An emergency call to action for the forests, their peoples and life on earth. The Penang Declaration: 10 years later

An emergency call to action for the forests, their peoples and life on earth

Ten years ago, the World Rainforest Movement met in Malaysia and issued the Penang Declaration. Much of what it stated was at the time original thinking and challenged the "received wisdom" of most national and international experts. It is therefore important to take stock of the changes that have occured since then in order to identify the changes that still need to be implemented to save the world's endangered forests and to ensure the livelihood of the people that depend on them.

The Penang Declaration begins by stating that "Forests, both temperate and tropical, are an integral part of the life support systems of the planet, performing numerous ecological and social functions that are essential for the continuation of life as we know it on earth. Those functions include: regulating climate at both the regional and global level; providing a habitat for the majority of species on earth; providing a homeland and spiritual basis for millions of forest peoples; maintaining and conserving soils; regulating hydrological cycles and ensuring water supplies."

The above quote is now accepted by most people. In practice, however, many decision-makers continue visualizing forests as either wood for industry or as occupying a space which can be dedicated to other productive activities.

Such attitude is accounted for in the Penang Declaration which states that "The current social and economic policies and practices that lead to deforestation throughout the world in the name of development are directly responsible for the annihilation of the earth's forests, bringing poverty and misery to millions and threatening global ecosystems with collapse. Such policies and practices include: plantations, both for industrial forestry and for export crops; ranching schemes; dam projects; commercial logging; colonisation schemes; mining and industry; the dispossession of peasants and indigenous peoples; roads; pollution; tourism."

All the above practices continue being major causes of deforestation. However, there has been an important shift in opinion. Ten years ago, those practices were accepted by most people as necessary to achieve development. Nowadays, there is strong and growing opposition to such "development" activities, which in many cases has succeeded to impede their implementation. At the same time, many international organizations and processes have accepted their responsibility over forest destruction and have taken some --yet insufficient-- steps to modify some of their destructive activities. The World Bank, for instance, has recognized the negative impacts on forests of some of its policies and projects and has incorporated environmental and social guidelines to its lending activities in some forest-related sectors. The FAO has to a certain extent modified a type of forestry thinking which was in fact leading to deforestation and which sparked the creation of the World Rainforest Movement to counter it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Forests has come up with a set of proposals for action to save the world's forests and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests is now working on their implementation. Although much more needs to be done, the above can be seen as signals that the times have changed.

Regarding the consequences of deforestation, what the Penang Declaration said ten years ago is now widely acknowledged as almost common sense by most people. This is another major change, which paves the way to finding solutions. The Declaration stated that "The immediate and long-term consequences of global deforestation threaten the very survival of life as we know it on earth. Indeed, the scale of deforestation and its impact now represents one of the gravest emergencies ever to face the human race. Such consequences include: the disruption of climatic equilibrium and the acceleration of global warming; a loss of biological diversity on an unprecedented scale; the destruction of forest-based societies; increasing droughts, floods, soil erosion and desertification; the dispossession and displacement of peasants and forest peoples through floods and the other ecological impacts of deforestation."

As respects to solutions, there has also been a major shift from the situation at the time, which denounced that "Official solutions to the problem of deforestation have ignored or played down the fundamental causes of deforestation and have instead adopted policies that blame the victims of deforestation for their plight, while simultaneously pursuing solutions that can only result in the further degradation of forests and croplands through the promotion of industrialised forestry."

Although there are still some supporters of the "blame-the-victim" approach, they have become increasingly isolated and there is now broad consensus over what are currently called the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation, which include --amongst others-- causes such as external debt, international trade rules, overconsumption, structural adjustment, agicultural policies, land concentration and landlessness, which are now being viewed as some of the root causes of deforestation processes.

What remains almost identifical from ten years ago is the fact that "Throughout the world, the victims of these policies are taking action to arrest deforestation and reverse the process of destruction. In Sarawak, Amazonia, the Himalayas, Thailand, the Philippines and elsewhere, people are standing up to protect the forests and their societies. Such peoples have proved that they are able to use the forests in the only way that is compatible with their preservation. It is not corporations, aid agencies and banks, which should be entrusted with the design and implementation of the protection and regeneration of the forest wealth of the planet."

