

*Women's Major Group contribution for the Eighth Session of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals (OWG8)
Forests and Biodiversity*

Analysis & key recommendations by the Women's Major Group¹

The Women's Major Group believes that forests and biodiversity and the policies to protect both must be discussed together and not be separated into two different topics as has been done in the TST Issues Briefs.

As acknowledged in the TST Issues Briefs, the importance of the diverse forest ecosystem to achieve global sustainable development cannot be over-emphasized. Forests are diverse ecosystems, home to a large proportion of the world's biodiversity, and essential to the life supporting environment of Planet Earth. They contribute to the regulation of hydrological, carbon, nitrogen and nutrient cycles and thus help maintain the delicate balance of atmospheric gases vital for a habitable atmosphere. They moderate temperature and are necessary for holding soil in place and keeping it from eroding into waterways as troublesome sediment. By helping regulate the global hydrological cycle, forests are essential for maintaining the quantity and quality of freshwater available on Earth. They are vital for human livelihoods of over 1.6 billion people who directly depend on forests for food, fibre, medicines and fuel, as well as for the quality of life for many more people. Recent studies even highlight the critical role of forests in maintaining marine ecosystems, including coral reefs.² Other studies demonstrate their important role in cleansing pollutants from the air.³ We are only just beginning to understand the multifaceted and very far-reaching role of forest ecosystems in supporting virtually all life directly or indirectly. Their diligent conservation must be central to any sustainable development planning and policy. The definition of forests must properly portray this, which requires the FAO's definition being revised to ensure that monoculture tree and shrub plantations are not falsely included in it.

¹ This briefing paper was elaborated by members of the Women's Major Group on Sustainable Development, <http://www.womenrio20.org/>. It is based on a more comprehensive report with recommendations for the post-2015 agenda by WMG members: http://www.womenrio20.org/docs/Womens_priorities_SDG.pdf. For more information, please contact Ms. Almuth Ernsting <almuthbernstinguk@yahoo.co.uk>

² Klein *et al.* 2014. Evaluating the influence of candidate terrestrial protected areas on coral reef condition @in Fiji. [Marine Policy Volume 44](#), 360–365.

³ Lelieveld *et al.* 2008. Atmospheric oxidation capacity sustained by a tropical forest. *Nature* 452, 737-740. **See also** Tarraborrelini *et al.* 2012. Hydroxyl radical buffered by isoprene oxidation over tropical forests. *Nature Geoscience* 5, 190–193.

Furthermore, the Issues Briefs highlight the essential role of biodiversity in sustaining the livelihoods of rural communities. They acknowledge that women in developing countries are often particularly severely affected by biodiversity loss and by exacerbated poverty and deprivation due to the destruction and degradation of forests, grasslands and other ecosystems. Indeed, women, as primary providers for their children and families are disproportionately affected by virtually anything that compromises the life supporting capacity of different ecosystems including forests. Women are also often at the forefront of efforts to protect ecosystems and biodiversity. Although both TST Issues Briefs highlight the need to address the drivers behind the loss of forests and other biodiversity, they fail to adequately identify those drivers and to propose credible policies. Instead, they focus on market-based mechanisms and other policies that will facilitate the increasing commercialisation and financialisation of biodiversity. Commercialisation and financialisation of biodiversity have highly detrimental impacts on women and other economically marginalised groups.

Women tend to be particularly vulnerable to land grabbing because they are less likely to have formal/legal land titles and because they are commonly responsible for food production, including harvesting/collecting food from native ecosystems. Women have less hard currency than men because they frequently invest their resources in ecosystems and in agro-ecological farming systems that provide for their families. Commodification of ecosystems, including forests is increasingly a driver of land grabs.

Furthermore, women commonly have the main responsibility for procuring water and fuel wood and are thus particularly affected by freshwater depletion and pollution as well as by the loss of access to fuel wood and to plants used for traditional medicines. All of those impacts are caused or exacerbated by industrial plantations, including tree plantations.

Women pastoralists commonly find themselves marginalised and their traditional social and economic status eroded due to policies and investments that restrict pastoralism and promote the conversion of grasslands to crop or tree plantations, as well as by REDD+ projects.⁴

The flawed definitions of “forests” (as including industrial plantations) and “sustainable forest management” (as including industrial logging and land conversion to plantations) that are used, as well as the emphasis on a ‘green economy’ and other market-based approaches have the effect of promoting the expansion of monoculture tree plantations as so-called carbon sinks or for biomass production. Expansion of industrial tree plantations is a rapidly growing cause of biodiversity loss, with forests, grasslands, agro-ecosystems and mixed landscapes being increasingly converted to such plantations. This further underscores the importance of discussing forests and biodiversity together, as opposed to separating them into two different topics.

