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## [How does the FAO Forest definition harm people and forests? An open letter to the FAO](#)

*This open letter, calling on the FAO to revise its forest definition, will be sent to the FAO next March 21 when the International day of Forests is commemorated.*

If your organization has not yet signed, we invite you to support the letter. Please send an email to [fao2017@wrm.org.uy](mailto:fao2017@wrm.org.uy) and include your organization's name and country.

[Signatures as of March 16, 2017](#)

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### **How does the FAO Forest definition harm people and forests?**

In September 2015, during the XIV World Forestry Congress, thousands of people took to the streets in Durban, South Africa, to protest against the problematic way in which the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), insists on defining forests (1). The FAO definition considers forests to be basically just “a bunch of trees”, while ignoring other fundamental aspects of forests, including their many other life-forms such as other types of plants, as well as animals, and forest-dependent human communities. Equally, it ignores the vital contribution of forests to natural processes that provide soil, water and oxygen. Besides, by defining ‘forests’ as only being a minimum area of land covered by a minimum number of trees of a minimum height and canopy percentage, FAO has actively promoted the establishment of many millions of hectares of industrial tree plantations, of mainly alien species, especially in the global South. As a consequence, only one particular sector has benefitted: the tree plantation industry. Industrial tree plantations have been the direct cause of many negative impacts on local communities and their forests; which have been well-documented (2).

The protest march that took place in Durban in 2015 had people holding up banners saying *Plantations are not Forests!*, and ended in front of the venue of the World Forestry Congress, which was organised by the FAO. In response to a call from civil society leaders at the march, a WFC official left the Congress building to receive a petition that had been signed by over 100,000 individuals and groups from around the world. The petition called on the FAO to urgently change its forest definition and to define forests by their true meaning. But once again, the FAO did not change its definition.

Nevertheless, something new did happen: Unlike the silence in response to previous demands for the FAO to change its flawed forest definition, this time FAO reacted to the protest, and sent a letter in response. One point in the FAO letter is particularly interesting. It stated: “*There are, in fact, over 200 national definitions of forests that reflect a variety of stakeholders in this matter...*”, and goes on to say, “*...to facilitate the reporting of data..., a globally valid, simple and operational categorization of forests is required*” in order that it can “*enable consistent comparisons over longer periods of time on global forest development and change*”. In writing this, the FAO attempts to convince us that its role

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is merely one of harmonizing the 200-plus different definitions of forests that different countries have.

But is it really true that the existing FAO forest definition did not influence the way the 200 national definitions of forests were formulated in the first place? And is the FAO correct when it claims that the many different national forest definitions are a result of the reflections of a variety of stakeholders in these countries, again playing down its own influence?

We believe the opposite to be true. First of all, FAO's forest definition was adopted a long time ago, in 1948. According to a recent joint analysis by different authors of forest concepts and definitions, *"FAO's definition, agreed on by all its [UN] members, is the first to be used by all countries for harmonized reporting; the definition adopted by FAO remains the most widely used forest definition today"* (3).

A good country to use as an example to see if the FAO definition is being used, is Brazil, the country with the highest forest cover in the global South, and according to official sources, almost 8 million hectares of industrial tree plantations, mostly eucalyptus monocultures. In its 2010 (4) publication *"Forests of Brazil"* the Brazilian Forest Service (SBF), under the national government Ministry of Environment and responsible for forest-related issues *"... considers as a forest the woody vegetation types that come closest to the forest definition of the Organization of the United Nations for Food and Agriculture (FAO)."* As a logical progression from basing its definition on what FAO already defined, it states that *"Brazil is a country... of natural and planted forests"*, where *"planted forests"* refers to the 8 million hectares of mostly eucalyptus monocultures. How the Brazilian government defines a forest is therefore not the result of a process that *"... reflects a variety of stakeholders in this matter"*. On the contrary, it is rather a result of what the FAO had already determined.

