

WHAT POSSIBILITIES EXIST FOR OVERCOMING THE POLITICAL CAUSES OF DEFORESTATION AND FOREST DEGRADATION?

Manuel Rodríguez Becerra¹

SUMMARY

The late 1990s could be critical for trends in deforestation and forest degradation, globally one of the principal environmental and social problems demanding collective action. In order to achieve this it would be necessary to give effect to the various proposals and recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development (WCFSD), and the 11th World Forestry Congress. It would also be necessary to consolidate other initiatives developed by intergovernmental bodies and international non-governmental organizations.

Of particular significance among the latter are promising initiatives concerned with: criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of forests, the consolidation of which has continued through five different processes; innovative actions of various communities and non-governmental organizations concerning community participation in the sustainable management of forests; recognition of ownership of forests by communities that have traditionally lived in them; and programmes for the certification of forest products, promoted by both government bodies and non-governmental organizations.

I have had the opportunity to participate actively in the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, of which I was Co-Chairman, and in the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development, whose report will be published early next year. These two bodies are expected to complement one another.

THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON FORESTS

The IPF functioned satisfactorily despite the major constraints mentioned below. Its principal successes, which I indicated on closing the Fourth Session of the Panel, include the following:

It was definitively recognized by the Panel that forests are of importance beyond the forestry sector; and that their problems should be tackled from the standpoint of development, with due consideration of environmental, economic, social and cultural factors.

The experience of the Panel has shown the value of promoting an integrated international dialogue on forests; it was therefore recommended that the Commission on Sustainable Development should

¹ Co-President, Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (Colombia).

initiate such a dialogue with a view to following up the IPF recommendations and examining in depth many aspects on which there is still no agreement or which require further attention.

The Panel made good progress in its aim of gaining a better understanding of problems associated with forests and in designing and recommending some 150 proposals for action on: national forestry programmes; international cooperation in financial aid and technology transfer; scientific research, evaluation of the numerous benefits of forests; the development of criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of forests; trade; and international organizations and multilateral institutions. In many instances great creativity was demonstrated in designing this package of proposals - which are perhaps excessive in number and very variable in kind and quality - despite the constraints encountered. The IPF sessions and seminars held between sessions served as a backdrop, as did the various bodies in civil society which cooperated with us - non-governmental organizations and representatives of the forest communities and the private sector.

The adoption by the Special Assembly of the United Nations of the IPF recommendations, which includes the establishment of a Permanent Forum on Forests with a Technical Secretariat under the aegis of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the mandate to consider possible aspects of a convention, constitute a positive response by governments.

WILL WE BE CAPABLE OF IMPLEMENTING THE IPF RECOMMENDATIONS?

It is still too early to evaluate the work of the IPF. This will only be feasible in a few years' time, when we are able to determine the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented. It would be enough to give effect to a selection of the most significant proposals for action in order to bring about a difference in forest management, and this will depend entirely on the political will of our governments. The results achieved by the IPF offers a magnificent opportunity to make the leap from words to deeds.

However, many people are likely to be sceptical about this, because they have gradually become convinced, not without reason, that in the matter of forests (as in other areas of sustainable development and the environment at the global level) there is a large gap between what is agreed between governments and what is done in practice.

After difficult negotiations at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, in which there were significant differences between the views of the developed and the developing countries, a Declaration on Forests was agreed together with an ambitious programme of action contained in Agenda 21.

Five years after the Earth Summit it has to be acknowledged that progress has been unsatisfactory. This is not to deny the praiseworthy actions that governments, non-governmental organizations and public bodies have taken here and there. But it is clear that, on the whole, these actions are far from reversing the predominant trends: in the tropics about 17 million hectares are being deforested every year, while a substantial proportion of temperate and northern forests present serious degradation problems deriving from inappropriate methods of exploitation.

THE CHALLENGE OF OVERCOMING MAJOR POLITICAL OBSTACLES

Although it may seem paradoxical, both the IPF and the WCFSD, as well as other initiatives mentioned above, represent a development of the Rio accords and a response to dissatisfaction with the current situation. Promising opportunities exist, but in order to make progress it is necessary to recognize and tackle considerable obstacles, two of which are central to this paper.

