Tropical Forestry Action Plan+30: The FAO and the World Bank are at the center of another false solution to the forest crisis: REDD and Climate Smart Agriculture

30 years ago, during FAO's World Forestry Congress in Mexico in June 1985, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) was adopted as the new international framework for forest-related action (1). In November of the same year, representatives of bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, supported by some international NGOs, also accepted the TFAP (later renamed into Tropical Forests Action Programme) as a framework for their bilateral and multilateral activities and funding related to tropical forests.

Pilot and demonstration projects at the national level and investment programmes elaborated with the support of the World Bank were important activities that paved the road for adoption of TFAP. Over the course of 10 years, more than one hundred countries embarked on TFAP processes, directed by the FAO, in partnership with the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Resources Institute (WRI). Ministries in countries of the global South prepared national plans on 'sustainable forest management', investment strategies and lists of activities to be undertaken to address the deforestation crisis. All these activities related to five areas the TFAP had identified as “critical”– and all five related to promoting neoliberal set-up of state institutions and a segregated land use with intensive industrial forestry and agriculture and the related export and processing industries on the one hand and strict conservation of tropical forests in protected areas that deprived local communities of access to the forest. (2) While the forest crisis continued and deforestation soared, the majority of the TFAP initiatives had collapsed by 1995 – though many of the negative impacts for forest communities of the activities they promoted remained much longer.

Fast-forward 30 years, and funding from the World Bank and FAO (as well as their TFAP partners UNDP and WRI and a handful of industrialized country donors) is again pushing forward pilot and demonstration initiatives and national policy and investment schemes in a large number of countries with tropical forests in the global South. Again, the stated objective is to tackle the deforestation crisis. The ‘development’ objective of the TFAP has been replaced by the objective for the initiatives promoted by the World Bank and FAO to now address the climate crisis, through reducing emissions caused when forests are destroyed. And again, the initiatives – this time under the umbrella of REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), landscape REDD and climate-smart agriculture – are bound to fail in addressing the forest and climate crisis because as with the TFAP, their analysis of the root causes is faulty (3). The TFAP 30 years ago and now, REDD and climate-smart agriculture wrongly identify the problem in small-scale peasant agriculture and the solution in industrial forestry and agribusiness.

Numbers replace political debate

Where 30 years ago TFAP promoted and paid for national forestry programmes as the policy instrument that would help solve the problem, the World Bank, FAO and bilateral donors this time

around are pushing for forests and agricultural landscapes be made to fit into the balance sheets of accountants. Since 2005, funding for forest carbon inventories (accounts of the amount of carbon stored in trees and soils in an specific area), forest carbon mapping (showing where forests are with lots of carbon stored in the trees, using largely satellite technologies), forest carbon assessments and investment plans based on experimental 'performance-based' carbon payments (payments that depend on the results of an specific carbon project) has skyrocketed. And the FAO, the World Bank and the same bilateral donors that 30 years ago funded most TFAP activities are now financing these carbon assessments and mapping and methodology activities.

In the discussions on REDD and climate-smart agriculture, carbon assessments and mapping are often presented as technical exercises, yet they are fundamentally political: These accounting and mapping exercises are essential elements in the construction of the story of where the problem lies and what solutions are proposed to the forest and climate crisis. Accounting exercises as part of REDD model projects that focus on changing shifting cultivation towards more sedentary forms of agriculture and climate-smart agriculture pilot projects emphazising the need of yield increases in peasant agriculture produce the ‘objective numbers’ that then help present the false picture that peasant agriculture and shifting cultivation of forest peoples are the problem (4).

Another example for how carbon accounting is used to manufacture a particular interpretation of the problem and marginalize others is the FAO's “Climate-smart agriculture for development” webpage (5). The page lists five initiatives that either focus on or include carbon assessments in forests and agriculture as a main component. The Mitigation of Climate Change in Agriculture (MICCA) Programme includes in its areas of work, “Monitoring and Assessment of Greenhouse Gas Emissions; Mitigation Potential in Agriculture; Pilot projects: putting climate-smart agriculture into practice (6).” The UN-REDD Programme (7), guided by FAO, UNDP and the UN Environmental Programme and which collaborates with MICCA, opens its webpage with the headings "Measurement, Reporting and Verification". Moreover, two programmes supported by the European Union, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the MICCA Programme seek to further advance the carbon accounting. The Ex-Ante Carbon-balance Tool (EX-ACT), which is a land-based accounting system developed by FAO that estimates changes of carbon storage on forest and agricultural land and the Economics and Policy Innovations for Climate-Smart Agriculture (EPIC) programme, with the “ultimate objective” "to support developing and in-transition countries to formulate agricultural investment proposals to increase resilience to climate change and promote CSA [climate-smart agriculture]." (8) Many names for more or less the same thing: Making forests fit on a carbon accounting scheme!

