What Kind of Future for the World Rainforest Movement?

20 Years after *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation*

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Foreword

In 1999, the report *"Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation*[1]*: Case Studies, Analysis and Policy Recommendations" was published. It resulted from a collaboration between the United Nations Intergovernmental Forum of Forests (IFF) and a large group of NGOs, including the World Rainforest Movement* (WRM).

Groups involved in the report prepared more than 60 in-depth case studies about the main underlying causes of deforestation at the national and international level, and organized nine international workshops. The aim of the process was to increase knowledge and raise awareness around the underlying causes of deforestation among policy makers, as well as to formulate recommendations of how policy makers could address these causes.

In 2019, twenty years and significant additional forest loss later, the WRM International Secretariat decided to revisit this process. Our first idea was to identify and analyse which underlying causes of deforestation are still relevant, and which new causes might be drivers of forest loss. However, in the course of the discussions, we asked ourselves if there wasn't another perhaps even more important question to ask: What can we as WRM learn from that particular process of 20 years ago?

WRM's engagement with that process was based on a number of assumptions. Some of these have changed. What has also changed as a result is WRM's approach towards attending international forest policy forums. While we continue to follow what is being discussed at such forums in order to alert grassroots organisations and activists about upcoming threats, we question the assumption which underpinned the Underlying Causes process: that policy makers will take the necessary decisions if only they are given the right information. What prevents deforestation, however, are the community struggles against appropriation and/or destruction of their land. Thus, WRM is engaging more in processes that strengthen community resistance on the ground in tropical forest countries and regions.

We asked Larry Lohmann – a long-time member of the WRM Advisory Committee - to reflect on what the assumptions 20 years ago and now around halting deforestation could mean for WRM's future work. His text is the result of an exercise that included conversations between the author and the WRM Secretariat team, the WRM Advisory Committee, and close allies of the WRM International Secretariat in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

This document confirms that the analysis of the underlying causes from 20 years ago still broadly holds. Even more importantly, the document opens the door for a self-critical reflection on WRM's work and role over the past 20 years, raising a number of issues for further discussion and challenges for WRM´s work in the years to come.

Although focused on WRM´s work, we think that this document may also be of interest to a larger group of national and international organizations, movements and activists committed to critically reflecting on the consequences of engagement in international policy processes and support to social struggles in the forests.

Montevideo, December 2020

WRM International Secretariat Team

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SUMMARY:

This document has been prepared as a part of the World Rainforest Movement's efforts to reflect on the lessons of its two decades of work since the publication of *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation*. It is divided into four sections. The first section asks how WRM might look at the underlying causes of deforestation today as compared with 20 years ago. The second section suggests that, in analyzing these causes, WRM's main discussion partners today are somewhat different from those of two decades ago, and asks why this might be the case. The third section argues that WRM's increasing focus on grassroots dialogue means being open to a greater variety of concepts of forest, land, energy and climate. The fourth section suggests that it also means adopting a more critical approach to the types of interaction and relationship associated with international policy forums.

Introduction: WRM and the Causes of Deforestation

Because the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) concerns itself with the defence of forests, it has always tried to improve its grasp of what threatens them. Indeed, one of the main reasons for WRM's founding in 1986 was to challenge false understandings of the causes of deforestation then being propounded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Resources Institute and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO).

These false understandings were varied. But overall they tended to attribute forest loss to forest-dependent communities rather than corporations and states. Such theories were being used to promote the industrial forestry plans of large companies such as pulp and paper company Aracruz Celulose in Brazil as "solutions" to forest crisis.

WRM's founders were concerned to counter these notions with more responsible accounts that would help open more political space for the efforts of indigenous and peasant forest defenders to fight dispossession and deforestation with their own democratic methods. WRM's 1989 *Penang Declaration* called for a halt to industrial plantation schemes, commercial logging, dams, commercial ranches, mining and industrial projects, the Tropical Forest Action Plan, the United Nations Biodiversity Programme, and so forth. It also stressed that "a fairer and more equitable economic system" was "fundamental to any strategy for saving and regenerating the world's forests."[2]

Predictably, however, most states and corporations – together with many academics and a large group of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with forests – continued to propagate false explanations for deforestation that discouraged such systemic views.

These false explanations included "slash and burn agriculture," "overpopulation," "illegal smallholder encroachment," "firewood collection," "peasant ignorance," "human activities," "insufficient privatization," "insufficient free trade," "insufficient police," "insufficient protected areas," "not enough commercial plantations," "not enough corporate involvement," "incorrect prices for forest products and services," "not enough high-tech, capital-intensive agriculture," and so forth.

Such explanations were useful for reinforcing the position of many states, corporations, and UN agencies.

Propagating them also helped many academics, bureaucrats and NGOs maintain their prestige and connections, attract funding and patronage, and avoid being vilified by power-holders.

On the whole, however, as WRM continued to point out, they had a

harmful effect on forests and forest-dependent peoples, because they both reinforced and concealed the main threats that had to be addressed.

A decade after the *Penang Declaration*, then, it seemed very much in line with WRM's work to participate in a collaborative project that aspired to revisit and document in fresh detail what the real, underlying causes of forest degradation were. The result was a 145-page document published in April 1999 entitled *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation: Case Studies, Analysis and Policy Recommendations*.[3]

The *Underlying Causes* project reveals much of what WRM was doing and thinking 20 years ago. So it might be a good place to start for a discussion paper that aims to stimulate self-critical thinking both about WRM's past and about its future.

What is perhaps most striking about *Addressing the Underlying Causes* from the perspective of 2020 is how relevant its analysis remains. None of the underlying causes that the document identified have been genuinely addressed. They remain as significant today as ever.

For example:

• The territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples and other defenders of forests are still not adequately recognized. In some cases, these rights have been transformed into commodities with a price, so that forest defenders can be rewarded in the market if they forego them.

• Discrimination against forest-dependent peoples has continued, often in the form of what today is more likely to be referred to as criminalization. This *criminalization* of forest-dependent peoples is accompanied by a trend toward *decriminalization* of many destructive corporate activities in forests.

• Corporate-state alliances continue to drive deforestation. Governments are still promoting destructive colonization schemes, and the law, including land rights law, is still being used as a frontier weapon to grab forest-related resources. In Indonesia, for example, overlapping state-granted mining and land concessions can now cover well over 100 per cent of a province's territory, or the major part or the whole of an island. Aggressive state-led programmes to open more forest areas to commercial development are in

evidence from India to Brazil, where Amazon deforestation increased in 2019 to its highest rate since 2008, according to the government's own figures.

• Militarized methods of centralizing control over forests are still being employed, whether by states, by global corporations, by NGOs, or by all three.

• Agribusiness is at least as destructive as it was 20 years ago, probably more so.

• Big development or infrastructure projects such as dams, roads and mining and oil-extraction schemes continue to take their toll. They are often now integrated into giant infrastructure "corridors" bringing together extraction, transport, energy, labour, manufacturing and ecosystem service market projects.[4]

• State regulation and standard "nature conservation" continue to be at least as big a problem for forests as lack of regulation or lack of "conservation." Forest peoples continue to be harassed and dispossessed for official protected areas, while many forest lands nominally under state protection are leased out to private logging, mining or plantation contractors.

• Impoverishment and disempowerment of forest defenders continue to undermine forest protection.

• Investment patterns, debt, macroeconomic policies, global commodity flows and trade relations continue to play central roles in deforestation around the world.

• This does not mean that there is nothing to update. In some ways, the world has moved on. But on the whole, the underlying causes identified in 1999 have only been reinforced.

Ironically, what has perhaps reinforced them the most is the way they have been expanded and repackaged to show off new, supposedly "green," "democratic" or "participatory" dimensions.

Such was the consensus of, for example, a November 2016 WRM gathering in Bangkok that brought together experienced grassroots activists from Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and India.[5] As one activist at that meeting lamented, the corporations responsible for forest loss

"... have advanced in the past 10-20 years much more than we have. Now they are all green, they are all certified with several labels, they are all sustainable. Yet we are still doing many things in much the same way."

Among the ways that the "old" underlying causes have been amplified and supplemented with "green" or "participatory" additions are the following:

• Forest-destroying plantations aimed at production of edible oil, sugar or paper pulp have been increasingly supplemented by forest-destroying "bioenergy" plantations supplying fuels for electricity, aviation or automotive industries – fuels that are advertised as being "greener" than oil, coal or gas. Because huge volumes of wood and other biotic materials are required to generate the same amount of energy as fossil fuels, the impact on forests is immense and growing. In addition, wood fuels also generate more net carbon dioxide emissions than the fossil fuels that they replace, at least during the crucial first decades of the changeover.[6]

• Control over forest land is now being centralized not only in order to facilitate maximum production of wood, minerals or hydropower, to enable nature tourism, or to advance "nature conservation." It is also being centralized to secure as much of the biosphere's carbon-cycling capacity as possible to "offset" emissions from fossil-fuelled industries and transport. In the two decades since *Addressing the Underlying Causes*, these emissions – which offsets are designed to perpetuate – have themselves been increasingly identified as a major cause of forest destruction.[7] Yet offset policies – institutionalized in REDD+ schemes or "ecological fiscal transfers" – are structured in a way that is bound to undermine existing relationships between local communities and their land. Ironically, it is precisely these relationships that have preserved hundreds of forests for hundreds of years. Such offset policies seldom if ever provide communities themselves with enough income to compensate for their loss of the types of access to forests that they need. Nevertheless, the campaign to supply forest carbon storage to industry has come to dominate international forest policy discussions in the 21st century.[8]

• Many forest lands are also being centrally reorganized in order to "compensate" for forest destruction elsewhere. Accompanying and licensing forest-destroying commercial projects in India, for example, are

official "compensatory afforestation" (plantation) schemes[9] that not only dispossess forest-dependent peoples but also themselves tend to degrade forests. The reorganization of local people's forest lands as "biodiversity offsets" in countries such as Madagascar, meanwhile, is not only offered as an excuse for biodiversity depletion elsewhere, but itself becomes an additional cause of social and environmental degradation.[10] Mainstream conservation policies that have forcibly separated Indigenous Peoples and peasants from forests – with many devastating environmental and social effects – are now being strengthened and extended with the help of post-2000 ideologies like Natural Climate Solutions as well as ambitious schemes that are recruiting public support for professional, bureaucratic "protection and restoration" of 30 or even 50 per cent of the earth's lands and oceans.[11] Many of the same colonialist institutions that were responsible for the forest damage done by traditional "forests-without-people" conservation are positioning themselves to move into this new space, often in alliance with large business interests.

• New labels and procedures aimed at giving old agents of deforestation a greener or more democratic cachet have proliferated. The 20th-century certification bureaucracy known as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (established in 1993), advertised as capable of making industrial forest extraction environmentally friendly, has now been joined by many similar initiatives such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (2003). Like the FSC, the RSPO has been thoroughly discredited by research from WRM and other organizations.[12] Yet there is also now a Round Table for Sustainable Soy (RTSS) (2006); a Roundtable for a Sustainable Cocoa Economy (2007); a "Better Sugar Cane Initiative" called Bonsucro (2008); a Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (2018); as well as a 400-member Consumer Goods Forum (1999) promoting "zero-net deforestation" by 2020 in beef, soy, palm oil, pulp and paper supply chains; a Sustainability Consortium (2007) that is supposed to document how well its several dozen corporate members are avoiding high conservation-value or high carbon-stock areas in their own supply chains; and countless other bodies aimed at reassuring the public about the forest conservation credentials of companies like Unilever, Cargill, Walmart and Starbucks. None of these coalitions are designed in a way that could interrupt the dynamic of forest destruction on which their corporate patrons depend for profitability.

