
[ADB's draft forest policy: The politics of participation](#)

Tadao Chino, the President of the Asian Development Bank knows what civil society wants from his Bank. During the ADB's 2001 Annual General Meeting in Hawai'i, President Chino accepted a statement, "People's Challenge to the ADB", signed by 68 NGOs. The statement included the demand that "Directions for future policies and practices must emerge from public debates and discussions, and not through closed-door negotiations among elite groups of ADB management, national and government elites and technical 'experts'."

President Chino promised that the views of the NGOs "would be taken into account". Unfortunately, in its preparation of its proposed new forest policy, the Bank seems to have forgotten the President's promise.

The Bank claims that it consulted with more than 500 people during workshops in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. In February 2002, when the Bank produced a draft of its new forest policy, 140 people attended a workshop at Bank headquarters in Manila. Before the Manila workshop, the Bank sent its "draft strategic framework" to "about 12 forestry experts . . . for review and comment".

These "experts", of course, were selected by the Bank. Once the Bank's draft forest policy appeared, any pretence of public debate disappeared. "Formal external consultation process was concluded with the February 2002 Regional Consultation," explained Jan P.M. van Heeswijk, Director General of the Regional and Sustainable Development Department at the ADB. "The internal review process is still underway," van Heeswijk added.

This internal review process is precisely the type of elite, closed-door negotiations that the NGOs in Hawai'i were keen to avoid.

The shortcomings of the Bank's latest draft forest policy, dated June 2003, are illustrated by its uncritical support of industrial tree plantations. Indeed, one of the objectives of the Bank's new policy is to "increase the extent and productivity of plantations".

A monoculture eucalyptus plantation, consisting of vast blocks of same-aged trees which are clearcut every five years, has more in common with an agricultural crop than with a forest. Yet the Bank defines a plantation as a "forest established by planting and/or seeding in the process of afforestation or reforestation".

A forest is defined in the draft as "an ecosystem with a minimum of 10% crown cover of trees and/or other wooded land/bamboos generally associated with wild flora, fauna, and natural soil conditions and not subject to agriculture." But when it comes to protecting forests from conversion to plantations, the draft states, "ADB will not provide assistance for plantations in natural forest areas with more than 40% crown density."

Thus a forest with 39% crown density is afforded no protection. No explanation is given for the

sudden increase in the minimum crown cover from 10% to 40%, although this is a significant weakening of the protection afforded by the policy.

Even worse, the draft policy gives a green light to all forest-destroying projects, by allowing Bank consultants and staff to decide that deforestation or forest degradation cannot be avoided. The draft policy states: "Where environmental assessment indicates that the proposed investment will contribute significantly to natural forest degradation or conversion to nonforest land use, and change in forest land use becomes inevitable, ADB will require rehabilitating or reforesting an equal area as appropriate in consultation with affected communities."

The Bank fails to explain what the word "inevitable" means in this context. Nor does it explain how the decision is to be reached that damage to forests is inevitable. A forestry consultant hired by the ADB may decide that replacing large areas of forest, fields, grazing lands and swiddens with monoculture plantations is inevitable. To villagers, whose livelihoods depend on this land, such a decision would be far from inevitable.

Because the Bank defines plantations as forests, it fails to provide any protection to forests. If an ADB-funded industrial plantation project planned to replace, say, 50,000 hectares of forest, to comply with the Bank's policy, the project developers could suggest that they would "reforest" a further 50,000 hectares with industrial plantations. Whether the Bank will also fund this "reforestation" is not clear from the draft policy.

The ADB has made its June 2003 draft policy available on its web-site. The Bank "welcomes comments", which, it assures us, will be given "serious consideration". The Bank "reserves the right to use the comments" in writing its forest policy and "may publish a list of contributors who have provided comments".

What the web-site does not mention is that the ADB's Board has already discussed and rejected the June 2003 draft.

At a board meeting on 22 July 2003, several of the Bank's Executive Directors requested revisions to the June 2003 draft policy, according to Uschi Eid, state parliamentary secretary at Germany's Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Eid described the draft policy as "unfortunately behind our principles and minimum standards for this sector; it does not reach the quality of the 'Operational Standards' of the World Bank."

The problem with the Bank's internal review process is that it is internal. It is not public. It does not allow participation. The Bank will not make public all the comments it receives. It will not respond to comments. How the Bank will decide which comments are to be included and which are to be ignored is unknown. None of the Bank's alleged experts will have to face questions in public about the forest policy. In asking for comments, the Bank is doing no more than attempting to legitimise an autocratic process.

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