Open letter to FAO on the occasion of the International Day of Forests 2014

The United Nations (UN) has declared March 21st as the International Day of Forests. For us a good reason to send once again a letter (see below) urging the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN to review its present definition of forests, that mainly benefits the interests of the timber, pulp and paper and rubber industries.

We are inviting FAO to take the initiative to correct the present misleading definition. This would be in the benefit of the millions of peoples that depend on forests and for the entire humanity, as well as for the thousands of rural communities struggling against the invasion of their territories by industrial tree plantations, falsely called "forests" by the FAO definition.

La Via Campesina, Friends of the Earth International, Focus on the Global South and the World Rainforest Movement.

Open letter to FAO on the occasion of March 21st 2014
Defining Forests by their true meaning!

To FAO General Director

José Graziano da Silva

We are a broad group of social movements, NGOs and activists, writing this urgent appeal for FAO to review its present definition of forests. FAO´s definition as it stands reduces a forest to any area covered by trees, discarding the structural, functional and biological diversity of non-tree elements that make up a forest, as well as the cultural importance of the interaction between forests and communities . This FAO definition mainly benefits the interests of the timber lobby and the industrial tree plantation companies for pulp/paper and rubber. The definition fails the at least 300 million women and men worldwide who, according to FAO, directly depend on forests for their livelihoods. These include indigenous and traditional peoples and populations, many of whom are peasants whose food sovereignty depends on practicing agriculture in the forest, complemented by their use of a rich diversity of non-timber forest products. They all not only guarantee their own food sovereignty, they make crucial contributions to feeding the world. Forests play a fundamental role in the lives of these women and men, including peasants, artisans, fisher folk and gatherers, and they must be among the main actors in a review process that FAO should initiate to ensure the organization`s definition of forests reflects how forests are seen in the 21st century.

Forests have such an importance in the lives of millions of people, women and men, who worldwide depend on forests in a variety of ways, they often find it difficult to express in words how crucial forests are for them, even in their own language. Sometimes, forest peoples summarize this importance through calling the forest simply their "home"- not just a piece of land covered by trees but a territory where they feel protected and where they can find what they need to live well. These

people are often indigenous peoples, including the last remaining about 100 groups of peoples living in isolation. They also include many other forest-dependent groups with a rich diversity of ways of living. Without exception, they show great respect towards the forest on which they depend and feel part of.

While the collection of non-timber forest products is an essential activity for many of the forest-dependent women and men, they are also peasants practicing agriculture with methods transmitted over many generations that have been refined in a way so as to maintain forest functions intact. This form of agriculture, together with fishing and hunting, as well as the collection of a range of non-timber products like honey, fruit, seeds, acorns, tubers, medicinal plants, herbs guarantees the food sovereignty and health of these populations. Peasants further contribute to the livelihoods of an even higher number of people, 1.6 billion according to FAO's own estimate. Also, timber is used by forest peoples mainly for local domestic needs and rarely as a main commercial activity. But if the latter is the case, the trade is mainly done in local markets. Forest-dependent communities are often well aware of the destructive potential of commercial timber extraction. It often results in huge profits for a few outsiders but leaves behind irreparable destruction and severely affects people´s livelihood.

But states and multilateral institutions like FAO and the World Bank still see forests as land where the commercial extraction of valuable timber by private, often foreign companies, is the best way for countries to get on the so called "development" track and take people out of "poverty". This timber-centric perspective is at the root of the present FAO definition of forests: "**Land with tree crown cover** (or equivalent stocking level) **of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares (ha). The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 meters (m) at maturity in situ** (…)". (1)

This reductionist definition also justifies the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations as so called "planted forests. Under FAO´s definition, such large-scale monocultures are even considered "reforestation" and are said to compensate for forest loss. In practice, industrial tree plantations and other industrial monocultures like oil palm and soy have contributed immensely to the destruction of forests and other biomes like grasslands and savannas throughout the world. While providing a handful of transnational companies with enormous profits, they have left forest-dependent communities impoverished, often even driven them out their territories. Women, with their specific relation with the forest, tend to suffer most from forest destruction. Communities affected by large-scale monoculture tree plantations never call them forests.

FAO's "state of the world´s forests" report continues to spread the myth that deforestation is less of a problem than it was in the past. The supposedly positive news is the result of FAO confusing forests and plantations, permitting that tens of millions of industrial fast-growing monoculture plantations of eucalyptus, acacia and rubber are counted as "planted forests" in countries' forest statistics. Under FAO's present forest definition, even a genetically modified fast-growing eucalyptus plantation of 100,000 hectares is called a "forest", in spite of all the negative impact it has as a large-scale monoculture crop, not to speak of the risk of contaminating the genetic composition of surrounding trees and forests.

In its founding principles, FAO portraits itself as an organization leading "international efforts to defeat hunger", as well as being a "neutral forum where all nations meet as equals". For this claim to become true, FAO needs to urgently revise its forest definition from one that reflects the preferences and perspectives of the timber, pulp/paper and rubber companies to one that reflects how forest dependent peoples see and use forests.

In contrast to the existing process within FAO, a process of elaborating a new and more appropriate definition of forests must effectively engage those women and men who directly depend on forests. An appropriate forest definition must support their modes of living, their networks and organizations. On the International Day of Forests we commit to continue the campaign to move the FAO and all concerned institutions to initiate a process led by forest communities to formulate a new definition of forest.