• Initiatives embraced by state and international organizations that claim to render less virulent some of the old underlying causes of deforestation have often merely extended the life of forest-destroying mechanisms. In late 20th-century India, Joint Forest Management schemes to give local communities a voice in forest care generally failed to check the destructive commitments of corporations and the state. So too, the post-2000 imposition of the formal duty on states to obtain the Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Peoples to development projects on their territories has been met, very often, with creative evasions. These evasions allow many forest-destroying projects to go forward pretty much as before, only with a new "participatory" patina. As Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos of the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores y Trabalhadoras Rurais (Union of Rural Workers) of Santarém notes, that ends up giving forest movements a new task: how to resist the official enclosure of "participation" within the framework of FPIC while reaffirming movements' own procedures for deciding what participation is.

• The state has also learned to permeate the grassroots in other new ways that help perpetuate deforestation. One example noted by Soumitra Ghosh, a close ally of WRM who works in West Bengal, is micro-finance, which extends innovative forms of debt and debt collection to new classes of impoverished villagers. In such ways, Ghosh points out, the grassroots itself is being "constantly made, unmade and remade" in ways that pose new threats to forests.

• The carbon offsets industry meanwhile continually sprouts its own labels that claim its damaging products are in fact benign. Examples include the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Standards (2005), the Verified Carbon Standard (2007) and the Guidelines on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (2013) of the United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD). Another example is the California Tropical Forest Standard (2019) that will be used by California's carbon offset programme if the state decides to compensate for the state's industrial emissions by purchasing rights to the carbon sequestration capabilities of forests in other countries. None of the standard-setting bodies involved admit that carbon offsets are themselves an underlying cause of deforestation. Rather, they simply assume, without evidence, that they are not.

• Much-hyped new "green economy" policies tend to work in the same destructive ways as – and also tend to reinforce – old "non-green" policies, only in disguised ways that often make them more difficult to criticize. (See BOX below: Acre's Green Economy: Business as Usual?)

• A post-2000 "digital economy" that promised to make obsolete some of the dynamics driving deforestation has instead augmented them. (See BOX below: The Digital Economy is a New Deforestation Economy.)

• Increasingly, corporations are trying to contain feminist movements by instituting "gender policies." For example, the transnational plantation company SOCFIN defends its operations in Sierra Leone by saying that about a quarter of their permanent employees are women. SOCFIN goes on to assert that policies have been established "to protect their work," and that a "gender committee" has been set up to "discuss women's issues and grievances."[13] In large part, however, such measures merely give a different colouration to an underlying patriarchy.[14] Supposed "new opportunities" for women tend to be restricted to low-paying, arduous and demeaning tasks. Corporate gender policy documents never even raise the question of why physical and sexual violence against women is such a systemic aspect of extractive industry operations worldwide, whether they involve plantations, logging or mining.

• The exploitation of forest labour in general has increased with outsourcing, which saves business costs by making the life conditions of workers (who are now often relabeled "collaborators," "independent contractors," or "partners") more precarious. This trend reflects the changing structure of the post-2000 world economy, which has seen capital's profits more dependent on directly "taking" things from workers, land and forests and less on "making" them (manufacturing).

• Environmental economists' post-2000 efforts to price more and more aspects of nature have tended mainly to reinforce the dynamic that makes forests exchangeable and dispensible and forest loss "compensatable" through mechanisms such as biodiversity offsetting and compensatory afforestation. This often renders the struggles of local peoples against the primary agents of deforestation still more difficult.

Acre's Green Economy: Business as Usual?

In Brazil, Acre state has become a leading "green economy" laboratory celebrated by the World Bank, the German government, and many others.

One part of Acre's "green economy" is the state's System of Incentives for Environmental Services, including carbon sequestration services.

Such services have already been sold to, for example, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), in order to "offset" emissions associated with the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. Future customers could include, again, the state of California, which wants its industries to be able to buy cheap pollution licenses that would allow them to exceed official greenhouse gas emissions targets.[15]

In practice, converting Acre forests into production lines for such licenses tends to restrict the use of forests for local subsistence, including traditional, low-impact forest rubber-tapping. Inhabitants report being pressured to stop planting, hunting, gathering and clearing land, with fines being handed out for any use of fire.

Any monetary compensation provided to residents for carbon management is at best only a small fraction of minimum wage. A fish-farming scheme advertised as helping provide alternative "ecological" livelihoods, meanwhile, has flopped badly.

At the same time, Acre's "green economy" tends to leave untouched highly-damaging forest encroachment by large commercial interests – including loggers, cattle ranchers and plantation firms.

Like conventional commercially-oriented forestry programmes, Acre's green economy exploits workers and undermines their subsistence rather than respecting and helping them organize sufficient livelihoods on their own terms,[16] while benefits go mainly to small landowning and other elites.

Revealingly, some of the big landowners promoting Acre's "green economy" are direct descendants of former "rubber lords." Under the rubber lords, rubber-tappers were prohibited from growing crops that might interfere with latex production. The rubber lords' descendants are now enforcing similar prohibitions supposedly in order to maximize carbon stockage.[17]

Local union organizer Dercy Teles Cunha Carvalho sums up Acre's green economy policies by noting that they simply do not help to "support people to sustain themselves in and from the forests" in ways that have long proved to be effective, such as community-controlled gathering of latex, Brazil nuts and açaí.

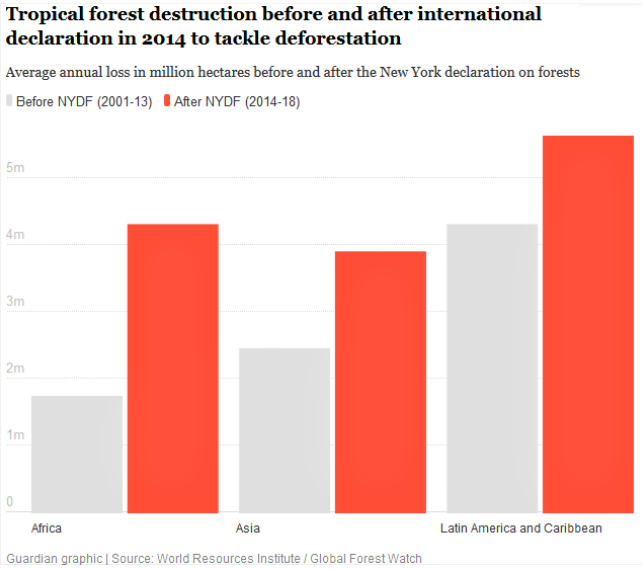
On the contrary, they tend to narrow ordinary people's livelihood opportunities to ecologically-destructive sectors like cattle-raising, for engaging in which they are then persecuted on "environmental" grounds.

Predictably, deforestation attributable to industrial logging and other causes identified by WRM and others in 1999 is continuing.

Given the role of these 21st-century trends in propping up the underlying causes of deforestation identified by WRM and others in 1999, it can come as no surprise that most of the groups that WRM closely interacts with who are striving to combat the "old" underlying causes also take a stand against these new developments.

For example, few of the activists battling mining or oil extraction that WRM closely works with are not also critical of the expansion of the trade in ecosystem services, which is designed to support these industries. Few movements with experience struggling against the expansion of monoculture plantations feeding the edible oil or paper pulp industries are enthusiastic about industrial agrofuel plantations deploying some of the same species.

Because the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation have, by and large, not been addressed but only reinforced by official initiatives, it is also no surprise that the growing number of abstract promises by governments or international coalitions to do something about the crisis – few of which even mention the underlying causes – are having no effect. For example, the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF) – backed by the Consumer Goods Forum, the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 and Forest Trends – pledged to cut forest loss in half between 2014 and 2020. Yet in reality, deforestation surged 43 per cent during the period.[18] (See graph at right from *The Guardian*.)



Other trends suggest that the fundamental mechanisms driving the losses remain untouched. Rates of energy consumption, for example, have nearly doubled since 2010. Despite 25 years of global climate negotiations, greenhouse gas emissions grew at an average 1.6 per cent per year between 2008 and 2017 and "show no signs of peaking."[19] Annual emissions in 2017 were a record 53.5 gigatonnes of CO_2 and its "equivalents," more than double the 2000 figure of 25 gigatonnes.[20]

The Digital Economy is a New Deforestation Economy

By the year 2000, it was already clear that the forest-friendly "paperless economy" heralded by 20th-century prophets of computerization was never going to happen.

Today it is equally obvious that the "immaterial" production that is supposed to be facilitated by digital technologies is anything but.

For example, the mining industry's quest for both common and rare minerals to feed the computer industry is extending its footprint further and further into forested and other lands.

Computer-enabled transport and extraction corridors are meanwhile menacing the lifeways of numerous forest-dependent peoples.

Huge new quantities of electricity are required to run burgeoning libraries of "big data" through super-fast computer processors concentrated in giant data centres. That puts still more pressure on forest lands that contain hydropower or fossil fuel sources, as well as on climate stability.

At the same time, sophisticated attempts to digitize agriculture and nature conservation tend merely to expand the range and scope of corporate resource extraction and state efforts to surveill, harrass and repress forest-dependent peoples.[21]

Not least, the growing capacity of corporations like Google and Facebook to control public discourse through sophisticated algorithms and the mining of "big data" threatens a kind of "automatic suppression" of popular movement perspectives such as those of land rights campaigners in Brazil.[22]

Many of the ultimate effects of such trends, in addition, cannot be predicted or may turn out to be worse than expected. For example, scientists surprised themselves recently when they found that some 40 per cent of the world's insect species may go extinct over the next few decades, threatening agriculture and forest regeneration alike.[23]

Indeed, it might be argued that official global initiatives to tackle deforestation and forest degradation – as reassuring but pointless gestures – themselves constitute one further cause of forest destruction.

Ever since the ill-fated Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) was formulated by the FAO and other international actors in 1985, such programmes have almost invariably failed even to mention, much less attempt to understand or address, most of the underlying causes of forest destruction.

Thus TFAP had no research programme for investigating how to confront the political and economic interests involved in commercial and infrastructural expansion into the forests. On the contrary, it sought answers in the logging, plantation and extraction industries themselves, as well as in increased power for repressive state agencies such as military and forestry units. Instead of organizing around the underlying causes of deforestation, it encouraged the very corporate sectors that lay at the root of much of the crisis.

Today, similarly, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has no plan for analyzing or tackling the historical political and economic drivers of fossil fuel extraction and use. On the contrary, it does not study or even mention them. Nor does it cite the name of a single corporation or bureaucracy central to fossil fuel extraction and use.

Even the scientific panel advising the UNFCCC has adopted a methodology that systematically hides the underlying causes of deforestation and climate change (see BOX: Why Climatology is an Underlying Cause of Deforestation).

Why Climatology is an Underlying Cause of Deforestation

In 1990, scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) started compiling tables showing the quantities of greenhouse gases being emitted "by" each country. Global warming, they decided, was "caused" at the locations where carbon in trees or in coal, oil and gas was transformed into carbon dioxide and released into the air. Responsibility for climate change lay with the governments of the nations inside whose borders these chemical reactions took place.

Ever since, climatologists have been telling the world that it is "unscientific" to blame the bulk of climate change on anything other than carbon atoms "crossing the border" into the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide molecules. The main goal of climate action, they claim, must be for national states to curb the migration of carbon atoms across this border – and to expel the "excess" carbon that has already migrated into the air.

This ideology has been adopted by nearly everyone who discusses climate change. International climate negotiations do not explore how to confront the fossil-fuelled mechanization of human labour on which today's corporate profits depend. They do not analyse the relationship between deforestation and oil, coal and gas exploration.

