with it, the influence of their impacts. For example, in the case of Swaziland, plantations occupy 8 percent of the national territory and are located on the best land. The same happens in many countries, where certain states or provinces contain very high percentages of their land given over to such monoculture plantations (Kwazulunatal in South Africa, Misiones in Argentina, Espirito Santo in Brazil, Chile’s Ninth Region, etc.)

Forest tenure

FAO states in its report (page 80) “Public forest ownership remains by far the predominant category in all regions.” Adding that “At the global level, 84 percent of forest lands and 90 percent of other wooded lands are publicly owned.”

A figure is shown in this section, illustrating the percentages for “forest ownership” in 19 countries of South East Asia where it appears that 92% are public property – totalling 365 million hectares of forest – while industry appears with a meagre 1%.

To start off with, these figures conceal two things: that although they are in public hands, many forests are destroyed by companies enjoying concession rights for extractive activities – logging, mining – and for the establishment of plantations and it is precisely these concessions that give them rights implying that these forests are in private hands.

This is a situation occurring in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Panama, the government has approved major concessions for the development of mining industries in forests, causing prejudice to the people living in them, such as in the case of copper and gold mining in the Ngobe-Bugle and Kuna territories. In 2005, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 103 timber companies received concessions covering 14,752,600 hectares of forests. In Gabon, most of the forests have already been allocated to timber companies, while over half the territory of Suriname is under concession, benefiting a handful of people. Among these concessions are those granted for timber exploitation and gold in tropical forests of vital importance to the Marune. The forestry sector in the Central African Republic is dominated by companies and capitals of French origin, intervening in the exploitation of close on 3.2 million hectares of forests allocated under concession. Concessions granted in the state of Kachin in Burma – one of the last major areas of forest remaining intact in continental Southeast Asia – enable a small elite to enrich itself with the extraction of natural resources, logging and mining. In Cambodia at the end of the nineties the government granted over a million hectares of logging concessions – at the expense of the local inhabitants’ lands and forests that have been their means of livelihood for generations – and land concessions, many of them to establish large-scale industrial tree plantations which, according to FAO criteria, appear as forests.

Also contained in these statistics of forests are the plantations in Indonesia belonging to the Asia Pulp & Paper Company (APP), involved in the pulp and paper industry. APP has been granted two concessions for the plantation of trees for pulp in the provinces of Riau and Jambi. The latter works with *Acacia mangium* as raw material for pulp. So far, the area already converted or to be converted into “Acacia land” by the company covers 500,000 hectares in that province. In Riau, it is fast establishing plantations to feed its pulp mills, turning forests into plantations and superimposing them on community lands. APP also has another concession in the south of Sumatra, covering 380,000 hectares. During the seventies, the Indonesian government declared 140 million hectares of land as State forests, ensuring State control over forests traditionally managed by thousands of local communities. As with concessions for industrial logging, the government grants concessions to the pulp and paper industry without considering who lives on the land or who has traditionally used the forest (see WRM Bulletin N°101). The plan is now to establish another five million hectares of *Acacia* plantations for pulp.

Forest landscape restoration

In this section (page 76), FAO defines that “forest landscape restoration” involves “practical approaches that do not try to re-establish the pristine forests of the past” but to adopt other

approaches that “restore the functions of forests and trees and enhance their contribution to sustainable livelihoods and land uses.”

To illustrate this model, the page on this issue shows a photo with the caption that serves to give a clear idea of the goal: “a mosaic of planted forests for wood production and secondary naturally regenerated forest for protection of valleys and waterways,” in Bahia State, Brazil.

Between 1970 and 1985, Bahia lost 70 percent of its native forests with the arrival of the pulp and paper companies Suzano-Bahia Sul, Aracruz, CAF Santa Bárbara Ltda. and Veracel. Only 4 percent of the original Mata Atlantica remains in the extreme south of Bahia in reserve areas and over half the arable land is in the hands of the companies. The eviction of rural workers, quilombolas (slave descendents), indigenous peoples and small farmers has caused an increase in the Favelas (shanty towns), the disintegration of groups and families and violence and poverty.

This destructive process is far removed from restoration. The euphemism neglects the tragedy of the occupation of territories in the South by powerful groups seeking favourable conditions for their monoculture tree plantations – that is to say, cheap labour and land and soil, water and climate conditions favouring rapid growth of the exotic species introduced, while leaving pollution and social conflict out of their own countries.