Differences in interpretation between developed and developing countries in respect of critical agreements made at the Rio de Janeiro Conference on the Environment and Development are

preventing the planning of the collective measures needed in order to combat tropical deforestation, that is to say those measures in which developed and developing countries participate on a basis of solidarity.

The second obstacle is the continuing refusal of the political and economic élites - in developed and developing countries - to recognize and combat the principal factors underlying deforestation and forest degradation at national and international level. The systems of land and forest tenure comprise one of the factors triggering these phenomena, especially in tropical countries.

Unless we remove these two essentially political obstacles, the sustainable management of forests will remain little more than a chimera. I may be accused of adopting a reductionist or simplistic position, since there are numerous causes of deforestation which have complex interrelationships and acquire their own peculiarities in the economic, political, social, cultural and ecological context, whether at the sub-regional, national or local level. Furthermore, tackling the causes of deforestation requires a combination of interrelated measures which recognizes this great complexity. For their implementation, a range of different strategies is necessary involving the development of new institutional schemes and management capabilities, public and private financial resources of international and national origin, programmes of education, training and awareness development, and so on.

Clearly, forest problems and their solutions are complex and it would be utterly wrong to imagine that one had only to tackle a few causes or implement isolated solutions. However, experience gained in the IPF has shown me how easy it is to lose sight of what is vital by being overwhelmed by complexities. Clearly, this loss of direction is one which frequently conceals the difficulties and resistance created by critical subjects which, when coming up against complex interests, fail to find the required political climate in which to deal with them.

DIFFICULTIES IN CREATING INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE IPF EXPERIENCE

The Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) has confirmed yet again the very slow progress after the Rio process as regards solving the problems of sustainable development and the environment at national, regional and global level.

In the IPF process we had the same substantial disagreements between the developed and developing countries as have been expressed in other international dialogues and negotiations, for example in the Special Assembly of the United Nations in June of this year and in the conferences held last year involving the parties to the Conventions on Biodiversity and Climatic Change, to mention three relevant cases.

It is of great concern that enormous differences in interpretation exist between developed and developing countries in respect of the significance of the right to development², international solidarity (global compact), shared but differentiated responsibilities³, and the transfer of new and additional financial resources and of technologies on concessionary and preferential terms from the countries of the north to those of the south.⁴ These principles were enshrined in the Earth Summit, the Declaration of Rio, Agenda 21, the Conventions on Biodiversity and Climatic Change and the Forest Principles.⁵

² Principle 3, 'Declaration of Rio de Janeiro on the Environment and Development', in Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, V.1, Rio de Janeiro, 3-4 June 1992 (New York: United Nations, 1993). In the Framework Convention on Climatic Change it is established that the participants have the right to development and should promote it (Principle 4, Article 3).

³ Principle 7, Declaration of Rio de Janeiro.

Although these principles are explicitly recognized in different sections of the IPF Report, except for the one on the right to development, they are not clearly expressed in the proposals for action.⁶

For the developing countries the principles mentioned are pivotal for moving towards the sustainable development of forests. It is considered that they are basic requirements for devising a Plan of Action incorporating, in a balanced way, national measures supported by domestic resources with measures which, because of their global significance, demand resources provided through international cooperation.

The case of financial resources

During the negotiations the developed countries rejected the possibility of providing new and additional resources. In the various negotiations following Rio this position was maintained with few exceptions, one of which has been that of the Nordic countries of Europe. Furthermore, the developed countries have stressed that during the coming years it is to be expected that development aid (ODA) will continue to decline, as has happened during the past five years. During the latter period, ODA fell to its lowest level since 1973, amounting on average to 0.3% of GNP, compared with 0.35% in 1992. The most significant reduction was that of the USA, from US\$ 11 700 million in 1992 to US\$ 7 300 million in 1995.⁷ This situation is far from what was envisaged in Agenda 21, according to which *'the developed countries reaffirm their commitment to reach the target set by the United Nations, namely 0.7% of GNP for ODA'*.⁸