Instead, they talk only about "reducing emissions" of certain kinds of molecules. And they see the state as capable of tackling the problem. That encourages the idea that continuing exploitation of fossil fuels is fine as long as enough trees can be officially appropriated to serve as refuges for surplus carbon atoms repatriated from the atmosphere.

By the same token, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) accounts for the worldwide loss of species, varieties and habitats with the diagram below.[24]

In this diagram, the CBD tells us that disembodied, history-independent, pan-human "demands for food" and "demands for energy" are what lie behind habitat loss and other direct causes of the biodiversity crisis. Driving these causes in turn, according to the CBD, are equally abstract, spectral forces like population growth, economics and "science and technology."

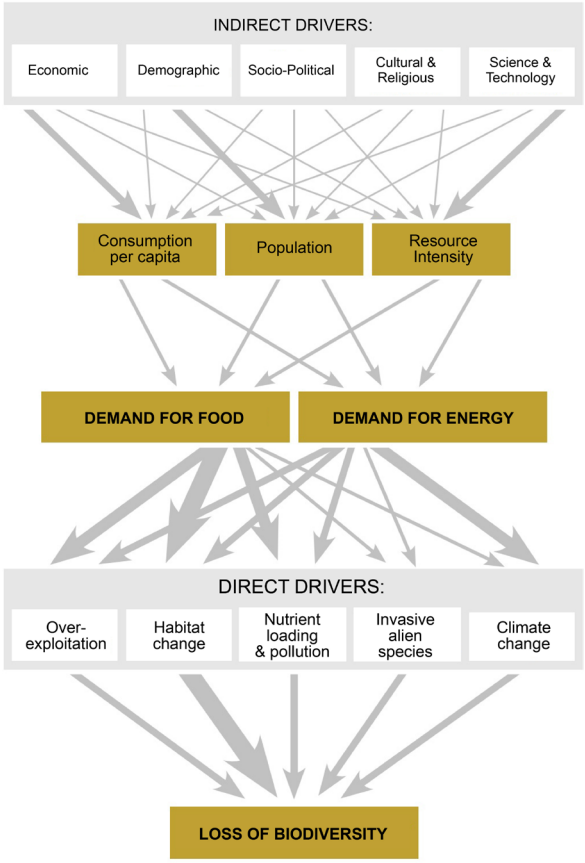
Not only is this embarrassingly nonsensical account of deforestation and other types of environmental degradation not the same as that of *Addressing the Underlying Causes*. It profoundly conflicts with it. Were it allowed to, it would get in the way of constructive movement action.

There is no sign that this trend will change.

On 3 December 2019, for instance, the Environment Committee of the European Parliament resolved that there should be "legally binding" biodiversity targets at global and EU levels to ensure that 30 per cent of natural areas are conserved by 2030 and 30 per cent of degraded ecosystems restored. Again, the resolution was accompanied by no serious analysis whatsoever of what was causing biodiversity loss or what might stem the loss.

Instead, it merely endorsed more economic growth. Most of the ongoing flood of high-level meetings and international declarations about forest loss are similar. They sound the alarm about the crisis while continuing indirectly to promote the underlying causes. They can thus be considered part of the problem.

FIGURE 4.2 | Links between food, energy and biodiversity loss



Schematic representation of the links between biodiversity loss, the direct and indirect drivers of change, and the demand for food and energy. The width of the arrows gives a broad and approximate illustration of the importance of the economic sectors in driving biodiversity loss.

Who is WRM Talking to? A Need for Clear Answers

In sum, there is no question that WRM needs to continue and extend the work that was summarized in *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation* in 1999. The issue, however, is how to do this.

It would certainly be possible to undertake an updated version of the 1999 report that could suggest what strategies for movement organizing are necessary to cope with the changes of the last 20 years, for example the ways that the "green discourse" is used as a new device for victimizing forest-dependent peoples.

It would also be possible simply to carry on the work of the *WRM Bulletin*, which, by continually seeking fresh analyses of the mechanisms that are threatening the world's forests today, amounts to a kind of rolling update of *Addressing the Underlying Causes*. Recent *Bulletin* issues have touched on, for example, the strategies of the mining industry to cast itself as a sustainable provider of materials for a green energy transition,[25] the role of conservation NGOs in assisting destructive corporate operations,[26] the ways that racism serves capital in the forests,[27] and the methods of reinterpreting living beings that the CBD uses in the process of opening doors to their privatization.[28]

Yet whatever approach WRM decides to take today to the old issue of the underlying causes of deforestation, there is one set of questions that need clearer answers even before WRM plans any new work on the issue. These questions have become ever sharper and more urgent over the past 20 years.

They are: Who does WRM want to talk to, and how, when it talks about the underlying causes of deforestation? Who does WRM want to work with on those causes? Who are its audiences and discussion partners?

These questions cannot be separated from the question of how WRM proposes to identify and address the underlying causes of deforestation from 2020 forward.

The relevance of these questions can be illustrated by contrasting the audience that WRM was speaking to 20 years ago in *Addressing the Underlying Causes* and the audience it is speaking to today in the *WRM Bulletin*.

The political practice of sharing, discussing and updating knowledge about the underlying causes of deforestation in the *Bulletin* – and among WRM's movement partners – is different from the political practice of sharing, discussing and updating the same kind of information with the audience of the 1999 report on *Addressing the Underlying Causes*. It is conducted differently, for different purposes and according to different rules, and has different effects.

Considering how WRM might move forward from 1999 on the issue of the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation means taking into account the lessons that have been learned since then about strategies of choosing the *contexts* in which the issue of underlying causes is formulated and addressed.

Presumably, the main intended audience of the *WRM Bulletin* is grassroots activists who look to it for analyses that they can use in their own efforts to understand forests, the threats to them, and how to build movements to defend them based on local, regional and global realities. Of course, in effect, grassroots activists also formed one part of the audience for *Addressing the Underlying Causes.* The process of putting together the report provided opportunities for forest activists to get together to think through what they had learned and to formulate lessons that could be shared with groups on the ground.

Yet the *officially*-designated audience for *Addressing the Underlying Causes* was very different: "policymakers."

Policymakers are not like the main intended audience of the *WRM Bulletin*. They are a varied lot, but they tend to use the information and analysis available to them differently from the ways grassroots movements use them. Policymakers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge from popular movements, intellectuals and NGOs, which they then call upon to decide the correct levers to push to bring about changes for the better.

First, like grassroots activists, policymakers insist on reinterpreting and deploying information that they are given in order to bring it into line with the commitments and understandings that they already have. But those commitments and understandings are different from those of most *WRM Bulletin* readers.

Grassroots activists might try – for example – to make sense of information about an anti-dam struggle on another continent by considering whether its strategies might be adopted in their own context in modified form.

Policymakers, however, would be more likely to treat that information as a warning about the kinds of resistance that might be expected to local dams, and as an incentive to formulate ways of repressing, containing, or compromising with it in advance.

This divergence is only natural. Whereas grassroots activists might be trying, for example, to build democratic alliances to protect water, policymakers are much more likely to be paid to ensure that state investments in hydropower can be defended.

Policymakers also tend to be more committed than forest communities to using the information that they are given to reinforce institutionalized fantasies rather than join in struggles for forest justice.

For example, most policymakers put their faith in orthodox economics – a field that, since the 18th century, has been organized around fantasies depicting a world of "equal exchange."

In this fantasy world, labour exploitation does not exist, racism and patriarchy are accidents that have nothing to do with production, nature consists of "resources" that are in principle inexhaustible or replaceable, wealth is due to the ingenuity and discipline of owners and managers, and all problems or contradictions are "exceptions" to an underlying equilibrium.

No matter how implausible these fantasies may seem, most policymakers are dedicated, as part of their professional duties, to preserving it by reinterpreting criticism from the grassroots as nothing more than calls for "reform" of a fundamentally non-oppressive, non-exploitative system.

That too means that the two groups will act in different ways on the same information.

Second, policymakers are not, in fact, individuals who control how the future is going to unfold. In reality, they have their hands on very few of those figurative levers of power. Even if they were paid or otherwise motivated to support popular movements and protect forests, and supplied with every bit of relevant information about the underlying causes of forest destruction, they would have few means of acting on that information.

Nor would most people even particularly *want* them to have privileged or unchallengeable access to many levers of power.

Like grassroots activists, policymakers are usually well aware of these limitations. They know that the power of states and international organizations, and therefore of whatever policies that they might formulate, is always constrained by many factors.

These include the need to organize natural resource subsidies for capital and to build and maintain coalitions with powerful political parties, religious groups, civil society organizations, corporate associations, financiers and so forth.

Policymakers cannot simply decide on their own to take seriously the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation if there are no powerful popular movements forcing their bosses and prominent political institutions to do so.

They understand that in the absence of such movements, they would be fired from their jobs if they tried to act too strongly against capital's imperatives to deforest. That in turn would jeopardize their prestige, livelihoods and the welfare of their families.

Not least, taking effective action on the underlying causes of deforestation would disrupt the fantasies that structure the institutions that employ policymakers, as well as their own enjoyment of their life's work.[29]

It follows that even if there are "gaps" in policymakers' knowledge about those underlying causes, it may not *necessarily* do any good to "fill" those gaps with a publication like *Addressing the Underlying Causes*.

Indeed, it may sometimes even do harm, unless it is accompanied by actions based on a profound, realistic understanding of how policymakers are likely to react (or not) to the information, how popular movements might respond to this reaction, how policymakers might react (or not) to this response in turn, and so on.

That in turn requires a solid grasp of the possibilities available to popular movements to put pressure on policymakers, their superiors, patrons and opponents *other* than simply providing information to them – or to the opinion formers, researchers or lobbyists on whom they rely.

It also requires a solid grasp of the damaging ways in which policymakers may turn to their advantage the mere fact of movements' participation in official forums, regardless of what information is exchanged.

For example, will the act of activist participation bestow credibility on a forum at a time when social movements are seeking to reduce its credibility? Will it unwittingly lend support to the fantasy that states and policymakers are capable of tackling the underlying causes of deforestation given the correct information and the "political will"?

Activists – including perhaps some friends of WRM who participated in the production of *Addressing the Underlying Causes* – have not always taken the trouble to exercise such skills of strategic anticipation and long-term political evaluation of the contexts in which knowledge is shared.

Instead, many have tended simply to assume that identifying the roots of crisis in a public or private forum – or striving to insert a bit of critical text into a policy document – must *necessarily* be good for popular movements, regardless of the forum in which that identification takes place or the text in which the criticism appears, and regardless of the nature of the cut and thrust that ensues. Therefore, many activists assume, no thought need be taken about context.

This can lead to a lack of discrimination in the choice of the forums in which discussions about forest crisis are conducted, a diffusion of movement energies, and an unwitting reinforcement of the underlying causes of deforestation. It can also lead to unnecessary surprise and disappointment

when the conclusions of a study like *Addressing the Underlying Causes* end up having so little impact on forest politics.

Neither are "knowledge gaps" necessarily the overriding reason that blocks middle-class environmentalists or influential NGOs like Environmental Defense Fund, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) or Greenpeace from being able, by and large, to make effective common cause with grassroots forest defenders.

Of course, good information about the underlying causes of deforestation is always necessary to efforts to break damaging alliances and build more constructive ones.

But it is not sufficient. More important is the determination to come to terms with class, race and gender hierarchies and loyalties, dangerous funding structures, bureaucratic logics, cultural and political biases, and the fantasies that structure the behaviour of people who work in corporations and state or international institutions.

One especially significant reason that forest movements need to exercise discrimination in their choice of discussion forums is that their craftier opponents have learned to welcome criticisms of destructive forest policies and practices as guides about how to immunize themselves against more severe opposition. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," goes the old saying. Corporations and organizations such as the World Bank have often emerged more resilient after skirmishes with environmentalists because of their ability to adapt many of the trappings of popular resistance to their own purposes and fantasies.