But the influence of the FAO's forest definition goes beyond just determining national forest definitions. In these times of climate change, the FAO's definition has been the main point of reference to define what a forest is under the UN climate change convention (UNFCCC). By adopting the FAO's narrow wood-based definition, the UNFCCC has also promoted a view of forests being an area of land containing only trees. For the UNFCCC, it's mainly the trees in a forest that matter because of their capacity to store carbon as they grow, and not forest-dependent communities. Such affected communities are most negatively impacted by restrictions placed on their use of forest resources by *"forest carbon offset projects"*, also often referred to as REDD+ projects (5). A forest definition only focused on trees opens the door to including *"planted forests"* – read: industrial tree plantations – a completely false way of *"reducing deforestation and forest degradation"*, as an option under the climate change convention through which carbon can supposedly be sequestered from the atmosphere and permanently stored. In practice this is just another money-making opportunity for the tree plantation industry, and a major threat to communities affected by the trend of expanding *"carbon sink"* tree plantations.

Following the latest UNFCCC negotiations, countries have recently been revising their forest legislation, in the hope of attracting so-called 'climate finance'. Unsurprisingly, the definitions used are largely based on the FAO's forest definition. In Mozambique, for example, at a workshop on REDD+, a consultant proposed a new forest definition for the country. Just like the FAO's definition, it is also based on the presence of trees saying that a forest is an area with *"...Trees with the potential to reach a height of 5 metres at maturity.."* Also in Indonesia, the Ministry of Environment and Forests submission to the UN Climate Conference in 2015, stated that it had *"...adjusted the FAO forest definition..."* in order to define its forests. Once again a definition that defines and values a forest only through its trees, and that divides *"forests"* into a number of different categories including *"natural forest"* and something called *"plantation forests"* (6).

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The FAO's forest definition also influences the actions of the financial and development institutions promoting wood-based activities such as the industrial logging of forests, industrial tree plantations, and REDD+ carbon offsets. The main example is the World Bank (WB) which as part of the United Nations conglomerate has been partnering with the FAO for decades in a number of forest-related initiatives. They again joined forces in one of the most ambitious plans launched during UNFCCC COP 21 in Paris, the so-called African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100) (7). AFR100 aims to cover 100 million hectares of deforested and so-called "degraded" lands in different African countries with trees. The World Bank will make US\$ 1 billion available for this plan. But to understand what the World Bank views as "reforestation", it is crucial to see how the Bank itself defines a forest. Unsurprisingly, its definition is also borrowed from that of the FAO, describing a forest as "*An area of land...with tree crown cover of more than 10% that have trees...*" (8) . By defining forests in this way, the World Bank opens the door wide for tree plantation companies expanding their large-scale monoculture tree plantations over community territories in Africa to be part of the ambitious "restoration" plan it is promoting together with the FAO and other partners. The AFR100 proposal strongly resembles the failed Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) from the 1980's, which was also dreamed up by the World Bank in collaboration with the FAO.

### Final remarks

There is an urgent need for the FAO to stop misrepresenting industrial tree plantations as "planted forests" or "forestry", because national governments, other UN institutions, and financial institutions, as well as the mainstream media will then follow its inappropriate example. This deliberate confusion of tree plantations with forests is misleading people, because forests in general are viewed as something positive and beneficial. After all, who could be opposed to "forests"?

Above all, the FAO should take full responsibility for the strong influence its "forest" definition has over global economic, ecological and social policies. The 2015 petition that was presented to the FAO in Durban states that it portrays itself in its founding principles as being a "neutral forum where all nations meet as equals". To live up to this claim requires, among other things, that the FAO must urgently revise its forest definition from one that reflects the preferences and perspectives of timber, pulp/paper, rubber, and carbon trading companies, to one that reflects ecological realities as well as the views of forest-dependent peoples. In contrast to the existing dominant influence of wood-based industries over the FAO, a transparent and open process to establish new and appropriate definitions for forests and tree plantations must also engage effectively with those women and men who directly depend on and therefore protect forests.

