
The Mumbai Porto-Alegre Forest Initiative

A number of participants at the World Social Forum 2004 met in Mumbai and believing that forest issues are in essence social and political and that forest communities are increasingly affected by globalization --and new forms of trade and economic liberalization that comes in its way-- agreed on the need to create a global movement to ensure forest conservation and peoples' rights over forests. The principles on which the movement would be based were agreed upon and circulated by the groups as the Mumbai Forest Initiative - Statement of Principles.

A year later the group and some other participants of the World Social Forum 2005 met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, reviewed and revised the Mumbai Forest Initiative. The result is the Mumbai - Porto Alegre Forest Initiative. What follows are its 12 principles with a brief explanation under each.

1. Indigenous peoples and other forest dependent communities living in and using forests for their survival needs are the true protectors and governors of these forests and enjoy inalienable rights over their forests.

The starting point is that forest and forest-dependent communities have inalienable rights over their forests. These rights were overturned during colonization and the new independent states maintained in place the same legislation that had been imposed on communities by the colonial powers. At the same time, this principle acknowledges the role that communities play --and wish to play-- in the protection of forests that provide to their survival needs and that they hold the knowledge to govern them adequately.

2. The protection and conservation of forests demand that their rights be ensured.

Most cases of forest destruction are not caused by communities but through decisions taken outside forest areas (e.g. logging concessions granted by governments). If forests are to be protected and conserved, the first step is to ensure that communities' rights over their territories are legally acknowledged. The complementary step is to ensure that those rights are fully respected.

3. The institutional mechanisms for the social control by forest peoples -including indigenous peoples and other forest dependent communities --over forests will evolve according to the socio-ecological and economic needs of the communities and will take separate shapes according to the varied cultural profiles of the communities in various parts of the world.

This principle stresses the cultural and biological diversity existing within forests and emphasises that diverse mechanisms will be implemented by different forest communities in different types of forests and that these mechanisms will evolve through time to adapt to changes. At the same time, it cautions against the imposition of homogenous recipes from governmental or non governmental actors.

4. The historical role and positive contribution of women in the governance and nurturing of forests must be recognised and their full participation in decision making must be ensured.

If women are made “invisible” in many areas, no-where are they more invisible than in forests, both regarding their role in forest protection and on the differentiated impacts they are forced to endure resulting from deforestation and forest degradation. Acknowledgement of their role must be necessarily accompanied by their right to fully participate in decisions over those forests.

5. Governments must ensure an enabling environment for the community governance of forests.

Governments have a crucial new role to play in creating the conditions for adequate forest protection. Not only must they ensure that rights over forests are put safely --and legally-- in the hands of local communities, but they must also put in place mechanisms to support community forest governance. This “enabling environment” ranges from responding to specific support requested by communities, to putting in place policies that enhance the communities’ ability to achieve forest protection.

6. Governments must ensure that legislation and policies comply with the above principles.

In many cases, legislation and policies apparently far removed from forests result in forest destruction. For instance, mining and oil legislation linked to energy policies may be contradictory to forest policies based on the above principles and may result in the dispossession of local forest communities and in forest degradation. As a result, all government policies and laws should be previously analysed regarding their possible impacts on forests and forest peoples and modified or withdrawn if necessary in order to avoid those impacts to occur.

7. Society at large benefiting from the broad range of products and services provided by forests must support communities in their efforts to govern and conserve forests.

Public opinion is increasingly clear about the role that forests play in their lives, particularly regarding the environmental importance that forests have in the conservation of water, biological diversity and climate at the local, regional and global level. Support from society is essential, particularly at this stage, when forest communities are not even granted their rights over forests and when forests are disappearing at an alarming rate in numerous countries. Supporting communities’ struggles to govern and protect their forests should therefore constitute an important step in the creation of conditions that bring power over forests back to those best entitled to ensure forest conservation: the forest communities themselves.

8. NGOs and other civil society organizations at national and international level committed to the conservation of forests and to the protection of forest peoples’ rights should have a supportive role to peoples’ initiatives to govern the forest and to be accountable to them.