In the programme for combating deforestation in Agenda 21 it was estimated that the annual cost would be US\$ 10 000 million, including approximately US\$ 3 700 million from the international community as concessions or donations.⁹ In 1995, ODA rose to US\$ 1 500 million. With regard to technology transfer on a concessionary or preferential basis, no significant increase has been recorded in the IPF, as has been the case with the implementation of the other aspects of the Rio Accords. The developing countries, on the other hand, have made major efforts in terms of programmes and financing with a view to meeting the Rio commitments. A good example is the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development and the Forest Convention agreed by the countries in the region.

The causes of the differences between the countries of north and south on fundamental matters: an interpretation

Why have growing differences emerged in the various post-Rio international negotiations and

⁴ Agenda 21, Chapter 33, in **Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development**, Paragraph , Article 4, 'Convention on Climatic Change'. Paragraph 3, Article 20 and Paragraph 1, Article 16, 'Convention on Biological Diversity'. Principles 10 and 11 of the 'Forest Principles'.

⁵ There is an extensive bibliography on the Rio Earth Summit. See Luigui Camplignio et al. **The Environment after Rio, International Law and Economics** (London: Graham Trotman/Martinus Nijhoff, 1993); Manuel Rodríguez Becerra. **Environmental Crisis and International Relations** (Bogotá, CEREC, FESCOL, 1994).

⁶ The same differences occur at the regional level. This was the experience in the 'Bolivian Summit on Sustainable Development' in which a 'Declaration and Plan of Action for the Sustainable Development of the Americas' was signed. The differences in interpretation between the USA and Canada on one hand and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on the other are very like those described in this paper.

⁷ Christopher Flavin, 'The Rio Legacy', in World Watch Institute, **The World Situation** (Barcelona: Icaro Publishing, 1997), p21.

⁸ [Unofficial translation], Agenda 21, Chapter 33, page 13. ⁹ Agenda 21, in **Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development**, V.1, Rio de Janeiro, 3-4 June 1992 (New York: UN, 1993).

forums in relation to the principles mentioned? In my opinion, the problem stems from assumptions from the cold war period predominating at the Rio Conference. These assumptions are no longer very significant for the developed countries that have a key role in the international arena.

International solidarity, new and additional financial resources, and concessional and preferential technology transfer are fundamentally associated with the notions of international cooperation held by the developed countries between the 1950s and 1980s. International cooperation during this period was an essential instrument for securing loyalty to the Western industrialized countries and the Soviet Union.

One unquestionable winner in the cold war was the market economy expressed as free international trade. The Rio Declaration, reflecting this fact, established that '*States should cooperate to promote a favourable open international system for economic growth and sustainable development in all countries so as to tackle more effectively the problems of environmental degradation.*'¹⁰ The developed countries have been concentrating on this principle of the internationalization of the economy at the expense of the principles of international solidarity and the transfer from north to south of resources on a concessionary basis or as donations.

The developed countries, in rejecting the possibility of new resources, apparently assume that free trade and the internationalization of markets will produce the resources needed for achieving global sustainable development. There is no other explanation for the enormous pressure applied by the developed world on the developing world in the various negotiations on the environment and sustainable development, aimed at this resolving the environmental problems of developing countries using national resources. Similarly, the developed countries consider that the market is the most appropriate mechanism for technology transfer, and that there are impossibilities and difficulties in the way of this type of transfer deriving from the fact that a substantial part of the technologies in question is privately owned.

Free trade, patterns of production and consumption in relation to sustainable development

For many developing countries it is not at all clear what conditions of free trade would provide the financial resources needed for the protection and restoration of renewable natural resources of value to humanity, nor is it clear what conditions of international trade would ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. Recent experience shows how the internationalization of free trade is accelerating the destruction of some strategic resources, such as forests. Free trade has created conditions whereby various multinational timber firms of doubtful reputation, in both the south and the north, are stepping up the non-sustainable exploitation of valuable natural forests, for instance in Guyana and Surinam.

