
Forest Policy: Letter to the World Bank

The Forest Peoples Programme addressed on May 12th the following letter to Mr. Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, concerning the forest policy of the Bank:

"Dear Mr . Wolfensohn,

We have been following with interest the correspondence between the World Bank and NGOs about the evolution of the World Bank's forest policy and the setting up of the 'ad hoc working group', titled the 'Forest Industry and Conservation CEOs Forum'. We share many of the concerns already expressed by NGOs about the nature of this group and its connection to the forest policy implementation review but will not recapitulate these points here. We understand that the meetings are to continue and that a second meeting is scheduled for June 9th; we hope this will be more inclusive and in particular that serious efforts are made to include southern NGOs and forest peoples' representative organisations in the process.

Having now had a chance to examine the minutes of the January 9th meeting, we are writing to express serious concern about the content of the January discussions and of the proposed follow up themes to be covered by the six 'working groups' established at the first meeting. We note that at no point in the minutes of the first meeting is there any mention of the social dimensions of forests, forestry or of the Bank's forest policy nor any reference to the World Bank's principal mandate of poverty alleviation.

It should not need restating that the world's forests are all inhabited and provide homes and livelihoods to tens of millions of indigenous peoples and provide goods and services crucial to the welfare of billions of other human beings. The World Bank, as an international development agency set up to combat poverty and secure the futures of poor and marginalised peoples, should ensure that their interests and rights are central to all forest policy discussions.

By contrast, the minutes of the January meeting suggest that forests are only valued by the group as reserves of timber, for biodiversity conservation, watershed protection and recreation. The importance of forests for local communities appears to have been wholly omitted from discussion and from the topics to be covered by the working groups. This gives the unhappy impression that the group is intentionally set on marginalising the interests of the poor and the powerless in favour of large businesses and corporations, which is quite at odds with the World Bank's expressed mandate.

We are sure that you will agree that this is a serious oversight. We urge that special measures are taken to ensure that, at the next meeting, priority is given to a discussion of the social values of forests and to alternative models of forest management, which respect the rights of local communities and which involve them centrally in forest ownership, control and management.

We look forward to learning how you plan to address this matter.

Yours sincerely

