A positive reaction from CIFOR

Two weeks ago, the WRM and Oilwatch disseminated an open letter to David Kaimowitz, Director of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), expressing our concern over a CIFOR research paper "which appears to give green credentials to two activities that are at the core of deforestation and forest degradation: oil and mining." (see letter at http://www.wrm.org.uy/deforestation/oil/Cifor.html)

The resulting reactions have been very positive, particularly from CIFOR itself. In spite of the strong wording of our letter, both Kaimowitz and one of the authors of the paper (Sven Wunder) responded constructively to our concerns. At the same time, CIFOR posted in its web page our letter and their responses to it, thus enabling everyone to have a complete picture of the discussion. We greatly appreciate this open attitude and we have also linked the full responses to our web site.

More importantly, our letter gave CIFOR the opportunity of clarifying its views on the oil and mining industry by stating that "Our study in no way discounts nor minimizes the negative direct consequences of oil and mineral activities for forests and we certainly do not support either the oil and mining industries large contribution to global warming or their frequent role in promoting corruption and undermining the rule of law."

Additionally, Kaimowitz's response further clarifies CIFOR's position by saying that "Our goal was definitely not to justify the oil and mining industry. It was to show that the macroeconomic policies typically associated with structural adjustment programs such as exchange rate devaluations can have very negative impacts on forests. This helps to strengthen the argument that the World Bank and national governments must do environmental impact assessments of their structural adjustment policies. The methodology used in the book also shows that it is in fact possible to do environmental impact assessments of structural adjustment policies."

By clarifying the above, CIFOR has now made it very difficult for the oil and mining industry to use its study as a greenwashing tool. We also appreciate this very much.

However, it might be very useful if CIFOR were to carry out a specific research on the social and environmental impacts of oil and mining activities in the same countries addressed in the study that motivated our reaction. To go beyond the mere "forest cover" issue and document the widespread impacts on people and the environment (human rights abuses, loss of livelihoods, cultural impacts, disempowerment, water and air pollution, biodiversity loss and so on), which can be described as forest degradation. We would certainly be willing to collaborate with CIFOR in this endeavour.

It is now perhaps necessary for us to clarify our position regarding CIFOR in general. Contrary to what our letter may have led people to believe, we have great respect towards both CIFOR and its Director. We reacted against a specific research paper and not against the institution. We would have probably not reacted at all if an oil industry consultant had produced the study. CIFOR holds a well-deserved credibility among forest activists and we would certainly not like it to lose it. Hence our strong and immediate reaction to what we considered --and still consider-- to be a huge mistake on

its part.

We believe that our letter was necessary and that --fortunately-- the resulting discussion has been extremely useful. There has been only one loser: the oil and mining industry. David Kaimowitz ends his response saying that: "CIFOR remains as willing and interested as ever in working closely with both WRM and Oil Watch on the very many issues where we strongly agree." And so do we.

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