
FAO's "forests" or how to cheat at patience

FAO is cheating at a game of patience. And pretends that nobody notices it. All over the world we are watching the alarming destruction and degradation of forests and in this process the rights of indigenous peoples are being violated, watersheds are being affected, whole regions are being altered, the climate is being de-stabilised and species of flora and fauna are disappearing.

However, FAO (the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation), considered by many international bodies and by the forestry profession as the maximum authority on the subject of forests, is manipulating data on the true situation in such a way as to cover up the seriousness of the destruction process. Thus, in its report "Global Forest Resources Assessment 2000" (FRA2000) it introduces changes into its previous definition of forests, not to update it from its obvious obsolescence but to make it worse. Thus FAO manages to reach the conclusion that, in comparison with former assessments, an increase has taken place of the world forest cover. Nobody --not even themselves-- believe it, but at least they are trying.

This conclusion is reached through the manipulation of its definitions which, inter alia, state that "Forest includes natural forests and forest plantations. It is used to refer to land with a tree canopy cover of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 ha.". This definition has been justifiably ridiculed on an international level, as it implies that a major part of the city of Asuncion (capital of Paraguay) should then be considered as a "forest."

With a stroke of the pen, applying this definition of forests, FAO has managed to lower deforestation rates and thus today there are 400 million hectares more of forests than the world figures for 1995. According to FAO itself: "Despite the high losses of the world's natural forests at the global level, new forest plantation areas are being established at the reported rate of 4.5 million hectares per year" and this results in a significantly lower net rate than that recorded in the previous FAO report, corresponding to the period 1990-1995. Although it does not use these same words, it may be inferred that insofar as plantations compensate for the loss of forests, there is no cause for concern, and the "forest cover" will have been maintained. So, FAO goes on cheating at this game of patience. Or is this its way of fulfilling its function in its capacity as Sectoral Co-ordinator for Chapter 11 of Agenda 21 (of the Earth Summit): "Combating deforestation"?

What is behind this game? In the first place it should be noted that the plantations included are only industrial tree plantations, mostly aimed at wood production. Not included in this definition are trees for other purposes, such as fruit-trees or coconut plantations or agroforestry systems. And here we have an interesting case: why are the rubber tree plantations, formerly not considered as forests by FAO, now included as such? The reason is very simple: now rubber tree plantations have started to be increasingly used as wood and therefore acquire --for FAO-- visibility as forests. But they continue to be the same as before. Why can't plantations of other types of trees such as orange trees, banana trees or coconut trees be considered as forests? The answer is clear: because they are not intended for the production of wood. And this shows one of the concepts at the root of this definition and all it implies: a forest is not seen by FAO as what it is --a complete ecosystem including the human communities that depend on it-- but exclusively as producing wood.

Ten years after the Earth Summit, at the level of this "expert" organisation, not only has nothing changed for the better in this respect, but things have got worse. And this cannot be attributed to ignorance, as much has been said --and fully documented-- on the subject. Even when FAO tries to open up the umbrella by stating that it does not "intend to imply that plantations are equivalent to natural forests," and that "great care has been taken to keep the statistics for natural and planted forests separate" --though only in Southern countries-- what is true is that for FAO both categories continue to be just one and the same: forests.

It is illustrative to summarise here a written exchange which took place recently between a FAO staff member and a South African environmentalist regarding the area which --according to FAO statistics-- is covered by forests in that country. The FAO staff person finished his argument by saying "Forest plantations are areas with trees, and therefore a (kind of) forest." And the environmentalist replied: "by the same token, it could be claimed that locusts are a 'kind of bird' or that cornfields are a 'kind of prairie.'

Placing tree plantations on the same level as forests implies ignoring the various functions the latter fulfil: they are home to millions of people, they provide them with food, medicines, fibres, firewood, building materials, they regulate the local water regime and the global climate, just to mention a few of them. It also implies ignoring the long struggles taking place in many countries, both in the South and in the North (from Australia to Chile, from Spain and Portugal to South Africa and Brazil, from Thailand to India) against the invasion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, so frequently carried out in detriment to forests. These struggles are not against the forests, but against the plantations, precisely because these do not have anything in common with forests and have a serious impact on local communities and their environment.

It is important to point out that within the orientation given to the approach towards forests, the promotion and legitimisation of industrial tree plantations are a perfect fit within the framework of the Green Revolution, promoted since decades ago again by FAO. All this is joined, and the various ramifications and connections link the deforestation process to cover industrial needs, with the invasion of monoculture tree plantations to feed the paper industry, with those who promote these processes --major transnational companies-- through an international web of organizations at their disposal, among which the WTO, the IMF and various international instruments.

In this process, the latest biotechnology findings are integrated into the technological package that has accompanied and continues to accompany agro-industrial production --weed-killers, pesticides, fertilisers, etc.-- first of all expressed in the already widespread techniques of selection and cloning of the most suitable genotypes for industrial purposes, with the intention of going on to use genetic manipulation. Presently, the major companies are involved in this, injecting money into academic research centres and attempting to take their dangerous experiments out to the field. FAO does not say anything in this respect, but will surely include plantations of transgenic trees --if we allow this to happen-- as "planted forests" helping to maintain the "forest cover" of the planet.

All this is serious. And even more serious coming from an organisation that has the mandate of monitoring how forests and their resources are used to improve the population's economic, environmental, social and cultural conditions, guaranteeing the conservation of resources to satisfy the needs of future generations. And furthermore, FAO is an active part of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, preparing official documentation, part of which is the assessment of progress made, including insufficiencies and deficiencies.

Once again we stress the imperious need for the eradication, once and for all, of productivist and

reductionist conceptions of one of the most biodiversity-rich ecosystems --the forest. In order to analyse clearly what is happening with the forests, it is essential to establish a clear differentiation between plantations and forests. A plantation may be considered as positive or negative and it is good that the necessary conditions for it to be positive for people and the environment are discussed. But it can never be considered to be a forest. It is time that FAO's definitions on forests are definitively shelved --as part of the history of forest thinking-- and that it be explicitly recognised that a forest is much more than a collection of trees aimed at producing wood and that a plantation is not a forest. It would be an enormous contribution to the forthcoming Johannesburg summit meeting.