Civil society organizations can play a positive or a negative role in forests and there are examples of both. The first question they need to pose themselves is whether they are only committed to forest conservation or if they are committed to forest peoples’ rights --and to forest conservation. If the answer is the latter, they need to understand that what communities need is support --and not outside leadership-- and that ensuring long-term forest protection implies true empowerment of forest communities. The role of those organizations must therefore be perceived as a short-term involvement supporting the creation of conditions for self-governance by forest communities.

9. We oppose NGOs and other civil society organizations involved in activities affecting or undermining forest peoples rights and interests.

Though by no means a generalized situation, a handful of large international conservation

organizations --acting in partnership with a few local partners-- have chosen to disregard forest communities' rights and capacities and are actively seeking --in collaboration with some governments and corporations-- to obtain ownership and/or management rights over forests that belong to local communities. Such organizations will receive the total opposition they deserve.

10. Industrial logging and plantations, and so-called development and conservation projects which lead to deforestation and forest degradation and to the displacement of forest communities and livelihoods, cannot be allowed.

Experience has more than sufficiently shown that many so-called "development" projects have only served to develop the wealth of the wealthy, while pushing forest peoples to impoverishment and loss of livelihood means. Industrial logging is perhaps the most obvious example, but there are many others, such as dams, monoculture tree plantations, roads, mining, oil exploitation, shrimp farming, colonization and so on. If forests are to be protected, no such types of projects must be allowed. True development does not imply forest destruction; on the contrary, for forest communities, development means enhanced and permanent access to forest goods and services and therefore implies forest conservation.

11. We oppose any involvement of the World Bank, IMF, WTO and other International Financial Institutions in policies and projects that can affect forests and forest peoples.

The World Bank has a long history of forest destruction. Many of the most destructive projects in forests have been funded by this institution and it continues doing so. The positive aspects of its past forest policy were never implemented and its solution has been to downgrade its own policy in order to continue carrying out "business-as-usual". The International Monetary Fund has never even had a forest policy or acknowledged the huge impacts of its structural adjustment policies on forests. The World Trade Organization is doing its utmost to ensure that no barriers to international trade are put in place and even defines some forest protection measures as illegal "non tariff measures". The conclusion is that in order to protect forests and forest peoples, these institutions must be kept well away from forests and that their policies and projects must be carefully screened for possible impacts on forests.

12. The commodification of nature and forests by corporations, governments, international institutions and some NGOs is not acceptable.

While forest communities are trying to assert their rights over forests as a means of ensuring forest conservation and livelihoods, neoliberalism is trying to create market mechanisms to get yet more profits from nature. Nature is out for sale and everything marketable is being put a price tag. Even the carbon stored in wood is being sold; so is the forests' water cycling capacity or the medicinal properties of countless plants. This must be seen as what it really is: a further step in the privatization of life, which --if allowed-- will result in corporate appropriation of almost everything. For this reason, this initiative concludes that such process is totally unacceptable.

This statement of principles is intended to contribute towards initiating a global process of solidarity building among movements, groups and individuals working on forest issues, at local, national and international levels. We appeal to all of you join this process.

Porto Alegre, 30 January 2005

World Rainforest Movement, Delhi Forum, National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers of

India, Jharkham/Save the Forest Movement (India), New Trade Union Initiative (India), Friends of the Earth International, WALHI/Friends of the Earth (Indonesia), Tebtebba Foundation (Philippines), Coecoceiba/Friends of the Earth (Costa Rica), CENSAT/Friends of the Earth (Colombia), Rede Alerta Contra o Deserto Verde (Brasil), FASE (Brasil), Sobrevivencia/Friends of the Earth (Paraguay), International Forum on Globalisation (USA), Accion Ecologica/Oilwatch (Ecuador)

If you wish to sign on, you can either send an e-mail to wrn@wrn.org.uy (including your name, organization and country), or do it through our web page at:
http://www.wrn.org.uy/statements/Mumbai/form_MumbaiPortoAlegre.html

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