
[World Forestry Congress in Africa 2015: More tree monocultures or more forest conservation for Africa?](#)

In September this year, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is organizing the XIV World Forestry Congress, this time to be held in the African continent, in Durban, South Africa. This Congress is the most significant gathering that FAO organizes in relation to forests and is held every six years. But, what sort of “forests” are been talked about here? What does the Congress pretend to achieve, and what impacts could it have on the African continent, especially thinking on the communities and peoples who depend on the forests?

The terms “forestry” and “forests” are so nearly identical that they can be easily confused. But their meanings are very different. According to dictionary definitions, “forestry” is “the science of planting and taking care of trees and forests”, as well as “managing timber growth and yield.” This shows that when speaking of forestry, the predominant view is that wood production is an important function of forests, of trees, hence the definitions talk about “planting forests” when we all know that, in reality, it is only possible to plant trees.

When the most important FAO Congress on forests concentrates its focus on forestry, it is clear how much weight this concept has within the organization. The view that a forest is basically a “big wood storage,” without people, plants, insects or animals, without all those webs of life that are present in each forest. This view is also reflected in the forest definition that the FAO keeps defending: basically a collection of trees, with no mention of all the other elements that make up a forest as it is usually understood: a place of biodiversity rather than industrial monoculture, a place often regarded as “sacred” by forest-dwelling communities.

Although FAO has a “strategy” document for “forests and forestry,” this document keeps guiding the work of a department called “Forestry Department” (1), another indication of FAO’s priorities. Besides, this Department is advised by a relevant commission called “Advisory Committee on Paper and Wood Products”, which meets once a year with the main goal of offering guidance to the work of the Forestry Department’s activities and programmes on relevant issues to the paper and forest products industry. (2)

The Finnish Tiina Vähänen, the World Forestry Congress Deputy Secretary-General, said: “When the world’s foresters and forest supporters come together for the XIV World Forestry Congress in Durban in September, they will have a unique opportunity to highlight the urgent need to give forests credit for the true value they provide.” (3) This is indeed a fundamental issue requiring serious reflection on the part of FAO. Why?

Since FAO was founded in 1945, it dedicated to the following objectives: eradicating hunger and poverty. To do this, it invested in programmes which in its vision intended to develop food production within nations in order to guarantee food security for their populations. Based on its definition of

forests, in which forests can be “planted,” FAO promoted the expansion of large-scale monocultures of trees like eucalyptus, pine, acacia, rubber tree, etc. Including oil palm plantations, which share many features with these tree monocultures, tens of millions of hectares of monocultures have been planted in countries of the global South over the past 20-30 years, particularly in Latin America and Asia.

Without exception, these plantation projects were imposed on local populations and presented as programmes that would “develop” the region and would “fight” poverty. Today, we find that in the regions where the large-scale tree plantation monocultures are concentrated, the local populations are poorer than they were before. Many people have been evicted from their homes and territories, besides the losses incurred through the destruction of forests. A large number of studies already show that large-scale tree plantations increase the ravages of hunger and poverty instead of eradicating them (4).

It is symbolic that this year’s World Forestry Congress is being held in Africa. According to consulting firm Pöyry, also Finnish as Ms. Vahänen: “There is growing interest in Africa as a destination for forest investors, drawn by the availability of land, competitive rates of tree growth, and low labour costs.” (5) In fact, the African continent is facing an invasion of companies and investment funds that are appropriating land to promote African palm plantations, especially in West and Central Africa, and eucalyptus, rubber tree and pine plantations, mainly in the east and south of the continent. The negative impacts in Africa may be even more devastating than in other global regions due to the importance of the land for food production for its people, a majority of whom are rural dwellers. When small food farms are replaced by tree monocultures, as is happening in several countries, poverty and hunger follow in their footsteps. Many people lose their source of food supply when forests are lost in order to make room for “planted forests”, together with other highly biodiverse areas such as native pastures and savannas, of great value to the communities.

Africa has also become a favorite place for tree plantations for carbon “storage” under the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) mechanism. (6) Coincidentally or not, Ms. Vähänen formerly coordinated REDD promotion work within FAO. We suspect that when she says it is time to highlight forests and “the true value they provide”, she is first thinking of the economic value of the carbon stored in forests, when it is traded to “offset” the polluters’ emissions, mainly from industrialized countries. In any case, the fact that this year the Congress is being held in Africa provides an excellent opportunity for FAO to learn, from African people who depend on forests for their livelihood, how they view “the true value forests provide.”

In this regard, Ms. Vähänen said: “We are working to ensure that the voices of young people, women and local communities will be heard”. (7) It remains to be seen whether this will really occur in a truly meaningful way, and whether FAO and its officials will really open their ears to hear the voices of African young people, women and local communities who depend on the forests for survival. These are the people who have protected the forests from the threats posed by FAO’s own policies, such as promoting tree monocultures. If FAO does not listen to these communities in a real and meaningful way, the organization will probably continue to be “prey” to the interests of large timber companies and others interested in promoting tree monocultures, principally in countries of the global North, including Finland.

Winnie Overbeek (email: winnie@wrm.org.uy)
International Secretariat of the World Rainforest Movement (WRM)

(1) <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/al043e/al043e00.pdf>

-
- (2) <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/tree-plantations/forest-definition/>
- (3) http://forestry.fao.msgfocus.com/files/amf_fao/project_59/February_2015/WFC_InFO_News.pdf
- (4) <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/an-overview-of-industrial-tree-plantations-in-the-global-south-conflicts-trends-and-resistance-struggles/>
- (5) http://www.poyry.com/sites/default/files/africanplantationforestry_-_june2011-lfwp-br.pdf
- (6) See the WRM publication “REDD: a Collection of Conflicts, Contradictions and Lies,” at: <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>
- (7) See reference (3)