Pulpwood Plantations: All roads lead to Rome

Whenever the expression “planted forests” is used, the concept can be traced back to the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The more the concept is challenged by local peoples and NGOs struggling against plantations, the more the FAO builds up support to maintain it.

The reason is simple: the FAO has chosen to be at the service of northern corporations that benefit from tree plantations – articularly from the pulp and paper sector. Presenting monoculture tree plantations under the guise of “planted forests”, has proved to be a good marketing tool which serves to hide the social and environmental disaster that large-scale, fast wood, monoculture tree plantations imply.

But the role of the FAO does not stop at the definition level. It has been actively promoting the establishment of such plantations since the 1950s and continues doing so. Between 1990-1995 it even supported research in China on genetically engineered trees, that later resulted in the massive and uncontrolled planting of GE poplars in that country. The latest case is the FAO-led process that resulted in the adoption of the “Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Management of Planted forests”, which are now in their implementation stage at country level.

What is the aim of these guidelines? Even before reading the guidelines themselves, it is clear that they are aimed at supporting plantation expansion for the pulp industry. For instance:

- The report’s cover photo is that of a “Planted forests landscape, Bahia, Brazil, courtesy Veracel Company, Brazil”. The negative social and environmental impacts of precisely Veracel’s plantations have been very well documented and local people are campaigning against them. By placing the picture in the report the FAO is providing support to these and similar destructive plantations that are being challenged in the South.

- The acknowledgements. The report says that “FAO wishes to acknowledge its major partners in preparing the early concepts and drafts”. The partners mentioned from private-sector associations are all linked to the pulp and paper industry:

“International Council for Forest and Paper Associations, Brazilian Paper and Pulp Association/Sociedade Brasileira de Silvicultura, American Forest and Paper Association, Confederation of European Paper Industries, Portuguese Paper Industry Association, Japanese Paper Association/Japanese Overseas Plantation Centre for Pulpwood, Corporación Nacional de la Madera – Chile, Swedish Federation of Forest Owner’s Associations and New Zealand Private Forest Owners Association.” Why should these corporate associations support this FAO-led process if it were not that they plan to benefit from the resulting guidelines?

- The absences. Not one single Southern organization is mentioned in the “acknowledgement”. Given that the main critics of plantations are based in Africa, Asia and Latin America, this means that the FAO chose to exclude critical voices that would have certainly opposed guidelines for the promotion of “fast wood” plantations –which are the ones needed by the pulp industry.

- The bibliography: Not one single document critical to plantations is mentioned. In the case of WRM, the FAO chose to ignore, not only the countless articles disseminated over the last 10 years –based on local peoples' testimonies of impacts- but also our published research findings on plantations in Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, Ecuador, Indonesia, Laos, South Africa, Swaziland, Thailand, Uganda, and Uruguay. Turning a blind eye on this and other documented evidence about plantations' impacts proves the FAO's role in supporting plantation-related corporate interests. The following quote from the guidelines is also very illustrating:

"Governments should create the enabling conditions to encourage corporate, medium- and small-scale investors to make long-term investments in planted forests and to yield a favourable return on investment" and "facilitate an environment of stable economic, legal and institutional conditions to encourage long-term investment …"

This is not new. Many southern governments have already created those "enabling conditions" –following recommendations from FAO, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Latin American Development Bank, bilateral agencies such as JICA, GTZ and others- which have resulted in "favourable returns" to pulp and paper corporations and in very painful "returns" to local peoples and their environments.

The pulp industry is at present migrating to the South and planning to dramatically increase its production capacity over the next five years by more than 25 million tonnes. This means that it will need extensive areas of fast-growth plantations to feed its pulp mills. Within this context, the "Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Management of Planted Forests" will assist them in putting governments at their service and in weakening opposition to their expansion.

It is therefore necessary to be aware about this new threat and to oppose the implementation of these guidelines at country level. The FAO should be reminded that its mandate is not to promote tree plantations but –according to its web page- to "lead international efforts to defeat hunger".

Given that the theme chosen this year for the FAO-created World Food Day –16 October- is "The Right to Food", it appears to be necessary to remind the Food and Agriculture Organization that pulpwood plantations can not ensure "that every girl, boy, woman and man enjoys adequate food on a permanent basis", though they will certainly aim at ensuring that every pulp mill enjoys adequate wood supply on a permanent basis.

Unfortunately, when looking at the promotion of pulpwood plantations, all roads continue leading to Rome.

(*) The full FAO report is available at ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/009/j9256e/j9256e00.pdf