Comments on the synthesis report

What follows are comments by WRM's International Coordinator on the synthesis report, presentation made at the Global Workshop on January 18th.

Before making any comments, it is important to explain how the process leading to this synthesis report -and to this Global Workshop- was implemented. From the start it was decided that the process would be participatory (and stemming from concrete realities), solution-oriented (and not accusatory) and that it would include all regions of the world.

Seven regional (Asia, Africa, CIS, Europe, Latin America, North America, Oceania) and one indigenous peoples focal points were selected to implement eight workshops, and their first task was to identify organizations/people interested in and capable of carrying out case studies. They all received a number of agreed guidelines, the main one being that case studies should be carried out, whenever possible, in collaboration with local communities facing deforestation or forest degradation. Once the case studies were finalised, they formed the discussion basis for the workshops, which included the participation of governments, academics, NGOs, indigenous peoples organizations, peasant organizations and international agencies. Using the case studies as a starting point, the workshops identified the major underlying causes and actors and elaborated a number of recommendations to address them. In total, this process included case studies in some 40 countries as well as 15 more papers presented in the different workshops.

The possible conclusions to be derived from that process are many, but some deserve to be highlighted:

1) Deforestation and forest degradation is occuring in all regions of the world. Until now, the prevalent idea was that these were problems of the South and particularly of tropical countries. Although it is undeniable that the problem is a serious one in those countries, it has now become clear that temperate and boreal forests are facing similar problems and that deforestation and/or forest degradation is taking place in most countries of the world.

2) There is a great heterogeneity of direct and underlying causes in the different contexts.

3) There are simultaneously great similarities as respects to a number of common underlying causes and actors identified in the regional and indigenous peoples processes.

4) The level of understanding of these underlying causes is still insufficient and many actors (including local communities, governments, academics, industry and even NGOs) still find difficulties in identifying the chain of causalities leading to the direct causes. The lesson learnt from this process is therefore that it is important for participatory processes like this one to take place in all countries, inviting all those directly involved or interested to identify the main direct and underlying causes and agents of deforestation and forest degradation. This will pave the way for solutions.

To facilitate the discussions at this Global Workshops, common underlying causes in all or most

regional/indigenous peoples workshops have been grouped under the following headings and it is important to stress the similarity with the causes identified by the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and presented by David Kaimowitz this morning.

1) Land tenure. Among the many different situations, there are two main ones:

- at the forest level. The lack of recognition of the legal rights of indigenous peoples and other traditional communities over their territories opens up the entry of external agents to those forests and implies the beginning of the deforestation process.
- outside the forest. Inequitative land tenure patterns in nearby or distant agricultural areas which result in spontaneous or goverment-sponsored migration to the forest with the resulting deforestation processes.

2) Resource management. The workshops identified the following common underlying causes:

- limited vision of the forest and its multiple values, especially by agents external to the forest. Because of this limited vision, only some aspects are taken into consideration, such as wood, or underground resources (oil, minerals), or land for agriculture. The decisions made are usually merely economicist. As the water produced by the forest has no market value it is therefore considered as non existing. The same is applicable to all the other products and services produced by the forest but which have no price tag attached to them.
- decision-making without the participation of local communities and where industrial or macroeconomic interests prevail.
- development policies which result in deforestation, such as road-building, energy-related projects, etc.
- issues related to governance, such as corruption (leading to illegal felling and/or to the occupation of lands), lack of institutional capacity, human rights violations related to the struggle for land and to the desire of local communities to participate in decision-making, laws that are not enforced or that are contradictory with other existing laws.

3) Trade (particularly international). The issue is not trade itself but its continued growth and promotion, resulting in:

- unsustainable extraction of forest products and of subsoil resources within the forest.
- substitution of forests by other productive activities, such as agriculture, cattle-raising, large-scale tree plantations, oil palm plantations, shrimp farms.
- ever increasing trade (linked to overconsumption), which is to a great extent made possible by the undervaluation of forests and the externalization of the environmental and social costs of natural resource exploitation

4) International economic relations. Although underlying causes grouped under this heading affect mostly Southern forests, it is important to highlight them at the global level, because the involvement of Northern countries is crucial to address them, given that it is mostly they who establish the rules of the game. Among the issues that need to be addressed are:

- macroeconomic policies imposed or promoted by the North, such as structural adjustment programmes, which in many different ways constitute an important underlying cause. For instance, the promotion of an export-oriented development model based on natural resources or the reduction of the size of the state which results in lack of personnel to control forest management (or leading to corruption linked to lower salaries).

- the issue of external debt and its service and repayment, that linked to the above leads to the unsustainable extraction of natural resources.
- unfair international trade relations, which translates in lower prices and in the need to increase extraction to unsustainable levels to compensate for loss of revenues.
- the active promotion of investments by transnational corporations and the inadequate regulation of their activities by either host or home countries.

5) Social Exclusion. It is important to underscore that even when the issue of social exclusion -which includes poverty- was identified as an underlying cause, it was also highlighted that it is part of a chain of causality which originates in some of the causes identified above (for example, unfair land distribution, macroeconomic policies, etc.)

The synthesis report on purpose does not summarize the agents involved in the different underlying causes nor the solutions identified in the regional and indigenous peoples workshops, because we thought that this was a task for this global workshop and we wanted keep that discussion as open as possible.

However, we felt it was important to highlight some general conclusions which seem to stem from the case studies and workshop discussions:

The first conclusion is that -given the heterogeneity of situations- there is a need to identify the chain of causality in each country, with the informed and active participation of all relevant actors.

The second is that there is a clear need for the establishment of democratic mechanisms for decision-making over natural resource management, including specifically the recognition of the territorial rights of indigenous peoples and other traditional communities, as well as the establishment of equitable land tenure systems in agricultural areas.

Thirdly, that it is necessary to introduce changes to the current international macroeconomic policies, including the trade liberalization process.

Finally, that it is essential to modify the current unsustainable consumption patterns.

Obviously the above are only some general conclusions, which aim at providing input to the discussions which will take place as from today in this Global Workshop, which we hope will result in a number of important recommendations to be presented at IFF3 later this year. Additionally, we also hope that we will reach a shared and deeper vision about the issue, resulting in concrete commitments to begin to address the underlying causes of the serious deforestation and forest degradation processes which are affecting the world as a whole and the lives and livelihoods of the people who inhabit those forests.