Almost identical is also the dispossesion --and frequently the repression-- carried out against local people by many governments to hand out the forests and forest lands to corporations, with support from aid agencies and multilateral banks. The difference lies in the fact that such actions are becoming known worldwide and that networking efforts are linking those struggles and facilitating support to the plight of local communities.

With regards to solutions, the Penang Declaration urged "the United Nations and national governments to take urgent steps:

- To restore ecological justice and integrity to humanity by returning to the millions of people both who live in the forest and who depend upon it, their right to sustainable livelihood.

- To restore ecological justice and integrity to life on earth through ceasing further forest destruction and regenerating damaged forest lands through the guidance of indigenous peoples, peasants, and local communities, planting only their choice of trees and plants, with the aim of restoring ecological diversity and the survival of indigenous societies.

- To restrain the overconsumption and wastage of resources by the world's privileged groups through

making the necessary changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns consistent with the development of sustainable livelihoods throughout the globe, in order to satisfy the ecological, spiritual, social and aesthetic needs of people everywhere."

Specifically, the Penang Declaration called "upon the United Nations and national governments:

-To empower forest peoples and those who depend upon the forests for their livelihood with the responsibility for safe-guarding the forests and ensuring their regeneration by:

a) achieving land security for rural peoples , both through revising land tenure legislation and through land reform, as recommended in the Brundtland report;

b) empowering local people with the right to a decisive voice in formulating policies for their areas;

c) rejecting social and economic policies based on the assumed cultural superiority of non-forest peoples.

- To halt all those practices and projects which would contribute either directly or indirectly to further forest loss. Such proyects would include: plantation schemes, dams, ranching,schemes, mining and industrial proyects, commercial logging, the Tropical Forest Action Plan, etc.

- To revise radically the policies of those agencies that currently finance the projects and practices causing deforestation. Funding for such proyects should be ceased and instead directed towards projects that promote the protection and regeneration of forests. The agencies involved include: the multilateral aid agencies and banks, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank; the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Development Programme; the overseas aid agencies of the developed countries; and major international corporations.

- To implement, through the agency of forest peoples and under their direction, a programme for regenerating degraded forest lands and reinvigorating local cultures.

- To take inmediate steps to curb the wastage, misuse and over-consumption of timber products.

- To ban all imports of tropical timber from natural forests and tropical woods products.

- To take immediate steps to cut down the consumption of imported beef from tropical forest areas.

- To restructure the present unequal world economic system which is dominated by institutions and practices that favour the developed countries at the expense of the poor of the Third World. This global system at present enables the developed countries to control and use an overwhelming and disproportionately high share of the world's natural resources. A fairer and more equitable economic system is therefore fundamental to any strategy for saving and regenerating the world's forests.

- To initiate a global shift towards developing sustainable livelihoods. The basic goals of such a shift would be developing systems of production that are ecologically and socially sustainable. This will require:

a) reducing the scale at which production is carried out and adopting practices which minimise the impact of production on the environment;

b) maximising local self-sufficiency;

c) and assuring that economic activities are subordinated to social and ecological ends."

Summing up, we believe that the above shows that the Declaration issued ten years ago in Penang contained both an accurate analysis on the forest crisis and a way forward regarding solutions. Although the forest crisis is far from being solved, there is growing agreement at most levels with the above analysis and solutions and this constitutes a major step in the right direction. Much needs to be done, but given that the main causes and agents of forest destruction have been clearly identified and given the public concern, awareness and involvement on the issue, it has become increasingly wrong and intollerable for governments, international agencies and corporations to continue business as usual. Business as usual means death as usual - death to entire ecological systems, precious plant and animal species, and cultural diversity. Such changes will encourage all those concerned over forest destruction to increase the pressure on the relevant national and international bodies to make them implement solutions to address the problem in an equitable manner. We therefore call upon all concerned organizations and individuals to work together to ensure that those solutions be fully implemented at all levels to save the endangered world's forests. If we do not, history will judge us accordingly.