

World forestry at a crossroads: going it alone or joining with others?

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Some reflections on forest sector trends, in light of the XIII World Forestry Congress.

The XIII World Forestry Congress was hosted by Argentina from 18 to 23 October 2009. Its theme, “Forests in Development: a Vital Balance”, referred to the importance of establishing a sustainable equilibrium not only among the ecological, social and economic functions of forests, but also between forestry and other sectors. Extremely wide-ranging topics – virtually every current forestry issue – were considered during the various plenary sessions, thematic sessions, side events, specialized fora and poster sessions.

The congress was attended by more than 7 000 forestry experts from over 160 countries, representing a wide range of disciplines (technical, social, economic, ecological) and functions (policy-makers, scientists, trade and industry, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and students). Since the World Forestry Congress is the largest forestry gathering in the world, its findings collectively provide a picture of views and trends in the forest sector. This article identifies some trends perceived by the authors, using as the point of reference their observations from the XII World Forestry Congress, held six years earlier in Canada (see Box). The article concludes with the authors’ recommendations for change to ensure the sector’s relevance and effectiveness in sustainable development.

TOPICS AND TRENDS

Globalization and social integration of forests continue unabated, and display great dynamism and diversity

Although the congress’s Final Declaration states that people are becoming increas-

ingly alienated from forests (because of urbanization, for example), it has become evident that many more people (city dwellers, NGOs, etc.) are becoming stakeholders in those same forests. Forests are increasingly considered as part of a larger whole. Many forest-related problems extend beyond geographic borders, and most are closely interwoven with other issues beyond the forest sector.

The increasing number of claims on forests – economic, social and environmental – and the plurality of stakeholders at all scales (global, national and local), with different and sometimes conflicting interests, values and vocabularies, complicate the play of forces and the decision-making regarding forests, requiring an integrated, coordinated, collaborative approach.

A general shift can be observed in many countries in governance practice and policy-making and in the role and position of central government, i.e. from government to governance. Two tendencies in governance are prominent: a vertical expansion up towards the global and down to the local levels (multilevel governance) and a horizontal expansion to include markets and society (multi-actor governance). Forests are increasingly becoming a societal concern, of interest to others besides foresters.

The vertical and horizontal connections are only developing with difficulty

The connection between international dialogue and local implementation of sustainable forest management has improved little since 2003. The sole change is that regional forestry processes are now encouraged to fill the

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Some trends observed at the XII World Forestry Congress in 2003

In 2003 the authors recorded the following impressions after attending the XII World Forestry Congress in Quebec City, Canada.

Increasing globalization of forestry issues. Treaties were seen increasingly to shape the broad environmental context for national forest policies and management, but the links to global developments in land use, trade, information and communication technology, urban-rural relationships and institutional and administrative developments were not automatic.

Social integration of forest management. The multifunctionality of forests, the multi-dimensional nature of influences, the plurality of stakeholders and the need to build bridges through partnerships, participation and new alliances were recognized. Forests could no longer be viewed as the exclusive domain and responsibility of the forest sector.

Global and local: two parallel, separate processes. Policy-making at the global level had increased, while connections to the local level were decreasing. Locally generated experience was often failing to influence international discussion.

Forests as an integral component of the landscape. Increasing interest in a landscape approach to forests was resulting in greater emphasis on intersectoral relationships and the underlying causes of deforestation.

Strict separation of functions no longer viable. It had become apparent that strict separation between protected areas and utilization areas was neither tenable nor feasible, and that utilization and protection objectives needed to be achieved as part of sustainability to support livelihoods and combat poverty.

Importance of good governance and effective institutions. Good governance, based on democratization, accountability, empowerment, transparency and equitability, was being allocated a more important place in discussion of forests at all levels.

Shift from valuing forests to increasing financing for sustainable forest management. Much interest was seen in payment or compensation for environmental functions of forests by the beneficiaries; thus, discussion of the financing of forest management was increasingly shifting away from development cooperation to international cooperation.

Greater emphasis on partnerships. The increasing appreciation that the sector cannot “go it alone” was leading to the development of many new types of partnership, for example involving local communities and businesses, or NGOs and businesses. Stakeholders seemed to be finding more common ground and more opportunities for cooperation than in the past.

gap in communication between the local and international levels and to facilitate national and local implementation of internationally agreed principles.

The effects of other economic sectors on forests are becoming greater, especially those of large-scale agriculture and bioenergy. But while the importance of cross-sectoral relationships and planning continues to be emphasized, in most countries these have improved little if

at all. Much is said about integrating forests into landscape approaches and into national policy, and about strengthening the relationships with others that influence (or are influenced by) forests. Yet neither those in the forest sector nor those in other sectors have been able to give effective shape to this integration. The lack of intersectoral connections also applies to international climate discussions, where the forestry community

frequently watches from the sidelines and feels to a certain extent excluded from decisions.

The real challenge for the forest sector lies in forging links with other sectors and among various levels.

