

How does the FAO Forest definition harm people and forests?

An open letter to the FAO

In September 2015, during the XIV World Forestry Congress, thousands of people took to the streets in Durban, South Africa, to protest against the problematic way in which the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), insists on defining forests (1). The FAO definition considers forests to be basically just “a bunch of trees”, while ignoring other fundamental aspects of forests, including their many other life-forms such as other types of plants, as well as animals, and forest-dependent human communities. Equally, it ignores the vital contribution of forests to natural processes that provide soil, water and oxygen. Besides, by defining ‘forests’ as only being a minimum area of land covered by a minimum number of trees of a minimum height and canopy percentage, FAO has actively promoted the establishment of many millions of hectares of industrial tree plantations, of mainly alien species, especially in the global South. As a consequence, only one particular sector has benefitted: the tree plantation industry. Industrial tree plantations have been the direct cause of many negative impacts on local communities and their forests; which have been well-documented (2).

The protest march that took place in Durban a year ago had people holding up banners saying *Plantations are not Forests!*, and ended in front of the venue of the World Forestry Congress, which was organised by the FAO. In response to a call from civil society leaders at the march, a WFC official left the Congress building to receive a petition that had been signed by over 100,000 individuals and groups from around the world. The petition called on the FAO to urgently change its forest definition and to define forests by their true meaning. But once again, the FAO did not change its definition.

Nevertheless, something new did happen: Unlike the silence in response to previous demands for the FAO to change its flawed forest definition, this time FAO reacted to the protest, and sent a letter in response. One point in the FAO letter is particularly interesting. It stated: “*There are, in fact, over 200 national definitions of forests that reflect a variety of stakeholders in this matter....*”, and goes on to say, “*...to facilitate the reporting of data..., a globally valid, simple and operational categorization of forests is required*” in order that it can “*enable consistent comparisons over longer periods of time on global forest development and change*”. In writing this, the FAO attempts to convince us that its role is merely one of harmonizing the 200-plus different definitions of forests that different countries have.

But is it really true that the existing FAO forest definition did not influence the way the 200 national definitions of forests were formulated in the first place? And is the FAO correct when it claims that the many different national forest definitions are a result of the reflections of a variety of stakeholders in these countries, again playing down its own influence?

We believe the opposite to be true. First of all, FAO’s forest definition was adopted a long time ago, in 1948. According to a recent joint analysis by different authors of forest concepts and definitions, “*FAO’s definition, agreed on by all its [UN] members, is the first to be used by all countries for harmonized reporting; the definition adopted by FAO remains the most widely used forest definition today*” (3).

A good country to use as an example to see if the FAO definition is being used, is Brazil, the country with the highest forest cover in the global South, and according to official sources, almost 8 million hectares of industrial tree plantations, mostly eucalyptus monocultures. In its 2010 (4) publication “*Forests of Brazil*” the Brazilian Forest Service (SBF), under the national government Ministry of Environment and responsible for forest-related issues “... considers as a forest the woody vegetation types that come closest to the forest definition of the Organization of the United Nations for Food and Agriculture (FAO).” As a logical progression from basing its definition on what FAO already defined, it states that “*Brazil is a country... of natural and planted forests*”, where “planted forests” refers to the 8 million hectares of mostly eucalyptus monocultures. How the Brazilian government defines a forest is therefore not the result of a process that “... reflects a variety of stakeholders in this matter”. On the contrary, it is rather a result of what the FAO had already determined.

But the influence of the FAO’s forest definition goes beyond just determining national forest definitions. In these times of climate change, the FAO’s definition has been the main point of reference to define what a forest is under the UN climate change convention (UNFCCC). By adopting the FAO’s narrow wood-based definition, the UNFCCC has also promoted a view of forests being an area of land containing only trees. For the UNFCCC, it's mainly the trees in a forest that matter because of their capacity to store carbon as they grow, and not forest-dependent communities. Such affected communities are most negatively impacted by restrictions placed on their use of forest resources by “forest carbon offset projects”, also often referred to as REDD+ projects (5). A forest definition only focused on trees opens the door to including “planted forests” – read: industrial tree plantations – a completely false way of “reducing deforestation and forest degradation”, as an option under the climate change convention through which carbon can supposedly be sequestered from the atmosphere and permanently stored. In practice this is just another money-making opportunity for the tree plantation industry, and a major threat to communities affected by the trend of expanding “carbon sink” tree plantations.

