
When will the FAO stop calling fast wood plantations “forests”?

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has the task of carrying out periodic assessments on the state of the world's forests. In order to do this, it has developed a number of definitions one of which –obviously- is about what can be considered to be a forest. This should have been a relatively easy mission ... were it not for the fact that the FAO decided to define plantations –included those of alien species- as “planted forests”.

The recently published State of the World's Forests 2007 report includes a box (8) with the heading “Planted forests in the continuum of forest characteristics” (see note 1), where “productive plantations” are under the heading “planted forests” and are defined as “Forest of introduced and/or native species established through planting or seeding mainly for production of wood or non-wood goods”. It is interesting to note that in that box even “trees in urban environments” are included in “the continuum of forest characteristics”!

From the above it becomes clear that for the FAO any “productive tree plantation (e.g. a fast-growth monoculture eucalyptus plantation) is not only a “planted forest”, but pure and simply a “forest”. This has very important consequences, because time and time again the FAO assessment –due to such definition– hides the reality of widespread deforestation, the equally important reality of forest degradation and biological impoverishment of forests and the negative impacts of eucalyptus, pine, acacia, teak, gmelina, rubber and other alien tree plantations on people and the environment.

It may perhaps be debatable if a plantation of a native species can be considered to be a forest or not, but there can be no doubt that a eucalyptus plantation in South Africa or in Brazil or a pine plantation in Chile, or a rubberwood plantation in Cambodia, or a gmelina plantation in Costa Rica, or a cryptomeria plantation in India are not. However, the FAO not only defines them as “forests”, but includes them as part of the world's forest cover.

The FAO needs to be made aware that this is not an issue to be discussed within a closed circle of experts –as it has done until now– because this unscientific definition has concrete negative consequences on people and the environment. It is precisely these people –that suffer the impacts of plantations– who are the real experts. They have defined them as “green deserts”, “planted soldiers”, “green cancer”, “dead forests”, and these definitions are much closer to reality than calling them “planted forests” or “forests”.

This issue about the FAO definition is not an idle academic exercise: it is about people. It is about the way in which this definition disempowers local communities fighting against large-scale monoculture tree plantations –“productive forests” in the FAO terminology. Governments, consultants, multilateral agencies, aid agencies and –more importantly- large corporations use this concept of “planted forests” as a means of hiding the impacts of these plantations to the broader public. People in Finland are told that Metsä Botnia is “planting forests” in Uruguay or that Stora Enso is “planting forests” in Brazil and are in this way convinced that those companies are doing something positive abroad. It would be much more difficult to convince them that planting “green deserts” or “dead forests” in southern countries is acceptable. But this is precisely what they are doing.

The fact is that these alien monoculture tree plantations are impacting on forests, grasslands, soils, water resources, biodiversity and people's livelihoods and that the FAO is not only responsible for concealing this in its assessments but for its continuing support to the establishment of "forest plantations". The only doubt is whether the FAO realizes the social, environmental and political implications that this has or whether it doesn't.

Giving the FAO the benefit of the doubt, we recommend it to open up a dialogue on this issue with the more knowledgeable experts –the people impacted by plantations– and with national and international organizations that have been supporting them and documenting the impacts. As an initial step in that direction, it should at least be open to learn from organizations such as CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research), which in a 2003 publication coined the term "fast wood plantations". This is exactly what they are and the way in which we would like the FAO to call them. Is this too much to ask for?

(1) Box 8 is available at: <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/009/a0773e/a0773e09.pdf>