
Addressing deforestation and forest degradation: now a matter of political will

This edition of the WRM bulletin is entirely focused on the NGO-led process, jointly organized with the government of Costa Rica and UNEP (with additional support and participation from an important number of governments and intergovernmental agencies) to identify and suggest measures to address the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation.

For years, the WRM had fought against the findings of experts who blamed poverty, demographic pressures, fuelwood consumption and shifting agriculture for most of the deforestation processes occurring in the South. Those same experts highlighted deforestation in the South while concealing similar destructive processes in the North.

For some time, the WRM was practically the only organization putting together information and analysis generated by its affiliates and by a handful of independent researchers, and campaigning to raise awareness about those hidden causes of deforestation. Issues such as territorial rights, inequitable land tenure patterns, the FAO's Tropical Forestry Action Plan, macroeconomic policies, overconsumption and the development model were highlighted as some of the major underlying causes leading to the destruction of forests.

Other people and organizations joined in this approach and at present the situation has experienced a dramatic change. Although the blaming-the-poor approach has still important supporters (particularly within the FAO and its followers), most informed people at all levels have a broader understanding of the chain of causality leading to deforestation and forest degradation. At the intergovernmental level, the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests underscored the importance of this issue and recommended the organization of a Global Workshop to study the international underlying causes and to link them with the country-specific causes, while the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) is conducting serious research into the matter and is reaching conclusions which have strong similarities with those arrived at by the WRM and other NGOs working on the forest issue.

The above change was manifest at the global workshop, where participants from NGOs, indigenous peoples organizations, local community organizations, governments and intergovernmental organizations worked together and reached a broad consensus on an important number of underlying causes and actors and identified actions to address them.

We believe this to be a crucial step forward. Both the global workshop and the regional and indigenous peoples' processes leading to it have raised awareness and knowledge on the chain of causality resulting in forest loss and have established bridges between governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental actors worldwide.

The first step to stop the destruction of forests in both North and South is first to acknowledge that deforestation and forest degradation is actually occurring. The regional workshops have provided strong evidence on the fact that this is not only a Southern issue, but that it is also happening in the

North. The second step is to understand the process leading to such destruction. There is now consensus in the identification of many of the common underlying causes. The third is to take measures to address the identified causes. We have moved substantially forward in the first two, while much needs to be done regarding the third. The time is therefore ripe to begin putting pressure on governments to take action. Underlying causes have been identified, many possible solutions have been recommended and although they need to be tailored to specific country situations, it is now mostly a matter of political will -at both national and international level- to implement them. This will certainly not be easy. Strong economic forces (with equally strong political support) benefit from the current pattern of forest destruction. But acknowledging that changes will be difficult does not imply that they are not feasible. All the people who have participated in the Underlying Causes process are now in a much better condition to raise awareness within their own constituencies and to put pressure on decision makers to redress the situation. At the same time, the informal networks created in the process will continue coordinating actions at the international level to support the in-country changes. In sum, we are now entering a new phase, where solutions are possible and much will depend on the role that civil society organizations will play.