(1) http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/ad665e/ad665e06.htm

Signed by:

La Via Campesina	International
Friends of the Earth	International
Focus on the Global South	International
World Rainforest Movement	International
RECOMA	International
GRAIN	International
Acción por la Biodiversidad	International
Global Justice Ecology Project	International
Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement International	International
Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la Gestion Communautaire des Forêts (REFACOF)	International
Redmanglar Internacional	International
Campaign to STOP GE Trees	International
Red Internacional de Forestería Análoga (IAFN-RIFA).	International
ICRA International	International
Carbon Trade Watch	International
Down to Earth	International
Global Forest Coalition	International
Inclusive Development International	International
CEEweb for Biodiversity	International
ETC Group	International
GESER (Grupo de Estudios sobre Ecologia Regional)	Argentina
Red Agroforetal Chaco	Argentina
Biblioteca Popular Bernardino Rivadavia	Argentina
LLASTAY-para la defensa del medio ambiente	Argentina
GLOBAL 2000 (Friends of the Earth Austria)	Austria
Climaxi	Belgium
11.11.11	Belgium

GRABE BENIN	Benin
Cercle de Recherche pour l'Identification et la Promotion des Alternatives du Développement Durable (CRIPADD ONG)	Benin
GRABE-BENIN ONG	Benin
Asociacion Ecologica del Oriente	Bolivia
Center for Environment	Bosnia and Herzegovi
CENTRO DE AGRICULTURA ALTERNATIVA DO NORTE DE MINAS	Brazil
COATI-Centro de Orientação Ambiental Terra Integrada-Jundiaí	Brazil
Aliança RECOs – Redes de Cooperação Comunitária Sem Fronteiras	Brazil
Movimento Mulheres pela P@Z!	Brazil
FASE Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional	Brazil
SINDICATO DOS TRABALHADORES RURAIS DE XAPURI	Brazil
Instituto de Desenvolvimento Socioeconômico Sustentável Espaço Vital	Brazil
Fórum Mudanças Climáticas e Justiça Social –	Brazil
Fórum Carajás	Brazil
CEPEDES	Brazil
Comissão Pastoral da Terra/MS	Brazil
Struggle to Economize Future Environment (SEFE)	Cameroon
Tropical Forest and Rural Development	Cameroon
Green Development Advocates	Cameroon
Union paysanne du Québec	Canada
Amics Arbres	Catalunya
Colectivo VientoSur	Chile
AGRUPACIÓN DE MUJERES MAPUCHE XANALAWEN	Chile
Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres – Chile	Chile
GRUPO SEMILLAS – Colombia	Colombia
Fundacion Beteguma	Colombia
COECOCEIBA – Friends of the Earth Costa Rica	Costa Rica
Asociación Conservacionista YISKI	Costa Rica
Friends of the Earth – Croatia	Croatia
Friends of the Earth Czech Republic	Czech Republic
NOAH – Friends of the Earth Denmark	Denmark
Réseau CREF	DRC
LINAPYCO	DRC
Ethiopian Consumer Society	Ethiopia
Finnish Nature League	Finland
association enjeu libre	France

GITPA	France
ONG Brainforest	Gabon
H2O GABON	Gabon
Rettet den Regenwald e.V.	Germany
denkhausbremen e.V.	Germany
Forum Ökologie & Papier	Germany
Abibiman Foundation	Ghana
PAPDA (Plateforme haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif)	Haiti
Organizacion Fraternal Negra Hondureña	Honduras
All India Forum of Forest Movements	India
Thanal Centre for Agro Ecology and Environmental Studies	India
Sawit Watch	Indonesia
The Samdhana Institute	Indonesia
Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement Côte d'Ivoire	Ivory Coast
Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement	Ivory Coast
Sustainable Development Institute	Liberia
Foundation for Community Initiatives	Liberia
Global Environment Centre	Malaysia
Programa Universitario México Nación Multicultural – UNAM	Mexico
Ecoturismo TAP Asesores	Mexico
Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, AC	Mexico
JA! Justiça Ambiental/FOE Mozambique	Mozambique
Acção Académica para o Desenvolvimento das Comunidades Rurais-ADECRU	Mozambique
Transnational Institute – Netherlands	Netherlands
Earth Watch Media	Netherlands
FEDICAMP	Nicaragua
Community Forest Watch	Nigeria
Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria	Nigiera
SOBREVIVENCIA, Amigos de la Tierra Paraguay	Paraguay
NGO Forum on ADB	Philippines
Ecological Society of the Philippines	Philippines
Buy Responsibly Foundation	Poland
Friends of the Siberian Forests, Russia.	Russia
Biowatch South Africa	South Africa
South Durban Community Environmental Alliance	South Africa

Jubilee South Africa	South Africa
Centre for Civil Society	South Africa
Timberwatch Coalition	South Africa
Ecologistas en Accion	Spain
Proyecto Gran Simio (GAP(PGS-España)	Spain
Bruno Manser Fund	Switzerland
Pro Natura / FoE Switzerland	Switzerland
Envirocare Tanzania	Tanzania
Thai Climate Justice Working Group	Thailand
Bogazici Members Comsumer Cooperative	Turkey
Gaia Foundation	UK
Permaculture Association UK	UK
Biofuelwatch	UK
The Corner House	UK
Global Witness	UK
Acton Allotment Association	UK
EcoNexus	UK
Grupo Guayubira	Uruguay
Oakland Institute	USA
Dogwood Alliance	USA
Biofuelwatch	USA
Moana Nui Action Alliance	USA
SustainUS	USA
Responsible Investment at Harvard Coalition	USA
ForestEthics	USA
Rainforest Relief	USA
Lutheran Development Service Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe
FoodMattersZimbabwe	Zimbabwe
Particiatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM)	Zimbabwe
AZTREC	Zimbabwe
Practical Action Southern Africa	Zimbabwe
Intercultural Resources	
Maendeleo Endelevu Action Program	
Asociaciación DOMITILA HERNANDEZ FADEMUR CANARIAS	