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**The FAO's Use of Fear and Forestry as Tools of Neoliberal Economics**

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## **The FAO's Use of Fear and Forestry as Tools of Neoliberal Economics**

H. Burke Green

(Abstract)

In this thesis, I study the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) depiction of West African forests in its *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa*, which attempts to describe all of West Africa's forests simultaneously. The FAO is a large international development agency that produces agricultural and environmental information for individual states and other international agencies, such as the World Bank. The FAO's forestry studies pander to Western fears of environmental degradation, assumptions of African backwardness, and the assumed "rational" behavior of private investors in a free market by depicting West African forests as rapidly, uniformly, and irreparably degrading due to "irrational" resource management. The FAO presents privatization as a natural goal of international development, and requisite for "rational" land use. Unless private investors are given control of forests, the FAO implies, "irrational" deforestation will destroy West African forests. The FAO has thus incorporated Western fears about the environment into their neoliberal economic agenda.

Academics have challenged the FAO's description of West African forests and have found that, in many cases, the FAO's attempts to provide generalizations and recommendations over large regions do not adequately reflect the economic and geographical diversity of the region. Current academic literature challenges the representation of West Africa, and the environmental discourse of international development. I find that even critics of environmental discourse do not adequately challenge the underlying neoliberal assumptions that motivate the FAO. I propose that critics must further distance themselves from the assumptions inherent to international development by incorporating economic philosophy into their critique.

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## Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recounts the story of West African forests in the form of a crisis narrative: in the beginning, the forest provided enormous benefits to the poor, but now the forests are disappearing and as a consequence the poor will suffer in the future. This narrative appears repeatedly throughout FAO forestry documents. Here is an example:

Traditionally, the forest has played an important survival role in most African countries. The social and economic benefits derived from the forest are enormous, yet the rate of deforestation and land degradation within the past two decades in some countries in the continent makes one wonder whether rational use and sustainable management considerations ever take the center stage when decisions to exploit these rich natural resources are being considered.<sup>1</sup>

This crisis narrative implies blame for environmental ills by indicating that someone is acting irrationally. Although the FAO does not indicate who, it looks like everyone in Africa is degrading the forests through irrational use and unsustainable management. This narrative, along with the embedded label of “irrational” applied to Africans, indicates that some sort of intervention is necessary. Some outside agency must teach “irrational” Africans how to manage their forests for their own good! The quotation mentions “rational use and sustainable management,” but does not say specifically what those things mean. Because the FAO does not ascribe any particular actor to forest management, one might guess that the FAO does not know who is irrationally mismanaging this resource, or even what rational behavior would look like. Adding insult to injury, many academics have published work since the mid-1990’s indicating

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<sup>1</sup> FAO. “Synthesis Report.” *Sustainable Forest Management Programme in African ACP Countries*. (Accra: FAO, 2003), 6.

that deforestation may not be as widespread a problem in Africa as the FAO has claimed for the past thirty years. This quotation, then, although it fits well into popular American conceptions about Africa, may not accurately represent real circumstances. This crisis narrative may represent the FAO's use of fear to promote its idiosyncratic version of neoliberal economics: the decentralization and privatization of control over West Africa's forests.

The FAO creates forestry narratives and data that the World Bank, individual state governments, and even academics reproduce. Crisis narratives are stories “with a beginning, a middle, and an end (or premises and conclusions, when cast in the form of an argument)... [D]evelopment narratives tell scenarios not so much about what should happen as about what will happen – according to their tellers – if the events or positions are carried out as described.”<sup>2</sup> The most obviously powerful institutions, state governments and multinational lending organizations, adopt the FAO's description of a deforestation crisis in West Africa as a tool to legitimate their policies and lending requirements. By participating in an institutional-scale dialogue on environmental topics in West Africa, the FAO is contributing to what I, and many other authors working within environmental discourse analysis, call an environmental discourse about West Africa. The FAO's forestry narratives describe a place where once Eden-like forests covered the land, but because of irrational land use and mismanagement, economically useful forests are disappearing at alarming rates. Unless someone stops forest mismanagement, the region, and potentially the world, will suffer. FAO data and narratives fit neatly into what are considered acceptable ideas about West Africa, and serve to legitimate other aspects of international development. It is, therefore, an integral part of the environmental discourse that permeates international development.

The FAO's importance within environmental discourse stems not from active lending and policy formation, but from its role as an advisor to the World Bank and individual states. For example, the World Bank requires National Environmental Action Plans from member nations in order to receive lending. Individual states use the FAO's data to formulate and carry out these plans. The FAO has actively fostered the belief that it is a natural repository for much of the world's environmental and agricultural information. The FAO's voice in this discourse maintains that deforestation is a problem everywhere in West Africa (although worse in some areas than others), and that forest management (primarily access control) policies everywhere should reflect this problem. The FAO's predictions for West Africa's forests are gloomy at best. According to the FAO, the region will face forest product shortages in the future, with even the best policies in place. The FAO presents deforestation and land degradation as the rule, and any "success stories" as exceptions.