Without the pressures exerted by forest movements, for example, how could capital and its agents and regulators have found either the motivation or the materials to forge new weapons like green labels, ecosystem service exchange, environmental economics, Free Prior Informed Consent procedures, and so forth? All of these, as noted above, are now a part of the arsenal belonging to the forces of deforestation and forest degradation.

Thus just as it would be shortsighted to try to write analyses of forest degradation for the *WRM Bulletin* without understanding how its readership

was likely to use them, so too it can be unwise to participate in policy forums without understanding the relative strength and orientation of the forces that will determine how that participation is ultimately used.

Unless collective efforts are made to predict these outcomes, alliances may be weakened.

The dangers can be illustrated by events from WRM's own experience. In the 1990s and 2000s, different WRM Advisory Board members from the global North insisted on continuing to exchange information and opinions within certain international forest forums despite the pleas of grassroots groups and others associated with WRM not to do so. Concerns were raised that, by implicitly giving credibility to the forums in question, the board members in question would undermine movement positions in the specific, sensitive local negotiations and maneuvers in which they were engaged.

Although everyone involved agreed on the nature of the forest threats in question, two radically different theories of political strategy were in operation.

The Northern board members were at least partly motivated by the political theory that disseminating correct information about forests could only help popular movements no matter what the nature of the forum was. The idea was that "every little bit helps."

They also openly expressed a belief that the only way of "engaging" with the actors in the forum was to confront them in their own protected environment with contrary analyses and demands for change.

The grassroots groups, on the other hand, had a far more sophisticated grasp of *realpolitik*.

They knew that information is never mere information, but always part of a complex political game that can give it different kinds of significance. They also had enough experience to understand that there are many more kinds of "engagement" with corporations and states than simply making demands of them within their own favoured arenas – giving verbal comments on policy, adding provisions for "safeguards," and the like.

For example, they knew that to refuse to participate in a forum is one way of "engaging" with that forum, provided outside sources of political strength are available.

It was this kind of practical experience that the Ecuadorian organization Acción Ecológica, a close ally of WRM, cited when it objected in 2002 that Friends of the Earth International's negotiations in favour of "corporate accountability," "new investment criteria," "access to energy," and so forth – all of which tended to focus on adding "text" to various policies – were actually "weakening our efforts" to "prevent corporations from enter[ing] our country," "steal[ing] our resources," "introduc[ing] transgenic organisms", and "harm[ing] our sovereignty":

"We understand that a Northern organization cannot conceive of a world without corporations, but this is not true in our case. In our countries self-centered development is still possible based on community economies and a large portion of the markets is informal. Millions of persons still live from hand craft, small agriculture or inshore fisheries. Our economic, social and environmental problems originate precisely from the implementation of market economies whose arms are the corporations."

This terminology notwithstanding, it is not only "Northern organizations" whose participation in certain kinds of policy discussions can adversely affect movement partners' work.

For example, in the 1990s, the growing commitment of Third World Network (TWN) to supporting Southern governments in international policy forums meant that it was no longer able to exercise solidarity with Indigenous and other movements who often had to oppose the policies of those governments.

That became a matter of concern for many organizations in the WRM circle. Accordingly, TWN agreed to withdraw as host of the WRM Secretariat and no longer plays an active role in WRM.

TWN's subsequent efforts to single out various bits of the Kyoto Protocol carbon trade treaty for endorsement also put it at odds with various movements struggling against carbon markets at the grassroots.

In short, in evaluating what it might mean to submit information, analysis or demands to a particular policy forum, it is always necessary to consider the extent to which prevailing "ground rules" determine what that information will mean in context.

To take yet another example, a United Nations or other international body will often inform representatives of forest movements that they will be allowed to speak only for two minutes and that they should not "speak too loudly" (to quote Dercy Teles).

In effect, this tells the activists that the political meaning of their speeches will not be "in" the text of what they actually say.

Instead, it will be changed into something like "Thank you so much. I have been generously allowed to participate, and I know you will take into consideration how what I say might benefit your plans. But I know that you have little chance of actually understanding or respecting me. And that's perfectly OK! Never mind."

In deciding whether to attend, activists need to assess in advance whether it will be possible, in alliance with others, to subvert this meaning of their statements away from the effect that the forum organizers intend. And similarly for written submissions to official or corporate consultation procedures.

And there are still more reasons for questioning the idea that the problem with official national or international forest policy and practice is that policymakers "lack the necessary knowledge" about the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation.

Arguably, one of the weaknesses of – for example – WRM's ongoing campaign critical of industrial tree plantations is that it appears to rest too much on the assumption that the problem is largely that not enough people – or at least people in power – understand that "plantations are not forests."

The problem is not merely the intrinsic unclarity of this slogan (in one sense of "plantation", there is growing evidence that the entire Amazon forest may in fact be old plantations,[30] although clearly not the kind of industrial plantations that WRM is inveighing against).

It is also that there seems to be little basis for thinking that rank and file technocrats at, say, the FAO, do not "know" that plantations are not forests. Nor that if they knew, then FAO would formulate better policies.

The reality is that even if every single official at FAO understood and agreed with WRM's point, the FAO would still have overwhelming incentives to ignore and devalue its own knowledge. Hence simply telling the FAO and other organizations year after year that "plantations are not forests" is by itself not much of a campaign strategy.

The point is not that it is useless to compile a document like *Addressing the Underlying Causes* or to propagate slogans such as "plantations are not forests."

The point is, rather, that such interventions need to be integrated into a coherent overall strategy of building new alliances that operate according to ground rules different from those governing policy forums and thus can mobilize different kinds of leverage.

In other words, it is not an effective campaign strategy simply to compose a "text," set out a "position," or formulate an "ask" and then to insert it into any available forum or organize a social media buzz on the assumption that it will always have the same effect.

It will not.

Sometimes such a text will amount to a threat or warning to those in authority. Sometimes it will be a tactic for embarrassing or discrediting corporations or states. Sometimes it will be an opening move in a complicated legal strategy. Sometimes it will be a tactic for attracting media attention. Sometimes it will be an appeal to outsiders who are not present. Sometimes it will be a way of unifying diverse currents of resistance. Sometimes it will be a method of sabotage. Sometimes it will be just a way of stimulating and organizing a movement's internal reflections.

Whether a text makes a difference, and *what* difference it makes, depends on the larger context in which it finds a place.

Yet if activists need to be wary about simply assuming that contributing to a policy forum will always be tactically useful, they also should not jump to the conclusion that it will always be tactically useless.

As WRM Advisory Board member Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network, Frank Luvanda of Suhode Foundation in Tanzania, and other friends of WRM have argued, popular movements cannot rule out in advance the possibility that a presence in some particular policy forum may prove useful or necessary at certain moments.

Insofar as that is true, however, it is because that presence has a function in carefully thought-out larger strategies.

It is not because participating in international policy forums constitute the "only" way of "engaging" with corporations or the state. It is not because the alternative would be to "do nothing and sit around in our armchairs" (a direct quotation from one Southern-based NGO network formerly associated with WRM). It is not because "the forums invited us and it's an opportunity;" or that "they're paying us, and maybe we could use the money for our own purposes."

Emmanuel Elong of Dibombari, Cameroon, a leader in the central African struggle against the palm oil plantations of the transnational firm SOCFIN, is one activist who points to the importance of having a clear strategy in mind when participating in international forums.

Elong is clear that, for him, international forums are of value mainly because they either provide indirect ways of putting pressure on local authorities to protect community rights (that is, of letting them know that they are being monitored from abroad) or help local organizers obtain new means to do their own work.

But such benefits need to be balanced against the considerable time and sweat required to participate in such global forums. It takes a lot of effort, for instance, to communicate local experience in rural Africa to distant urban-based audiences.

It also takes a lot of effort to counter the damage that other participants in the same meeting may do to the cause of forest protection.

Organizations such as WWF, for example, have been known to attend international forums in order to back the efforts of conglomerates like SOCFIN to get a stamp of approval from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

Whatever benefits might accrue from participation in international policy forums also need to be balanced on a case-by-case basis against competing claims on organizers' time from grassroots communities themselves.

Shrishtee Bajpai is a young researcher-activist working with communities in Korchi, Maharashtra who are simultaneously confronting mining companies, megaprojects, exclusionary conservation policies, conservationists, entrenched patterns of patriarchy and anti-*adivasi* prejudice, and the challenge of taking advantage of any remaining opportunities opened up by the 2006 Indian Forest Rights Act. Bajpai emphasizes that in such contexts, what is crucial to empowerment is "reflection, not reaction" – including reflection on "who we are" and why certain institutions are the way they are.

That takes time, trust, study, close daily attention to process and to internal divisions, patient devotion to efforts to expand networks and political spaces, and a willingness to admit that there is "no ultimate place to reach, rather a spiral process of struggles and transformations."

Little of this can be allowed for in the schedules of activists committed to regular attendance at international policy forums.

Fellow Indian activist Pravin Mote, while not dismissing such forums, also prioritizes grassroots work. Mote notes that what communities often learn and benefit from most is direct contact with other, similar struggles and their strategies.

His analysis is echoed by that of Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos, the veteran union leader from Santarém in Brazil. Santos keeps an open mind about participating in any forum in which key issues can be discussed, but also emphasizes that strengthening communities is the real issue.

In any negotiation, he adds, it is crucial to know who is who. Who is ultimately on the side of workers? Who is ultimately on the side of capital?

In many ways, Santos observes, this has become harder over the last 20 years. "People who say they support you," he points out, "are sometimes the most dangerous."

In addition, the increased reach of media of all kinds has made public discussion at international forums and elsewhere more dependent on mass-produced sets of what are often deceptive data. People get confused and their analyses weakened, Santos notes, giving corporations an advantage. While Santos sees Indigenous movements as having grown stronger over time, in the age of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro they now face new attacks. These attacks, as in India, are coordinated with fresh attacks on labour and reinvigorated support for agribusiness.

For Soumitra Ghosh from West Bengal, one plea for participation in international policy projects that rings particularly hollow – at least in the Indian forest context – is that "we could use the money and travel opportunities being offered for purposes of our own."

Ghosh singles out for special scrutiny not United Nations or other intergovernmental organizations themselves, but rather well-known, nominally-independent, well-intentioned international NGOs committed to recruiting Southern and grassroots input for international policy processes.

Such organizations, presumably, would agree with many of the conclusions of *Addressing the Underlying Causes* and the articles currently appearing in the *WRM Bulletin*.

Yet by not putting such conclusions to work in effective strategic contexts, Ghosh argues, they often contribute to a "loss of flexibility" in grassroots organizations.

For example, such organizations can become too dependent on making paper contributions to the forestry libraries of ministries and international agencies to the detriment of effective ground-level work.

If too many grassroots activists become NGO representatives in policy

forums rather than strategists striving to build political connections and political strength on the ground, Ghosh adds, forest struggles suffer. Local leaders tempted into taking up "issue-hopping" international careers have less time for local exchanges and movement organizing.

Ghosh cites his own NGO as an example of an organization whose effectiveness was adversely affected when it tried to reconcile its grassroots work with the funding opportunities afforded by international NGO connections. It became a drag on his organization's work to have to report so many "facts" to outside agencies (including data about underlying causes of deforestation) and to demonstrate that it was achieving "tangible outcomes."

Ghosh's warnings about international "NGO-ization" of grassroots movements find some parallels in the testimony of Dercy Teles, the union leader from Acre state in Brazil.