Growing awareness of the multifunctionality and importance of forests is encouraging, but forest management and protection are still improving too slowly

The greatest threats to forests come from beyond the domain of forestry, arising from the rapidly increasing demand for food, feed and fuel. Given the major predicaments facing humanity – poverty, famine, energy, water, climate change, financial crisis, emergencies, conflicts – and the political and social urgency of tackling them, forests, if seen in isolation from these, easily become a secondary political priority, despite the rhetoric devoted to them.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of protecting forests for their regulatory functions and biodiversity, increasing claims on land and on wood as a raw material (for construction and energy) are leading to greater pressures on forests. Whether an equilibrium can be found among these competing claims, in the form of sustainable, integrated forest management, is open to question, especially because the production functions of forests immediately provide money (whether legally or not), while collective goods such as the regulatory functions of forests are rarely priced and compensated.

Forests and climate: justifiable expectations or just the latest hype?

The topic of forests and climate had little visibility in 2003 and hardly any role at the XII World Forestry Congress, but in 2009 it was of the greatest interest, attracting the largest audiences.

A message formulated by the congress for delivery to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen,

Denmark in December 2009 “note[d] with concern the impacts of climate change on forests and strongly emphasize[d] the important role forests play in climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as the need for forest-dependent people and forest ecosystems to adapt to this challenge”. The general message was that forests provide far more than just carbon sequestration.

Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD), in particular, was presented as an opportunity to channel more money into forest protection, forest recovery and other aspects of sustainable forest management. It is clear that the “climate trump card” (or should that be “straw to clutch at”?) has quickly had a positive effect on the overall mood in the forest sector. It has led, in a relatively short time, to new fervour, high expectations and a large number of new initiatives regarding forests and carbon.

Doubts and misgivings have also arisen, however, as to the extent to which these expectations can be met. There are still major problems in technology, methodology and implementation, for example regarding definitions and the monitoring and verification of changes. There are also concerns that a REDD mechanism could be just as complex and unworkable for forests as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) was in the past (as evidenced by the dearth of afforestation/reforestation projects under the CDM). Most countries that are candidates for REDD funding do not currently have the institutional capacity to use it effectively. Deforestation and forest degradation remain deeply rooted in macroeconomic, political and institutional conditions, power relations, land-ownership and poverty; there are no quick solutions to any of these problems.

Forests and energy: a controversial dilemma

Opinions at the congress differed regarding whether rapidly developing industrial

demand for renewable sources of energy is good or bad for forests and forestry.

Some predict that future developments in biorefining and bioprocessing technology will lead to major opportunities for bioenergy from forests, including potential for the expansion of intensively managed forest plantations for biomass production.

Others are concerned that the increasing demand for bioenergy, particularly first-generation biofuels, is already bringing about major changes in land use that directly or indirectly threaten forests, for example the conversion of natural forest into plantations for soybean, oil-palm or other rapidly growing biomass crops. Potential social and environmental risks of this type of land-use change were pointed out, including potential impact on soil, water and biodiversity and on the income, property rights and livelihoods of local populations.

Whether bioenergy development will have positive or negative outcomes for forests and forest-dependent people will depend to a great extent on the rules, standards and incentives created for the production of biomass and the effectiveness of their implementation.

What was striking (and perhaps also a warning) was that the congress dealt with issues of forests and energy primarily from an environmental perspective (i.e. as an alternative to fossil-fuel-generated energy) and almost entirely overlooked the socio-economic issues, particularly the ties between fuelwood use and poverty. This remains a dire problem in many countries but has almost entirely disappeared from international development cooperation agendas.

Forest landscape recovery and management of secondary forests should not be neglected

The climate and energy discussion has generated additional interest in the conservation of natural forests and the creation of forest plantations. However, recovery of degraded forest landscapes

and effective management of secondary forests are equally important, because forests are often essential components of the landscape on which poor local people depend for their livelihood and culture, and they are also vital for biodiversity (and the recovery of biodiversity) and ecological regulation. Sessions on forest landscape recovery and management of secondary forests concluded that these are two of the main challenges for forestry and require more attention.

What has happened to the interest in community forestry and social forestry?

For many years, participation by local populations in forest management, in the form of community forestry and social forestry, was strongly promoted as the way to sustainable forest management. Although interest in this subject has not actually disappeared, it no longer takes an important place in discussion. For example, projects and programmes concerning the relationship of people and forests in dry areas generated abundant experience in the past, but this issue has been sidelined

The importance of protecting forests for their biodiversity and other environmental services is increasingly recognized



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Forest landscape recovery is a key challenge, as many poor local people depend on forests for their livelihood and culture

as others – particularly climate change – have attracted more attention.

Valuation of forests is not enough; ultimately, what is needed is a healthy financial basis for management and protection

Financing is increasingly seen as the key to effective management and protection of forests, and there is a great deal of innovative thinking and experimentation in this area. The multifunctionality of forests is emphasized as a basis for generating investment and extra income for forest management. New ideas are also being developed for setting up green national accounts (which incorporate the value of environmental services in economic accounting), within which the actual contribution of forests to the economy and society is quantified.