The destruction of local livelihoods for tree plantations and other extractive industries can result in a loss of the resources that functioning ecosystems provide to women. Tree plantations are also associated with water pollution and soil contamination by agrochemicals. Moreover, expansion of monoculture tree plantations is a serious cause of rural depopulation, as tree plantations provide extremely little employment per hectare of land. Rural depopulation causes the deterioration of public services like schools, health centres and other community services and infrastructure, as well as the loss of shops and markets, not to

⁴ See Mera Declaration, <http://www.marag.org.in/photobook.pdf>

mention the diversion of labour away from food production and other vital sectors. This is particularly detrimental for family caretakers, the overwhelming majority of whom are women and girls. Plantations also trigger a rise of alcoholism amongst men, domestic violence, family break-ups and violence against women from incoming workers.⁵ In addition, women have faced even more violence in recent years as they are increasingly on the frontline when confronting police and militaries when resource exploitation occurs in their territories.⁶

The planet is undergoing the greatest mass extinction since the disappearance of dinosaurs. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, extinction threatens 68 percent of known plant species, many of them plants with which women have enabled families to survive times of war, famine, colonisation, and dislocation. If humanity is to survive climate change, we must empower women to maintain habitats and traditions that sustain families by gathering food, medicine, and shelter in healthy ecosystems. Furthermore ecosystem destruction and degradation, including deforestation and forest degradation, is one of the important causes of climate change.

Different pressures on biodiversity – such as habitat destruction, over-exploitation, climate change, agrochemical use and alien invasive species can act synergistically and thus dramatically accelerate the loss of biodiversity⁷ upon which women depend, often directly for sustenance. This requires all of those pressures, and the drivers behind them, to be urgently addressed.

Sustainable Development Goals must support meaningful and evidence-based responses to biodiversity loss, including deforestation and forest degradation:

The Women's Major Group believes the protection of biodiversity, including forests and other ecosystems, must be central to Sustainable Development Goals. This requires genuine and meaningful responses, not the false solutions proposed in the two Technical Issues Briefs.

Such responses must:

- **Address the underlying causes** of biodiversity losses, including forest and other ecosystem destruction and degradation;
- **Address unsustainable consumption, trade and production systems**, especially the destruction caused by industrial agriculture and tree plantations, industrial logging and industrial fisheries;
- **Ensure there is no trading in biodiversity and forests**, such as biodiversity offsets, other new markets related to ecosystems or any inclusion of ecosystems in carbon markets.
- **Eliminate perverse incentives** that harm biodiversity as vital for effectively conserving biodiversity – as well as being cost-effective. This has been recognised by all 193 Parties to the CBD.⁸ Harmful perverse incentives include those for industrial

⁵ Overbeek W, Kröger M, Gerber J-F. 2012. An overview of industrial tree plantation conflicts in the global South - Conflicts, trends, and resistance struggles, W. Overbeek et al, EJOLT Report No. 3, 2012, [wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf](http://www.wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf)

⁶ See for example http://www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/sp_nwi-mexico_centralamerica-lr.pdf (In Spanish) and/or <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/women-front-line-eviction-fight> (In English)

⁷ See for example Experimental simulations about the effects of overexploitation and habitat fragmentation on populations facing environmental warming, Camilo Mora et al, Proceedings of the Royal Society, 22nd April 2007

⁸ <https://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/default.shtml?id=12310>

agriculture and logging, mining, biofuels and industrial wood-based bioenergy and for industrial fishing fleets.

- **Enact policy reforms** that shift support from industrial agriculture to small farmers and agro-ecological farming to address key drivers behind biodiversity losses; especially policies that pay attention to addressing women's needs and are able to empower them. Policy reforms must include land reforms that grant women the same rights as men in relation to land ownership.

We would like to offer the following concrete recommendations for goals and targets related to forests and biodiversity:

Goal: Conservation of Ecosystems and Sustainable Management of Land and other Natural Resources

Targets include:

- Zero loss of forest cover by 2030 (based on a definition of forests that excludes industrial tree and shrub plantations);
- Zero depletion of clean freshwater resources, full protection and ambitious restoration of healthy freshwater ecosystems by 2030. This requires both the protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems and ending over-extraction of water, especially for irrigation and water-intensive industries;
- Zero loss of other ecosystems, including grasslands, peatlands, savannah, tundra and alpine ecosystems by 2030;
- 50 million hectares of degraded or destroyed ecosystems restored or allowed to naturally regenerate by 2030;
- Phasing out all agricultural practices that cause soil erosion, depletion and compaction by 2030;
- All potentially perverse incentives promoting unsustainable consumption and production patterns that might trigger biodiversity loss have been redirected or eliminated by 2030;
- The territorial rights and customary conservation practices of Indigenous Peoples, women and local communities have been fully documented and recognized by 2030;
- Women and men participating equally in forests and other natural resource governance;
- Free, Prior and Informed Consent of all communities, including Indigenous Peoples, required for any projects and developments that may affect lands which they own, occupy or otherwise use.

Indicators for these targets should be gender sensitive and include an indicator based on the implementation of the Aichi Targets. The target on perverse incentives should include an indicator on mainstreaming biodiversity in all Overseas Development Aid and other public financial flows, as well as an indicator on eliminating subsidies that are potentially harmful for biodiversity. Last but not least, it should include a gender-disaggregated indicator of the amount of public support and other positive incentives provided for sustainable use of biodiversity by Indigenous Peoples and local communities.