Teles has been involved in forest struggles for many decades. She concludes from hard experience in the Conselho Nacional de Seringueiros (National Council of Rubber-Tappers) that civil society organizations should not try to become assistants to state bureaucracies. Nor, she adds, should trade union organizations take on the role of executing state policy.

For example, for trade unions to help promote an urban style of education among rubber workers in the Amazon – one designed to prepare them for jobs in cities – is to ignore the reality that "ours is a different kind of education." It is also a mistake, Teles says, for union organizations to accept the management of corruption-prone large budgets.

One suggestive case of how participation in policy forums needs to be subordinated to wider strategy considerations was the hearing of the California Air Resources Board (CARB) held in Sacramento in September 2019.

The hearing was advertised as helping CARB to decide whether to adopt the California Tropical Forest Standard mentioned on p. 12 above as a methodology for evaluating and legitimizing REDD+ - type programmes conducted outside California's boundaries.

CARB's staff had already made clear through years of exchanges with activists and experts that CARB had no interest whatsoever in fighting deforestation. Nor was it interested in joining movements to curb it.

What CARB *was* interested in was getting official permission to use forests in regions like Acre, Brazil and Chiapas, Mexico to manufacture cheap licenses to pollute for California industries under the state's global warming legislation.

The forest activists who chose to participate in the 2019 hearing, such as Miriam Cisneros from the Kichwa community of Sarayaku in Ecuador and Jutta Kill of WRM (many of whom were restricted to that fabled two minutes of time for their presentations), were under no illusions that the hearing had been convened for any other purpose than to further this goal.

Moreover, CARB knew that they knew this. And the activists in turn knew that CARB knew that they knew it. All sides understood that the hearing had nothing to do with reasoned discussion of the causes of deforestation.

Instead, it was a theatre for ritual displays of power. The issue was what effect the drama enacted in the hearing room would have on media coverage and California taxpayer mentality.

Would the drama give moral authority to Sacramento's efforts to help California manufacturers go on using fossil fuels? Or would it instead reinforce popular opposition both inside and outside the borders of the state in a way that made trouble for Sacramento bureaucrats?

No critic of the Standard seriously expected CARB to respond to information or analysis about the underlying causes of deforestation. They knew CARB would react only to physical shows of strength and transnational unity.

Such shows of strength included the physical resistance to REDD+ projects that had already taken place on various continents. They included the rebellious red T-shirts sported by opponents of the Standard present at the meeting. They also included the implied economic threats to California corporations, the threats to the reputations of the bureaucracies that cooperate with them, and the livelihood threats to the individual officials working inside those bureaucracies.

Of course, it is too early to evaluate exactly what effects the participation of forest activists in this particular international policy forum might ultimately have.

What is certain, however, is that those effects, if they turn out to exist, will not be due to the "opportunity" afforded to activists by CARB to "submit evidence" or "engage" with a REDD+ process on CARB's terms in CARB's own protected Sacramento environment.

Instead, they will be due to the activists' own overarching strategies of twisting CARB's ground rules, understanding and confronting CARB's governing fantasies, and simultaneously "engaging" with corporations in other, more wide-ranging and more confrontational ways across the world.

These lessons and observations may be useful not only in responding to the question of whom WRM and its affiliates should spend the most time talking to, and how they might talk to them.

They may also be useful in deciding how to respond to incessant demands from state officials and corporations to provide them with "alternatives" acceptable to their needs.

As noted above, policymakers and private companies alike engage in unending efforts to reinterpret the actions of resistance movements as "criticisms of a model" as well as "proposals for an alternative model."

But that is not usually what they are. And on the whole it is damaging to popular movements to acquiesce in such reinterpretations.

In short, it can be just as anti-democratic and self-defeating for forest movements to endorse the political theory that action consists in the implementation of "alternatives" as it is for them to lend support to the fiction that "policymakers" can – or should – decide the future after being given "true and correct" information by popular movements.

For grassroots struggles, the big problem is not that no one has given the authorities good "alternatives," any more than it is that no one has given them proper "information." The world is not a set of implemented plans and models but something far more complex.

Twenty years ago, WRM was still at a stage at which it *did* intermittently accept this language of "models" and "alternatives."

For example, it sometimes consented to flatter foresters, state officials, and the United Nations by pretending to make "policy recommendations" for them to pretend to try to "implement."

To some extent, that is, WRM still paid lip service to the anti-democratic ideals embodied in the structures of international policy forums and of the official "international world" as a whole.

Those ideals picture negotiation as a process of locating, transferring and building on "equivalent" meanings and beliefs among hierarchies of reified, racially-bordered groups (see the concluding section of this paper, *Different Engagements Mean Different Approaches to Understanding Itself*).

But that tactical pretence arguably no longer fits into any coherent long-term political strategy for WRM as a whole. It has become increasingly evident just how impractical and disrespectful it is to assume that the grassroots groups that WRM tries to connect with one another are necessarily making "policy recommendations" or "alternatives" to be symbolically or implicitly surrendered to states or international bodies for "implementation."

Today, very appropriately, WRM has turned its efforts more toward facilitating and strategizing horizonal alliances, exchanges, discussions and other processes among different grassroots movements themselves.

With its frequent field trips, WRM is also perhaps taking even more seriously than ever before the venerable plea of grassroots resistance movements everywhere to "come and see for yourself what's really going on."

Different Engagements Mean Different Concepts

One aspect of this more grounded, bottom-up approach is a self-conscious questioning of the very ways of dividing up the world that dominate the practice of official international policy forums.

Twenty years ago, WRM more or less accepted without challenge many of the central categories in which forest struggles are discussed in such forums.

These categories include *forest, land, water, soil, plantation, energy, resource, population, nation, plant, animal, consumption, production, biodiversity, ecosystem, ecosystem service, demand, labour* (as waged), *development, economy, cost, carbon balance, climate, climate impact, climate mitigation, climate adaptation, hectares, crop, product, time* (as linear process), *space* (as abstract), *nature and society* (as abstractions), as well as many others.

For example, while WRM stoutly rejected the FAO definition of *forest* on the ground that industrial plantations were included, it nevertheless tended to tolerate other mainstream definitions of *forest* that are also ultimately derived from colonial forestry science.

For instance, the 1996 WRM publication *Pulping the South* defined a forest as a "complex, self-regenerating system, encompassing soil, water, microclimate, energy, and a wide variety of plants and animals in mutual relation."[31]

Such mainstream definitions failed to question the fundamental capitalist opposition between "humans" and "nature," and forest and agriculture, even though many forest movements and forest communities had been resisting such definitions for a long time.

Today, partly as a result of engaging in closer dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, peasants and labour unions, together with the deepening deprofessionalization[32] that has come with that contact, WRM is perhaps beginning to understand better what the problems are with such concepts.

It has arguably become more aware of how widely, across the world, categories such as those in the long list above are contested or put into brackets. It has become more conscious of how and where they are being broken apart, or why they never held much sway in the first place. And it is likely to understand better why this is important to alliance-building and political strategy.

Most crucially, perhaps, the WRM of 2020 is probably better prepared than the WRM of 2000 to grasp the implications of the fact that many Indigenous groups have long refused to look at forests as things that humans are not a part of, and that are not a part of humans.

Not long ago, WRM Advisory Board member Silvia Ribeiro described in the *WRM Bulletin* a meeting with a *wixárika* community in Jalisco, México about maize, transgenics, agrochemicals, threats to territories and so forth.

During the meeting, Ribeiro suddenly realized to her surprise that the wixárika were using the Spanish language to refer to the concepts plant and animal because they had chosen not to harbour those concepts in their own language.

The problem with the notions *plant* and *animal*, one community member explained, was that they excluded community members. To create an easily-exchangeable "equivalent" for such European words in *wixárika*, he implied, would be to deny the reality that each being that a European might classify as a *plant* or *animal*, like every mountain, road, pot, spring or fire, is in fact a living subject in dialogue with humans, "part of the same continuum of beings that make up community in a territory."[33]

These forest practices constitute a living critique of, and counterweight to, international policy forums and their commitment to creating the exchangeable units required for, say, commercial transactions and biodiversity regulation.

Wixárika categories, located outside many of the structures of industrial capital, make possible a kind of political leverage unobtainable otherwise.

Paying close attention to such practices also helps reveal the deep commitment of international policy forums to censoring radically-opposed concepts like those found in *wixárika* practice.

This is a censorship with which, in the past, WRM may have occasionally been complicit without being aware of it. WRM's current commitment to investigating cases such as that of the *wixárika* may help bring to light, and to combat more effectively, the hidden exclusions, brutality and violence that form the unspoken framework of official international policy discussions.

To vary the example, friends of WRM have long known that many Indigenous Peoples and peasant groups share a conception of *forest* – if they have one at all – not as a fixed entity to be defined in terms of tree cover, biodiversity or carbon-sequestration potential, but rather as one moment in a transformational cycle of a given piece of land from field to fallow to woodland to field again.

Or they may see it an area of land, like a burial forest, more in terms of its community or political use than as something defined by Western biology. (Similarly, *forest* was defined in Old English as a hunting ground for the supply of game to elites, whether it contained any trees or not).

Here the proper response to a UNEP expert's question "Is this piece of land a forest?" can be another question: "When?".

Similarly, an appropriate response to the official's question "How is this forest to be preserved?" can be yet another question: "How can we find out from communities the best ways of contributing to their struggles to defend their own forest practices, including subsistence cycles?"

Obviously, WRM has always respected and supported such perspectives. But they now perhaps need to be more thoroughly integrated into its strategic thinking.

So while this discussion paper began with the seemingly self-evident claim that WRM concerns itself with the defence of *forests*, WRM's commitment to the grassroots is arguably leading it along a path that loops back towards a constructive reassessment and redefinition of that very mission.

To put the point in a different way, the concept *forest* may need strategic reconsideration not only because it is part of WRM's name, but also because its political history, like the political history of *climate*, is somewhat different from other terms that frequently pop up in international discussions, such as *mining* or *oil palm.*

One good thing about the word *mining* is that it's difficult to talk about mining without talking about mining companies, business competition, subsidies and capital accumulation, as well as what opposes capital accumulation.

As a way of defining a crisis, *forest* – as WRM has customarily used the term – is vaguer, more contested and more slippery.

The word leaves fewer obvious openings for discussion of corporations, states and underlying causes. In the hegemonic definition, *forest* means *trees*. So a *forest* crisis becomes a crisis of trees. Anybody or anything that seems to be damaging trees can be argued to be equally at fault.

Certainly, a paper company like Kimberly-Clark or an agribusiness firm like Monsanto can be blamed. But so can any peasant clearing land for a swidden field, or any microorganism causing bark disease.

The global tree rather than the global company becomes the topic of discussion. And it is forestry experts who get to decide what that global tree is. Participants in international policy forums on forests tend to have to yield to this technocratic undertow in a way that participants in forums on mining arguably do not.

The same holds of the international climate change conferences in which WRM has often felt pressured to participate.

There, it is often the expert on the movement of carbon dioxide molecules and the direction of ocean currents who gets to speak. The activist with grassroots knowledge of agribusiness or Chevron or capital's use of machines to control labour has to go to the back of the room and listen. Supposedly, their knowledge is not "about *climate*," as *climate* is defined by the experts. (See BOX: Why Climatology is an Underlying Cause of Deforestation.)

This is not, fundamentally, a question of terminology. To try to hear the voices of different forest communities talking to one another, as WRM is increasingly trying to do, is to place oneself in the middle of, and take sides in, an encompassing, ongoing historical process of political conflict. Mainstream concepts like *forest, hectare, resource, ecosystem, energy, consumption, biodiversity, nation* and *climate* did not exist before this process, but have emerged from it. And they have always been contested, particularly at the rural grassroots.[34]

The more thoroughly that such grassroots voices are listened to, the more obvious it becomes that the challenges that they represent can seldom strategically be put in the form of "policy recommendations" or "alternatives" tailored to the format of official international policy forums.

