
[“New forests for Africa”: A nice slogan for promoting industrial tree plantations?](#)

A conference called “Forests for the Future: New Forests for Africa” has taken place on March 16 and 17 in Ghana (1). A promotional video on the Conference’s website showing many wonderful images from forest areas states that the event “serves as the starting point to learn from each other and to boost reforestation in Africa”. But what can we really expect from this Conference? What is meant for example with the term “reforestation”? Considering that industrial tree plantations are called “planted forests” by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the institution that defines what forests are at the international level, what are the implications of the “new forests” promoted by the Conference? And which are the Conference partners that are supposed to share experiences in order “to learn from each other”, in other words, what are Conference participants going to “teach” each other, if we look at their experiences and specific agendas?

Africa got a lot of attention at the UN climate talks last December in Paris. The discussions were not about the fact that it is the continent that contributes far less to the climate crisis while probably being hit the most by it than any other continent. The attention was there because Africa is being announced as having “the largest restoration opportunity of any continent” (2) by, for example, the World Bank supported AFR100 initiative, that aims to plant 100 million hectares of trees in Africa (3). The Conference in Ghana is clearly organized as a follow-up to these climate-related initiatives. It states in its introduction text that “reforestation and landscape restoration as means of combating climate change are now high on the agenda of many governments and organizations”. The WRM has explained and stated many times that although planting trees sounds good at a first glance and may be necessary in many cases, it is crucial to make the question of how they are being planted and for whose benefit.

How the “reforestation” that is being talked about in the Conference will be done is a crucial question. It can be done at a small scale with a local community or group of farmers by replanting different native species aiming at having some diverse forest back of what existed in the past with ownership and benefits for the local people. But it can also be done by planting thousands of hectares of an industrial tree monoculture with many negative impacts for the local populations and environments; this form is always pushed by companies and investors seeking for profits, and supported by governments and multilateral institutions like the FAO or the World Bank. It is therefore crucial to understand what the Conference partners mean by “reforesting Africa”. The latter practice of “reforestation” seems to prevail if we only look at the program and one of the main Conference organizers, the Dutch forest management and consultancy company Form, and its Ghana branch called Form Ghana. Form Ghana promotes “reforestation” mainly with teak monoculture tree plantations. The “reforestation” also generates carbon credits that can be sold. Even though they try to promote their plantations as sustainable through the FSC-certification, as WRM pointed out many times, this certification system is above all a mechanism in the benefit of companies, allowing the wood demand and thus plantations to expand more.

Besides, Form Ghana claims that “sustainable (plantation) forestry offers an interesting investment opportunity”. No surprise that also the Conference that the Form company helps to promote gives a lot of attention to “reforestation” as an investment opportunity, and necessary changes in legislation are therefore also essential, as the Conference video explains, highlighting the importance “to ensure a secure and growing return on investment”. UN ex-secretary general, Kofi Annan, from Ghana, also appears in the same video stressing this point, when he says: “You always have to have an enabling environment and the right regulatory system to encourage the investors to invest, (...)”. However, the experience in countries in the global South, where industrial tree plantations have expanded with millions of hectares in the past decades, shows that governments passed laws and regulations like tax breaks, and even in some countries like Brazil tax money was given to plantation companies through national development banks, always with the aim of creating as much benefits as possible for plantation companies and investors, including flexible labour and environmental legislation. (4)

Industrial tree plantation companies are among the Ghana Conference speakers. For example, the Norwegian Green Resources company, that portrays itself as Africa’s largest forestation company, will talk, among others, about the “successes” of the company. Green Resources has tripled the size of its industrial tree monoculture area – eucalyptus and pine plantations - during the last five years. The company is present in Tanzania, Uganda and Mozambique (5). But for communities in Mozambique, for example, the experience with this company is far from a “success” story. During a WRM visit to the area, we heard a number of serious complaints about how the company with its “reforestation” activities with eucalyptus plantations invaded fertile lands crucial for their food crop production and thus affected severely their food sovereignty. Promises of employment and other benefits did not or very poorly concretize (6).

Another indication of how corporate interests, and thus the industrial tree plantation lobby, are present at this Conference is having also consultancy companies from the North on the speakers lists, such as the Finnish Indufor, one of the main ones. They are key actors in the industrial tree plantation lobby of Northern countries like Finland with a wood-based economy (7). Together with the tree plantation business, pulp and paper companies, like Finish Stora Enso and UPM, are spreading the monoculture tree plantation model across several countries in the global South, aiming to produce at a lower cost and thus be able to profit more.

Plantations are not Forests!

No doubt that reforestation is an urgent and real need in many African countries. But reforestation should not be inverted into the promotion of industrial tree plantations, because plantations are not forests! Large-scale monoculture tree plantations create more business opportunities and profits for companies and investors, while creating more problems for local communities.

If the communities directly impacted by these “new forests” would meaningfully be part of the speakers list of this Conference, participants could learn that the “successes” of corporate models based on amount of trees and profits from investments are not real, and definitely not the way forward! And let’s not forget that besides all the severe impacts of industrial tree monoculture plantations at the local level (see WRM’s [website section on the impacts of industrial plantations](#)), this model has also severe impacts on the climate to which it is supposed to contribute by the Conference in Ghana and related initiatives. They are promoted as steps forward to “help” fighting the climate crisis. But promoting large-scale industrial monoculture plantations is a heavily oil and natural gas-dependent activity. It requires heavy mechanization, the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides, the transportation of products over long distances, and different forms of deforestation.

To promote this model - instead of stopping with it - will only worsen the climate crisis. It is therefore essential to support and strengthen communities in their struggles against large-scale tree plantations.

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- 0. <http://newforestsforafrica.org/>
- 0. <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/about-afr100>
- 0. <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/impact-investors#project-tabs>
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