Not a word in any of the five introductory pages to these initiatives on the fact that industrial agriculture, the agricultural model subtly promoted through these initiatives, is a main driver of deforestation and responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions from the agriculture and forestry sector. Instead, images and 'objective' figures distilled from the carbon accounts are and will be used to reinforce the myths that peasant agriculture and shifting cultivation are the main causes of deforestation.

The booklet “FAO success stories on climate smart agriculture” is another example of the FAO's role in framing deforestation in a way that blames peasant agriculture and shifting cultivation for forest loss and promotes industrial agribusiness and monoculture as solutions. The booklet includes 11 examples of climate smart agriculture. All 11 examples included in the booklet are from countries in the global South (China, Tanzania, Peru, Malawi, Vietnam, Zambia, India, Nigeria, Nicaragua etc.).

Agroecology is also conspicuously absent from the list while several examples are linked to financing

through carbon markets. These include pilot projects from Malawi or Zambia, countries with some of the lowest greenhouse gas emissions in the world. Yet, the FAO's 'climate-smart' proposal is that they finance their projects aimed at adjusting to a global climate crisis caused by excessive fossil fuel use in industrialized countries through a carbon market that is based on countries like Malawi and Zambia reducing their already low greenhouse gas emissions so industrialized countries can continue burning oil, coal and gas.

“Turning our farmers’ fields into carbon sinks – the rights to which can be sold on the carbon market – will only lead us further away from what we see as the real solution: food sovereignty. The carbon in our farms is not for sale!”, *La Vía Campesina*, a world-wide peasant organization, wrote when governments and corporate lobbyists met in Warsaw, Poland, for the annual UN conference on climate change in 2013. They pointed out what FAO and the World Bank regularly fail to highlight in their presentation of the "deforestation problem": that while agriculture is a major contributor to climate change and forest loss, not everybody growing crops shares the same responsibility for the emissions or the destruction of forests. It is the industrial food system – with its heavy use of chemical inputs, the soil erosion and deforestation that accompanies monoculture plantation farming, and the emphasis on production for export markets – which is the main source of greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation, not shifting cultivation and peasant farming (see WRM bulletin 204, August 2014). By contrast, peasant farming and agroecology, with a focus on food sovereignty are already proving that it is possible to grow food to ‘feed the world’, and do so producing far fewer emissions than the industrial model of agricultural production of crops for export markets.

Just as TFAP did nothing to halt the drivers of deforestation, it is becoming increasingly obvious that REDD and climate-smart agriculture are not designed to tackle the root causes of forest loss or climate change. Rather, they will help pave the way for industrial agriculture and food production for export to expand even further while industrialized countries are supplied with the carbon credits that will allow them to continue burning oil, coal and gas while at the same time pretending they are reducing emissions. Making visible this construction of the narrative that blames peasant farming and promotes industrial agriculture and carbon markets as (false) solutions will be important throughout 2015 as FAO, the World Bank and their partners will engage in a major push to increase the momentum for REDD and climate-smart agriculture to be included as part of the carbon markets in the next international climate agreement expected to be adopted at the December 2015 UN climate conference in Paris, France.

(1) Committee on Forest Development in the Tropics Tropical Forestry Action Plan. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome, 1985.
http://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/docs/002-162/002-162.html
(2) http://www.fao.org/docrep/r7750e/r7750e06.htm
(3) See WRM articles: “REDD moves from forests to landscapes: more of the same, just bigger and with bigger risk to cause harm”,
http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/redd-moves-from-forests-to-landscapes-more-of-the-same-just-bigger-and-with-bigger-risk-to-cause-harm/ ; and “Blue Carbon” and “Blue REDD”: Transforming coastal ecosystems into merchandise,http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/blue-carbon-and-blue-redd-transforming-coastal-ecosystems-into-merchandise/
(4) See, “REDD, A Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies”,
WRM, http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/
(5) http://www.fao.org/climatechange/climatesmart/en/
(6) http://www.fao.org/climatechange/micca/en/#approach
(7) UN-REDD stands for “United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from

Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries”
(8) http://www.fao.org/climatechange/epic/home/en/