
The Green Economy according to FAO: More “green deserts”

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is hosting a Rio+20 side event on June 18, called “Forests: The heart of a green economy”. FAO states that sustainable forest-based enterprises can offer a pathway for the transition toward a low-carbon economy, and announces that this event “will highlight the role of forests and industry in fostering local livelihoods.” It adds that “climate-smart” management of forests is increasingly seen as “a collaborative effort between the public custodians of forests, private enterprises and local communities.” (1)

As we know, there are countless experiences in genuinely sustainable forest management, practiced by forest peoples over the course of many generations, and based on deep knowledge and a holistic vision of the forest. However, these communities are facing ever greater threats to their survival, because another, predatory form of forest management, based on logging, the expansion of industrial plantations of trees like oil palm, mining and energy infrastructure projects, are leading to ever greater destruction. Between 2000 and 2010, 130 million hectares of tropical forest were destroyed. And the trend of “environmental services” – another topic on the agenda of the FAO side event – poses yet another threat to forest peoples, in the form of REDD+ projects (see WRM Bulletins N° 169 and 175).

The fact that forests are still viewed solely as a source of timber, and are exploited by private companies that profit from the consumption of luxury wood products, mainly in the countries of the North, is closely tied to FAO’s definition of “forest”: “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.” But there is much more to forests than trees; they encompass a wealth of biological diversity which includes human communities that live in and/or depend on them. (2)

What is needed, as FAO points out, is a “collaborative effort”. But in the case of this event, that collaboration is limited to panellists representing governments, the World Bank, and the forestry industry, including the Brazilian Pulp and Paper Association (BRACELPA), one of whose members is Suzano, and UPM, a Finnish transnational. Among those invited to participate, there are no representatives of local communities, nor of those who manage forests in a genuinely sustainable way, nor of those who are affected by the activities of monoculture tree plantation or logging companies – many of which are certified by the FSC as “sustainable” despite the suffering they cause to local communities, as denounced in countless cases. It is no surprise that the FSC is also represented at the FAO side event.

It is obvious that for the communities negatively impacted by the policies promoted by FAO, it would be much better if FAO – a UN agency – sought to talk directly with them, and not with the private sector, as a way of reviewing its definition of forest. This is the heart of the matter. Reconsidering this definition, and engaging in dialogue with local communities to develop policy guidelines for effective protection of forests, would really be a smart path.

(1) <http://www.fao.org/forestry/trade/76571/en/>

(2) <http://www.wrm.org.uy/forests.html>

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