

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Discussion Paper 16

**THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF DEFORESTATION
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES:
PRINCIPAL ISSUES AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

by

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November 1990

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ISSN 1012-6511

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Preface

Work on environment, sustainable development and social change constitutes an important part of UNRISD's medium-term research programme approved by the Institute's Board at its meeting in July 1989. The basic objective of research in this area is to analyse the implications of environmental deterioration for the livelihood and living conditions of the poverty groups in urban and rural areas, evaluate their individual, family and group reactions and strategies to combat the adverse effects of environmental changes, and assess their interaction with other key actors such as the agencies of the state, the modern commercial interests - national and foreign, the non-governmental agencies and grass-roots movements. Another important goal of this research is to suggest feasible policy options which, while preserving and enhancing the environment, would also safeguard the livelihood and interests of the poorer and weaker social groups. It is planned to disseminate the results of research findings through publications, a series of workshops and discussions with policy makers and grass-roots organizations. The work is being phased in a manner that would make it possible to provide inputs to the preparatory process for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

The work on environment is organized in three projects dealing respectively with people's participation in resource management; women, population and environment; and the social dynamics of deforestation. The last project is being supported by a grant from the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC). The project comprises a set of country and regional studies, research on some thematic issues which cut across individual countries and regions and a number of workshops at national and international levels.

The present paper was initially prepared as a background document for launching the work on the social dynamics of deforestation. It is being issued now as a Discussion Paper in order to inform interested agencies and individuals about the scope, objectives and contents of the project as also to stimulate dialogue and collaboration with those working in this area. The paper undertakes a broad survey of the extent and rates of deforestation, the underlying processes and mechanisms, the social consequences and the policy implications. This is done with a view to elaborating the Institute's research perspective in this area and to designing a research programme focused on the themes identified above.

The paper questions some of the currently widely used definitions of deforestation. It examines some of the deeper processes behind deforestation which go beyond the conventional explanations of poverty, population growth and modernization. It highlights the critical importance of development policies, land tenure systems and large-scale domestic and foreign commercial interests in

agriculture and livestock in spreading deforestation. The authors argue that effective environment policies are unlikely to be adopted in the absence of organized pressure from those adversely affected by deforestation processes and a corresponding deterioration in the access to natural resources.

The authors of this paper are responsible at UNRISD for the implementation of this project. Solon Barraclough, a previous Director of UNRISD, worked for many years in Latin America and is currently acting as the senior consultant for the project. Krishna Ghimire, who did his doctoral work on deforestation and land tenure in Nepal and has worked in the field of agro-forestry and woodfuel planning in the past, is co-ordinating the project.

November 1990

Dharam Ghai
Director

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International concern about deforestation in developing countries has been increasing during recent years. In the rich industrialized North, this is in part explained by mounting indications that tropical deforestation is accelerating and new evidence about its contribution to global warming. This growing environmental awareness is also partly due to the political influence of 'green movements'. In the South, popular movements by some indigenous groups negatively affected by deforestation processes have played a role. So, too, have the perceptions of many among the intellectual, socio-economic and political élite that rapid deforestation may be prejudicing their countries' possibilities for sustainable development in the future while its short-term benefits accrue mostly to corporate and consumer interests in the North and to a few small minorities in the South.

This growing international concern about deforestation has been articulated through the United Nations system in many ways. The 1972 Stockholm United Nations Conference on Environment and the subsequent creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is one example. In 1977, the United Nations Conference on Desertification held in Nairobi called upon governments and international agencies to bring desertification processes under control by the end of the century. The World Conservation Strategy, emphasizing the interdependence of conservation and sustainable development, was launched in the early 1980s by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) together with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), UNEP, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). This was followed by the preparation of global Tropical Forestry Action Plans (TFAPs) in the mid-1980s by FAO and by the World Resources Institute (WRI) with the support of the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). There have subsequently been numerous internationally inspired and supported national TFAPs as well. The 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development and the follow-up 1988 resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on "Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond" both highlighted deforestation issues. By the late 1980s, there was an almost obligatory mention of environmental issues in nearly all United Nations documents and projects. Most recently, the United Nations system is taking the lead in organizing the Conference on Environment and Development to be held in Brazil in June 1992.