Although steps are being taken towards resolving this type of problem, for instance with the establishment of a voluntary code of conduct by the multinationals, as recommended by the IPF, there is a clear need for a broader and more comprehensive set of conditions on national and international forest product markets as a base for their sustainable development. One requirement is the adequate valuation of forest resources, something that has barely begun.

However, international solidarity does not refer exclusively to questions of financial and technological resources and trade. It also implies that developed countries should take a lead in bringing about changes in lifestyle and in the dominant patterns of consumption and production in their societies, which are not environmentally sustainable and are being increasingly adopted in the

¹⁰ [Unofficial translation] Principle 12.

developing countries. Even in Agenda 21 this goal is side-stepped through the incorporation of cosmetic programmes, and the IPF dealt very superficially with this matter. Clearly the goal is difficult to achieve because of its economic, technological and other implications, but this does not mean that we should do nothing about it. How many hectares of natural forest are we felling every day in order to obtain wood for consumer products that are totally extravagant?

The potential and limitations of private capital for sustainable forest management

The very firm positions of the developed countries in relation to financial and technological resources created a clear obstacle to devising for collective action, and will also limit the implementation of many of those that were agreed.

The IPF recommendations stress the need for in-depth consideration of two approaches to obtaining the resources needed for financing recommended proposals for action: the increased generation of public financial resources at national level, and the creation of conditions attracting national and international private investment in sustainable forest management projects.

The generation of new domestic and international resources is partly linked to the appropriate valuation of forest products and services and their internalization, a process still in its very early stages which will take many years, and it would be unwise to rely exclusively on this strategy to save tropical forests. At the same time, however, it needs to be recognized that the generation of domestic resources from forests presents enormous possibilities, as is being demonstrated in many developing countries where very promising mechanisms are already being introduced.

The many recommendations for creating a favourable climate for attracting international private capital to forest projects are now very relevant since this type of capital is increasing in importance relative to international finance from public sources. However, one must recognize that this strategy is limited and needs qualifications. On the one hand, private investment will only be directed towards financing projects, as may be the case with national nature parks. On the other hand, the attraction of private capital could increase deforestation and forest degradation if past trends continue. It is easy to show that, on balance, both domestic and international private investment in the exploitation of tropical forests has had adverse effects.

The IPF has acknowledged that, in order for international private capital to play a positive role in the sustainable use of forests in developing countries, it is necessary to draw up a set of measures of various kinds by both developing and developed countries and the international organizations. Among these measures are the establishment of regulatory frameworks ensuring sustainability, an increase in governments' ability to enforce the law, incentives of various kinds, the participation of the main interest groups - especially the representatives of forest inhabitants - in the decision-making processes related to the granting of forestry permits or concessions and in audits, the use of economic instruments that properly recognize the value of the timber, the establishment of certification systems and a voluntary code by the multinational timber firms, etc.

A hope: compensation for global services

In the light of the above remarks one has to ask: Who will pay for the global services provided by tropical forests? Let us state the two most widely mentioned at international level: forests as a medium of biodiversity and as absorbers of carbon. We know that tropical forests contain the greatest proportion of biodiversity on the planet and that they have a critical role in climate regulation, the retention of carbon being the most prominent factor. According to present information and studies the prospects for halting deforestation are not good if we fail to devise reasonable formulas recognizing the value of these benefits.

To judge from the dynamism of the emerging market in carbon absorbers, expressed in the

mechanism known as joint implementation, the developed countries appear to be recognizing this necessity. This could be taken to indicate that developed countries are increasingly accepting the findings of the scientific community on the reality of global warming. If this is the case the evidence will be forthcoming at the next meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Climatic Change in Kyoto. If targets are agreed at this meeting for reducing greenhouse effect gas emissions, mechanisms of compensation for the conservation of natural tropical forests (ie. the maintenance of existing carbon stores) and the planting of new forests (ie. the creation of new carbon stores), whereby there would be a reversal of the trend that has occurred since Rio in international resources for sustainable development, would go ahead.

