While FAO celebrates the International Day of Forests, artificial trees advance: genetically engineered “forests”

For several years now the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has celebrated the International Day of Forests on March 21. This year’s theme is: “Forests, Climate, Change.” But the changes we see that the FAO promotes only increase the problems of the peoples who depend on forests, such as the trend in Southern countries, like China, Malaysia, Brazil and Chile, to promote commercial plantations of genetically engineered trees.

Forests are vitally important for many indigenous peoples. One leader from the Amazon rainforest said: “We have many customs, many beliefs and traditions, which are directly related to the forests, the air, water, the earth and the sun, in a very unique, cosmological spiritual relationship, very profound and respectful”.

But according to FAO’s one-minute promotional video for the 2015 International Day of Forests, forests are essential because “[they] are the frontline against climate change,” emphasizing exclusively the capacity of forests to absorb CO_2 in the wood and soil. This focus seeks to include forests in a climate agreement to be made in Paris at the end of this year. Could the change that FAO is advocating with the International Day’s theme, “Forests, Climate, Change”, be to persuade everyone to share that limited vision in which forests are needed merely in order to combat the climate crisis? And, what does that mean for the peoples and communities that depend on forests?

Supposed solutions to reduce deforestation of tropical rainforests put forward in the last decades, have been characterized by narrow visions, impositions and benefits for only a few:

- Already in the 1980s, “Sustainable Forest Management” (SFM) of tropical rainforests promoted the idea that it is important to “keep forests standing” while promising benefits for local communities and forest conservation. But in practice, SFM has continued to destroy tropical forests, because instead of seeking to stop logging, it only recommends doing it “selectively”. This has benefited timber companies, perpetuated forest destruction and provoked negative impacts on local communities. In fact, wood extraction and forest destruction actually increased in areas under “sustainable management” in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information, see WRM Bulletin Issue 207.

- In 2005, the mechanism for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) was launched, making the same promises as SFM and adding that it would also combat global warming. But again, it has not benefited communities or stop deforestation. On the contrary, local communities are blamed for deforestation and their way of life is undermined by these projects, as restrictions are imposed on their use of the forests. The beneficiaries are polluting industries that are able to buy carbon credits from these projects, which grant them the right to pollute. Meanwhile, the real causes of deforestation are not addressed by REDD or REDD+. For more information, see WRM Bulletin Issue 184.

- In 2007, large conservation NGOs in Brazil launched the idea of “zero deforestation”. In the last years, this has been followed by a torrent of similar announcements from several of the companies promoting tree monocultures and which are among the main perpetrators of deforestation, such as Wilmar and Asia Pulp and Paper (APP), main drivers of deforestation in Indonesia. One of the problems is that it is a non-binding commitment, making it difficult to enforce. Wilmar alone has 800 supplier companies. Still, in 2014, the New York Declaration on Forests renewed the same commitment, with Wilmar and many other companies signing and promising to bring deforestation down to “zero” by 2030. The declaration also states that “forests represent one of the largest, most cost-effective climate solutions available today.”

Although the Wilmar corporation, for example, has undertaken to monitor “zero deforestation” in each of the 800 companies that supply it with palm oil (even using satellites), we need to ask which are the forests we talk about. Will they be the “High Conservation Value” forests, identified by certification schemes like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (see WRM Bulletin Issue 201) as worth keeping intact? Or will they be the forests as understood by the communities, who consider all the areas they use, with more or less biodiversity, as important and therefore of “high value”? And although deforestation can be monitored by satellites, what “satellite” could monitor the countless land and labour conflicts in countries like Indonesia, which are as serious as the problem of deforestation?

What these supposed solutions to deforestation have in common is that they see forests as merely a “tree storehouse”, from which trees can be extracted, or even “sustainably” planted to provide wood or store carbon. A further problem is that FAO has shown no willingness to change its current definition of forests, which also regards them as collections of trees. As a result, FAO promotes tree monocultures as “planted forests”, to serve the furniture, pulp and paper, tire and palm oil industries, among others, as well as to act as a carbon “storage”, serving dirty industries that seek to buy a right to keep on polluting. The false concept of “planted forests” introduces a subtle, but key, change to the policy of “zero deforestation,” transforming it into “zero net deforestation.” This means that a given area of forest can be cut, so long as another “forest area”, such as a tree monoculture, is planted elsewhere. In the 2000-2010 decade alone, the area of monoculture tree plantations worldwide increased by 50 million hectares, especially in the countries of the global South.

And there is no shortage of incentives to expand these plantations still further, as with the genetic manipulation of trees like the eucalyptus. An application has recently been made for authorizing commercial plantations of genetically engineered eucalyptus in Brazil, with the aim of achieving even greater productivity or incentivizing their capacity to store carbon. But this would have major ecological impacts, denounced by one thousand women from the *Via Campesina* organization which occupied this month an experimental field planted with transgenic eucalyptus. In this bulletin, besides analyzing the situation in Brazil, we also reflect the expansion of transgenic trees in China, mainly with poplar monocultures, Malaysia with rubber trees and Chile with experiments on pine and eucalyptus trees. And, as for shocking anyone: even a monoculture plantation with transgenic trees is called by the FAO as a “planted forest.”

Perhaps the most serious aspect of all these proposed “solutions” to combat deforestation is that they envisage no other prospect than the continuation of the destructive model of production and consumption and the strengthening of corporate power. None of the plans put forward by FAO and other institutions considers the idea of leaving oil or minerals in the ground, producing food in each country to promote food sovereignty, or ending the extraction of tropical woods and the expansion of monoculture plantations of palm, soy, eucalyptus, etc. All these are excellent proposals to fight both climate change and deforestation.

In the current race for the last remaining fertile lands, oil reserves and mineral deposits, communities that depend on forests are liable to lose their territories, either because their lands are being destroyed by these expansions, or because the area they live in will be preserved for being an area chosen to “offset” destruction elsewhere, or because the forest is considered of “high conservation value.”

We cannot accept proposals to continue destroying forests on the pretext that they will be “offset,” even less if this was made with monocultures with transgenic tress, as that would only deepen even more the problems and impacts. The simple reason is that every area, every place, with its own specific people and community, is unique and needs to be preserved, not destroyed, and cannot be compensated for. Recognizing this has so far proved the best way to combat deforestation. This may be the most important change that FAO needs to promote.

*Source: WRM information document on the occasion of FAO International Day of Forests, see:*http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/united-nations-2015-international-day-of-forests-theme-forests-climate-change-what-change/

See also a short WRM video in response to the advertisement video made by the FAO for the 21st of March: http://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/this-is-not-sustainable-video/