

# **What is a forest, and when is it a forest?**

**A critical reflection on the concepts used in  
international forest policy processes**

**WRM Briefing**

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### WRM Briefing

This is the third in a series of briefings based on a longer discussion paper produced from 2019-2021 by Larry Lohmann, a member of WRM's advisory committee. The discussion paper is based on input from interviews with several grassroots activists, the WRM advisory committee and the international secretariat; and it is a critical self-reflection on WRM's past, present and future work around forests, deforestation and its participation in international forest policy processes, fora and initiatives. The discussion paper can be accessed [here](#).

World Rainforest Movement

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# Introduction

In 2021, WRM published a critical self-reflection of its past, present and future work and, in particular, of its participation in international policy processes around forests. This reflection analysed WRM's engagement, along with that of many civil society groups, in the UN-led process on the Underlying Causes of Deforestation. This process began in 1999 as an initiative of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF)<sup>1</sup>.

Although it is focused on WRM's work, this critical self-reflection may also be of broader interest to national and international organizations, movements and activists that are committed to critically reflecting on the consequences of engaging with international policy processes for social struggles in forests. In order to encourage broader reflection on these questions, WRM decided to produce three shorter briefings. The first one, focused on the causes of deforestation, shows how more than 20 years after the 1999 Underlying Causes report, none of these causes has been truly addressed; in fact, several causes have intensified and new ones have been added to the list. As a result, forests continue to be destroyed on a massive scale. The second briefing reflects on the question of NGOs' attendance at international forest policy meetings: should grassroots activists and NGOs continue to attend international forest policy processes to provide decision-makers with policy recommendations, even if these recommendations are routinely ignored—as in the case of the 1999 Underlying Causes report? After all, NGO participation can legitimize such processes.

The present briefing is the third in the series and builds on the discussion in the previous briefings. It focuses on another important dimension of participation in international forest policy fora: language, and in particular, the concepts and categories that are used in such processes. It reflects on how these concepts stand in the way of addressing the underlying causes of deforestation. This, we argue, is another reason why it should come as no surprise that—despite countless international forest policy meetings and initiatives—forests keep being destroyed.

Examples of these supposedly universal concepts include *forest*, *ecosystem*, *climate* and *biodiversity*, in French *forêt*, *écosystème*, *climat* and *biodiversité*; in Spanish *bosques*, *ecosistemas*, *clima* and *biodiversidad*; and in Portuguese *florestas*, *ecossistemas*, *clima* and *biodiversidade*, and so forth.

The use of such concepts usually goes unchallenged, not only in international policy spaces but also in many other spaces and documents where they appear—including in the meetings and materials of civil society organisations and social movements. These concepts even appear in the names of organisations, such as the World Rainforest Movement.

But why are these concepts so problematic, and why is it important to reflect on how their use influences the way deforestation and its underlying causes are discussed? Because concepts pave the way for the solutions that emerge from these processes.

Looking again at the case of WRM: it has long rejected the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations's international definition of *forests*, because the FAO defines a *forest* as any area covered with a certain quantity of trees growing in a certain pattern. WRM has contended that a *forest* is much more than a bunch of trees. It has argued, in particular, that human communities are part of a *forest*. This is something that the organisation has learned in conversation with Indigenous Peoples and other communities living with *forests*. Yet, WRM's main critique of the FAO's definition of *forests* centres not so much on the concept of *forests* itself, but on the fact that this definition includes industrial tree monoculture plantations. WRM and other groups have carried out campaigns and used the slogan 'plantations are not forests,' – which can implicitly reaffirm a mainstream concept of *forest*.

WRM has also become aware that a number of Indigenous Peoples rooted in *forest* territories have decided not to translate forests and other concepts that are used in international forest policy talks, and/or they have decided to adopt their own definitions. For many of these communities, a *forest* is not a fixed entity that could be meaningfully defined in terms of *tree cover or carbon sequestration*, as the FAO and other actors behind policy

processes attempt to define it. A definition like the FAO's is irreconcilable with an understanding of a *forest* as part of a transformational cycle of an area of land.

International forest policy processes, however, have censored any Indigenous definition of *forests*. In their conference halls and documents, these processes will not tolerate any definition that falls outside of allegedly universal categories, such as *forests, climate, biodiversity, ecosystems*, and so on. This conceptual monopoly directly excludes Indigenous concepts—which are rooted in realities that involve different cosmologies and often longstanding struggles for life.

