## China: From afforestation to povery alleviation and natural forest management

The World Bank's work in China's forest and forest-related sectors is portrayed as highly successful by the report, though including a number of recommendations for future work to address some current constraints.

Most of the Bank's loans in the forestry sector appear to have been directed to tree planting activities. Bank investments of more than US$ 1 billion "helped to add more than 3.3 million hectares of high-quality trees to the country's forest stock." Such plantations are said to have been focused on the poorer areas of the country and implemented in degraded agricultural lands, wastelands, eroded lands or slopes. Unfortunately, the report fails to distinguish between different types of plantations ("engineered plantations", commercial plantations, shelterbelts, orchards, etc.), the relative size of each, species composition, benefits to local peoples, etc. which makes it difficult to emit an opinion on them. It also fails to define terms which are highly controversial such as "degraded lands" or "wastelands". In fact, when the study found that in sample villages agricultural land had increased without a corresponding decline in the forest area, it discovered that "unused wasteland was used for most of the agricultural expansion."

The report argues that China's internal wood consumption, coupled with the 1998 logging ban decreed by the government, would exacerbate deforestation in South East Asian countries as a result of additional wood exports to China. Plantations are portrayed as the only solution to address the problem. Surprisingly -says the report- imports have not increased as much as might have been expected as a result of the ban.

According to interviews with foresters, "in almost every major forest region in China, most plantations are being established on land that is either barren, or at most is home to scrub-covered hills." However, the report adds that, in spite of massive tree plantation activities, the total timber area has remained relatively constant, which would imply that wood producers are logging and not replanting large areas of China's mature plantations as well as natural and/or old growth forests. If foresters harvest in old growth or natural forests and replant with single species -says the report- "China's forests would be experiencing a decline in diversity and associated environmental services that had previously been provided by the natural forests that they are replacing." But the report immediately argues that "plantations are (or in the future will be) taking pressures off of remaining natural forests."

The different projects analysed in the OED study contain poverty alleviation as a major component, though until 1995 most projects assumed a "trickle down" effect. "The poor were expected to benefits from increased opportunities, higher incomes, more food availability in the area, and similar effects." As from that date, mechanisms for poverty alleviation are said to be designed to go beyond "trickle down", increasingly emphasizing farmer participation in planning and implementation. However, "it is unclear from project documents if the current strategy to support forest sector projects, watershed development, and plantation expansion is going to have a large effect on people and a positive effect on the environment." The gender issue goes unmentioned, while indigenous peoples are only mentioned in the introduction.

The 1997 Country Assistance Strategy, with a strong focus on poverty reduction, included specific references to reforestation of denuded areas and the preservation of forest reserves and of biodiversity. Surprisingly, while the Bank produced 45 economic reports and 6 agricultural sector reports on China after 1991, none of the sector reports were specific to forests. Although the OED report thus constitutes the most comprehensive review of the sector, the absence of sector work "is not available to assess whether the Bank is working in the right or wrong areas." Poverty and environmental sector reports are judged as "quite shallow and uninformative."

The World Bank's work in China appears to have a specific feature which distinguishes it from the Bank's work in other countries: the policy dialogue is driven primarily by the Chinese government and is based on its own priorities and not those of the Bank. As a result, there is a high level of project ownership and support by the government.

From our viewpoint, research on the positive and negative impacts of the massive tree plantations implemented in China should be prioritized by the Bank, in order to assess which types of plantations should be supported, which should be modified and which should not be promoted at all. Although the report mentions impacts on biodiversity, it does not go sufficiently in-depth into the matter, nor does it analyse impacts on water, on soils or on people and their livelihoods. Neither does it provide any data regarding whether the needs of poor people are effectively being met by these plantations and even less if other types of investments could result in better addressing the issue. This huge experiment merits an equally massive research.