In September 2006, a large group of “men, women and young people, rural and urban workers, indigenous people, scientists, teachers and students” from Bahia denounced the “situation of degradation and poverty found in the region of the Extreme South of Bahia, promoted by the Veracel pulp company, a Stora Enso joint venture.” In their letter they affirmed that the company caused “approximately 400 [rural] workers” to lose their jobs. Most of these people moved to the outskirts of neighbouring cities. Additionally “Throughout the region, extensive eucalyptus plantation has promoted the disappearance of several rivers and streams” (see WRM Bulletin N° 110).

For these people these are neither figures nor statistics, but tragic situations which affect their lives and their future.

Forestry and poverty reduction

In this section (page 78), FAO mentions the possible links between national forestry programmes and poverty reduction strategies and comments on the conclusions of various interviews with government authorities. Once again, when referring to the contribution made by “forest resources” to homes and the identification of opportunities and obstacles for the contribution of the forestry sector to alleviate poverty, the problem of industrial tree plantations is entirely overlooked.

What is understood by “forest resources”? If we are talking of the forest and its products, much can be said about the contribution they make to the communities that live or depend on them. Food is found in forests, such as honey, fruit, seeds, nuts, roots, tubers, insects, wild animals. They use the resin, rattan, bamboo, tannin, colourants, leaves, straw, skins, and leather for self-consumption or as a source of income when sold. The plants found there serve as fodder and are of particular importance for the production of cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, and camels. To this should be added the important contribution made by the forest ecosystem to regulating the water cycle.

Here again we return to the problem of what is concealed in the FAO concept of equating plantations with forests. Behind this euphemism is hidden the suffering of numerous peoples in Asia, Latin America and Africa, where monoculture tree plantations are destroying peasant farming, substituting

the production of food, preventing the necessary agrarian land reforms and devolution and demarcation of indigenous lands, displacing communities from their land and ecosystems and dismantling their culture.

Acacia plantations are destroying the Belum and Temenggor forests in Malaysia; in Cambodia, monoculture plantations of acacia, pine and eucalyptus indiscriminately advance on the grasslands that the local Phnong population use for grazing cattle and on ancestral forests and graveyards that are an essential part of their culture. In Indonesia, the introduction of tree plantations to supply the pulp and paper industry has come into conflict with local populations' boundaries and ownership, seen in the enormous number of "complaints" and "claims." In Ecuador, in 2006, young people from Muisne carried out action against the Japanese company EUCAPACIFIC's tree plantations that are having a profound effect on the region, depleting their water, flora and fauna that used to be abundant and used by the local population and evicting the owners themselves from the area. In Colombia this year the Permanent Tribunal of the People – Colombian Chapter met to bring to trial transnational companies focusing on the issue of biodiversity and exploitation of natural resources in that country, accusing Smurfit Kapa – Carton de Colombia among other things, "of violating human, environmental, social and cultural rights." "The destruction of tropical rainforests, Andean forests and other ecosystems is destroying the communities' social weave, traditional and cultural means of production, eliminating and contaminating water resources; influencing government policy-making in the country and putting pressure on State officials to favour the multinational's interests."

The forestry companies arrive with great promises of employment, selling the message that they "offer opportunities for employment, even in the most remote areas of the country." But research and testimonials tell a very different story (see "Promises of employment and destruction of labour" <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/fase.html>; WRM Bulletins N° 74 and 69). Final employment figures are very far from those announced and work in the plantations is usually seasonal, outsourced, poorly paid and very often takes place under deplorable conditions.

We could continue mentioning numerous more cases that we have heard and denounced in our campaign against industrial tree plantations. Unfortunately, they are many.

While peoples and social movements appeal for food sovereignty, FAO is walking along paths leading to the opposite direction. It is high time for the organization to address the underlying causes of deforestation. We would like to see a report dealing in depth with the problems arising from unequal land tenure, the lack of participative democracy, the influence of the military and the exploitation of rural areas by urban elites, excessive consumption in high-income countries, uncontrolled industrialization – factors that are at the root of forest destruction and degradation.

Likewise, if FAO aspires to be the world agency contributing to shed light on the state of the world's forests with a view to their care and preservation, it is also responsible for making visible the urgent problem of the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations at the expense of territories, ecosystems and peoples of the countries of the South. FAO is responsible for giving a voice and an opportunity to these questionings and problems.

A first step is to acknowledge that plantations are not forests and to eliminate finally the unsustainable categorization of monoculture tree plantations as forests.