THE LAND TENURE SYSTEM - THE TRIGGER OF DEFORESTATION

Although the lack of international solidarity on the part of developed countries is one of the chief obstacles to halting the deforestation of tropical forests, it would be entirely inappropriate not to recognize the fact that within the frontiers of developing countries there are powerful causes of natural forest destruction and degradation which they have not wanted to remove. This point is the other side of the coin of weak international solidarity which is currently preoccupying developing countries. I am referring in particular to the land tenure system, with special reference to Latin America.

The land tenure system: the case of Latin America

It is often alleged that the principal cause of deforestation is the opening up of forest borders in order to grow intensive crops, graze livestock and establish small subsistence farms. Of course, the changeover in the use of land to farming to meet people's food requirements can justify the deforestation of areas whose ecosystem is not strategically important because of its biodiversity and as long as other irreplaceable services are not threatened. However, in Latin America the number of hectares opened up annually in the name of agriculture and stockfarming substantially exceeds what is needed to meet such requirements. This occurs predominantly on forest land that is not suitable for agriculture: it is land for extensive stockfarming or enclosures. This indicates that the frequently mentioned opening up of land for farming is, in many cases, merely a reflection of different factors.

Among the underlying causes of these developments is the poverty of large groups of people who, in order to survive, are at the forefront of the colonization process.

However, in Latin America this phenomenon of deforestation caused by poverty cannot be fully understood unless seen in relation to the concentration of wealth which reinforces it and to the growing demand for land as a speculative asset.

I am referring particularly to the hispanic tradition of using land as a money box, a savings deposit or an asset whose valuation is not correlated with its productivity. A substantial number of people invest their savings in properties of various sizes, ranging from those called recreative farms to large estates, the main purpose being to ensure an increase in their real value and, in many cases, as a hedge against inflation. Production and productivity are thus, for many, secondary considerations, and this leads to the widespread phenomenon of unproductive or underutilized land. As the economy grows and people's ability to save correspondingly increases, the demand for land also increases. This in turn increases its speculative value, since demand for land judged to be best because of its location or the richness of its soil is in fairly inelastic, and new pressures are thus generated in favour of felling the forests in order to develop new enclosures. The clearest evidence of the speculative value of land is that its potential profitability in many regions is less than the expected profitability relative to its commercial value.

The people on newly cleared land are generally colonists or poor families seeking the means of survival, who often open up small plots on forest land.. The landowners follow, buying wholly or partly enclosed land from the colonists, who move on to the forest again to open up new plots. The colonists of tropical forests have given rise to the familiar image of poverty as the principal factor responsible for deforestation. It is true that poor people cut down the forests. But in most instances they do so because they do not have access to land suitable for farming, since much land of this kind is subject to a Kafkaesque process of speculation and under-utilization. In Colombia we are deforesting 300 000 hectares annually even though at present no new land is needed for agriculture. Whereas the exploitation of timber only accounts for 10% of deforestation and cutting for firewood another 10%, the so-called opening up of land for agriculture accounts for 80%.

The phenomenon I have described in the case of Latin America is repeated, with variations, in countries elsewhere.

Forests, states and the public interest

In many countries the fact that part of the land and forests is State-owned, together with the forms in which governments customarily administer them, is one of the principal causes of deforestation and forest degradation. This phenomenon, which I shall not describe here, occurs in both developed and developing countries, frequently against the background of domination by powerful interest groups with openly corrupt practices. In the hearings dealt with by the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development it emerged that the governments of various countries grant forest concessions on land that has been inhabited for many generations by indigenous communities. This is done without acknowledging in the slightest that the communities have any rights to the forests, without regard for the fact that they have been efficient custodians of the forests, and, in the majority of cases, without consulting with these people about the relevance of the permits granted without providing for their participation in the economic benefits derived. Even more seriously, the companies obtaining the concessions and permits frequently exploit the forests in such a way as to destroy them permanently or degrade them, thus reducing the inhabitants to worse poverty.

National sovereignty and forests

While identifying the system of land and forest tenure as one of the main triggers of the destruction of forests, we also find that reform of the system is given very low priority at international level, for instance the Convention on Biodiversity and the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests. It is added that the matter is one of national sovereignty and that it cannot be a subject of international dialogue between governments.

