WRM Statement: The climate and forest crises cannot be solved with number games and false solutions

After more than twenty UN climate conferences, the negotiations are still focused on figures and numbers, as if the climate crisis is only about that. Instead of spending time on real solutions like leaving fossil fuels underground, the climate talks have deliberately come up with mechanisms that enable corporations to continue doing business as usual. Deforestation has been apparently placed at the center of the discussions, as one of the main causes of climate change. But forests are seen as mere carbon stores that need to be conserved for the carbon they contain, as if this would halt climate change. And in turn, the problem of deforestation has also been reduced to a debate of figures and numbers only.

Numbers are indeed a powerful way of reducing complex crises into measurable figures, of distracting attention away from the real causes of the problem. This is the case with the intergovernmental "responses" to the forest crisis in the past decades. For example, "sustainable forest management" determines a supposedly "sustainable" quantity of timber that can be logged; the REDD+ mechanism is about quantifying and economically valuing the capacity of forests to fix and store carbon; "zero net deforestation" proposals are also based on quantifying in how many years this figure could be reached – or how much forest elsewhere has to be "restored" so the result of continued deforestation is nonetheless "net zero".

All these supposed "solutions" have benefited an industry of consultancy companies, measuring, monitoring and quantifying forests, trees or forest functions. But they have failed to halt climate change or deforestation. They have failed because none of them address either the direct nor the underlying causes of the problem such as the current expansion-driven and capitalist production and consumption model or the profoundly unequal power relations between corporations and communities. Furthermore, all these "solutions" generate more problems for forest-dependent communities:

- "Sustainable forest management" allows an inherently destructive activity such as logging to continue with the promise of "keeping the forests standing". But the concession model**,** while beneficial to logging companies, is destructive for the forest and harmful for the communities for whom the forest provides a livelihood, especially for women. Even worse, the concept, backed up by numbers indicating that only a "small amount" of timber will be taken out, also serves as a "passport" for companies to enter into new forest areas and supposedly conserve these by just taking out a "few" trees.

- REDD+ locates the main cause of deforestation in the practices of forest-dwelling communities, especially practises used for (subsistence) food production, as shown in a systematic analysis of 24 REDD+ projects and national plans in different countries. The communities living in areas covered by REDD+ projects are being subjected to restrictions on forest use which interfere with their ways of life

and livelihoods and reinforces the idea that a well-conserved forest is a forest without people.

- The most recent idea, **“zero net deforestation”**, has attracted many agribusiness companies that have a record of causing forest loss and harming forest-dependent peoples and communities. These companies, joined by other large food companies and international conservation NGOs, promote the New York Declaration on Forests that includes a pledge to end “net” deforestation, which means they will continue logging if the damage can be “offset” somewhere else. The Declaration was signed in 2014, on the sidelines of the UN Secretary General’s climate summit. Yet, this Declaration, stating that it aims “*to cut natural forest loss in half by 2020, and strive to end it by 2030*”, does not spend a word on what its agroindustry signatories will do to actually halt plantation expansion. This very expansion continues to lead to deforestation in direct and indirect ways.

Moreover, “zero net deforestation” means that large-scale deforestation can continue as long as large-scale industrial monoculture plantations of eucalyptus, acacia, pine and other trees continue to expand. This is because of the absurd UN’s FAO definition of a “forest” defining it as any collection of trees, even transgenic ones, of a certain minimum height and density. Large-scale industrial monoculture plantations are thus called “planted forests”. The area covered by tree plantations increased by 50 million hectares worldwide in the 2000-2010 decade alone, causing serious problems for local communities. Yet, the FAO sees this increase in industrial tree plantations as a contribution to reducing overall deforestation, and concludes that net deforestation is lower than it actually is because industrial tree plantations are covering more land.

Under “zero net deforestation”, maybe only “high conservation value” or “high carbon value” forests are safe. But even those areas could be destroyed without causing any “net deforestation”, if, for example, companies can acquire “biodiversity credits” to “offset” the destructive impacts of their activities on biodiversity through protection of land with an "equivalent" biodiversity value elsewhere. Deforestation thus continues, and we are asked to believe that it has been “effectively offset”.

But no “offset” can provide real compensation since every area, every place with its own specific people and community, is unique, no matter how impressive the figures, the numbers and the calculations of “equivalent” species or carbon might seem.

Final remarks

The upcoming UN climate negotiations appear to once again put forests in the center. Unfortunately, negotiations will focus one more time on how to secure more corporate profits by promoting false solutions to the crisis, such as REDD+ and recent new versions based on the same assumptions. Again, it will be about numbers and figures and not about tackling the real causes of the climate crisis.

Our appeal is to unite, organize and mobilize with forest peoples and populations, social movements and other groups and activists to strengthen our pressure to confront the real causes of destruction and pollution. With the UN negotiations about to prove for the 21st time that the climate negotiators are unable to sign off on an action plan that will prevent climate and social disaster, we need to strengthen our struggles and our analysis on what is causing this crisis. Let’s unite and march for strengthening movements and the numerous experiences on the ground that already challenge every day the corporate-driven and destructive model!

We invite groups that have not signed yet to join the Call to Action prepared in 2014 for the UN climate summit in Lima. The Call shows and denounces the links between the destructive model and

false solutions for the climate and deforestation crisis. It voices a clear NO to these false solutions for the climate crisis involving offsets. Read and join the Call here: http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/to-reject-redd-and-extractive-industries-to-confront-capitalism-and-defend-life-and-territories/

November 26, 2015