There is a great deal of interest in payment for ecosystem services (PES), a concept that was still new and unelaborated at the 2003 congress but has now become part of mainstream thinking. Significant experience has been gained, but the many publications on the subject make clear that the PES concept is still under development. Problems that still need to be solved include, for example, how the value of a certain ecosystem service can be quantified, how the price should be determined, who the users are, and how those users should pay for the service. But paying for ecosystem

services need not necessarily be done through the market, as is often supposed; in some cases it may involve obligatory payment in the form of a tariff or tax.

Attention is also focusing on new sources of funding, including institutional investors. Many countries, however, are only beginning to tap such sources. One major challenge is how more money can be generated from the capital market (already the most important source) and used in a socially responsible and sustainable manner for forest recovery, management and protection. More than in the past, the forest sector must create a workable link to the financial sector; this involves the two sectors learning “to speak each other’s languages” in order to do business together, particularly as regards the provision of formal financing to small producers.

The forest and financial sectors must learn more about each other in order to do business together, particularly as regards the provision of formal financing to small producers



Is certification effective, or does it simply lead to proliferation of standards?

Forest product certification continues to have appeal as a market instrument to promote sustainable management and production, but it has not really taken hold yet for tropical forests (for which the concept was originally developed). Certification processes are still driven by the international market; the concept has barely taken hold in national markets, where the largest quantities of timber and other forest products are sold and where certification could achieve the greatest benefit in terms of sustainable management. Reasons for this limited success include the direct and indirect costs involved in certification, which are not compensated for in prices; the specific requirements set; and above all the lack of policy and institutional preconditions for sustainable forest management.

At the same time, forest managers are confronted by a plethora of new standards and certification or verification schemes, for example for biomass, energy, carbon-dioxide sequestration, fair trade and legality. This proliferation not only may lead to confusion and higher costs for producers and consumers; it also entails the risk of unequal requirements for the various systems. The certification market requires harmonization and coherence if it is to achieve its intended credibility, effectiveness and scope.

Without good governance and effective institutions, the extent of sustainable forest management will remain limited

Governance was an emerging topic at the 2003 congress, with cautious discussion of corruption, illegality and bad governance. Attention to it has grown, as shown by Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) and Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) processes. Good governance and sound institutions are viewed as the decisive factors for sustainable forest management. Good (or good enough) forest governance is now a generally accepted concept in discussion of forests; this is seen as involving not only trust, transparency and accountability, but also fair and equitable participation and organization of roles, rights, responsibilities and powers among stakeholders and institutions at all levels, and not only in the forest sector. Substantial progress has been made in sustainable production chains, combating illegality, modernizing the forest sector and responsible business activity.

AND THE FUTURE?

The trends observed above suggest that the forest sector must focus, more than in the past, on the outside world and questions and perceptions that are arising there. Currently, the sector focuses inward in its approach to problems and solutions – often viewing other sectors and society at large as the cause of the problems (or lamenting their lack of support and recognition) rather than as partners and facilitators in solving them.

Many of the solutions to forest problems have to come from other sectors, society in general and political circles. Conversely, major functions that properly managed forests can provide to society and the cost of losing forests are often not highlighted sufficiently. The forest sector must adopt a more active, strategic and political position in public debate and must contribute

to current political and intersectoral agendas, indicating what it has to offer. Persuasiveness *vis-à-vis* the agricultural sector, the financial sector and political circles in general will be decisive. New agendas, such as that for the world's climate, can bring new opportunities to the forest sector.

However, the necessary skills to operate and communicate strategically are not currently well developed in the forest sector. Investment is needed to develop skills in communicating, managing conflict, achieving consensus and collaborating with others. This entails giving up some of the autonomy (or supposed autonomy) of the sector and learning to accept being only a small part of a larger dimension.

Forestry institutions will need to focus outward, to become service providers that can supply concepts and methods, substantive and policy-oriented forestry expertise and implementation capacity so that forests can deliver the best possible contribution to sustainable development. In this context, it is the task of the forest sector to make clear the value of forests, i.e. the value of all the goods and services they provide, including their role in combating poverty.

The world in 2009 is different for forests than it was in 2003, and it is difficult to predict what the situation will be in 2015 when the next World Forestry

Congress will be held. What is certain, however, is that the developments and tendencies sketched here – ongoing globalization and decentralization, social integration, interconnection, complexity, governance changes and increasing competing claims on forests – constitute major challenges for the forest sector and for forestry specialists. The question is how those challenges are to be tackled.

Forestry cannot “go it alone” in isolation from other sectors. In addition to maintaining and guaranteeing substantive expertise, actors in the sector will need to be flexible in their ideas, attitudes and methods if they wish to remain interesting, relevant and effective partners in developing and implementing global and local forestry agendas.

In Buenos Aires, the Director General of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Francis Seymour, wondered: “Can we orchestrate good vibrations?”, referring to the question of what policy and institutions are necessary so that sustainable forest management has a positive impact on local households and society in general.

The authors believe that this is indeed possible if the forest sector manages to come out of its shell and make progress in connecting and cooperating with other parties, as a fully recognized and equal stakeholder. ♦

Going it alone, or joining with others?



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