

National Forest Programmes and environmental non-governmental organisations: Participatory overkill or real opportunity for strengthening ecological needs of forest related policies?

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Eight years after the Earth summit in Rio to Environment and development, the last ancient forests are still under major threat. Although a lot of international conventions have been adopted and conferences about forest issues have taken place since Rio, illegal logging and illegal timber trade is quite common and main reason for deforestation and forest degradation. The governments and the international state unions (EU, UN, WTO etc.) and fora don't have neither a holistic approach to sustainable development nor to sustainable forest management.

Every international forest strategy is dominated by the interests of governmental bodies and does mostly not reflect the urgent demands of environmental and social non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as indigenous people. The implementation of these strategies would hardly affect the underlying causes (UC) of deforestation and forest degradation, identified in the Costa Rica Workshop 1999 with NGOs, because it is restricted to forest issues. But the main UC are unsustainable consumption and trade, lack of transparency and participation (especially indigenous peoples and local communities) and an incoherent system of funding, subsidies and development projects. The value of forests as an ecosystem is totally underestimated and the timber over-valued.

1. The role and specific contributions of national forest programmes in implementing global/regional forest strategies

The national forest programmes were one of the few outcomes of IPF and IFF. Without describing all the goals of this instrument, National Forest Programmes promise to close the gap between international agreements and operational forest management (or mis-management). NGOs have demanded many years the implementation of global obligations on a holistic governmental policy. National Forest Programs could be part of it. Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) requests full participation of the relevant stakeholders and full transparency for National Forest Programs. This fulfils one action point of the Underlying Causes Study: Without participation of indigenous peoples and local communities, as well as ENGOs, concepts and strategies would both fail to prevent deforestation and forest degradation and to be sustainable.

National forest laws or ecological relevant conditions for subsidies are very often not or hardly controlled by governmental bodies. That means governmental policies are neither implemented at the strategic level or the operational level.

2. Strong and weak elements of national forest programmes

The weaknesses of National Forest Programs demonstrates also the weakness of any governmental forest policy:

- Part of the Underlying Causes are never touched, like unsustainable trade capacity of timber;

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- National Forest Program is going to be only a framework agreement. Operational changes to improve the forest situation are not necessarily expected.

Apart from this, participation of stakeholders with different approaches needs a good concept. For NGOs an enormous number of meetings, conferences, working groups etc. could lead to a “participation overkill”. Especially in developing countries the imbalance of financial capacity between different stakeholders could strongly influence the outcome of the National Forest Program processes. Governmental bodies and industries would dominate the discussions with an economic focus of the final policy. Environmental and social aspects would not be reflected in the policy, but needed for real sustainability. Especially for developing countries financial capacity building for NGOs is urgently needed. This is going to be a focus for development policy of donor countries (could be also part of National Forest Programs). The balance of interests should be clearly defined at the beginning of the National Forest Program process (e.g. ecological, social, economic chambers, or comment policy for minority opinions, or weighted votes).

3. The challenges of national forest programmes for the forest sector. Are there alternative instruments?

So far, international or regional forest strategies (in case they really exist?) have had no relevant influence to stop the forest destruction and forest degradation all over the world. After UNCED the NGOs have founded the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to use forest management certification as a tool to support good (sustainable) forest management practice on the forest ground. It has had direct influence on the forests. The participatory FSC process seems to be a good model to balance ecological, social and economic interests within so called chambers. The role of governmental bodies is mostly limited to their attitude as forest owners in the economic chamber. The discussion within regional or national FSC working groups has covered (if installed) a lot of the Proposals for Actions of Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) in a very successful way.

National forest programmes should be strongly linked and co-ordinated with National environment policy plans. These are responsible for a holistic environmental governmental policy with the goal of sustainable development of society. The National Forest Program as part of national environment policy plans is much more detailed. In this context they have to reflect e.g. biodiversity-, carbon-aspect as well as indigenous/workers rights. This implementation of National Forest Program into NEPP could lead to a comprehensive and holistic governmental policy targeting the conservation and sustainable management of forests. The National Forest Program alone couldn't provide this.

4. Research needs to be related to the development as well as to the implementation of national forest programmes

The initiative of Costa Rica has pointed out the underlying causes for deforestation and forest degradation based on empirical experiences. These Underlying Causes² could be the frame for research needs, which are related to the development as well as to the implementation of National Forest Programs:

- Unsustainable Consumption and Production Patterns
- The Imbalance of International Trade and Sustainable Development Regimes

² out of Initial Report of the Global Workshop to Address the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation, San José, Costa Rica, January 18 – 22, 1999

- Failure to value the forest as an ecosystem; lack of recognition of multiple functions of forests, and lack of capacity to manage forests
- Lack of transparency and accountability
- Inappropriate and increasing power of government bodies and corporations in land tenure including corruption, militarism, dictatorship
- Lack of acknowledgement of rights of individual and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including women, to access, use and manage natural resources, lands and territories, with emphasis on decision-making, access, participation and control at all levels.
- Inability of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to access information on, influence, support, or oppose development plans or projects.
- Legal instruments at all levels have weak and ambiguous concepts related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities
- Lack of recognition of land tenure rights, especially community and collective rights;
- Inappropriate development strategies, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and the erosion of government capacity.
- Debt servicing and debt creation
- Perverse Incentives and Subsidies
- Externalisation of operational costs by private sector
- Governance and Corruption, Institutions, Policy Implementation and Regulation
- Under-valuation of community forestry and non-timber forest products. Over-valuation of timber as the main forest product.

Research projects would be much more relevant for political decisions, if they would be conceived in an interdisciplinary approach. Foresters should be part of research teams instead of dominating them. Ecologists, Economists and social scientists could generate practicable and relevant results to assist processes like National Forest Program.

There is a lot of scientific knowledge accessible. Research could compile it for special issues, which come up within the National Forest Program processes. Special research interests from a minority of participants and from NGOs should be seriously taken into account for upcoming projects. The governmental bodies could promote and initialise it with financial capacities.

For the implementation of National Forest Programs into operational work, research could assist four process phases:

1. Identification of relevant institutions, stakeholders, possible obstacles
2. Concept development (participatory)
3. Implementation and ongoing evaluation
4. Re-adjustment

Conclusions

The idea of National Forest Programs is very ambitious. It seems to be a long way to reach the goal of a holistic policy approach to prevent deforestation and forest degradation. Policy-relevant and interdisciplinary research could assist the development and implementation of National Forest Programs. Involvement of NGOs must be based on real

participation (and not a pseudo one). A real governmental commitment is needed to reflect the huge environmental and social forest-related issues in their new policy.