In a way, the actors behind international forest policy processes transmit an unspoken message to communities who have a different concept of forests: forget about your reality and your struggles. The suggestion that community members are 'taking their seat at the table,' - a common slogan to lobby for wider community participation at such international policy meetings - actually means engaging community members in processes that ignore their realities. And their realities are a result of a particular historical process, usually marked by colonialism, racism, patriarchy, genocide, and relentless extraction for global capital accumulation.

Actually, most, if not all of the concepts mentioned above have emerged from these historical processes. *Forest*, for example, is a concept derived largely from colonial forestry science. And it has always been contested, in particular at the grassroots level where *forest*-dependent communities have expressed what a forest is in their own terms.

In short, language is never neutral, and certain concepts that are perceived to be harmless or even positive by the dominant discourse have historically been used—and continue to be used—to dominate people and territories<sup>2</sup>. The following text highlights the need to critically question the international *forest* policy discourse that not only uses, but imposes, concepts like forests. It also underscores the need to understand, respect and consider other viewpoints and knowledge on this matter, in particular that of *forest*-dependent Peoples.

## **What is a forest, and when is it a forest? A critical reflection on the concepts used in international forest policy processes**

Twenty-five years ago, WRM more or less accepted without challenge many of the central categories in which forest struggles are discussed in international forest policy processes.

These categories include forest, land, water, soil, plantation, energy, resource, population, nation, plant, animal, consumption, production, biodiversity, ecosystem, ecosystem service, demand, labour (as waged), development, economy, cost, carbon balance, climate, climate impact, climate mitigation, climate adaptation, hectares, crop, product, time (as linear process), space (as abstract), nature and society (as abstractions), as well as many others.

For example, while WRM stoutly rejected the FAO definition of forest on the ground that industrial plantations were included, it nevertheless tended to tolerate other mainstream definitions of forest that are also ultimately derived from colonial forestry science.

For instance, the 1996 WRM publication *Pulping the South* defined a forest as a "complex, self-regenerating system, encompassing soil, water, microclimate, energy, and a wide variety of plants and animals in mutual relation."<sup>3</sup>

Such mainstream definitions failed to question the fundamental capitalist opposition between "humans" and "nature," and forest and agriculture, even though many forest movements and forest communities had been resisting such definitions for a long time.

Today, partly as a result of engaging in closer dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, peasants and labour unions, together with the deepening deprofessionalization that has come with that contact <sup>4</sup>, WRM is perhaps beginning to understand better what the problems are with such concepts.

It has arguably become more aware of how widely, across the world, categories such as those in the long list above are contested or put into brackets. It has become more conscious of how and where they are being

broken apart, or why they never held much sway in the first place. And it is likely to understand better why this is important to alliance-building and political strategy.

Most crucially, perhaps, the WRM of 2024 is probably better prepared than the WRM of 25 years ago to grasp the implications of the fact that many Indigenous groups have long refused to look at forests as things that humans are not a part of, and that are not a part of humans.

In 2016, one article in the *WRM Bulletin* described a meeting with a *wixárika* community in Jalisco, México about maize, transgenics, agrochemicals, threats to territories and so forth.

During the meeting, the article's author realized to her surprise that the *wixárika* were using the Spanish language to refer to the concepts *plant* and *animal* because they had chosen not to harbour those concepts in their own language.

The problem with the notions *plant* and *animal*, one community member explained, was that they excluded community members. To create an easily-exchangeable "equivalent" for such European words in *wixárika*, he implied, would be to deny the reality that each being that a European might classify as a *plant* and *animal*, like every mountain, road, pot, spring or fire, is in fact a living subject in dialogue with humans, "part of the same continuum of beings that make up community in a territory."<sup>5</sup>

These forest practices constitute a living critique of, and counterweight to, international policy forums and their commitment to creating the exchangeable units required for, say, commercial transactions and biodiversity regulation.

*Wixárika* categories, located outside many of the structures of industrial capital, make possible a kind of political leverage unobtainable otherwise.

Paying close attention to such practices also helps reveal the deep commitment of international policy forums to censoring radically-opposed concepts like those found in *wixárika* practice.



This is a censorship with which, in the past, WRM may have occasionally been complicit without being aware of it. WRM's current commitment to investigating cases such as that of the *wixárika* may help bring to light, and to combat more effectively, the hidden exclusions, brutality and violence that form the unspoken framework of official international policy discussions.