Following the latest UNFCCC negotiations, countries have recently been revising their forest legislation, in the hope of attracting so-called ‘climate finance’. Unsurprisingly, the definitions used are largely based on the FAO’s forest definition. In Mozambique, for example, at a workshop on REDD+, a consultant proposed a new forest definition for the country. Just like the FAO’s definition, it is also based on the presence of trees saying that a forest is an area with “...*Trees with the potential to reach a height of 5 metres at maturity..*”. Also in Indonesia, the Ministry of Environment and Forests submission to the UN Climate Conference in 2015, stated that it had “...*adjusted the FAO forest definition...*” in order to define its forests. Once again a definition that defines and values a forest only through its trees, and that divides “forests” into a number of different categories including “*natural forest*” and something called “plantation forests” (6).

The FAO’s forest definition also influences the actions of the financial and development institutions promoting wood-based activities such as the industrial logging of forests, industrial tree plantations, and REDD+ carbon offsets. The main example is the World Bank (WB) which as part of the United Nations conglomerate has been partnering with the FAO for decades in a number of forest-related initiatives. Recently, they again joined forces in one of the most ambitious plans launched during UNFCCC COP 21 in Paris, the so-called African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100) (7).

AFR100 aims to cover 100 million hectares of deforested and so-called “degraded” lands in different African countries with trees. The World Bank will make US\$ 1 billion available for this plan. But to understand what the World Bank views as “reforestation”, it is crucial to see how the Bank itself defines a forest. Unsurprisingly, its definition is also borrowed from that of the FAO, describing a forest as “*An area of land...with tree crown cover of more than 10% that have trees...*” (8). By defining forests in this way, the World Bank opens the door wide for tree plantation companies expanding their large-scale monoculture tree plantations over community territories in Africa to be part of the ambitious “restoration” plan it is promoting together with the FAO and other partners. The AFR100 proposal strongly resembles the failed Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) from the 1980’s, which was also dreamed up by the World Bank in collaboration with the FAO.

Final remarks

There is an urgent need for the FAO to stop misrepresenting industrial tree plantations as “planted forests” or “forestry”, because national governments, other UN institutions, and financial institutions, as well as the mainstream media will then follow its inappropriate example. This deliberate confusion of tree plantations with forests is misleading people, because forests in general are viewed as something positive and beneficial. After all, who could be opposed to “forests”?

Above all, the FAO should take full responsibility for the strong influence its “forest” definition has over global economic, ecological and social policies. The 2015 petition that was presented to the FAO in Durban states that it portrays itself in its founding principles as being a “neutral forum where all nations meet as equals”. To live up to this claim requires, among other things, that the FAO must urgently revise its forest definition from one that reflects the preferences and perspectives of timber, pulp/paper, rubber, and carbon trading companies, to one that reflects ecological realities as well as the views of forest-dependent peoples. In contrast to the existing dominant influence of wood-based industries over the FAO, a transparent and open process to establish new and appropriate definitions for forests and tree plantations must also engage effectively with those women and men who directly depend on and therefore protect forests.

Sign-ons:

Abibiman Foundation in Ghana	Ghana
Acción Ecológica	Ecuador
Acción por la Biodiversidad	Latin America
Africa Europe Fair and Justice Network	International
African Women’s Network for Community management of Forests (REFACOF)	Cameroon
Aliança RECOs – Redes de Cooperação Comunitária Sem Fronteiras	Brazil
Alianza Biodiversidad	Latin America
All India Forum of Forest Movements.	India
Allure Marketing	Global
Ambiente, Desarrollo y Capacitación	Honduras
ARA	Germany
ARBA (Asociación para la Recuperación del Bosque Autóctono)	Spain
Árboles sin Fronteras	Ecuador
ARPENT - Association pour la Restauration et la Protection de	France

