
The World Bank in the forest

The current FPIRS process seems to be coming out with a number of ideas for the future Bank's approach to forests, some of which clearly expressed while others underlying though carrying an equally clear message. Most of these ideas are included in the OED report -whose reading we recommend- but we would like to concentrate on a few of them, which we consider to be more important.

Development is perceived as practically impossible without destroying the forests. This is the message, particularly for the so-called forest-rich countries (Cameroon, Indonesia, Brazil). The country is poor and therefore needs to use its resources unsustainably. We strongly disagree with this analysis, which sees conservation and development as opposites, which seems to forget that conservation is not equal to preservation, and which sends the concept of sustainable development into oblivion.

Linked to the above is another idea: that conservation is not an issue for Southern countries. Forest conservation is perceived as a global benefit for the rich countries and a cost for Southern ones. Therefore conservation (the OED report should have used the term preservation, which reflects what they mean) is only possible if the North channels substantial monies to the South for carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, global climate stability, etc. This is perhaps the message the Bank receives from governments, but in most cases it would receive the opposite message from indigenous and forest-dependent peoples, for whom that type of "development" implies the destruction of their livelihoods and cultures. Forest destruction is not a necessity: it is a political choice. Real conservation (sustainable use, not preservation) is possible and the Bank can strongly assist countries to achieve this purpose.

Another message -not present in the OED report, but which can be perceived when talking to Bank officials- is that the Bank's main mandate is poverty alleviation and not forest conservation. Again, this is a false dichotomy in most cases. On the contrary, in many situations forest destruction generates more poor. Surely it is the Bank's mission to avoid creating -and not only to alleviate- poverty. The OED report itself recognizes that the poor have not been a substantial cause of deforestation. In many other situations, forest destruction serves to enrich a small group of already rich people and transnationals and -in the best of cases- does not alleviate existing poverty. Finally, in those cases in which the poor effectively destroy the forest, the reason usually lies in governmental economic and social policies which the Bank could help modify and thereby contribute to both alleviate poverty and to protect the forest.

One of the main ideas coming out of this process -very much emphasized in the OED report- is that "forest plantations" should be strongly supported, as a way of relieving pressures from "conservation forests." This ignores the fact that tree plantations usually result in the destruction of forests -as highlighted in the Indonesian OED study- and that there's no proof regarding their usefulness in this respect. More importantly, the term "forest plantation" is used without describing its meaning and therefore includes socially and environmentally positive small-scale plantations aimed at satisfying local needs -which we totally support- and large scale tree monocrops having strong negative

impacts on people and the environment. The Bank should therefore clarify which type of plantations it seeks to promote.

A further message is that the prohibition of the 1991 Forest Policy for the Bank to finance -under any circumstances- commercial logging in primary tropical moist forests should be eliminated, because it had a "chilling effect" on the Bank's involvement in any type of forest management projects in those types of forests. Given the current situation, where primary forests of all types are decreasing at an alarming rate, we believe that the Bank should -on the contrary- extend this provision to all types of primary forests, to include tropical dry, temperate and boreal forests. The Bank has sufficient experience to know which projects might be socially and environmentally positive and need not feel "chilled" because of possible criticisms. Structural adjustment has received far more criticism and no-one felt so "chilled" within the Bank that it led to a suspension of those loans.

There seems to be an unproven conviction that the 1991 Forest Policy has been "superseded" and that it needs to be changed to adapt to the new situation. However, what the country studies clearly show is that the 1991 policy was not adequately implemented, and that major Bank activities -such as structural adjustment lending- completely ignored the possible impacts on forests. The policy may need some adaptations, but the basic conclusion stemming from the OED studies is that it was never fully implemented. We cannot understand the reason for this sudden urge for change.

Finally, it is important to stress -to be fair- that the OED has carried out a major, serious, and very valuable evaluation of the implementation of the Bank's Forest Policy. The fact that we don't agree with some of its conclusions does not mean that we don't appreciate the work which the different country teams carried out. It is equally important to stress that the Bank has opened up for scrutiny and that it has organized a number of consultations to receive input from all interested parties. We welcome this initiative and will try to contribute positively to the process.

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