Plantations and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests

In 1995, the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development established an Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) to address a wide range of forest-related issues. The IPF produced a final report in early 1997 containing a set of 135 proposals for action, that governments have agreed to implement. This package of proposals was formally endorsed at the June 1997 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the implementation of Agenda 21.

As a follow-up to the IPF, at UNGASS, governments established the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) to promote implementation of the IPF proposals for action, to monitor such implementation; and to address matters left pending by the IPF. The first meeting of the IFF took place on 1-3 October 1997 in New York, and will be followed by three more meetings before reporting back to the CSD in the year 2000: August 1998, May 1999 and another one sometime later that year.

The IFF is now an extremely important forum, where governments talk about forests together. It is being assisted by the Inter-agency Task Force on Forests, integrated by: the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (DPCSD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank. So the whole complex of the IFF is an important discusion forum among governments about forests.

The IPF and tree plantations

The IPF's proposals for action, whose implementation is now going to be promoted by the IFF, contain a number of contradictions as respects to plantations, which reflect the different interests at stake among the governments involved in the process. Some of them seem to wish to preserve native forests, others want to replace them by plantations; some wish to create extensive plantations, others want to simplify existing forests, converting them into something similar to plantations; some are interested in the continuing provision of raw material for the pulp industry, others are focused on plantations as carbon sinks. The result of the ensuing discussion, influenced by other actors such as industry, bilateral and multilateral agencies, NGOs, indigenous peoples' organizations, and others, has been a very confusing set of proposals. This confusion has also been influenced by the FAO's definitions, which includes plantations under the term "forests". Although the IPF's proposals for action do differentiate between natural forests and plantations, the terms used allow for confusion ("natural" forests and "forest" plantations) and therefore pave the way for them to be used as sinonyms, for the benefit of the promoters of plantations.

The first time plantations are mentioned is in paragraph 22, which says: "Both sustainably managed natural forests and forest plantations, as components of integrated land-use that takes account of environmental and socio-economic concerns, fulfil a valuable role in meeting the need for forest

products, goods and services, as well as helping to conserve biological diversity and providing a reservoir for carbon. The costs, benefits and disbenefits of different types of forest management, including forest plantations, need to be appraised under different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions. The role of forest plantations as an important element of sustainable forest management and as a complement to natural forests should be recognized."

That paragraph contains a number of conceptual errors:

1) Plantations are not forests

2) Plantations do not provide for most of the services provided by forests

3) Plantations do not help to conserve biological diversity

4) Plantations are not a durable reservoir of carbon

5) Plantations in many cases conspire against sustainable forest management, by replacing forests

6) Plantations are seldom a complement to natural forests.

At the same time, it contains another major contradiction in that it declares that "[T]he costs, benefits and disbenefits of different types of forest management, including forest plantations, need to be appraised under different social, cultural, economic and ecological conditions", but immediately recognizes (with no appraisal whatsoever) "[T]he role of forest plantations as an important element of sustainable forest management and as a complement to natural forests . . ."

The above paragraph is reinforced by paragraph 28, through which the "Panel urged countries:

(a) To assess long-term trends in their supply and demand for wood, and to consider actions to promote the sustainability of their wood supply and their means for meeting demand, with a special emphasis on investment in sustainable forest management and the strengthening of institutions for forest resource and forest plantations management;

(b) To recognize and enhance the role of forest plantations as an important element of sustainable forest management complementary to natural forests;

The above clearly shows a wood supply approach to forests. In spite of all the international processes which have taken place particularly after the Earth Summit, forests are here still being basically considered as wood producers. In that context, obviously plantations make sense, to ensure an ever increasing consumption of wood and wood products. However, they do not make sense from a social and environmental perspective, where local people and local environments suffer the impacts, either of "sustainable" logging or of plantations, and usually from both: the latter following the former.

Paragraph 43 states that in "some countries" [without specifying in which] plantations of fast-growing trees have had good and cost-effective results in terms of soil protection." Given that in many cases the opposite has been proven true, this should be brought to the attention of the IFF in order to avoid a wrong generalization of this type.

On the positive side, the document at least mentions that plantations should be implemented preferably with native species and should not replace natural forests. Paragraph 58 (b ii) urges "countries with low forest cover:

(ii) To plan and manage forest plantations, where appropriate, to enhance production and provision of goods and services, paying due attention to relevant social, cultural, economic and environmental considerations in the selection of species, areas and silviculture systems, preferring native species, where appropriate, and taking all practicable steps to avoid replacing natural ecosystems of high ecological and cultural values with forest plantations, particularly monocultures;"

We obviously strongly support the last part of the paragraph (avoiding the replacement of natural ecosystems by tree monocultures), but at the same time it raises some questions:

1) Why does this recommendation only apply to "countries with low forest cover"? Shouldn't all countries avoid replacing forests (whether with high ecological and cultural value or not) with plantations and shouldn't all not avoid monocultures?

2) Who is going to "plan and manage" those forest plantations": the local communities, the Forestry Department? Is the "provision of goods and services" aimed at the local community or at the international market? How are the decisions going to be made? What does "paying due attention" mean?

3) From a Western forestry science point of view, plantations of native species are seldom "appropriate", either because their wood production is slower, or because they don't have a market value, or because when planted in closed stands they tend to be affected by "pests and diseases" (animals and plants which make part of the local ecosystems). So "preferring native species, where appropriate" seems to be only wishful thinking, to appease environmentalists.

In sum, as respects to plantations, the IPF's proposals for action appear to be more a problem than a solution. However, there seems to be room for influencing their implementation and one of the campaign's main targets should be to generate awareness on the drawbacks of plantations, particularly the social and environmental effects that they have at the local level. The awareness-raising activities should obviously focus on IFF participants, but should at the same time aim at a much wider audience which will itself also influence decision-makers, both within and outside the IFF process.