Clearly, countries have the sovereign right to use their forests as a base for development. But in exercising this right they should take account of the interests of future as well as present generations. The weight of the sovereignty argument is greatest when used in the public interest. It becomes a caricature, however, when it conceals the perpetuation of systems of land tenure favouring privileged interest groups which, in addition to maintaining great social inequity, are generating the destruction and waste of the forests and the soil, two of the most valuable resources of our countries and the planet.

A hope: the recognition of the land and forest ownership rights of the communities inhabiting them

Notwithstanding this unpromising picture there is a hopeful sign in the progress made by some countries regarding recognition of the ownership rights over land and forests of the communities

living in them, the aim being to do justice to those who have made good use of the forests for centuries and even millennia. The strategy has been fully examined by the World Commission on Forests and has been one of the subjects attracting most attention during the five public hearings held in the different continents.

In Latin America a number of countries are moving in this direction. I might mention the case of Colombia, not only because I feel more comfortable in doing so (a way of not running the risk of wounding susceptibilities), but also because, as is now recognized, Colombia is one of the most advanced countries in this field.

Communities that own forests: lessons from Colombia

During the second half of the 1980s there was intense activity in Colombia aimed at recognizing the collective ownership rights to land and forests of the pre-Columbian people. At present the indigenous people's reservations cover 25 million hectares, amounting to 25% of the country's area, and in the Amazon region they cover 65% of the land area.

A radical reform of land tenure was initiated over a large part of the country in State-owned areas. This process continued in 1991 when, on the basis of the new Constitution, the black communities of the Pacific Basin were given collective ownership rights over the land and forests they have traditionally occupied. In this region, named *Chocó Biogeográfico*, is a forest with one of the highest concentrations of biodiversity per hectare in the world.

How was it possible to generate the political will for this reform of land tenure in part of the country? The institution of the indigenous reservations established by the Spanish was maintained after independence, and its continuation at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th largely accounts for the persistent struggle of the indigenous Amerindians in defence of the rights they had acquired.

The reservations having been consolidated as a legal reality, the way was open to recognize the rights of the communities of blacks and small farmers. However, before and after this recognition both communities had to implement various processes of political mobilization in the communities. The creation of political will resulted from conflictive social processes that often generated unspeakable violence and immense human suffering.

The Colombian State will now have to restrict itself to guaranteeing that the exploitation of the forests by the pre-Columbian people and the black communities conforms to the article of the constitution stating that property has an ecological function. The effect of this article is to create a new conception of the role of the State in the forests which is very different from that of the owner/administrator who grants concessions and performs policing functions. The State will now have to guarantee to Colombian society that these valuable forests will be managed in a sustainable way, and this implies the introduction of innovative regulatory mechanisms and economic instruments, such as those relating to access to genetic resources and the recognition of rights over traditional knowledge concerning forests, and also the initiation of programmes of work together with the communities and the provision of technical assistance wherever necessary.

In order to guarantee the proper management of the forests in these extensive areas of the indigenous reservations and the black communities, however, there is an urgent need to implement a process for the creation of a social consensus to legitimize the new reality. Many Colombians still appear not to know, do not wish to recognize, or prefer not to be informed, that the areas of greatest environmental significance in the country have owners. And if a minimal agreement is not achieved on the rights and obligations associated with the indigenous reservations and the black collectives, not only could the proper use of the forest be prevented but also new outbreaks of violence could occur. This is the country's highest priority in Amazonia and the Pacific shelf in so far as forest

policy is concerned.

Recognition of ownership rights: only the first step

The case of Colombia demonstrates the great challenges that have to be faced once the property rights of communities inhabiting the forests are recognized. While legal recognition is vital, it is only the beginning of a long process that should be incorporated into the framework of a policy of sustainable development, with everything that this implies.