To vary the example, friends of WRM have long known that many Indigenous Peoples and peasant groups share a conception of *forest* – if they have one at all – not as a fixed entity to be defined in terms of tree cover, biodiversity or carbon-sequestration potential, but rather as one moment in a transformational cycle of a given piece of land from field to fallow to woodland to field again.

Or they may see an area of land, like a burial *forest*, more in terms of its community or political use than as something defined by Western biology. (Similarly, *forest* was defined in Old English as a hunting ground for the supply of game to elites, whether it contained any trees or not).

Here the proper response to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expert's question "Is this piece of land a forest?" can be another question: "When?"

Similarly, an appropriate response to the official's question "How is this forest to be preserved?" can be yet another question: "How can we find out from communities the best ways of contributing to their struggles to defend their own forest practices, including life and livelihood cycles?"

Obviously, WRM has always respected and supported such perspectives. But they now perhaps need to be more thoroughly integrated into its strategic thinking.

So while it seems self-evident for WRM to claim it concerns itself with the defence of *forest*, WRM's commitment to the grassroots is arguably leading it along a path that loops back towards a constructive reassessment and redefinition of that very mission.

To put the point in a different way, the concept *forest* may need strategic reconsideration not only because it is part of WRM's name, but also because its political history, like the political history of climate, is somewhat different

from other terms that frequently pop up in international discussions, such as *mining* or *oil palm*.

One good thing about the word *mining* is that it's difficult to talk about mining without talking about mining companies, business competition, subsidies and capital accumulation, as well as what opposes capital accumulation.

As a way of defining a crisis, *forest* – as WRM has customarily used the term – is vaguer, more contested and more slippery.

The word leaves fewer obvious openings for discussion of corporations, states and underlying causes. In the hegemonic definition, *forest* means *trees*. So a *forest* crisis becomes a crisis of trees. Anybody or anything that seems to be damaging trees can be argued to be equally at fault.

Certainly, a paper company like Kimberly-Clark or an agribusiness firm like Monsanto can be blamed. But so can any peasant clearing land for a swidden field, or any microorganism causing bark disease.

The global tree rather than the global company becomes the topic of discussion. And it is forestry experts who get to decide what that global tree is. Participants in international policy forums on forests tend to have to yield to this technocratic undertow in a way that participants in forums on mining arguably do not.

The same holds of the international climate change conferences in which WRM has often felt pressured to participate.

There, it is often the expert on the movement of carbon dioxide molecules and the direction of ocean currents who gets to speak. The activist with grassroots knowledge of agribusiness or Chevron or capital's use of machines to control labour has to go to the back of the room and listen. Supposedly, their knowledge is not "about *climate*," as *climate* is defined by the experts.

This is not, fundamentally, a question of terminology. To try to hear the voices of different forest communities talking to one another, as WRM is increasingly trying to do, is to place oneself in the middle of, and take sides

in, an encompassing, ongoing historical process of political conflict. And mainstream concepts like *forest, hectare, resource, ecosystem, consumption, biodiversity*, nation and climate have always been contested, particularly at the rural grassroots.<sup>6</sup>

The more thoroughly that such grassroots voices are listened to, the more obvious it becomes that the challenges that they represent can seldom strategically be put in the form of “policy recommendations” or “alternatives” tailored to the format of official international policy forums.

Nor can such voices speak in the terms that professional specialists want to hear in response to their questions.

No formerly taken-for-granted definition of deforestation or forest degradation, biodiversity, forest fire or climate can survive this process of education untouched.

Accordingly, if WRM undertook a remake of *Addressing the Underlying Causes* today, it would surely have to include a re-examination of its own biases about what nature is.

For WRM, as for everybody else, choosing who *to* talk to influences what to talk *about*.

Nor is it going to help just to replace colonial forestry’s *forest* or *hectare* or *ecosystem* or *climate* with “alternative terminology.” The forest communities attempting to cope with today’s reinvigorated resource colonialism do not exist in order to supply replacement spare parts for modified structures of neoliberal capital accumulation. Why should WRM rush to embrace new slogans like *community forest* or *buen vivir* or *ecological reparations* if such terms end up being treated as nothing more than ready-made, finished rhetorical tools?