### Notes:

- 1 - "Land with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares (ha). The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 meters (m) at maturity in situ."
- 2 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/tree-plantations/>
- 3 - Chazdon, R.L., Brancalion, P.H.S., Laestadius, L. et al. *Ambio* (2016). doi:10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y. When is a forest a forest? Forest concepts and definitions in the era of forest and landscape restoration (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y>)
- 4 - [http://www.mma.gov.br/estruturas/sfb/arquivos/livro\\_portugus\\_95.pdf](http://www.mma.gov.br/estruturas/sfb/arquivos/livro_portugus_95.pdf)
- 5 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>
- 6 - [http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/seasia/Indonesia/pdf/FREL\\_Report.pdf](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/seasia/Indonesia/pdf/FREL_Report.pdf)
- 7 - <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/about-afr100>
- 8 - <http://tinyurl.com/hsb6cwy>

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## Sign-ons March 16, 2017

Abibiman Foundation in Ghana  
Acción Ecologica  
Acción por la Biodiversidad  
Africa Europe Fair and Justice Network  
African Women's Network for Community management of Forests (REFACOF)  
Aliança RECOs – Redes de Cooperação Comunitária Sem Fronteiras  
Alianza Biodiversidad  
All India Forum of Forest Movements.  
Allure Marketing  
Ambiente, Desarrollo y Capacitación  
ARA  
ARBA (Asociación para la Recuperación del Bosque Autóctono)  
Árboles sin Fronteras  
ARPENT - Association pour la Restauration et la Protection de l'Environnement Naturel du Tonnerrois  
Asoc. Conservacionista YISKI  
Asoc. Lihuen Antu  
Asociación Amigos de los Parques Nacionales (AAPN)  
Asociación Comunitaria Soluciones  
Asociación de Usuarios del Agua de Saltillo AUAS, A.C.  
Asociacion Ecologica del Oriente, Santa Cruz de la Sierra  
Asociacion ecologista rio mocoreta  
Asociación Ecologistas en Acción Las Palmas de Gran Canaria  
Asociación Geográfica Ambiental  
Asociación Qachuu Aloom "Madre Tierra"  
Asociacion Red de Coordinacion en Biodiversidad  
Associação dos Geógrafos Brasileiros, Seção Local Três Lagoas (AGB/TL)  
Attac France  
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance  
BankTrack  
BCMTY.org Chile  
BCMTY.org New Zealand  
Berggorilla & Regenland Direkthilfe  
Biodiversity Conservation Center,  
Biofuelwatch, UK/US.  
Biowatch  
Blog Combate Racismo Ambiental  
Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS)  
Botshabelo Unemployment Movement  
Brainforest  
Brighter Green  
Bruno Manser Fund  
BUND - Friends of the Earth Germany  
Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD)  
Censat Agua Viva.  
Center for Food Safety

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Centro de Investigación, Validación y Transferencia Tecnológica para el Desarrollo Rural, Ac  
Centro Internazionale Crocevia  
CETRI - Centre Tricontinental  
Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat  
Climate change awareness kenya  
Coalition Against Land Grabbing  
COECOCEIBA-Amigos de la tierra Costa Rica  
Colectivo VientoSur  
Comité Nacional para la Defensa y Conservación de Los Chimalapas  
Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN)  
Conselho Indigenista Missionário  
Construisions Ensemble leMonde

Consumers Association of Penang  
Cork Forest Conservation Alliance  
Crescente Fértil  
Denkhausbremen  
Diálogo 2000 - Jubileo Sur Argentina  
Dogwood Alliance  
EcoNexus  
Edenvale RiverWatch  
Environmental Association for Latin America  
European Civic Forum  
FASE Espírito Santo  
Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH)  
Finance & Trade Watch (Austria)  
Flemish Centre for Indigenous Peoples  
Focus on the Global South  
Forest Observatory  
Forests of the world  
Forum Carajas  
Fórum Mudanças Climáticas e Justiça Social  
Forum Ökologie & Papier  
Fossil-Free South Africa  
Friends of the Earth Interantional  
Friends of the Earth Sweden  
Friends of the Siberian Forests  
Fundación Azul Ambientalistas  
Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunal Integral  
Fundacion Recysol  
GeaSphere  
Geografía Viva  
Global Forest Coalition  
Global Justice Ecology Project  
GRAIN  
Great Ape Project  
Greenpeace International  
GroundWork  
Grupo de Investigación de Suelo y Agua (GISA)  
Grupo de Trabalho em Assuntos Agrários (GT Agrária - Seção Rio-Niteroi) da Associação dos Geógrafos

