Nagoya: Opportunity for a biodiversity-based forest definition

The Tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) will be taking place in Nagoya, Japan, from 18 - 29 October 2010. This meeting provides the CBD with a good opportunity for responding to the increasing demand to come up with a serious definition of one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth: forests.

Until now, most national and international bodies have uncritically adopted the FAO's definition of forest, which not only fails to adequately describe what a forest is, but also allows the inclusion of monoculture tree plantations as such. Though by no means intentionally, the FAO has recently published a report that could not be more timely for convincing the CBD about the necessity of seriously addressing this issue.

On October 4th, the FAO released the full report of the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010. If all the arguments put forward over the years for demanding the exclusion of tree monocultures from the definition of "forest" (see WRM's latest contribution in Bulletin 156) were insufficient, we believe that this report provides some very good arguments in this respect.

For instance, the way in which the FAO deals with two very similar tree monocultures -rubber and oil palm plantations- is a very good example of the above:

- Rubber plantations. Until the year 2000, the FAO understood that rubber plantations were NOT forests. However, since that date FAO considers that rubber plantations ARE forests. Why? According to the FAO, "because of their increasing significance as a supply of fibre for wood industries." Which means that a forest is defined by FAO solely by its capacity to produce a single product: wood. In this case, while rubber tree plantations produced only latex, they were not forests. When the price of rubber slumped and many producers started chopping down the trees and selling them as wood, they suddenly become forests. Following the same logic: shouldn't they now be excluded as "forests" because rubber prices have gone up once again?

- Oil palm plantations. Palm trees are typical components of tropical forests. However, oil palm plantations are NOT defined as forests by the FAO because "oil palm is an agricultural tree crop". Again, the reason is that they do not produce wood. Such nonsense reaches absurdity in the tropical African context, where plantations of a native tree species (oil palm) are not defined as forest while plantations of an alien tree species (rubber) are considered to be forests.

The above distinctions appear to be in contradiction with FAO's extremely simplistic definition of forest: "Land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 meters and a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ. It does not include land that is predominantly under agricultural or urban land use." That –according to FAO- is a forest.

Unless FAO defines what "land that is predominantly under agricultural use" means –which it does not- within its own logic either all tree plantations should be included or all should be excluded from being defined as "forest". Why is the production of oil palm an "agricultural" activity while the

production of wood by a eucalyptus plantation is not? Why are olive tree plantations not “forests” while pine plantations are such? Simply because the FAO says so.

A second set of arguments provided by the FAO report is related to what it defines as “afforestation” and “reforestation”. According to the FAO, the former implies the planting of trees in non-forest areas, while the latter means planting trees in areas previously occupied by forests. In both cases, the FAO defines the result as the establishment of “planted forests” (defined as “Forest [sic] predominantly composed of trees established through planting and/or deliberate seeding”).

What the FAO defines as “afforestation” in fact implies the destruction of the native vegetation (usually grasslands or savannas) and its substitution by a plantation of a (usually alien) tree species. However, instead of classifying this as the process of establishing an “agricultural tree crop” (from which only wood is harvested), it raises it to the category of “forest”. Why? Simply because such plantations produce wood which, according to the FAO, is what a forest produces.

In the case of what the FAO terms as “reforestation”, most people would assume that through this process forests are being restored by planting native species. They would be wrong. In the vast majority of cases, “reforestation” implies the planting of monocultures of alien tree species (pines, eucalyptus, acacia, gmelina, teak, etc.) in forest areas. This means that a diverse tropical forest area can be totally bulldozed and replaced by a single tree species –alien or native- and nothing will have changed for the FAO. In its own words: “Where part of a forest is cut down but replanted (reforestation) … there is no change in forest area.”

While such narrow approach clearly serves the interest of the pulp/paper and wood industries –which are portrayed as “planting forests”- it runs counter to the interests of local communities whose means of livelihoods –dependent on forests and grasslands- are destroyed under the guise of “planting forests”.

From a global perspective, the FAO’s insistence in continuing to define wood-producing monocultures as “planted forests”, hides the impacts of such plantations on biodiversity. “We are reminded that forests represent some of the most diverse ecosystems on Earth”, says the FAO report. May we in return remind the FAO that what it defines as “planted forests” represents some of the least diverse ecosystems on Earth, defined by many as “deserts of trees”.

The FAO report provides clear evidence about the frightening expansion of such “deserts of trees”, which have “increased by more than 3.6 million hectares per year from 1990–2000, by 5.6 million hectares per year from 2000–2005, and by 4.2 million hectares per year from 2005–2010.” From a biodiversity perspective, this can only be defined as a disaster, given that such plantations destroy the habitat of millions of native species –ranging from plants to insects- many of which have not yet been classified by science. The FAO, however, welcomes the expansion of these plantations because they “have further reduced the net loss of forests” –as defined by itself.

The above are but some few examples of the arguments unwillingly provided by this FAO report, proving the absurdity of considering any type of monoculture tree plantation as a “forest”, and thereby strengthening the need for excluding them from the definition of “forest”.

In that respect, we would like to highlight what the FAO says: that it “hopes that the information in this report will help broaden discussions on forests”. We believe it does, though much will depend on FAO’s willingness to do so –which until now has never happened. More realistically, we hope that the corporate-friendly and unscientific forest definitions used in this report will help to stimulate the

discussion in other fora –particularly within the Convention on Biological Diversity- for the adoption of a serious definition of forests that finally excludes the absurd category of “planted forests”.

See full FAO report at http://foris.fao.org/static/data/fra2010/FRA2010_Report_1oct2010.pdf