Usually, what grassroots communities talk about when they talk to WRM is not a theory that they are asking WRM to “agree” with, proselytize for, internationalize, “scale up,” or transfer to different contexts, like the “structural adjustment” theories promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank.

What those communities express, arguably, is more in the nature of an invitation for WRM to see itself as a part of a series of unfinished histories.

The telling of those histories demands respect for community struggles as well as recognition and careful study of their antagonists. It demands an understanding that, to borrow the words of Ecuadorian Indigenous leader Yaku Perez, “resistance is life itself.”

Trying to clarify such issues, an Ecuadorian activist gives the example of the dialogues that go on constantly among different Latin American social movements.

In this activist’s telling, no matter who participates in such dialogues (unlettered Indigenous women from rural areas, urban intellectuals, union activists or whoever), and no matter what the ostensible topic of the day happens to be (ecology, feminism, rights of nature or even some UN concept like “sustainable development”), always in the front of everyone’s mind is the common 500-year experience of the continent under colonialism, genocide, and relentless extraction.

Invariably at the pivot of the conversations and collective investigations that ensue is a question that is so obviously all-pervading that it does not need to be spoken aloud: Who are we as Latin Americans? What are we going to do with our history – a colonial, racist and patriarchalist past that (to adapt a phrase from the US novelist William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech) is not only not dead, but not even past?

A movement in Latin America that happens at certain moments to be confronting deforestation or climate change does not derive its meaning or force from being a special case of a generic worldwide environmentalism any more than a black woman confronting patriarchal violence can be represented by a black man or by a white woman, or by a committee of the two.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, deforestation and climate change – to say nothing of ecosystem service markets or Free Prior Informed Consent – cannot *themselves* be defined in such a generic way, any more than the particular patriarchal violence that black women suffer can be defined by black men or white women.

“To articulate the past historically,” the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote in 1940 as he fled the Nazis, “means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>8</sup> For most of the forest struggles with which WRM involves itself, such histories are always ready to flash up in the mind. For example, for many communities in Liberia, Cameroon, Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda, contemporary industrial oil palm plantation projects are simply “another round of colonial occupation.”<sup>9</sup>

Villagers’ lands are taken from them, often by force or manipulation, without consultation or consent. Farmers, especially women, lose the capacity to grow their own food or produce their own palm oil and are harassed and beaten by company security guards who accuse them of stealing palm fruits from company plantations. Commercially-valuable native trees are cut and water polluted just as they were in the early 20th century by figures such as Britain’s philanthropic Lord Leverhulme (below), the co-instigator of a terror campaign in the Congo that took over community groves of oil palms and turned huge forests into forced labour plantations.



Today, the communities living next to and inside the plantations formerly owned by Unilever (the company that still bears Lord Leverhulme's name) – which have now been gifted to other companies, both foreign and domestic – remain among the poorest in Africa.

And the whole package continues to be “cloaked in the story of a mission to help Africa, just as it was during the colonial period.”<sup>10</sup>

What “flash up” in every such moment of danger from large-scale industrial oil palm developments in West and Central Africa, moreover, are not only memories, but also awareness of space.

Just as an Indigenous farmer in the northern Thai hills may well experience a forest less as a collection of trees and biodiversity inventoried at a single moment than as a stage of a long history periodically involving connections to distant places, so too the struggle that an African palm oil plantation community engages in is likely to be linked both far into the past and future and deep into distant regions. The agribusiness companies driving today's renewed African land grabs hail not only from old European colonial centres like Belgium (SIAT) and Luxembourg (SOCFIN) but also from previously colonized zones of an even more remote Southeast Asia (Wilmar, Sime Darby, Golden Agri).

This is a Southeast Asia that itself bears the bloody imprint of oil palm plantations worked by near-slave labour, and that today continues to mix masses of cheap, brutalized migrant workers with enormous stretches of cheap, brutalized land, this time to produce agrofuels for a new “green economy.”

In short, contrary to the common mythology of purely “local” struggles to which even WRM – unfortunately – still sometimes resorts, African grassroots struggles against palm oil capitalism are no more confined to specific locations in space than they are to specific points in time.

Nor do they tend to experience themselves as such.

Nor are they treated as such by, say, the international organizations and corporations that must lavish countless “local” hours in Washington or Brussels offices to devising strategies to contain them.

The current struggle against SOCFIN plantations, for example, is not a struggle against abstract “global” forces by victims who are merely “local” (as WRM might have expressed it in 2000).

