

Will the Convention on Biological Diversity take on the challenge?

The Sixth Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) will take place in April in The Hague. Much is expected from this conference regarding forests, because this is the main thematic issue which will be addressed by the meeting. Additionally, the basis for negotiation is the draft programme of work elaborated last November by the CBD's scientific body (SBSTTA), which we welcomed (see WRM bulletin 52) as pointing at the right direction, including local peoples' rights, participation, equitable sharing of benefits, sustainable use, capacity-building and many other relevant issues.

Having said that, it is equally important to analyse the global context in which this conference is taking place, in order to understand the difficulties surrounding action to address the current drama being faced by forests and forest peoples.

The first issue that needs to be highlighted is that most of the underlying causes leading to forest destruction are actually being promoted by other intergovernmental processes and bodies such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In spite of scientific evidence proving the direct link between increasing consumption and international trade with forest destruction, those institutions insist in promoting further international commerce. In spite of ample evidence linking structural adjustment programmes with deforestation, the IMF and World Bank continue imposing the same recipe to the forest-rich countries of the South. Regardless of knowing that road-opening is the first step in forest degradation and destruction, the World Bank and regional "development" banks (IDB, AfDB, ADB) continue providing loans for further road building in forest areas.

The second issue that needs to be highlighted is that there is more than ample knowledge about the direct causes of forest loss and degradation. Everyone knows that logging, mining, oil and gas exploitation, hydroelectric dams, timber, pulpwood and oil palm plantations, shrimp farming, large-scale export-oriented agriculture and cattle raising, are destroying forests. In spite of that, the prevailing economic model is forcing forest-rich/monetary-poor southern countries to open up their economies for transnational corporations' investments in precisely those activities. The result is more forest loss and degradation.

Additionally, forests are facing another and even more dangerous threat: climate change. Even if tomorrow all governments were to agree that no more trees will be cut, forests might equally disappear or drastically change unless something is done to halt and reverse global warming. This issue is as well known as the above mentioned underlying and direct causes of deforestation. However, the relevant body created to address it (the Convention on Climate Change) has clearly shown the unwillingness of the major northern polluters (headed by the US) to commit themselves to real and substantive cuts in fossil fuel emissions. Even worse, the "solution" agreed upon is to plant millions of hectares of tree monocultures in the south to act as carbon garbage dumps (euphemistically called "carbon sinks") in the south, thus further contributing to biodiversity loss.

To make matters worse, the biotechnology industry has already entered the tree arena and is

manipulating genes to make trees grow faster, to make them resistant to herbicides, to decrease the lignin content in wood in order to increase the pulp industry's profitability. Although clearly posing a major threat to forest biodiversity, biotechnology is still on the loose (see article in the "general" section of the bulletin).

Finally, it is also necessary to highlight the dismal failure of the United Nations Forum on Forests (see article in the "general" section of the bulletin) to ensure implementation of the proposals for action agreed upon by the Intergovernmental Panel and Forum on Forests (IPF and IFF) to address the forest crisis.

That is the broader scenario in which the CBD processes is taking place. Those --and not lack of knowledge-- are the difficulties. The challenge for the CBD is to show leadership in making governments --north and south-- corporations, international and multilateral bodies and processes and other relevant actors to reverse the current pattern of social and environmental destruction in the forests.

If government delegates at the CBD are willing to take on that challenge and to come up with a credible plan of action to protect forest biodiversity, they can certainly count on us, NGOs and indigenous peoples organizations, to provide our support to its implementation.