There has been a proliferation of publicly and privately supported organizations engaged in advocacy and research relating to deforestation issues, many of them highly qualified and well funded. Several environmental groups and non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) active in the field are critical of United Nations-supported Tropical Forestry Action Plans and of international environmental efforts more generally. Deforestation is high on the agenda for international and national discussions during the 1990s.

Publications about the extent of deforestation, its causes, its environmental and socio-economic impacts and its possible remedies, have multiplied rapidly. A preliminary review of this literature shows considerable controversy about the rates, causes and social consequences of deforestation. There has been little systematic and comparative analysis of the interactions of deforestation processes at local levels with the associated changes in livelihoods of different social groups, the individual, collective and corporate responses of those involved or affected, and with public policies.

While the effects of public policies on deforestation have been the subject of some recent research, issues related to policy formulation and administration have received less attention. The influence of land tenure systems, and of social structures more broadly defined, has not been addressed systematically at local and wider levels in relation to the social dynamics of deforestation within different ecological and historical contexts. The alternative courses of action open to households, communities, national governments and organizations in order better to confront deforestation problems have apparently not been examined analytically and comparatively.

At the farm operating unit level, competitive, supplementary and complementary relationships of 'social forestry' or 'agro-forestry' receive scant attention in most of the literature. Alternative national and international policies are frequently proposed, but with little analysis of what social forces are capable of bringing them about. The constraints and opportunities imposed by an unstable world system are seldom explicitly taken into account when addressing local and national policy alternatives for dealing with deforestation and its socio-economic impacts.

The primary purpose of this paper is to identify UNRISD's research priorities in studying the social dynamics of deforestation. Such an analysis necessarily implies a review of the major issues suggested by a preliminary and extremely incomplete review of the voluminous literature in this field. This review has been informed by the Institute's experiences in research into the dynamics of social change in other areas, and by consultations with various specialists. It assumes that scholars who have devoted years or lifetimes to the study of environmental problems, or to their solutions, have already unearthed a great deal of information about deforestation and have identified many of the principal issues.

This brief review of the issues concludes that UNRISD could make a useful additional contribution to the ongoing debate about deforestation and its consequences. The Institute's initial research will concentrate on the social dynamics of deforestation at local levels in a few developing countries. Local level situations analysed will be selected to represent broader deforestation processes, ecological

contexts, historical settings and socio-economic structures encountered in wider regions. The local level research will focus on the complex interactions among deforestation processes, the associated changes in livelihoods of different social groups and their individual and collective responses to these changes, corporate interests, and public policies and programmes. Special emphasis will be placed on analysis of alternatives being proposed by different groups, individuals and institutions to ameliorate the negative socio-economic and ecological impacts of deforestation and to use forests more productively on a sustainable basis for the benefit of local people and others.

This approach implies much more than mere local level research. The social dynamics of deforestation at local levels, and the possibilities of changing them for the better, have to be analysed within broader sub-national, national, regional and world contexts. These broader systems largely determine the possibilities and constraints for improving resource use faced by individual households and communities. The research will have to take national and international systems and processes explicitly into account in order to suggest what changes may be possible in policies and institutions so that they become more supportive of sustainable and equitable use of forest-based life-support systems.

Brazil, Central America, Nepal and Tanzania have been selected for detailed case studies within the broader regional context of the Amazon basin, Meso-America and the Caribbean, the Himalayas and SADCC (Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference) respectively. In addition, there will be 6 to 10 studies dealing with particular themes which cut across several countries and regions such as property régimes and land tenure systems, national development strategies and their impacts on deforestation, the recent experiences of 'debt for nature swaps' and the frequently contradictory impacts of creating national parks and forest reserves. The results of these studies, together with a global overview report prepared by UNRISD, will be submitted to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to be held in Brazil.

The central issue is not how to stop deforestation but how to control it in order to meet social goals on a more equitable and sustainable basis. It is how humankind in general, and national and local societies in particular, can best balance the competing and

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