It is not being waged by people who are unable to “act globally” except by joining RSPO or REDD+ networks.

It is, instead, an intrinsically global struggle *itself*. From the beginning, it was continuous with, for example, historical resistance to the World Bank’s Washington-coordinated efforts, between 1970 and 1990, to cooperate with SOCFIN to renew and reinforce colonial-era property relations in the region.

Such “global” aspects of the struggle cannot be reduced to a battle for “human rights” or a “universal right to free prior informed consent” or to other worthy causes like “biodiversity,” “wetlands,” or “forests.”

If palm oil communities in Africa and Southeast Asia come to speak to and for each other, it is likely to be less on that basis than on the basis of connected experiences of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and resistance.

To put the point slightly differently, if forest movements happen to bring up colonialism, racism, patriarchy or the like, it is not their way of adding a few colourful rhetorical flourishes to a basic account of a fight for a few trees and patches of soil.

It is not merely to urge that the “social accompaniments” of environmental conflict not be forgotten.

It is not only to suggest that palm oil economies in the Africa of 2024 are analogous to those of 1924, or that they share a historical timeline.

In addition, it is to insist that today’s palm oil industry in Africa is “built, quite literally, on the back of this brutal history.”<sup>11</sup> The subsidies that it derives from a colonialist and racist past are translated every day into hard cash in current accounts.

That past is therefore, again, not only not dead but not even past.

For instance, Feronia-PHC’s precarious oil palm business in Democratic

Republic of Congo (supported until very recently by Britain's Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) Group, a government-owned company that used to be called the *Colonial* Development Corporation) simply could not be sustained economically if it did not occupy forest lands that were stolen from communities along the Congo River under Belgian colonial occupation between 1908 and 1960.

The same is true of REDD+ (Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation).

REDD+ would be unable to promise patented cheap substitute units of carbon pollution regulation for sale to the industrialized North were it not supplied with subsidies from past – and present – relations of colonial domination.

Those relations continue to subject rural peoples to brutal police and military force, as is evidenced, for example, by recent deaths in Uganda and Kenya.<sup>12</sup>

In short, it is not so easy to clip out analytical concepts like *colonial* from the ecological analysis of forest degradation in Africa without losing sight of the underlying drivers of the phenomenon altogether.

By the same token, it is not so easy to dismiss uprisings against decrees eliminating fossil fuel subsidies in Ecuador and France as “anti-ecological” once the overall anti-ecological thrust of the neoliberal policies to which the decrees belong is appreciated.

The issue here is that international forums on forest policy have never had much place for this kind of common sense.

The central credo defining the agenda of nearly every such forum is all the stronger for being unspoken: Forget Columbus. Forget Leverhulme. Forget Texaco. Forget Aracruz. Forget the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP). Forget the Pak Mul Dam. They never existed.

Or if they did, they're part of a past that is dead, or of some faraway place that has nothing to do with us or that would be rude to mention.

Let's separate ourselves from these smelly corpses, the idea goes.



Let's make sure never to refer to them, nor to the processes of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and global capital accumulation that they represent.

Let's pretend that these issues don't need to be raised.

Or that we've already solved them with our "gender policies" and "participation mechanisms."

Instead, let's talk only about disembodied futures in nonlocal locations.

Not for nothing, for example, is it an unofficial but explicit and self-confessed policy of the World Bank that "lessons from past experience" must be "generally ignored in the design of new operations" in favour of optimistic promises about a wholly theoretical future.<sup>13</sup>

Not for nothing did the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) fail for more than 25 years to mention the name of a single oil company, nor remember any global histories of coal or gas extraction.

Not for nothing does the Convention of Biological Diversity CBD never discuss turning points in the history of nature, but only an imaginary unchanging human species that is always and everywhere at war with nature, and whose characteristics, like craving for energy, are represented as eternal.

And not for nothing does the Natural Climate Solutions Alliance fail to mention the failures of REDD+ and the Clean Development Mechanism.

And this is true not only of the World Bank, the CBD, the UNFCCC, the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Forum on Forests, FAO, UN-REDD (UN Program for REDD), Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Centre for International Forestry Research and the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research.

It is also true, to a very large extent, of international NGOs like Forest Trends, Forest Dialogue, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy,

Environmental Defense Fund, WWF, Greenpeace and many others.

