

Certified nonsense

Nearly 25 years ago, a few environmental NGOs and logging companies launched a bold, green idea. Why not set up an organization that could enforce tough standards for sustainable harvesting of forests? Sounds like a plan. But does it work? **CHRIS LANG** reports.



Ugandan cattle herder Lawrence Kamonyo and his wife, flanked by rows of pine trees planted by the German company Global Woods. The wood is certified but Kamonyo lost his land and his livelihood.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was formed in 1993 by a group of environmental NGOs, timber companies and traders to promote ‘environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world’s forests’. Today, more than 187 million hectares of forests and tree plantations have been certified under the FSC system. Consumers buy FSC products believing they exclude timber from socially and environmentally damaging forestry operations. But is this really the case?

In 2002, I looked at FSC certification of two teak plantations run by the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) in Thailand. The case study was part of a report by the UK Rainforest Foundation, ‘Trading in Credibility: The myth and reality of the Forest Stewardship Council’. While the FIO’s certification was subsequently withdrawn, the FSC ignored the underlying structural problems.

More than a decade later, those problems remain. One major issue is that certification is voluntary. Another is that the FSC certifies tree plantations and logging in primary forests, despite the impact on local communities and the environment.

But the central conflict of interest is that to vet forestry companies the FSC uses third-party certifying firms – which are paid directly by the forestry company. It is clearly not in the certifying company’s interest to raise too many difficulties; it is in the forestry company’s interest to hire a certifying company with a

reputation of not interpreting FSC standards too strictly.

Critics point out that ‘there are no real consequences for certification bodies for poor performance, and few incentives to do better... It is cheaper to do a poor-quality audit and consultation than a high-quality one.’¹

Simon Counsell, head of Rainforest Foundation UK and an FSC founder, agrees: ‘There are too many cases on record of illegal timber coming through the FSC for it to be able to guarantee that certified timber is not illegal. FSC certification is neither a guarantee of legality, nor of sustainability. Its main purpose now is to help market timber and to prop up companies’ value, rather than protecting forests.’

Since 2006, Simon and I have run FSC-Watch, a website highlighting abuses and infractions under the FSC system. In that time we’ve featured dozens of examples of serious breakdowns in the certification process.

Two recent cases shed light on the FSC’s shortcomings.

Uganda: German pine trees

For the past 14 years, a German company, Global Woods, has been planting pine trees in the Kikonda Forest Reserve, 200 kilometres northwest of Kampala. The company claims the plantation produces ‘sustainable timber’. Since 2012, its operations have been FSC certified – despite the fact that local farmers were forced aside to make way for the plantation and cattle