Nor can such voices speak in the terms that professional specialists want to hear in response to their questions.

No formerly taken-for-granted definition of deforestation or forest degradation, biodiversity, forest fire or climate can survive this process of education untouched.

Accordingly, if WRM undertook a remake of *Addressing the Underlying Causes* today, it would surely have to include a re-examination of its own biases about what nature is.

For WRM, as for everybody else, choosing who to talk *to* influences what to talk *about*.

Nor is it going to help just to replace colonial forestry's *forest or hectare or ecosystem* or *climate* with "alternative terminology." The forest communities attempting to cope with today's reinvigorated resource colonialism do not exist in order to supply replacement spare parts for modified structures of neoliberal capital accumulation. Why should WRM rush to embrace new slogans like *community forest* or *buen vivir* or *ecological reparations* if such terms end up being treated as nothing more than ready-made, finished rhetorical tools for the use of the "issue-hopping" international activist elite that Soumitra Ghosh refers to on p. 33 above?

Usually, what grassroots communities talk about when they talk to WRM is not a theory that they are asking WRM to "agree" with, proselytize for, internationalize, "scale up," or transfer to different contexts, like the "structural adjustment" theories promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank.

What those communities express, arguably, is more in the nature of an invitation for WRM to see itself as a part of a series of unfinished histories.

The telling of those histories demands respect for community struggles as well as recognition and careful study of their antagonists. It demands an understanding that, to borrow the words of Ecuadorian Indigenous leader Yaku Perez, "resistance is life itself."

Trying to clarify such issues, WRM Advisory Board member Ivonne Yanez gives the example of the dialogues that go on constantly among different Latin American social movements.

In Yanez' telling, no matter who participates in such dialogues (unlettered Indigenous women from rural areas, urban intellectuals, union activists or whoever), and no matter what the ostensible topic of the day happens to be (ecology, feminism, rights of nature or even some UN concept like "sustainable development"), always in the front of everyone's mind is the common 500-year experience of the continent under colonialism, genocide, and relentless extraction.

Invariably at the pivot of the conversations and collective investigations that ensue is a question that is so obviously all-pervading that it does not need to be spoken aloud: Who are we as Latin Americans? What are we going to do with our history – a colonial, racist and patriarchalist past that (to adapt a phrase from the US novelist William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech) is not only not dead, but not even past?

A movement in Latin America that happens at certain moments to be confronting deforestation or climate change does not derive its meaning or force from being a special case of a generic worldwide environmentalism any more than a black woman confronting patriarchal violence can be represented by a black man or by a white woman, or by a committee of the two.[35]

Indeed, deforestation and climate change – to say nothing of ecosystem service markets or Free Prior Informed Consent – cannot *themselves* be defined in such a generic way, any more than the particular patriarchal violence that black women suffer can be defined by black men or white women.

Nor is this vernacular common sense confined to self-identified popular movements. During the 2019 uprisings in the Ecuadorian Andes, which were centred on austerity measures as well as on longstanding ecological grievances, it welled up even in newspaper cartoons:

COLUMBUS: Hi, I'm Columbus … I'm here to give you orders, leave you some colored mirrors, and take all the gold …

INDIGENOUS AMERICANS: This must be the International Monetary Fund's first visit …

"To articulate the past historically," the German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote in 1940 as he fled the Nazis, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[36] For many Latin Americans from all walks of life endangered by the neoliberalism of 2020, Columbus flashes up not only as an essential reference point but also as a living being now in figurative residence at the IMF.

For most of the forest struggles with which WRM involves itself, such histories are always ready to flash up in the mind. For example, for many communities in Liberia, Cameroon, Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda, contemporary industrial oil palm plantation projects are simply "another round of colonial occupation."[37]

Villagers' lands are taken from them, often by force or manipulation, without consultation or consent. Farmers, especially women, lose the capacity to grow their own food or produce their own palm oil and are harassed and beaten by company security guards who accuse them of stealing palm fruits from company plantations. Commercially-valuable native trees are cut and water polluted just as they were in the early 20th century by figures such as Britain's philanthropic Lord Leverhulme (right), the co-instigator of a terror campaign in the Congo that took over community groves of oil palms and turned huge forests into forced labour plantations.

Today, the communities living next to and inside the plantations formerly owned by Unilever (the company that still bears Lord Leverhulme's name) – which have now been gifted to other companies, both foreign and domestic – remain among the poorest in Africa.

And the whole package continues to be "cloaked in the story of a mission to help Africa, just as it was during the colonial period."[38]

What "flash up" in every such moment of danger from large-scale industrial oil palm developments in West and Central Africa, moreover, are not only memories, but also awareness of space.

Just as an Indigenous farmer in the northern Thai hills may well experience a forest less as a collection of trees and biodiversity inventoried at a single moment than as a stage of a long history periodically involving connections to distant places, so too the struggle that an African palm oil plantation community engages in is likely to be linked both far into the past and future and deep into distant regions. The agribusiness companies driving today's renewed African land grabs hail not only from old European colonial centres like Belgium (SIAT) and Luxembourg (SOCFIN) but also from previously colonized zones of an even more remote Southeast Asia (Wilmar, Sime Darby, Golden Agri).

This is a Southeast Asia that itself bears the bloody imprint of oil palm plantations worked by near-slave labour, and that today continues to mix masses of cheap, brutalized migrant workers with enormous stretches of cheap, brutalized land, this time to produce agrofuels for a new "green economy."

In short, contrary to the common mythology of purely "local" struggles to which even WRM – unfortunately – still sometimes resorts, African grassroots struggles against palm oil capitalism are no more confined to specific locations in space than they are to specific points in time.

Nor do they tend to experience themselves as such.

Nor are they treated as such by, say, the international organizations and corporations that must lavish countless "local" hours in Washington or Brussels offices to devising strategies to contain them.

The current struggle against SOCFIN plantations, for example, is not a struggle against abstract "global" forces by victims who are merely "local" (as WRM might have expressed it in 2000).

It is not being waged by people who are unable to "act globally" except by joining RSPO or REDD+ networks.

It is, instead, an intrinsically global struggle *itself*. From the beginning, it was continuous with, for example, historical resistance to the World Bank's Washington-coordinated efforts, between 1970 and 1990, to cooperate with SOCFIN to renew and reinforce colonial-era property relations in the region.

Such "global" aspects of the struggle cannot be reduced to a battle for "human rights" or a "universal right to free prior informed consent" or to other worthy causes like "biodiversity," "wetlands," or "forests."

If palm oil communities in Africa and Southeast Asia come to speak to and for each other, it is likely to be less on that basis than on the basis of connected experiences of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and resistance.

To put the point slightly differently, if forest movements happen to bring up colonialism, racism, patriarchy or the like, it is not their way of adding a few colourful rhetorical flourishes to a basic account of a fight for a few trees and patches of soil.

It is not merely to urge that the "social accompaniments" of environmental conflict not be forgotten.

It is not only to suggest that palm oil economies in the Africa of 2020 are analogous to those of 1920, or that they share a historical timeline.

In addition, it is to insist that today's palm oil industry in Africa is "built, quite literally, on the back of this brutal history."[39] The subsidies that it derives from a colonialist and racist past are translated every day into hard cash in current accounts.

That past is therefore, again, not only not dead but not even past.

For instance, Feronia's precarious oil palm business in Democratic Republic of Congo (supported by Britain's CDC Group, a government-owned company that used to be called the *Colonial* Development Corporation) simply could not be sustained economically if it did not occupy forest lands that were stolen from communities along the Congo River under Belgian colonial occupation between 1908 and 1960.

The same is true of REDD+.

REDD+ would be unable to promise patented cheap substitute units of carbon pollution regulation for sale to the industrialized North were it not supplied with subsidies from past – and present – relations of colonial domination.

Those relations continue to subject rural peoples to brutal police and military force, as is evidenced, for example, by recent deaths in Uganda and Kenya.[40]

In short, it is not so easy to clip out analytical concepts like *colonial* from the ecological analysis of forest degradation in Africa without losing sight of the underlying drivers of the phenomenon altogether.

By the same token, it is not so easy to dismiss recent uprisings against decrees eliminating fossil fuel subsidies in Ecuador and France as "anti-ecological" once the overall anti-ecological thrust of the neoliberal policies to which the decrees belong is appreciated.

The issue here is that international forums on forest policy have never had much place for this kind of common sense.

The central credo defining the agenda of nearly every such forum is all the stronger for being unspoken: Forget Columbus. Forget Leverhulme. Forget Texaco. Forget Aracruz. Forget TFAP. Forget the Pak Mul Dam. They never existed.

Or if they did, they're part of a past that is dead, or of some faraway place that has nothing to do with us or that would be rude to mention.

Let's separate ourselves from these smelly corpses, the idea goes.

Let's make sure never to refer to them, nor to the processes of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and global capital accumulation that they represent.

Let's pretend that these issues don't need to be raised.

Or that we've already solved them with our "gender policies" and "participation mechanisms."

Instead, let's talk only about disembodied futures in nonlocal locations.

Not for nothing, for example, is it an unofficial but explicit and self-confessed policy of the World Bank that "lessons from past experience" must be "generally ignored in the design of new operations" in favour of optimistic promises about a wholly theoretical future.[41]

Not for nothing does the UNFCCC never mention the name of a single oil company, nor remember any global histories of coal or gas extraction.

Not for nothing does the CBD never discuss turning points in the history of nature, but only an imaginary unchanging human species that is always and everywhere at war with nature, and whose characteristics, like craving for energy, are represented as eternal.

And not for nothing does the Natural Climate Solutions Alliance fail to mention the failures of REDD+ and the Clean Development Mechanism.

And this is true not only of the World Bank, the CBD, the UNFCCC, the World Economic Forum, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Forum on Forests, FAO, UN-REDD, RSPO, RTSS, FSC, GIZ, the Centre for International Forestry Research and the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research.

It is also true, to a very large extent, of international NGOs like Forest Trends, Forest Dialogue, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund, WWF, Greenpeace and many others.

The issue is not only that these organizations and the policy forums that they sponsor censor countless proper nouns.

It is not only that they try to amputate the living connections that grassroots struggles maintain with their deep pasts and wider surroundings.

It is not only that they try to weaken social movements by portraying them as "merely local and traditional" while picturing themselves as "universal and nontraditional."

It is also that they cannot even place *themselves* in the contexts of their own pasts and global connections.

In this, the organizations mentioned above differ sharply from the movements that WRM works with.

As WRM Advisory Board member Hendro Sangkoyo argues, the "persistent 'no'" articulated by many forest-dependent peoples in response to attempts by such organizations to coopt them tends to be based on a deep and contrary understanding of how life is reproduced as well as, often, a lived "sense of co-identification with the forests."[42]

Similarly, the alliances battling the oil palm plantation company SOCFIN differ from many large urban-based NGOs in that they have no choice but to take themselves seriously as actors in deep time and space.

And the Maharashtra villagers that Shrishtee Bajpai works with in India strive stubbornly, at considerable cost, to recognize in themselves formidable historical and institutional legacies that constrain them, as a prerequisite for taking them on.

Activist native speakers of Quechua and Aymara languages in South America's Andes, meanwhile, have taken their linguistic understanding of the past as being always "in front" of them as they follow in the footsteps of ancestors, while an unknown future remains out of sight "behind", and transformed it into a self-consciously provocative Spanish-language political slogan, *el pasado está adelante* (the past is in front of us).[43]

By contrast, organizations like the IMF, UN-REDD, or the Environmental Defense Fund, by cutting *themselves* off as a matter of official policy from their own history and spatial ties, are unable even to take themselves seriously.