The issue is not only that these organizations and the policy forums that they sponsor censor countless proper nouns.

It is not only that they try to amputate the living connections that grassroots struggles maintain with their deep pasts and wider surroundings.

It is not only that they try to weaken social movements by portraying them as “merely local and traditional” while picturing themselves as “universal and nontraditional.”

It is also that they cannot even place *themselves* in the contexts of their own pasts and global connections.

In this, the organizations mentioned above differ sharply from the movements that WRM works with.

As an Indonesian activist argues, the “persistent ‘no’” articulated by many forest-dependent peoples in response to attempts by such organizations to coopt them tends to be based on a deep and contrary understanding of how life is reproduced as well as, often, a lived “sense of co-identification with the forests.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the alliances battling the oil palm plantation company SOCFIN differ from many large urban-based NGOs in that they have no choice but to take themselves seriously as actors in deep time and space.

And Maharashtra villagers in India mentioned by another interviewee for this report strive stubbornly, at considerable cost, to recognize in themselves formidable historical and institutional legacies that constrain them, as a prerequisite for taking them on.

Activist native speakers of Quechua and Aymara languages in South America’s Andes, meanwhile, have taken their linguistic understanding of the past as being always “in front” of them as they follow in the footsteps of ancestors, while an unknown future remains out of sight “behind”, and transformed it into a self-consciously provocative Spanish-language political slogan, *el pasado está adelante* (the past is in front of us).<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), UN-REDD, or the Environmental Defense Fund, by cutting themselves off as a matter of official policy from their own history and spatial ties, are unable even to take *themselves* seriously.

They are unable to be serious either about the loss of forests or about themselves as products of historical processes that include deforestation.

The cynical disbelief that such organizations display toward their own preposterous tiger reserves, giant hydroelectric systems, carbon markets, and certification agencies does nothing to change the fact that their staff actually do spend at least eight hours every day working in or on these Disney Worlds.<sup>16</sup>

To take organizations like the World Bank or Conservation International seriously would therefore itself be unserious. How is WRM to engage with this unseriousness?

As the Ecuadorian activist points out, similar questions recur when well-intentioned Northern-dominated international networks strive to transform work done by emerging and internally-divided Southern movements around (for example) *buen vivir* or “rights of nature” into simple, ready-made “alternatives” to campaign around globally.

Can the European or North American partners in such networks take seriously the embeddedness of such movements in 500 years of conflict over colonialism?

Can they take seriously these movements’ nonfixed, fluid nature?

Or will they instead decontextualize them into embalmed bits of isolated text to be inserted into various international agendas?

And can Northern activists – including those friendly with WRM – understand how they themselves will be seen in the global South if they do so?

In so doing, can they learn to take *themselves* seriously as Europeans or North Americans rather than as rootless agents of trendy, right-on universal messages? And if they cannot, how is WRM to interact with them?

## Final remarks

*Milpa* is a Mexican word, widely used in Meso-America, that means an agricultural plot where people plant maize and many other crops. More than just a field, a *milpa* is a cultivation system for a flourishing community; it is a way of life.

There is a Mexican saying: “You can see the world from the *milpa*.” But do organisations like the UN, the FAO, and other organisations in international policy fora see and understand the *milpa*? Based on the reflection in this briefing, the answer is no. From their international offices they do not really see the *milpa*, which means they do not understand the world either.

Therefore, perhaps the main lesson to learn from the reflection in this briefing is that it’s necessary to be willing to turn things upside down, to understand the world from the *milpa*. This would imply knowing and understanding how people live, their struggles, and the causes of deforestation—with the *milpa* shaping UN, FAO, and World Bank policies, rather than the other way around.

For organizations like WRM—organizations that seek to strengthen collaboration with grassroots communities and their struggles, and that are used to talking about *forests*, *climate*, etc.—this has several implications. First, it means being open to and respectful of the broad diversity of concepts that the grassroots use instead of concepts like *forests*, *biodiversity*, etc. But also, it means being open to different kinds of interactions with another world—or better yet, a diversity of other worlds. And these worlds not only refuse to use concepts we are familiar with; they have a different conception of life with different ground rules than the ones familiar to us.

The longer paper on which this briefing is based (and in particular its final chapter called ‘Different engagements mean different approaches to understanding itself’) continues to reflect on these diverse worlds and their implications for WRM and other groups in their commitment to support the struggles of grassroots communities.

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