However, it is a matter of concern that there is very little international solidarity concerning the consolidation of these models of land and forest tenure by indigenous communities. Evidence of this is seen in the slowness with which practical recognition has been given to the rights of indigenous communities in relation to their traditional knowledge of forests and biodiversity, and in some initiatives on *licences* sponsored by powerful interest groups which would be in clear disregard of these rights. Furthermore, the inauguration of these ambitious community forest projects requires financial and technical resources that developing countries alone cannot provide. If the governments of north and south and their non-governmental organizations do not collaborate in the processes started in many countries to consolidate the recognition of ownership rights, there will be a risk of failure in one of the most audacious programmes to have been launched in recent decades for social justice and the protection and good use of natural resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The main causes of deforestation and forest degradation are essentially political. If solutions are not found to the conflict between the countries of north and south concerning their responsibilities for tackling this global threat, and we do not resolve the conflicts within countries regarding the use of land and forests, any other endeavours could be diminished or could fail completely.

The conflict between the countries of north and south is seen in the major differences in interpretation concerning fundamental elements of the agreements reached at Rio de Janeiro. These differences largely explain the remarkable slowness with which the agreements have progressed, as was recognized in the evaluation made at the Earth Summit five years later. They can only be overcome if the world's political élites, especially those playing a preponderant role in the international arena, become sufficiently clear-sighted about what is at stake and acquire the political will necessary for tackling global dangers and creatively seeking a genuine consensus on fundamental issues. Political will and clear-sightedness do not, however, develop in a vacuum: the difficult task of helping to build them falls to an aware and committed civil society.

At national level there is great conflict on the uses of land and forests. The upper hand always appears to have been gained by powerful interest groups, which see these resources only as means of gaining great wealth in the short term, and give no consideration to the public interest in the life-supporting functions of forest ecosystems. In this paper, we have shown how, in Latin America, the tradition of owning land as a hoarding strategy is the main cause of deforestation. The impoverished colonists at the agricultural frontier are merely protagonists and victims of the destruction of a valuable resource against a background of an inequitable system of tenure favouring speculation in land. In countries where forests are predominantly controlled by the State, governments have traditionally favoured the interests of industrial groups that often exploit the forests in an unsustainable way, to the detriment of the people who have traditionally lived in them. The absence of transparency in the ownership of forests and land has, in many countries, contributed to deforestation and forest degradation.

Within this scene of conflict there are some encouraging signs. The notion of economic compensation for the global environmental services given by forests is beginning to gain political

acceptance internationally. This is evident in the increase in joint implementation projects at an experimental stage within the framework of the Convention on Climatic Change. The joint implementation project recently agreed between Costa Rica and Norway, through which the protection of natural forests is ensured, is very encouraging. It is in keeping with the globalization of the economy and belongs among the types of approach that could help to overcome the north/south differences referred to above.

At national level there is a tendency to recognize that current and potential social conflicts in many societies can only be resolved through an equitable arrangement on land use. This is seen in some processes of recognition of rights over forests of communities that have traditionally lived in them. These processes acquire greater potential through the creation of conditions that favour the strengthening of community forests [and this] is accounted for by the growing trend being seen in both the developing and developed countries for increased democracy as a consequence of bottom-to-top processes fostered by populations existing which are more educated, aware and informed, and by globalization itself.

Finally, the achievements of the IPF and the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development in identifying problems and recommending measures can also be seen as a positive sign of the concern by governments and civil society to tackle the intensifying processes of deforestation and forest degradation. As has been stressed in the hearings of the World Commission, however the most critical problems affecting forests are basically political. So long as this fact is not recognized and confronted, many of the recent proposals for action, such as those recommended by the IPF, or those currently emerging or expected in the future, such as those of this World Forestry Congress and the World Commission on Forests, may not be put into effect, may result in only marginal efforts, or may fall on deaf ears. This has happened with the sound work and recommendations of many congresses, commissions and similar bodies set up during the past four decades. Many of their exhortations have been repeated many times over without significant effect. A similar remark could be made about other promising initiatives to which many governments and international and non-governmental organizations are committed, such as those concerning certification and ecolabelling and those relating to criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of forests, the impact of which could be slight if we do not resolve the political conflicts that, in the long run, are the greatest threat to success.