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Brasileiros (AGB)  
Grupo ETC  
Grupo Guayubira  
Grupo Semillas  
Guardianes del Iberá  
Human Rights Law Network  
ICCA Consortium  
ICRA International  
Indigenous Environmental Network  
Instancia de Consenso del Pueblo Maya Q'eqchi'-Poqomchi' de Alta Verapaz "K'amol B'e"  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy  
Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Imani, Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
Instituto Socioambiental  
International Center for Technology Assessment  
International Tree Foundation  
Intipachamama  
Jubileo Sur Americas  
Just Forests  
Justica Ambiental / FoE Mozambique  
Kalpavriksh  
La Asamblea Veracruzana de Iniciativas y Defensa Ambiental (LAVIDA)  
Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, AC  
Maiouri Nature Guyane  
MEFP  
Mesa Coordinadora De Jubilados y Pensionados de la República Argentina Filial Chaco  
MLT – Movimento de Luta pela Terra  
Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)  
Movimento Amigos da Rua Gonçalo de Carvalho  
Movimento Camponês Popular  
Movimento Mulheres pela P@Z!  
Movimiento Colombiano en Defensa del Territorio y afectados por Represas "Rios Vivos"  
MST- Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra  
Nature and Youth Sweden  
Naturvernforbundet - FoENorway  
Núcleo de Pesquisa Estado, Sociedade e Desenvolvimento na Amazônia Ocidental- NUPESDAO  
Oasis Earth  
Observatório dos Conflitos no Campo (OCCA)/UFES  
OFRANEH  
Oilwatch Latinoamérica  
OLCA - Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales  
Orang-Utans in Not e.V.  
OPIROMA - Organização dos Povos Indígenas de Rondônia, Noroeste do Mato Grosso e Sul do Amazona  
Otros Mundos AC/Amigos de La Tierra México  
Pacific Institute of Resource Management  
PAPDA - Plateforme haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif  
Partner Südmexikos e.V.  
PGU (Personal-Global-Universal): Towards Equitable Sustainable Holistic Development  
PLANT  
Pro Natura – Friends of the Earth Switzerland  
Programa Universitario Diversidad Cultural e Interculturalidad - UNAM oficina Oaxaca

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Protect the Forest  
Proyecto Gran Simio (GAP/PGS-España)  
Proyecto Lemu - Epuyen - Chubut  
PUSH  
Rainforest Foundation  
Rainforest Relief  
RECOMA - Red Latinoamericana contra los monocultivos de árboles  
Red Argentina de Ambiente y Desarrollo  
Red de Acción por los Derechos Ambientales (RADA)  
Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad  
Red de Mujeres Rurales de Costa Rica  
Red de Semillas "Resembrando e Intercambiando"  
Refopar(Reforestemos Paraguay)  
Reforest the Earth  
Regenwald statt Palmöl"  
Robin Wood e.V.  
Russian Social Ecological Union  
Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia)  
Salva la Selva  
SAVIA - Escuela de Pensamiento Ecologista  
School of Democratic Economics, Indonesia  
Siempuu - Foundation for Social Movements' Cooperation sr.  
Solidarity Sweden - Latin America  
SOS Forêt du Sud  
Swedish foundation Naturarvet  
Synchronicity Earth  
Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity  
Terra Australis Co-Op Ltd  
Terra Nuova - Centro per il volontariato Onlus  
The Bioscience Resource Project  
The Corner House  
The Gaia Foundation  
The Indigenous People of Mariepsko  
ThiSaBi  
TimberWatch  
Transnational Institute  
Unión Universal de Desarrollo Solidario  
Universidade Federal de São João Del Rei  
Verdegaia  
WALHI/Friends of the Earth Indonesia  
War on Want  
Woodland League  
World Rainforest Movement  
Zo Indigeous Forum (ZIF)  
ZZ2