
The FAO has no time to be “distracted” from its mission of promoting plantations

The FAO has recently released the 2009 edition of its “State of the World’s Forests” which, as usual, includes tree plantations as being part of the world’s “forests”. In spite of all the evidence documented by WRM and others proving that monoculture tree plantations result in social and environmental disaster –including forest destruction- the FAO continues to provide a “green” disguise to the plantations industry by defining them as “planted forests”.

In its recent report, when describing the situation in Latin America, the FAO says that “planted forests will increase”, but that “it is unlikely that the increased planting rate will be sufficient to offset continuing deforestation.” In FAO’s language, this means that if a land surface equivalent to the deforested area were to be planted, for instance, with monoculture eucalyptus plantations, deforestation would have been “offset” and thereby no deforestation would have occurred. To say it in the simplest possible terms, according to the FAO, 5 bananas minus 5 apples = 0 bananas.

How can a biodiverse tropical forest be equated with a monoculture alien tree plantation? For the FAO the answer is simple: because both produce wood. Although the FAO does not clearly explain this, an example can suffice to prove it. Until the year 2000, the FAO did not define rubber tree plantations as “planted forests”. However, in 2000 rubber plantations suddenly became “planted forests”. The main reason for this miracle was that rubber prices had slumped and that rubber trees were been cut and industrialized into wood products. They thus became wood providers and therefore deserved being classified as “planted forests”, because for the FAO a forest is simply a wood-producing system.

This is obviously absurd. It is plainly clear that monoculture tree plantations have nothing in common with forest ecosystems. While the latter provide habitats and food to countless species of native flora and fauna, the former are basically void of biodiversity. While forests regulate the hydrological cycle, plantations deplete water resources. While plantations result in the export of soil nutrients, forests recycle them constantly. While forests provide livelihoods to forest-dependent peoples, plantations destroy the resources they depend upon.

It is important to stress that the definition of forests is not an academic or linguistic discussion: it is a political issue having serious social and environmental consequences at the ground level. Defining plantations as forests empowers the corporate sector -particularly plantation companies- and disempowers local communities opposing them to protect their livelihoods. The FAO continues playing this role by refusing to change its definition.

Fortunately, the FAO is becoming more and more isolated on this issue. In 2008, a group of over 100 forestry professionals and students from 29 different countries released a statement expressing that “Throughout the world, governments are actively promoting the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, despite the serious social and environmental impacts already witnessed on existing plantations. The promoters of this model claim that plantations are forests, which simply is not true. Plantations are not forests. Unfortunately, many of our colleagues in the

forestry sector support this model, and our teaching institutions continue to train new generations of forestry professionals to perpetuate and expand this type of forestry model, aimed at seeing forests where they do not exist.”

Last September, a WRM representative presented the foresters’ statement to FAO officials in Rome and they admitted their concerns about certain types of tree plantations -which they recognized as having negative impacts. However, their response was that for the moment the organisation is unwilling to change the definition because this would be “a distraction to the FAO-led process of guidelines for improving plantations.”

This is unbelievable. How can a powerful organization such as FAO pretend that it cannot carry out two related tasks at the same time? Is it so difficult to change a definition while simultaneously continuing to lead a process for providing guidelines for plantations? The obvious answer is that the FAO is unwilling to change a definition that has proven to be so effective for the expansion of plantations under the guise of “planted forests”.

The fact is that the FAO continues to be a major actor in the promotion of plantations. Evidence on this is also provided in its recent report on the state of the world’s forests. Analysing the potential impacts of the current economic crisis on the forest sector, the report suggests “the pursuit of a ‘green path’ to development”, including –surprise surprise- “through afforestation and reforestation”. In FAO language, those two words -afforestation and reforestation- mean the same type of monoculture tree plantations that are impacting on people and the environment. Such plantations will be not only provided with the “planted forests” disguise, but also with fake social and environmental credentials through FAO’s voluntary guidelines for “improving” them. This, and not the organization’s claim that it has no time to be “distracted”, explains its reluctance to adopt a serious definition of forests that excludes plantations as such.

Whether the FAO likes it or not, more and more people throughout the world are raising their voices stating the simple and obvious truth: plantations are not forests! The FAO can pretend to be deaf, but the message is increasingly loud and clear.