l'Environnement Naturel du Tonnerrois	Costa Rica
Asoc. Conservacionista YISKI	Argentina
Asoc. Lihuen Antu	Argentina
Asociación Amigos de los Parques Nacionales (AAPN)	Nicaragua
Asociación Comunitaria Soluciones	Mexico
Asociación de Usuarios del Agua de Saltillo AUAS, A.C.	Bolivia
Asociacion Ecologica del Oriente, Santa Cruz de la Sierra	Argentina
Asociacion ecologista rio mocoreta	Spain
Asociación Ecologistas en Acción Las Palmas de Gran Canaria	Spain
Asociación Geográfica Ambiental	Guatemala
Asociación Qachuu Aloom "Madre Tierra"	Costa Rica
Asociacion Red de Coordinacion en Biodiversidad	Brazil
Associação dos Geógrafos Brasileiros, Seção Local Três Lagoas (AGB/TL)	France
Attac France	Australia
Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance	Netherlands
BankTrack	Chile
BCMTY.org Chile	New Zealand
BCMTY.org New Zealand	Germany
Berggorilla & Regenland Direkthilfe	Russia
Biodiversity Conservation Center,	UK/US
Biofuelwatch, UK/US.	South Africa
Biowatch	Brazil
Blog Combate Racismo Ambiental	Germany
Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS)	South Africa
Botshabelo Unemployment Movement	Gabon
Brainforest	International
Brighter Green	Switzerland
Bruno Manser Fund	Germany
BUND - Friends of the Earth Germany	India
Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD)	Colombia
Censat Agua Viva.	Usa
Center for Food Safety	
Centro de Investigación, Validación y Transferencia Tecnológica para el Desarrollo Rural, Ac	Mexico
Centro Internazionale Crocevia	Italy
CETRI - Centre Tricontinental	Belgique
Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat	Costa Rica
Climate change awareness kenya	Kenya
Coalition Against Land Grabbing	PHILIPPINES
COECOCEIBA-Amigos de la tierra Costa Rica	Costa Rica
Colectivo VientoSur	Chile
Comité Nacional para la Defensa y Conservación de Los Chimalapas	Mexico
Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN)	Nepal
Conselho Indigenista Missionário	Brazil
	République
	Démocratique du
Construisons Ensemble leMonde	Congo
Consumers Association of Penang	Malaysia

Cork Forest Conservation Alliance	North America
Crescente Fértil	Brazil
Denkhausbremen	Germany
Diálogo 2000 - Jubileo Sur Argentina	Argentina
Dogwood Alliance	USA
EcoNexus	UK
Edenvale RiverWatch	South Africa
Environmental Association for Latin America	Costa Rica
European Civic Forum	Europe
FASE Espírito Santo	Brazil
Finance & Trade Watch (Austria)	Austria
Flemish Centre for Indigenous Peoples	Belgium
Focus on the Global South	International
Forest Observatory	Morocco
Forests of the world	Denmark
Forum Carajas	Brazil
Fórum Mudanças Climáticas e Justiça Social	Brazil
Forum Ökologie & Papier	Germany
Fossil-Free South Africa	South Africa
Friends of the Earth Interantional	International
Friends of the Earth Sweden	Sweden
Friends of the Siberian Forests	Russia
Fundación Azul Ambientalistas	Venezuela
Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunal Integral	Nicaragua
Fundacion Recysol	Colombia
GeaSphere	South Africa
Geografía Viva	Venezuela
Global Forest Coalition	International
Global Justice Ecology Project	USA
GRAIN	International
Great Ape Project	International
Greenpeace International	International
GroundWork	South Africa
Grupo de Investigación de Suelo y Agua (GISA)	Venezuela
Grupo de Trabalho em Assuntos Agrários (GT Agrária - Seção Rio-Niteroi)	Brazil
da Associação dos Geógrafos Brasileiros (AGB)	International
Grupo ETC	Uruguay
Grupo Guayubira	Colombia
Grupo Semillas	Argentina
Guardianes del Iberá	India
Human Rights Law Network	Internatioanl
ICCA Consortium	France
ICRA International	Usa
Indigenous Environmental Network	
Instancia de Consenso del Pueblo Maya Q'eqchi'-Poqomchi' de Alta Verapaz "K'amol B'e"	Guatemala
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy	USA
Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Imani, Universidad Nacional de	Colombia

