
The UNFF must acknowledge that plantations are not forests

The United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) will be meeting in Geneva from 26 May to 6 June. NGOs and IPOs have expressed some of their concerns to the UNFF secretariat in April this year (see <http://www.wrm.org.uy/alerts/april03.html>), concluding that "if these points are not addressed soon, the UNFF will lose its credibility with civil society groups and indigenous peoples and subsequently with governments."

The UNFF stems from the 1992 Earth Summit process, when governments acknowledged the forest crisis and agreed on the need of initiating a process to address it. As a result, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) was created, followed later by the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) and finally by the current UNFF.

The mission of all those processes has been basically the same: "to develop coherent policies to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests." (<http://www.un.org/esa/forests/about-history.html>). However, the entire process has little to show regarding real achievements in implementing that mandate and forests continue to disappear at an alarming rate.

In spite of that reality, some governments insist that the situation has in many cases improved and that "forest cover" has in fact increased. They even have figures to prove it. But this is not true. The increase in so-called "forest cover" is due to the fact that monocultures of alien tree species are considered to be "forests", thus hiding the real deforestation rates.

Incredibly enough, the UNFF and its predecessors --the IPF and IFF-- still insist in considering plantations to be "planted forests", thus alienating support to this process by the numerous communities affected by plantations and by NGOs and IPOs supporting those communities.

A number of events that have taken place during the first months of 2003 are clearly showing this divorce.

Opposition to plantations from civil society was expressed in several events, starting in January, when a number of Latin American NGOs attending the World Social Forum in Brazil met to share their concerns regarding the promotion of large-scale tree plantations in this region. As a result, they created the Latin American Network Against Tree Monocultures in order to coordinate actions to oppose plantations.

In April, a seminar-workshop organized by the government of Ecuador to discuss a national plan for afforestation and reforestation resulted in a strong declaration from indigenous and peasant community representatives, stating that "large-scale commercial tree plantations, particularly monocultures, not only do not constitute a development alternative but, on the contrary, result in a number of problems" ... "because plantations are not forests" (see article on Ecuador in this bulletin).

At the beginning of May, NGOs from Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam organized a "Regional

workshop on commercial tree plantations in the Mekong region", the aim being to organize regional opposition to the spread of such type of plantations, which have already proven to have negative impacts on people and the environment, particularly in Thailand, which has a long history in this respect.

In mid-May, Brazilian social and environmental organizations met in the state of Minas Gerais to strengthen the Network Against the Green Desert --meaning eucalyptus plantations-- and to incorporate organizations from this state to the already organized in the neighbouring states of Espirito Santo, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro.

While local people affected by plantations organize opposition to confront them --the South African Timberwatch Coalition constitutes an additional example-- the UNFF provided a forum to promote them. In March, a number of governments and international organizations organized a UNFF Intersessional "Expert Meeting on the Role of Planted Forests in Sustainable Forest Management", held in New Zealand. Most of the organizing countries have extensive commercial plantations (such as Australia, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand and South Africa) and the obvious reason of this meeting was to provide further support --from the UNFF-- to the promotion of plantations.

It is sad to note this widening gap between the UNFF and local organizations on this issue, but the solution is --in theory-- quite simple. The UNFF should focus on the protection of forests --which is its mandate-- and distance itself from monoculture tree plantations --which is not. Instead of asking "experts", UNFF officials and government delegates should ask local communities in Chile, Brazil, Colombia, South Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Portugal --to mention only some-- if they consider plantations to be forests. The answer would be very clear: of course not!

If the UNFF process aims at having a positive impact in forest conservation --which we believe to be the aim of many of its officials and delegates-- it must acknowledge that plantations are not forests. This would enable this forum to focus on the true reason for its existence: "to develop coherent policies to promote the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests."