

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

Some reflections in the light of the World Forestry Congress, Argentina, October 2009

Herman Savenije¹ & Kees van Dijk², January 2010

The World Forestry Congress (WFC) took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 18 to 23 October 2009. In this paper, we will set out some of the results and findings. We have attempted to identify a number of trends and to indicate what their significance may be for us as forestry specialists. We have had valuable input from a number of Dutch colleagues who also attended the congress.^{3,4} We conclude that ideas, attitudes, and methods in the forestry sector need to change if that sector wishes to remain an interesting, relevant, and effective partner in the development and implementation of the global and local forestry agenda for sustainable development.

The thirteenth World Forestry Congress, hosted by Argentina, was entitled “*Forests in Development: A Vital Balance*”. That title referred not only to the importance of establishing a sustainable equilibrium between the ecological, social, and economic functions of forests but also one between the forestry sector and other sectors, both now and in the future. An extremely wide range of topics were dealt with during the various plenary sessions, the 60 parallel thematic sessions, and the more than 120 “side events”. In addition, there were also specialised forums, an exhibition, and hundreds of poster sessions. Virtually every current forestry issue was considered, for example forest financing, climate change, energy, combating poverty, bio-diversity, sustainable production and market chains, forests and water, certification, governance, and the relationship between sectors.



The congress was attended by more than 7000 forestry experts from more than 160 countries, representing a wide range of disciplines (technical, social, economic, ecological) and functions (policy-makers, scientists, trade and industry, NGOs, and students). The WFC is the largest forestry gathering in the world, offering opportunities not only to acquire and pool knowledge but also to network.

General impressions

The WFC took place at the Centro Rural, the congress centre – and also a cattle market – for the powerful cattle rearing sector, one of the major causes of deforestation in Latin America. Each day we were welcomed by the symbol of that sector, an enormous bronze bull.

The overall atmosphere at and around the congress was positive. Despite the fact that tropical deforestation and forest degradation are still continuing at significant levels extensive and their seriousness has been broadly recognised, there was no “doom and gloom”. Forests are on the rise as regards the amount of political attention paid to them, especially because of the focus on climate and energy, although the latter is viewed as controversial by the various interest groups and the former is seen by some as a forestry theme that has been “hijacked” by others.

Our general impression is that not very many new themes were in fact dealt with. A reasonable consensus would currently appear to be developing regarding the main forestry problems, their causes and consequences, and approaches to tackling those problems.

¹ Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality; e-mail h.j.f.savenije@minlnv.nl

² Tropenbos International; e-mail: kees.vandijk@tropenbos.org

³ We would like to thank Rob Ukkerman and Albert Bokkestijn (Netherlands Development Organisation, SNV) for their contribution and inspiration.

⁴ We are also grateful to Jozef Keulartz for his inspiring article “Duurzame onzekerheid en onenigheid” in *Krisis 8* (2), pp. 3–24. 2007.

The number of participants was surprising. If there was a trend towards reduced attendance at previous WFCs, then this one convincingly reversed that trend. That was partly due to the large number of participants from Argentina and Latin America, but even without them there was still a convincing increase in the number of participants. The large number of students was also encouraging. Although forests play a major role in all kinds of international forums, there is still obviously a need for sharing knowledge, pooling experience, and meeting colleagues outside the negotiation circuits. Moreover, many WFC participants are not the same parties as those who participate in the formal process. This year's congress was a real incentive for the next one in 2015, which will probably be held in South Africa or India.

World Forestry Congress: history, purpose, and focus

The first World Forestry Congress took place in Rome in 1926. It now takes place approximately once every six years in partnership between the FAO and a host country. The Congress is a good opportunity for policy-makers, implementers, researchers, interest groups, and students from all over the world to discuss and share the latest developments, innovations, insights, and knowledge in the fields of forest management, policy, research, and implementation. It therefore also provides a picture of how forests are doing, the state of knowledge, and the views and trends that are developing regarding forests and forestry throughout the world.

One important aim of the congress is therefore not only to pool knowledge and to network but also to map out the future and influence political agendas. The main conclusions and recommendations are set out in a *Final Declaration*, which is communicated to relevant forums.

Although the WBC originally had primarily a technical focus, that focus – parallel to global discussion of sustainability – has become increasingly broad over the past 25 years. This is reflected in the titles of the various Congresses since 1978:

1978: Jakarta: Forests for People

1986: Mexico: Forest Resources in the Integral Development of Society

1992: Paris: Forests, a Heritage for the Future

1997: Antalya: Forestry for Sustainable Development towards the 21st Century

2003: Quebec: Forests, Source of Life

2009: Buenos Aires: Forests in Development: A Vital Balance

The broader, global focus on sustainable forest management also raises the question of whether a more appropriate name for the Congress would be “World Forests Congress” rather than “World Forestry Congress”, given that “forestry” still has its more restricted earlier connotation for many people.

Main results

Even though the WFC focuses on technical matters and substance, the discussions frequently had a political tinge. One important aim of the congress is in fact not only to pool knowledge but also to map out the future and thus influence political agendas. The *Final Declaration* formulates 27 strategic actions, including a call for the forestry community to play a more prominent role in social and political discussion; for an emphasis on the multifunctional role of forests so as to generate new types of financing for forest management; more inter-sectoral relationships; more attention to the rehabilitation of degraded forests areas, management of secondary forests and fragile ecosystems and reforestation; the importance of good governance and the creation of the political and institutional conditions (i.e. an “enabling environment”) for effective forest management, with an emphasis on land ownership and sustainable production and trade. The congress also formulated a message directed to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 (COP15 UNFCCC). That message states that “The 13th World Forestry Congress, convened in Argentina in October 2009, notes with concern the impacts of climate change on forests and strongly emphasises 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 is that forests represent far more than just carbon sequestration, a fact that is sometimes



forgotten in the context of climate. The WFC demands rapid action, emphasising the need for sustainable forest management and the contribution that this can make not only to combating poverty but also to preventing deforestation and forest degradation. Finally, the congress supports the inclusion of REDD+⁵ in the new climate agreement and calls for further support for adaptation in the forestry sector.

Themes and trends

This section attempts to clarify a number of themes and trends that we noted at the congress. In conducting our analysis, we took the WFC held six years ago in Canada as our overall point of reference. We produced a report (in Dutch) on trends after that congress too;⁶ some of our main findings from back then are summarised in the box below. We believe that our overall picture and findings back then continue to be relevant. We will elaborate on these matters below.

1. **Globalisation and social integration of forests is continuing unabated, and displays great dynamism and diversity.** Although the congress's *Final Declaration* states that people are becoming more and more alienated from forests, due to urbanisation etc., we believe that another process is also operating that ensures that many more parties (city-dwellers, NGOs, etc.) are becoming stakeholders in those same forests. The increasing number of claims on forests – economic, social, and environmental – and the enormous pluriformity of stakeholders at a whole range of scales – global, national, local – make the play of forces and the decision-making regarding forests into something complex and obscure. Forests are increasingly becoming part of a cohesive, larger whole. Many problems regarding forests extend beyond borders; others are specifically local, but in every case they are closely interwoven with other issues beyond the forest. Partly as a result of this, a shift can be observed in governance practice and policy-making and in the role and position of central government – from government to governance – with two tendencies being prominent: (a) an upward vertical shift towards the global and a downward shift to local levels (“multi-level governance”) and (b) a horizontal shift towards the market and society (“multi-actor governance”). This complexity of the problems associated with forests demands an integrated, orchestrated approach and collaboration between various parties. That much-needed cooperation does not happen of its own accord because we are dealing not with a single global community but specifically with a multiplicity and variety of groups and communities, each with its own different interests, values, and vocabularies, which are seldom in line with one another and that sometimes conflict. This broad context, with these vertical and horizontal shifts, means that forests are increasingly becoming a societal and less and less a matter for “foresters”, and that the forestry sector is one of many players, with only limited influence.



2. **The vertical and horizontal connections are only developing with difficulty** The connection between international dialogue and local implementation has hardly improved since 2003. The sole change is that regionalisation processes are now encouraged internationally as an important intermediate layer of dialogue and implementation so as to fill in the gap that has arisen between national (local) and international.

⁵ REDD = Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. REDD+ refers to a broader approach, which – in addition to REDD – comprises the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

⁶ See *Tijdschrift voor Natuur, Bos en Landschap* (2004), no. 1: 11-12

Although the importance of inter-sectoral relationships and cross-sectoral planning of forests is again being very frequently emphasised, in most countries the relationships with other sectors have hardly improved (if at all). The ideas of integrating forests into the landscape scale ("landscape approaches") and into national policy, and strengthening the relationships with others that have an impact on forests (and vice versa) seem to go no further than mere lip service; in everyday reality, neither those in the forestry sector nor those in other sectors are able to give effective shape to these relationships. That is true even though the effects of other sectors on forests are becoming greater, for example those of large-scale agriculture, bio-energy, and bio-fuels. In a certain sense, the lack of connection also applies to international discussions in which decisions are taken within the climate community in the context of the UNFCCC on such things as the climate role of forests and where the forestry community watches from the sidelines and is to a certain extent excluded. We believe that the real challenge for the forestry sector lies in reinforcing the links with other sectors and the various different levels.

Some trends and developments that we identified in 2003

Increasing globalisation of forestry issues

"Treaties now increasingly shape the broad environmental context within which national forest policies and management must operate".... But the link is still not automatically made to global developments in land use, trade, ICT, urban-rural relationships, and institutional and administrative developments.

Social integration of forest management

The multifunctionality of forests and the multidimensional nature of influences is generally recognised; it is accompanied by pluriformity or expansion of the number of parties that concern themselves with forests. Forests are less and less the exclusive domain and responsibility of the forestry sector. It is important to build bridges to the other stakeholders – by means of dialogue and communication, consultation between sectors, partnerships, participation, and new alliances – if their insights and action are to have an effect.

Global versus local: two parallel, separate processes

Policy-making at global level has only increased. At the same time, connections to the local level are decreasing, meaning that much locally generated experience fails to have an effect in the context of international discussion.

Forests as an integral component of the landscape

Forests are increasingly being approached in an integrated and multifunctional manner as part of the larger landscape (the "landscape approach"). As a result, inter-sector relationships and the underlying causes of deforestation are being given a better place in discussions and in forest-related activities.

Strict separation of functions no longer viable

There is a growing realisation that the strict separation between protected areas and utilisation areas is neither tenable nor feasible. Utilisation and protection objectives must be achieved as part of an attempt to create sustainability ("making markets work for communities"). If this is not done, there will be a conflict with the objective of combating poverty.

Good governance and institutions – that's what it's all about!

The need for good governance and good institutions – with the associated continuity and long-term thinking – is being allocated a more important place in discussion of forests, at all levels and in connection with one another. This primarily involves such concepts as democratisation, accountability, empowerment, transparency, and equitability.

From "valuing forests" to "increased financing" for sustainable forest management

The focus is now shifting much more from valuing forests to paying for functions, i.e. payment or compensation for a function by those who benefit from it. As a result, discussion of the financing of forest management is increasingly shifting away from development co-operation to international co-operation.

Greater emphasis on partnerships

The increasing appreciation that "you can't do it all by yourself" is leading to the development of a wide range of new types of partnership, for example involving local communities and businesses, or NGOs and businesses. The parties would seem to be finding more common ground and discovering more opportunities for co-operation than in the past.

3. ***Increasing awareness of the multifunctionality and importance of forests is encouraging, but it has not automatically led to forests being better managed or protected.*** The greatest threats come from beyond the domain of forestry, arising from the rapidly increasing demand for food, feed, fodder, and fuel. Given the major crises currently facing us – food, energy, poverty, climate, financial-economic – and the political and social urgency of tackling them, forests can easily become only a secondary political priority, despite all the rhetoric. There is increasing awareness, it is true, of the importance of protecting forests because of their regulatory functions and bio-diversity, but at the same time the claims on land and wood as a raw material – for construction, firewood, and energy – are constantly increasing and leading overall to even greater pressure on forests. There are therefore a very large number of competing claims and trade-offs that demand political appraisal. Whether this will lead to an equilibrium in the form of sustainable, integrated forest management is open to question, especially because the production functions of forests immediately provide money – whether or not legally – while no price has been set for “collective goods” such as the regulatory functions of forests; the latter therefore do not generate income for forest users in return for managing forests sustainably.

4. ***Forests and climate: justifiable expectations or just the latest hype?*** The topic of forests and climate played hardly any role at the 2003 WFC, but at this Forestry Congress it was of the greatest interest, attracting the largest audiences. REDD, in particular, is seen as an opportunity to reduce deforestation and forest degradation and to channel more money into forest protection, forest recovery, and 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 mood in the forestry sector and that this has led, in a relatively short time, to new fervour, high expectations, and a large number of new initiatives regarding forests. At the same time, however, doubts and misgivings have arisen as to the extent to which these expectations can be met. A great deal will depend on how the new climate agreement will be further materialized after the recent UNFCCC Conference of Parties in Copenhagen. As to forests there are still major problems regarding technology, methodology, and implementation, for example definitions and the monitoring and verification of changes. There are also concerns that a REDD mechanism will become a system that is just as complex and unworkable for forests as the CDM was in the past. Most candidate REDD countries do not currently have the capacity or institutional conditions for tackling matters energetically and convincingly. Deforestation and forest degradation remain a complex matter that is deeply rooted in macro-economic and political trends and power relations, poverty, disputed land ownership, and low-quality governance, policy, and institutions; there are no quick solutions to any of these problems.

5. ***Forests and energy: a controversial dilemma?*** Opinions at the congress differed regarding the rapidly developing industrial demand for non-fossil alternative energy and the question of whether this is good or bad for forests and forestry. Half those present see major opportunities for bio-energy from forests as an economic alternative to forest management and the expansion of intensively managed plantations. They refer to the enormous technological developments in the field of bio-refining and bio-processing that this will make possible in the future. The other half are concerned about the increasing demand for bio-energy, particularly first-generation bio-fuels, which are already bringing about major changes in land use and that directly or indirectly threaten forests (for example the conversion of natural forest into plantations for soya, palm oil, or rapidly growing bio-mass). Potential social and environmental risks were pointed out: the impact on soil, water, and bio-diversity; the potential effects on the livelihood of local populations, as well as on their income and their utilisation and property rights. Whether the outcome will be positive or negative – and for whom – has not yet become clear and will depend to a great extent on rules and incentives as regards the nature of sustainability standards for the production of bio-mass



and compliance with those standards. What was striking – and perhaps also a warning – is that

the congress dealt with forests and the energy issue primarily from an environmental perspective (i.e. as an alternative to fossil-fuel-generated energy) and hardly at all from that of firewood and poverty, even though this remains a dire problem in many countries and has almost entirely disappeared from development agendas.

6. ***Forest landscape recovery and management of secondary forests are still neglected, but is there hope?*** The climate and energy discussion has generated additional interest in the preservation of natural forests and the creation of forest plantations. However, there is still insufficient recognition of the need for recovery of degraded forest landscapes and effective management of secondary forests; in fact, hardly any change or improvement could be identified compared to 2003. This is worrying because it concerns large and increasing areas and in many of those areas the forests concerned are specifically “poor man’s forests” that form an essential and integral component of the utilisation landscape and the livelihood and culture of local people. They are also more important than currently recognised for bio-diversity (and the recovery of bio-diversity) and ecological regulation. From a global perspective, with both ongoing deforestation and forest degradation making increasing demands on natural resources and forest products and services, but also from the poverty perspective, it is becoming less and less possible for us to simply ignore these forgotten forests. It is high time for renewed attention and recapitalisation for these forest landscapes.
7. ***What has happened to the interest in community forestry and social forestry?*** For many years now, 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 that interest has not actually disappeared, it no longer has an important place in discussion. The same applies to forests in dry areas and the relationship with the population, subjects that in the past – through various projects and programmes – generated the necessary experience but which no longer seem to be considered opportune. The question that arises is why that is so, and what has led to community forestry giving way to climate, energy, and the legality of chains?
8. ***Valuing forests is not enough; ultimately, what we need is a healthy financial basis for management and protection.*** Financing forest management in the broad sense 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, as a basis for generating investment and extra income for forest management has become an important concept. New ideas are also being developed for setting up Green National Accounts, within which the actual contribution of forests to the economy and society are quantified. There is a great deal of interest in paying for ecosystem services (PES) and new types of investment are also developing (for example institutional investors). That was far less so at the 2003 Congress, when the concept of paying for ecosystem functions was still new and unelaborated. Since then, this concept has become part of mainstream thinking, significant experience has been gained, and a large number of publications have appeared. Those publications make clear that PES is still in full-scale development. Various problems still need to be solved, for example how a certain ecosystem service can be defined as a commodity so that it becomes quantifiable and transferable, how the price should be determined, who the users are, and how those users should pay for the service. But paying for ecosystem services would not necessarily appear to be a market mechanism, as is so often supposed; in some cases, it may involve obligatory payment in the form of a tariff or a regulated compensation mechanism. In general, greater attention is being paid than in the past to the options that countries have for financing forest management themselves by tapping into innovative national sources of financing. Many countries, however, are still only at the start of such a process. 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 forestry sector must create a workable link to the financial sector; conversely, the financial sector is neither focused on nor equipped to do business with the forestry sector, particularly as regards giving small producers access to formal financing.
9. ***Is certification effective, or does it simply lead to proliferation of standards?*** Interest in with certification as a market instrument to promote sustainable management and production continues but it has still not really taken off as regards tropical forests (for which it was originally intended).

Certification processes are still driven by the international (i.e. western!) market. Certification for national markets has hardly got off the ground, even though it is often there that the largest quantities of timber and other forest products are sold and also there that the greatest benefit could be achieved as regards sustainable management. There are various reasons for this limited success, including 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. At the same time, forest managers are confronted by a plethora of new standards and of certification or verification schemes, for example for bio-mass, energy, CO₂ sequestration, fair trade, legality, etc.). This developing proliferation may well lead not only to confusion and to higher costs for producers and consumers but also entails the risk of unequal requirements applying to the various different systems. The certification market requires harmonisation and coherence if it is to achieve its intended credibility, effectiveness, and scope.

10. ***Without good governance and effective institutions, the scope 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. This trend has definitely continued, as is shown by such processes as FLEGT and FLEG. Good – or good enough – forest governance is now a concept that has become generally accepted in discussion of forests. This is definitely a positive development. Governance and institutions are viewed as the decisive factors for success and substantial progress in such matters as sustainable production chains, combating illegality, modernising the forestry sector, and responsible business activity. This involves not only such things as trust, transparency, and accountability but also the way participation, roles, rights, responsibilities, and powers are organised between the various parties and their institutions, both within and outside government and within and outside the forestry sector, nationally and internationally.

And the future?

More than in the past, the forestry sector must focus on the outside world and questions and perceptions that are arising there. Currently, the sector has a frequent tendency to solve problems by itself for what it sees as its “own” sector; it too frequently views society in general as the cause of the problems – and in any case already sees society as offering too little support and recognition – and not enough as an “accomplice” and facilitator in solving those problems.



Many of the solutions to the problems of forests have to come from outside the forestry sector through changes in other sectors, in society in general, and in political circles. Conversely, major functions that forests have – if properly managed – for other parties and the cost of losing them are often not highlighted sufficiently. More than in the past, the forestry sector must ***adopt a more active, strategic, and political position*** in the public debate regarding forests, and key into the current political and sector agendas, indicating what it actually has to offer. Persuasiveness vis-à-vis the agricultural sector and the financial sector, and in general vis-à-vis political circles will be decisive for success. New agendas, such as that for the world's climate, can help in this regard. At the moment, the necessary skills to operate and communicate strategically are not well developed within the forestry sector.

There will need to be investment in the skills involved in promoting and facilitating communication, conflict management, consensus-forming, and ***cross-border collaboration*** between groups and communities. This entails giving up some of our own autonomy – or supposed autonomy – and learning to accept being “told” by the larger dimension of which we form only an insignificant part. There needs to be greater recognition of the value of these kinds of processes behind the scenes, processes carried out by a whole range of government bodies, scientific institutes, businesses, and

civil-society organisations all over the world, often beginning on only a small scale. After all: the smaller these problems, the greater the scope for consultation, negotiation, and co-operation beyond the boundaries of the various communities involved.⁷

The role of forestry institutions will shift from being one of “do-it-yourself” to one of being a **service provider** in terms of supplying substantive and policy-oriented forestry expertise, concepts, and methods, high-quality expertise, and implementation capacity, with the aim being for forests – while guaranteeing multifunctionality and the integrity of forest ecosystems – to deliver the best possible contribution to sustainable development. In this context, it is the task of the forestry sector to make clear the actual value of forests in all its aspects of the production of goods and services, combating poverty, and protecting bio-diversity.

The world in 2009 is a very different one for forests to that in 2003 and it is therefore difficult to predict what the situation will be when the next WFC is held in 2015. What is certain, however, is that the developments and tendencies that we have sketched – ongoing globalisation and decentralisation, social integration, dynamism, interconnection and complexity, changes in governance, and increasing competing claims on forests – constitute major challenges for the forestry sector and for forestry specialists in terms of functions and positioning. The question is how those challenges are to be tackled.

Will we go it alone, or will we join with others? We do not claim to be able to provide a clear answer to this question and we would very much like to enter into discussion with others regarding this matter. We do conclude, however, that – in addition to maintaining and guaranteeing substantive expertise – a number of changes are necessary in ideas, attitudes, and methods in the forestry sector if that sector wishes to remain an interesting, relevant, and effective partner in the development and implementation of the global and local forestry agenda.

During the WFC, the director of 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. We believe that this is indeed possible if the forestry sector manages to come out of its shell and make progress in connecting and cooperating with other parties, as a fully recognised and equal stakeholder.

More information

Detailed information about the 2009 WFC, including the *Final Declaration*, can be found at <http://www.cfm2009.org/en/index.asp>. A full report on the congress can be downloaded from www.iisd.ca/ymb/forest/wfc13/.



⁷ See also Keulartz.