Is certification the solution?

Although many NGOs believe that certification of wood and other forest products is a good idea, there are a number of doubts about whether the actual process is moving in the right direction. The issue has resulted in confrontations between environmental organizations in countries such as Brazil, where some NGOs are working hard to convince logging companies to move into Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification, while other NGOs accuse those same NGOs of thereby promoting further forest destruction. There is also great controversy regarding the convenience of certifying forestry operations in countries such as Indonesia --where local peoples' land rights are unrecognized by the government-- and in Thailand, where most NGOs consider that there should be no certification because forests are already protected by an existing logging ban and that certification can undermine their efforts to protect forests.

Leaving aside the issue of FSC certification of plantations --which we extensively addressed in WRM's February 2001 special bulletin-- we will try to highlight some of the advantages and disanvatages of forest management certification and to draw some conclusions.
In this article we will only focus on the FSC, given that other existing certification schemes are merely aimed at "greenwashing" logging activities (a comparative analysis on the different certification systems is available at http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/logo.html). The main advantage of a certification system such as the Forest Stewardship Council is that it takes into account both social and environmental issues and that it includes the active participation of environmental and social NGOs --as well as industry. Although the system has shown some problems regarding actual implementation, the nine principles related to forests and their criteria contain a number of positive conditions for certification, with which most people would agree. There are however some problems. The main problem appears to be the need perceived by the FSC to supply the world market with as much certified wood as possible. The only way to move in that direction is to certify as many large-scale operations as possible. This also makes sense from the point of view of certifiers, who need to secure adequate payment for their work --which they can only obtain from companies. This has meant that most of the certification processes have focused on the activities of large-scale corporations, while too little has been done to certify small-scale forestry activities carried out by local communities. And this in spite of the fact that most NGOs working within the FSC would undoubtedly prefer to support the latter instead of the former, both for social and environmental reasons.

One underlying problem is that the FSC is focused on how to log. It has proved very difficult to get it to deal with the issue of where --and where not-- to log. To date, the FSC continues the focus on forests as sources of timber, largely failing to support or promote other revenue streams (fruits, medicines, resins, non timber fibres, etc). As such it has not helped those arguing for less logging and for forest areas to be off limits (permanently or under moratorium) to commercial logging.
The discussion must therefore necessarily look at the underlying issue, which is clearly overconsumption of wood and wood products, particularly in industrialized countries. However, as a market based mechanism, FSC certification relies on the good will of consumers to help bring about changes in forest management, and not on actually reducing consumption. This is a major issue, because the necessary condition for sustainable production is sustainable consumption, yet current levels of consumption are already unsustainable. There is thus a clear need to work at both the

production and consumption sides of the equation for certification to be meaningful.

At the same time, it is necessary to understand that if certification is a tool for addressing some of the problems affecting forests, it will be unable to address many of them, since many originate outside the forest sector. For instance, large-scale logging is promoted by governments as a means to ensure the necessary hard currency export earnings for external debt servicing. In other cases, logging activities are promoted as a first step for the replacement of forests by other export-oriented crops such as soya beans, palm oil or wood pulp. In this context, it becomes clear that while certification can in some cases be a solution, in others it can be irrelevant or counterproductive.

Given that the FSC is a market-based mechanism, it is necessary to underscore that the timber industry is a major example of an industry that has profitted from "market failure" --a failure to include the social and environmental costs of extraction in the price of timber. Notwithstanding its principles, the FSC is a market-driven process and experience has shown that it is failing to "internalise" some of the "externalities" that it is attempting to promote --such as indigenous peoples' rights and environmental values. Given that, at present, the "economies of scale" of certification favour large-scale operators, while placing costly and unsustainable burdens on small-scale, community-based certification schemes, the FSC needs to provide non-market incentives to small-scale operators to redress the current imbalance in the market place.

Account must also be taken that in many countries, FSC has consumed a large proportion of the working time of many forest NGOs who previously had given their attention to a wide range of ways to resolve forest conflicts and bring about better forest management. Any assessment of the costs and benefits of the FSC should look at what work has been dropped in order to focus on certification. This is as true for groups who have been fighting against certification as it is for groups who think certification can help.

Additionally, FSC national standard-setting and certification processes only work effectively in situations where human rights, law and order and principles of good governance are commonly observed. Where these conditions are absent, "participation" mechanisms are flawed and social and environmental considerations tend to get marginalised. The FSC therefore needs to adopt far more rigorous control mechanisms that would weed out flawed national standard-setting processes and limit the countries in which accredited certifiers can operate. Moreover, the FSC's standard-setting and certification processes reveal a failure to take into account the historical or institutional mistakes of the logging agencies or companies that are seeking certification. This results in these companies and agencies obtaining "certification" in some forest areas or operations while continuing their destructive logging and large-scale commercial plantations operations elsewhere, seriously undermining the efforts of NGOs and local communities working for structural changes in these forestry agencies/companies and their commercial forestry operations.

In sum, the NGO movement should try to coordinate efforts on different fronts, trying to avoid divisions, but without avoiding necessary discussion. FSC people should ensure that the system works in the right direction, taking into account the viewpoints and needs of local communities and ensuring that no certification takes place where the nine principles cannot be implemented, such as in the case of Indonesia, or where local people’s movements do not want FSC or its certifiers undermining their efforts at forest conservation in other ways.

At the same time, NGOs should join hands to combat overconsumption and to address those direct and underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation which are incapable of being addressed by FSC. All efforts should be seen as a contribution to a common aim.

Certification is neither the solution nor the only problem. The problems are many and will be solved through a joint and coordinated effort. Within this approach, certification focused on small-scale community based forest management may well still play a positive role.