They are unable to be serious either about the loss of forests or about themselves as products of historical processes that include deforestation.

The cynical disbelief that such organizations display toward their own preposterous tiger reserves, giant hydroelectric systems, carbon markets, and certification agencies does nothing to change the fact that their staff

actually do spend at least eight hours every day working in these Disney Worlds.[44]

To take organizations like the World Bank or Conservation International seriously would therefore itself be unserious. How is WRM to engage with this unseriousness?

As Yanez from Acción Ecológica in Ecuador points out, similar questions recur when well-intentioned Northern-dominated international networks strive to transform work done by emerging and internally-divided Southern movements around (for example) buen vivir or "rights of nature" into simple, ready-made "alternatives" to campaign around globally.

Can the European or North American partners in such networks take seriously the embeddedness of such movements in 500 years of conflict over colonialism?

Can they take seriously these movements' nonfixed, fluid nature?

Or will they instead decontextualize them into embalmed bits of isolated text to be inserted into various international agendas?

And can Northern activists – including those friendly with WRM – understand how they themselves will be seen in the global South if they do so?

In so doing, can they learn to take *themselves* seriously as Europeans or North Americans rather than as rootless agents of trendy, right-on universal messages? And if they cannot, how is WRM to interact with them?

Different Engagements Mean Different Approaches to Understanding Itself

The previous section argued that a respectful approach to the grassroots means being open to understanding and using a variety of different concepts of forest, land, ecosystem, energy and climate.

But it also means being open to the varied kinds of interaction that give rise to that variety.

Respect for the ideas that come up during dialogues with grassroots forest movements requires respect for the "ground rules" of the everyday give and take that make those ideas what they are.

That often means defying the "ground rules" of international policy forums, insofar as they generate types of interaction that are incompatible with grassroots communication and movement-building.

The difference between the two kinds of "ground rules" is, again, not a difference between the rules for "local" and "global" interactions. Community-centred forest struggles in the remotest rural areas of the South can "globalize" just as much as any official international policy or campaign based in Paris or New York.

If they do, however, they tend to be conscious of globalizing in, for example, a "centrifugal" way, by moving outward from the centre of an unbounded sphere that can also be a cosmos[45].

They do not "globalize" by trying to adopt the position of a godlike UN observer looking down on a single bounded globe from above and classifying everything in it using pre-cooked concepts like *forest* or *environmental movement* (or even, for that matter, *colonialism*).

Many of the methods of global interaction that grassroots struggles continue to employ to their advantage with friends and enemies simply don't work in official, self-described "global" policy forums, or are not permitted in them. And vice versa.

Accordingly, one way of describing the choices that WRM has to make regarding future participation in international policy forums might be to draw a rough political contrast between what might be called an *interworld* and what might be called an *intraworld*.

In the int*e*rworld of international policy forums, meanings, concepts, beliefs and identities tend to be treated as fixed, shared "things," tokens or commodities.

In the intr*a*world they tend to be seen differently.

This is because social interaction, and interaction with nonhumans, are conducted according to different "rules" in the two worlds.

The differences are hard to articulate in the dominant, official languages of today's nation-states. But their consequences cannot be ignored in any serious consideration of popular movement strategies with respect to international policy forums.

Some of these differences are tentatively outlined in the table below.

INTERWORLD RULES	INTRAWORLD RULES
Translators' main task is to recognize similarities. (One job of UN interpreters, for example, is to find communication-ready meanings and beliefs in the minds of one group or individual and then match them to "equivalent" meanings or beliefs believed to be in the minds of another group or individual.)	Translators' main task is to "produce difference." (One job of Amazonian shamans, for example, is to connect discourses to the "precise extent to which they are not saying the same thing."[46]) Seeing for yourself why things might be different from what you expect is a "condition of signification and not a hindrance."[47]
Meanings exist before interpretation.	Interpretation comes before meaning.
It can be determined what anyone believes by determining first what they mean. Translators should be thought of as discovering pre-existing meanings fixed in the minds of designated groups or individuals.	It's impossible to determine what anyone means independently of determining what they believe. Translators should be thought of as helping to create or invent meanings and beliefs together in the course of political encounters with peoples or individuals whose words are being translated.

Translation is a kind of currency exchange where preexisting tokens, once determined to be of objectively equal "value," can be substituted for one another.[48]	Translation is the creation of workable ecologies of difference. Translation modeled on currency exchange fails to give oppressed groups the "value" they need.
Translation is a matter of technical expertise. It comes before politics.	Translation is power-laden. It must be recognized as such.[49] Every translation is a political "event."[50] Translation is "dialogical and political work," not "mere technique."[51] The "interworld" idea that meanings are objective "things" discovered by experts, and not generated in the course of politics, helps conceal the unequal power relations that are often found in translation processes.
A *lingua franca* can be politically neutral.	No *lingua franca* can be politically neutral.
An established *lingua franca* is always necessary to establish common ground before coordinated, effective action can be undertaken.	An established *lingua franca* may be convenient on certain occasions. But it is not necessary for coordination, nor for effective environmental action.
Translation should be fast. Translators quickly find "equivalent" meanings and beliefs in different "languages" to turn over to negotiators so that they can move on immediately to the real political agenda.	Translation often has to be slow. Translators are dialogue participants. They help to perform an open-ended, always tentative type of communal political work that "takes as long as it takes." It is unsociable and unpolitical to regard translation merely as a response to a need for equivalents or a facilitator of exchange relationships.

As far as possible, translation should minimize the time spent in listening and consultation. Democratic governments should be able to promulgate laws quickly based on the principle that everyone already has "common understandings" of the public benefit.	To minimize the time spent in listening and consultation makes it difficult to discover differences, which is the more important job of translation.
Intercultural communication is mediation between separate civilizations. The collective identity, subjecthood and self-understanding of these civilizations is unmediated.[52]	Communication among groups is transformation. It is not interaction among "cultures," but rather a kind of intra-action that helps create the very groups that are supposedly "interacting".[53]
International negotiations about justice come after translation.	Translation itself can be just or unjust. Discussions about justice must include discussions about translation.
Discussions about racism come after translation.	This assumption is itself racist. The supremacy of white environmentalism can be fought only by being critical of interworld fantasies.[54] According to these fantasies, activists represent organically unified language communities addressing representatives of other supposedly homogeneous language communities.[55] These fantasies help underpin the global "pan-racism" and "clash of civilizations"[56] discourse of the leaders of today's nationalist right. As a historical creation, the interworld can be and is being contested by "plurinational" and other grassroots-based ecological movements.

The sharing that translation facilitates is benefit-sharing within markets of ideas, or within networks of colonial power presupposing the dominion of nation-states.	The sharing that translation facilitates involves democratic mutual exploration, transformation and self-discovery that need not subordinate itself to colonialist power relations.
Groups know immediately what they mean or believe. They enjoy privileged access to what is inside their officially-designated borders or their "own" ethnic/national "languages." Ethnic/ national groups' power to decide what their own beliefs and values are is just a fact. "Ethnic identity" is just a fact.	No one can be assumed automatically to "be able to say what one *oneself* means".[57] Groups come to understand and revise what they mean or believe through engaging in dialogue with others. What they know about themselves and their "languages" depends on the politics and history of translation events. Solidarity is grounded not on homogeneity but on a process that allows for distance, including distance from oneself. Ethnic/ national groups' power to decide what their own beliefs and values are is largely an 18th-century imperialist convention[58] and is confined to that tradition.
Communication, dialogue and understanding consist of "information exchange" and "finding commonalities."	Communication, dialogue and understanding involve "controlled equivocation" – "controlled in the sense that walking may be said to be a controlled way of falling[59]."

There is an objective "something" that is the meaning of a word. It is this thing that is transmitted during interpretation or translation. For example, the Chinese character 夷 has a meaning, and that meaning is the same as that of the English word *barbarian*. This is what makes *barbarian* the correct translation of 夷	This meaning of 夷 as *barbarian* is something that was created during the intra-action between the British and Chinese empires in the 19th century. It was created in a "dynamic process of meaning-making" that went on "*between* or *among* languages as well as within a single language".[60] It is an intra-cultural "supersign" or "hypothetical equivalence"[61] that came about during a particular political struggle. The idea that when Chinese referred to the British as 夷, they were calling them "barbarians" was used by the British as a justification for condemning and censoring Chinese texts. This translation was resisted, mostly unsuccessfully, by Chinese leaders. To show this, we should refer to this meaning with a special symbol that reflects its origin and lack of "objectivity" – a symbol like: 夷 *barbarian*.
There is an objective "something" that is the meaning of forest. At international policy forums, translators find equivalents for this meaning in the minds of participants. They then use that meaning to decide what the participants believe about forests. Indigenous and peasant peoples who attend such forums can then discuss forest policy with states and corporations on equal terms.	This "international" meaning of forest is not something that translators at international policy forums "find" in the minds of Indigenous Peoples and peasants. Instead, they create it in international meetings and documents themselves during their fast search for "equivalents." These hypothetical "equivalents" have biases reflecting the unequal power relations in such forums. As a reminder of this reality, we can perhaps refer to this concept of forest with a special symbol reflecting its origin in the biased "international world" of interstate negotiations – a symbol like: *forest/ bosque/ ป่า nkhalango/forêt/ 森林 / ihlathi/ বন /hav zoov.*

Communication succeeds when the translation process is halted at the objectively "correct" translation, transmitted without interference or "noise," and understood by the recipient.	Communication succeeds by "never assuming communality or taking comprehension for granted"[62] – or calling a final halt to the translation process.
Communication fails when messages get "lost in translation" or "signals" are blurred by "noise."	Communication fails when mistakes and questions come to an end. Nothing is ever lost in translation because there is nothing to lose. There is nothing "internal" either to individual language users or to ethnic/national "languages" that determines the meaning of their words.[63] The problem commonly signaled by the phrase "lost in translation" is not a technical problem. It is a way of expressing the contested politics of translation events themselves.
Languages are pre-given, internally-coherent systems or "things." You can count them.	Languages do not need to be treated as countable[64]. There is no sharp line between interlinguistic translation and intra-linguistic interpretation. To put it in a more shocking way, "there is no such thing as 'a' language[65]," at least in the sense commonly used in the interworld.

The two columns of this table represent not just different ways of organizing the world, but literally different worlds, with different institutions, different politics, different forests, different climates and different humans in each.

For example, when white, middle-class environmentalists in North America and Europe, such as Bill McKibben's 350.org, assume that "the climate movement" must base itself on the supposed "common ground" that *they* have learned to identify as "climate," they are implicitly insisting on interworld rules for relationships, and rejecting the norms of the intraworld.

They imagine that a particular intra-cultural "supersign" – what might be written down in shorthand as, say, *climate/Klima/ihu igwe/ آب و ہوا veðurfar/ 氣候 /nyengo/ климат* – is what must define effective movement-building on global warming. For them, it is this imagined "shared thread" that activists must unite around to create a truly powerful, sustained and universal climate movement.

Yet this "supersign" is in fact a parochial, colonial construction. It was created largely in a historically- and geographically-specific environment of urban meeting rooms populated by international experts, bureaucrats and politicians from very limited backgrounds and with very limited interests.

Drawing on postwar Northern traditions of military and computer technology, it narrowly restricts the definition of climate change to energy flows, statistical circulation models, and too many carbon dioxide molecules in the wrong place.

In so doing it refuses and ignores a multitude of contrary conceptions of climate, to be found in societies from Puebla to Pakistan to Molo to fenceline communities in Los Angeles, who all place climate change firmly in the context of centuries-old political conflict and failures of respect for both the human and the more-than-human.

