
[At the end of the International Year of Forests, is there anything to celebrate?](#)

The United Nations (UN) declared this year, 2011, the International Year of Forests. Now that 2011 is coming to an end, it would be interesting to take a look back for a brief overview.

The theme of the International Year was “Celebrating Forests for People”. Back in January, we asked, will the world's forest peoples actually have any reason to “celebrate”? Will progress be made this year in fighting the direct causes of deforestation, such as logging and the expansion of agribusiness? What about the so-called indirect or underlying causes, that is, the reasons behind the destruction of forests, such as an economy fuelled by the drive for profit and financial speculation, and excessive consumption that benefits only a small minority of the world's people?

REDD+

Once again, the international agenda on forests was dominated by the debate over the REDD+ mechanism. Banks, consultants, governments and even many NGOs were heavily caught up in attempts to move forward with the implementation of REDD+. Billions of dollars have been spent on these efforts, as denounced by a platform of NGOs, including indigenous peoples' organizations (1). These are funds that could have been used to encourage and build on successful initiatives for forest conservation and respect for human rights around the world, with no connection to the REDD mechanism.

What is rather striking is the “blindness” of those who most forcefully insist on promoting REDD+, such as the World Bank and various consulting firms. It seems they are unable to see the hard evidence of human rights violations taking place where REDD+ pilot projects are being implemented, as demonstrated by the case study undertaken by WRM on a project being jointly implemented by Conservation International and the Walt Disney Company in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2), among other studies. They are equally blind to the growing number of studies that have determined that REDD+ will not work due to serious obstacles, and particularly as a market mechanism (3). The many problems that have come to light led a coalition of indigenous peoples and other local communities to launch a call at COP 17 in Durban for a moratorium on REDD projects (see the article in this issue of the bulletin).

While Brazil strives to portray itself as the protector of the world's largest rainforest, a group of parliamentarians, with links to agribusiness, tried to reform the country's Forest Code this year, opening the way for the legal deforestation of millions of hectares, primarily for the benefit of those same agribusiness interests. Meanwhile, the proposed means of compensating for this destruction would be REDD+ projects and payment for environmental services, for which specific legislation is being speedily drafted. The promotion of a “green economy”, based on the commodification and control of natural resources and land, threatens the legally guaranteed rights of indigenous and traditional communities in Brazil.

The increased pollution resulting from this model also aggravates the pollution caused by large

transnational corporations in the North, which implies increased negative impacts on indigenous populations and other communities who live near these industries and their extractive areas in the North, exacerbating racism and other environmental and social injustices. In the South it also means, in the medium and long term, negative impacts on rainforests, making REDD+ a counterproductive proposal, even for those who believe that a “standing forest” and certain amount of control over it will guarantee their future.

There is a lack of structural proposals to tackle the direct and indirect causes of deforestation. Those that do exist continue to be viewed by governments and their partners as overly “radical”. But without these “radical” proposals, the climate will suffer an increase in the average global temperature of close to four degrees within a very short time (4). This will mean a genuinely radical change in the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world, especially women, who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

The definition of forests

Another factor that contributes to deforestation is, without a doubt, FAO's definition of forest, which allows monoculture tree plantations to be classified as forests. WRM undertook an intensive mini-campaign on this issue this year, developing tools and submitting a letter to FAO in September in which it urged the organization to urgently initiate a review of this definition, with the effective participation of forest peoples.

The opposition to the current definition of forests may have had an echo at COP 17 in the recommendation made by the SBSTA (5), the advisory body of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, in the framework of discussion around REDD. The SBSTA recommends that each individual country be allowed to adopt its own definition of forest, as opposed to a single definition imposed by the UNFCCC. Although, on the one hand, this opens up the opportunity to fight in each country for definitions that exclude monoculture tree plantations and better reflect the local reality of forests, it also opens up the possibility of the adoption of definitions that even further promote the expansion of monoculture plantations.

It is this second possibility that is most likely, given the enormous lobbying power of companies in the sector and the financial institutions that persuade national governments to promote tree plantations. Some government representatives have grown accustomed to having their electoral campaigns financed by plantation companies, who in exchange are provided with lands and various state incentives and other benefits. Without a clear definition and reference established at the international level, the door is open to definitions that best serve corporate interests.

The lack of interest in addressing the underlying causes of deforestation is even more obvious when we look at the advances made in plans to promote false solutions for the climate crisis. A prime example is the use of agrofuels, especially wood biomass, to generate electricity in Europe. The aim is to maintain the current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, turning once again to certification systems like the FSC for eucalyptus and pine plantations and the RSPO for oil palm plantations geared to the production of palm oil. Neither of these systems prevents the occurrence of serious human rights violations, as demonstrated by the article from Indonesia in this month's issue of the bulletin. Governments prefer to cater to the interests of corporations and banks, rather than worrying about the well-being and future of people and the environment, and even the climate. They attempt to confront the economic crisis with the same models as always, without bothering to establish limits on the exploitation of natural resources or to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the big polluters.

Resistance

We would have little to celebrate this year if it were not for the concerted challenges to “greenwashing” through certification systems, like the FSC label, in the countries of the North (6), and above all, if it were not for the resistance of the peoples of the forests and other biomes who have been struggling in various countries of the South against deforestation, and have fought back in areas where governments are providing incentives for the establishment of monoculture tree plantations and other forms of land grabbing.

The urgent need to protect the rights of these communities is becoming increasingly obvious. The alternative is the perpetuation of the violation of their rights and the criminalization of people who are only fighting to defend those rights, something that is happening in many different countries, from the pine plantation areas in Chile to the eucalyptus and oil palm plantations in Indonesia. Respecting the rights of the peoples who live in and depend on forests and other biomes is the best way to conserve forests, reduce the impacts of climate change, and promote food security and sovereignty.

To advance in this direction, we believe that it is fundamental to support and link together the most diverse resistance processes, from the struggle for forest conservation to the struggle against the international financial system, creating ties of solidarity among the peoples of the South and also with the peoples of the North, in order to increase the pressure on corporations and governments.

It is essential that the voices of different peoples, opposed to the privatization and appropriation of land and natural resources and in defence of their basic human rights, have a louder and more coordinated echo at the next big international events, such as Rio+20 (see the Rio+20 call for mobilization in this issue of the bulletin). And finally, we also firmly back the global call to fight land grabbing launched last month in Mali, Africa by La Via Campesina (see the related article also in this issue).

- 1- http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/REDD/Open_Letter_no_REDD.pdf
- 2- http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/REDD/DRC_REDD_en.pdf
- 3- <http://www.fern.org/carbonmarketswillnotdeliver>
- 4- <http://outrapolitica.wordpress.com/2011/11/17/a-un-ano-de-cancun-y-dias-de-durban-mas-de-40-c/>
- 5- <http://www.redd-monitor.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/l25a01.pdf>
- 6- An example was the denounce to the FSC in Belgium derived from the case of Veracel Celulose in Brazil (see <http://www.duurzaamoppapier.be>)