Colombia	
Instituto Socioambiental	Brazil
International Center for Technology Assessment	Usa
International Tree Foundation	UK
Intipachamama	Nicaragua
Jubileo Sur Americas	Latin America
Just Forests	Ireland
Justica Ambiental / FoE Mozambique	Mozambique
Kalpavriksh	India
La Asamblea Veracruzana de Iniciativas y Defensa Ambiental (LAVIDA)	Mexico
Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, AC	Mexico
Maiouri Nature Guyane	French Guyana
	Central African Republic
MEFP	
Mesa Coordinadora De Jubilados y Pensionados de la República Argentina Filial Chaco	Argentina
MLT – Movimento de Luta pela Terra	Brazil
Mother Nature Cambodia (MNC)	Cambodia
Movimento Amigos da Rua Gonçalo de Carvalho	Brazil
Movimento Camponês Popular	Brazil
Movimento Mulheres pela P@Z!	Brazil
Movimiento Colombiano en Defensa del Territorio y afectados por Represas "Rios Vivos"	Colombia
MST- Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra	Brazil
Nature and Youth Sweden	Sweden
Naturvernforbundet - FoENorway	Norway
Núcleo de Pesquisa Estado, Sociedade e Desenvolvimento na Amazônia Ocidental- NUPESDAO	Brazil
Oasis Earth	Usa
Observatório dos Conflitos no Campo (OCCA)/UFES	Brazil
OFRANEH	Honduras
Oilwatch Latinoamérica	Latin America
OLCA - Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales	Chile
Orang-Utans in Not e.V.	Germany
OPIROMA - Organização dos Povos Indígenas de Rondônia, Noroeste do Mato Grosso e Sul do Amazonas	Brazil
Otros Mundos AC/Amigos de La Tierra México	Mexico
Pacific Institute of Resource Management	New Zealand
PAPDA - Plateforme haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif	Haiti
Partner Südmexikos e.V.	Germany
PGU (Personal-Global-Universal): Towards Equitable Sustainable Holistic Development	UK
PLANT	USA
Pro Natura – Friends of the Earth Switzerland	Switzerland
Programa Universitario Diversidad Cultural e Interculturalidad - UNAM oficina Oaxaca	Mexico
Protect the Forest	Sweden
Proyecto Gran Simio (GAP/PGS-España)	Spain

Proyecto Lemu - Epuyen - Chubut	Argentina
PUSH	Sweden
Rainforest Foundation	United Kingdom
Rainforest Relief	Usa
RECOMA - Red Latinoamericana contra los monocultivos de árboles	Latin America
Red Argentina de Ambiente y Desarrollo	Argentina
Red de Acción por los Derechos Ambientales (RADA)	Chile
Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad	Costa Rica
Red de Mujeres Rurales de Costa Rica	Costa Rica
Red de Semillas "Resembrando e Intercambiando"	Spain
Refopar(Reforestemos Paraguay)	Paraguay
Reforest the Earth	UK
Regenwald statt Palmöl"	Germany
Robin Wood e.V.	Germany
Russian Social Ecological Union	Russia
Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia)	Malaysia
Salva la Selva	Spain
SAVIA - Escuela de Pensamiento Ecologista	Guatemala
School of Democratic Economics, Indonesia	Indonesia
Siemenpuu - Foundation for Social Movements' Cooperation sr.	Finland
Solidarity Sweden - Latin America	Sweden
SOS Forêt du Sud	France
Swedish foundation Naturarvet	Sweden
Synchronicity Earth	UK
Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity	Tanzania
Terra Australis Co-Op Ltd	Australia
Terra Nuova - Centro per il volontariato Onlus	Italy
The Bioscience Resource Project	USA
The Corner House	United Kingdom
The Gaia Foundation	International
The Indigenous People of Mariepsko	South Africa
ThiSaBi	Sri Lanka
TimberWatch	South Africa
Transnational Institute	International
Unión Universal de Desarrollo Solidario	Spain
Universidade Federal de São João Del Rei	Brazil
Verdegaia	Galicia
WALHI/Friends of the Earth Indonesia	Indonesia
War on Want	United Kingdom
Woodland League	Ireland
World Rainforest Movement	International
Zo Indigeous Forum (ZIF)	India
ZZ2	South Africa

Notes:

1 - "Land with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10 percent and area of more than 0.5 hectares (ha). The trees should be able to reach a minimum height of 5 meters (m) at maturity in situ."

- 2 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/tree-plantations/>
- 3 - Chazdon, R.L., Brancalion, P.H.S., Laestadius, L. et al. *Ambio* (2016). doi:10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y. When is a forest a forest? Forest concepts and definitions in the era of forest and landscape restoration (<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-016-0772-y>)
- 4 - http://www.mma.gov.br/estruturas/sfb/_arquivos/livro_portugus_95.pdf
- 5 - See more in <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/redd-a-collection-of-conflicts-contradictions-and-lies/>
- 6 - http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/seasia/Indonesia/pdf/FREL_Report.pdf
- 7 - <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/about-afr100>
- 8 - <http://tinyurl.com/hsb6cwy>