The WRM of two decades ago might have suggested – in public at least – that the problem with the politics of McKibben's 350.org (or, for that matter, the United Nations or WWF) was that the "underlying causes" of climate change that they identified (CO_2 molecules) were just not "underlying" enough.

And that, accordingly, they were merely committing "oversights" that could perhaps be corrected by more careful study of, for example, the capitalist history of mechanization and fossil fuels.

But, as the section above on *Who is WRM Talking to?* has already hinted, the matter goes deeper than that.

The problem with the UN, 350.org and WWF also reflects, more fundamentally, a political commitment to ways of doing things that are, literally, a world away from the types of social interaction to which WRM is more committed.

By advocating an "interworld" organization of climate action around carbon dioxide molecule flows, the UN, 350.org and WWF are doing more than just playing with words and numbers.

They are also helping to build a planet full of institutions such as cobalt mining corporations, REDD+ and Nature-Based Solutions, whose physical effects on grassroots communities and their forests could not be more painfully real.

Their "interworld" practices prevent them from either asking others how they might see climate and nature or listening carefully to the answers.

The schematic division between interworld and intraworld suggested here, however, should not be allowed to conceal the fact that both constantly interpenetrate.[66] Since the 18th-century invention of the interworld, it has been common to find both sets of rules operating in some of the same arenas at the same time.

For instance, products that come out of the interworld – for example, all those reified international "supersigns" like *ecosystem service/* خدمة النظام البيئ / *ekosystémová služba/ บริการระบบนิเวศ /serviço ecossistêmico*, together with the fetishized forms of nature that go with them – are constantly being confronted and renegotiated in the intraworld.

They are confronted, for example, every time that a community representative throws up her hands in frustration during an international meeting and says, "You just have to come visit us and see for yourself how we do things where we live."

Such intraworld events constantly take place even in the arenas most dominated by interworld rules. To take another example, both the UN and multinational corporations have an interest in enforcing "interworld" rules wherever possible. Both of them benefit institutionally from environments that continually assign a magic power to intra-linguistic "supersigns" like the FAO concept of *forest*.

That pushes everyone in the room toward treating forests as "natural resources" for capital.

It pushes everyone toward fast negotiations over who will get the benefits from exploiting them.

And at the same time, the bias and violence behind the fetishized "supersigns" is efficiently concealed.

Yet in order to create and maintain a social environment that makes such "supersigns" into universal "things," multinational corporations and the UN often first have to enter environments where intr*a*world rules prevail. They often need to establish "listening relationships" with critical communities, conducted according to intr*a*world ground rules, in order to understand how better to enforce int*e*rworld rules subsequently.

To vary the example, the first international environmental summits saw many encounters between bureaucrats who had never thought about "the environment" and scientists who had never given a moment's thought to, for instance, "international trade."

For a brief historical moment, no int*e*rworld and not even any "supersigns" were available for either side to exploit.

That forced them to engage in slow mutual learning activities in an intr*a*world until int*e*rworld rules could be imposed capable of generating a set of stable "keywords" – such as *sustainable development/ การพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน / pembangunan berkelanjutan/garapen iraunkorra/fandrosoana maharitra* – that simultaneously served the needs of capital, concealed its violence, and truncated and streamlined relationships among technocrats themselves.[67]

In many ways, as Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos, the union leader from Santarém points out, interworld rules have become more sophisticated and far-reaching over the past 20 years.

For instance, Brazil's new Forest Code makes use of mapping technologies that quickly and "automatically" translate lands and forests into market-friendly formats without the need for cumbersome processes of consultation, questioning and checking with their inhabitants.[68]

It is a striking fact that many of the forests that WRM has traditionally concerned itself with are, by contrast, places where intraworld rules

prominently apply. This is obviously true in some of the greatest remaining forest areas in the Amazon and in central Africa. But it is also true of some of the great forested lands of the past.

Imagine, for example, traveling through the Great Lakes region of North America between 1650 and 1815.

At that time and place, the power of Algonquian Indigenous groups ensured that French and British colonizers and traders – as well as Indigenous Peoples themselves – had to follow intraworld rules rather than interworld rules.[69]

Indigenous and European nations had little pre-existing common experience or common understanding of what forests were; what fur-bearing animals were; what land cessions were; what a gift, commodity or price was; what trade was; what Indians or Europeans were; what negotiation and dispute settlement were; what political representation was; what justice was; what the obligations of alliance were; or what political subjecthood, strength and weakness were.

In this situation, the kind of dialogue that followed the interaction model of today's UN policy negotiations would have been, politically speaking, far worse than useless.

For example, any fast and efficient translation into French or English of Indigenous concepts like *chieftainship, manitou,* the *personhood* of game animals, or *covering the dead* (compensating collectively for wrongful killing in order to foster greater social harmony) carried connotations that were outlandish or offensive to *both* sides.

So did any workably short, quick translation into Indigenous languages of European concepts like *debt, customer, game conservation* or *military leadership*.

Such translations produced only disorder, conflict and rampant killings.

Thus when, in the early 1700s, Indians translated rising prices charged by French merchants for European goods as a reprehensible lapse of paternal duty on the part of French political leaders, that translation translated back

into French as evidence of a childish ignorance of how markets work.

Further translation back and forth only made things worse.

Nor was it useful or even possible to try to create int*e*rworld concepts like 夷 */ barbarian or forest/bosque/* ป่า */nkhalango/forêt/森林/ihlathi/* বন */hav zoov*. To formulate such supposedly "compromise" concepts could only destroy the possibility of dialogue about forests or anything else. In many ways, this was a pre-interworld universe.

The issue was not that messages or signals in the Great Lakes region of the time would get lost or garbled in translation. There *were* no messages for which "equivalents" could be sought. There *were* no "beliefs" pre-formed in imaginary, unmediated self-communion by given, autonomous, closed, enduring linguistic communities.

Instead of being imagined to be formed once and for all inside isolated communities, nations or "ethnic groups" and then exchanged, meanings and beliefs about forests were understood to be constantly in the process of being created and recreated in the process of being always up for grabs in a space where unambiguous hierarchies of power were difficult to establish.

In other words, it was hard for anybody to imagine articulating any belief even to themselves that was prior to the act of laboriously translating it into the diverse idioms of all parties present, including their own. Nobody thought they could classify others' words in terms of their own without having to recognize that others were classifying *their* words in terms of *their* own.[70]

Another way of saying the same thing is to note that the territory on which everybody had to operate and negotiate was not an int*e*rcommunity but rather an intr*a*-community space.

Algonquians and French both had to undertake what Lydia He Liu would call a "reciprocal wager" on improvising and continuing to improvise ways of justifying (usually confusedly) "their own rules in terms of what they perceived to be the practices of the other," to cite the words of historian Richard White.[71] They had to try continually to speak in each other's "political discourse for the first time."[72]

So when Onontio (an Algonquian term for the French governor at Quebec) realized that, if he wanted to maintain some semblance of European imperial presence in the region, he had to acquire some of the gift-giving generosity associated with Indigenous-style leadership, he also had to throw himself into speculation (and error) about how Native Americans interpreted copper kettles or furs.

He had to recontextualize and historicize the dominant European translation ("theft") of certain Indigenous modes of exchange between enemies.

He had to try to understand that he was strongest exactly when he might at first appear to himself to be weakest, or most unwilling to resort to force – that is, when he played the part of a "kind father" who mediates quarrels among his "children" impartially instead of deploying military power to decide disputes.

The difference between int*er*world and intr*a*world norms is particularly relevant to WRM's work insofar as the activists in the WRM network with urban, middle-class intellectual backgrounds deliberately strive to put themselves in non-hierarchical, non-colonialist, trustful and listening power relationships with other activists in the network with quite different peasant, Indigenous, rural or more oppressed backgrounds.

WRM succeeds or fails partly depending on whether it can make these relationships a reality.

This section has tried to suggest that part of what makes these relationships possible is a loyalty to intraworld norms and an awareness of the difference between them and interworld norms.

This is an awareness that international policy forums tend to militate against by their very nature.

Being a part of the WRM network, in other words, arguably involves being at ease not only with multiple senses of concepts like *forest*, but also with multiple concepts of concepts themselves.

This seems to be one key to achieving WRM's stated mission of making it possible for "activists from different parts of the world" to facilitate the

"exchange of information and experiences among community groups in different forest regions in the global South where communities live with and from the forest."[73]

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, at the time of *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation*, everyone associated with WRM was already very well aware that WRM was constantly pushing beyond the boundaries of what the political mainstream narrowly defined as "forest issues."

In its commitment to grassroots movements, WRM had no choice but to confront the very structures of big business, technocracies, world trade, banking, military repression, infrastructure policy, and many other issues that traditional environmentalism tended to leave alone.

That remains the case today. To borrow the words of Hendro Sangkoyo of WRM's Advisory Committee, there is a strong case that WRM's work "should nurture a narrative and action space not only in defence of the forests but manifestly also against the very rapid expansion of ... industrial urbanism" as well as the entire cancer-like "fanning out of death" along the "trajectory of market rationality."[74]

To continue to work in this direction, WRM perhaps needs not only to continue to evaluate the changes in forest politics that have taken place since 2000, but also to reassess critically its own experience during that time in order to try to understand how it might go even further in its support for grassroots movements.

In this connection, it will be useful to continue experimenting with different kinds of dialogue and forum that bring together disparate movements in a radically democratic way that challenges not only old concepts but also the old relationships that entrench them.

To cite only one example, Sangkoyo's School of Democratic Economics recently joined a working group on women and mining together with Jaring Advokasi Tambang (Mining Advocacy Network) to organize a "roving listening conference" with women shamans from all provinces of Kalimantan

with the aim of "understanding losses as defined by the subjects of healing themselves." According to Sangkoyo, if WRM is to continue following a "resistance/healing agenda," it must "re-think the very terms that define what the movement is."[75]

To move forward, WRM may also need to look again at how deep the disconnections are between participation in international policy forums and such efforts at movement-building on the ground.

The last two decades have made ever clearer that it is only through slow processes of mutual learning full of conflict and solidarity that grassroots forest movements co-create themselves as well as the categories that come to describe their world. Arguably, it is through self-criticism of its own previous limitations that WRM can best honour its longstanding commitment to identifying and acting on the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation.[76]

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1 The underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation – different from the more visible direct causes such as logging, agribusiness or mining – tend to be hidden from view, less discussed and poorly understood. They are closely tied to the capitalist-racist-patriarchal system. The underlying causes of tropical deforestation are also closely related to the colonial legacy.

2 An emergency call to action for the forests, their peoples and life on earth: https://wrm.org.uy/?p=5242 .

3 Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation: https://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/UnderlyingCausesReport.pdf.

4 How Infrastructure is Shaping the World. A Critical Introduction to Infrastructure Mega-Corridors: https://is.gd/fqIBQE ; Corridors as Factories Supply Chains, Logistics and Labour: https://is.gd/dsTvNF

5 Meeting report: What is happening to our forests?: https://wrm.org.uy/?p=12006 .

6 Biomass Takes Us Backwards: https://is.gd/lsxAwY ; BURNED: Are Trees the New Coal?: https://www.linktv.org/node/103734; Mary S. Booth, "The Great Biomass Boondoggle," New York Review of Books, 14 October 2019..

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8 https://www.redd-monitor.org.

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12 WRM/Subject:Certification: https://wrm.org.uy/?p=369 ; Palm oil watchdog's sustainability guarantee is still a destructive con: https://eia-international.org/?p=33372 .

13 https://www.business-humanrights.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-01-09-Socfin-response-to-Fian_Final.pdf, p. 5.

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15 Acre against Chico Mendes: https://reporterbrasil.org.br/?p=34014

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