To a certain extent, the FAO does not need to justify presenting a pessimistic, homogeneous view of West Africa because it is simply recreating the world according to the expectations of the popular media and policy makers in America and Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> It uses popular orientalist (i.e., Western-produced power-knowledge discourses of Asia and Africa) conceptions of West Africa and often unfounded colonial forestry information and traditions that have been passed down as "inherited wisdom" within international development to create an image of West Africa that is palatable to Westerners. The idea of a "Dark Continent" still exists within Western popular culture, policy, and lending institutions, and so the FAO's pessimistic view of West African forests simply plays into Western conceptions of Africa as a perpetually

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<sup>2</sup> E. Roe. "'Development narratives' or making the best of blueprint development," *World Development*. Vol. 19, No. 4 (1991): 288. Cited in: Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, "Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa," (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996): 7.

<sup>3</sup> As a clarification, I use the "the West" and "Western" as shorthand for Western Europe and the United States.

imperiled continent, impotent in the face of famine, disease, and war. From a reading of these FAO texts, one would think that West Africans naturally and timelessly suffer from universally dismal (and deteriorating) living conditions. These reports fulfill the expectations of the World Bank, the FAO, and Western states-in depicting West Africa as a suffering, backwards place in need of modernization and economic liberation.

### **FAO forestry as an orientalizing discourse**

It is easiest to think of FAO forestry reports about Africa in terms of an orientalist discourse: it is a body of knowledge that is created through (Western-backed) power relationships, re-created and legitimated in multiple institutions, and that, at the end of the day, impacts African power structures. The FAO's orientalist discourse depicts West Africa as a region with rapidly deteriorating resources. The discourse cites various alleged causes for deforestation, but according to the growing body of academic literature that studies this discourse, it generally blames the poor as either victims or villains, either as an impoverished (and growing) population depleting its already limited resources, or alternatively as villains practicing "slash and burn" agriculture. Western economic interests use environmental discourse as a weapon in a struggle for control over land and resources. The World Bank has responded to popular Western concerns about the global environment and has forced other development institutions to follow suit. The FAO has obeyed by creating forestry "synthesis reports" which advise countries and the World Bank on the state of the world's forests.

Because this thesis is a study of an outside agency's (FAO) attempt to represent a particular group (West Africans), Edward Said's notion of orientalism, which is to say claims to speak for or with other cultures, is an important idea to engage. Said's argument rests on the

idea that Western Europeans and Americans perceive themselves as essentially different from the rest of the world, and that they reify this difference through colonial and neocolonial power-knowledge structures.<sup>4</sup> Colonial anthropologists established the persistent dichotomous Western perceptions of other cultures, e.g. developed (West) / underdeveloped (Other) or traditional (Other) / modern (West).<sup>5</sup> Europe's colonial domination of Africa allowed it to define the initial terms of study, and this continues today through major lending institutions, the popular media, and Western public policy makers. I argue that FAO forestry is a form of orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, and follows a similar progression. First, FAO forestry is an example of Western fears that are reproduced "scientifically." Western forestry within international development has created a scientifically, institutionally backed representation of West African forests. Then that image is repeated in many ways (in the media, in FAO reports intended to inform policy makers and international donor institutions). Finally, the West foists its understanding of West Africa back on less economically powerful West African states in the form of recommendations, National Environmental Action Plans (as required by the World Bank), etc.

Orientalism's roots may lie within colonial power structures and scholarly disciplines (e.g. anthropology, botany, and other knowledge creating institutions), but the representation of others through epistemological institutions continues today, and I use the FAO as an example. The FAO represents West African forests to the rest of the world and generally limits the voice (and place of power) it gives to the "traditional." This is, as V.Y. Mudimbe describes it, an "epistemological ethnocentrism; namely, the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 4.

learned from ‘them’ unless it is already ‘ours’ or comes from ‘us.’”<sup>6</sup> This works beautifully to describe the FAO’s *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa*, a synthetic report that attempts to describe all of West Africa’s forests. The FAO employs people from the individual countries included in the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* report to write smaller, contributing reports in terms given by the FAO. These foresters may live in the countries they study, but the ideas, along with the conversation, belong to the FAO.

According to academic writers Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns environmental discourse about Africa today is based largely on “inherited wisdom” that uses many British and French colonial assumptions and data to perpetuate the image of a backwards continent in danger of irreparably degrading its natural resources. These and other academics writing within the corpus of literature that informs my work critique the claims and authority of the FAO’s Forestry Department,<sup>7</sup> and forestry within environmental discourse in general. They focus on the claims made by foresters and economists working within the World Bank and FAO. Whether consciously or not, they are fighting the imagery of a “Dark Continent” through more optimistic images of Africa.

While following the trail of these academic critics, I began studying FAO documents. I found that the 2003 *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, in particular, actually used forestry data orienting statements, narratives, and homogenizing imagery as instruments to promote privatization, which is to say, the idea that a growing market (on a macro-scale) benefits everyone. Through the arguments advanced in their corpus of literature focusing on forestry, academic critics have launched a critical study of the FAO’s intellectual framework as evidenced

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<sup>6</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> The FAO has several departments: Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, which are managed by a General Committee. Each department meets every two years with reports and recommendations for the General Committee. See FAO Website, FAO, (2006): [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org).

by their forestry department. Instead of examining the forestry of the FAO, as many academics have done, I study its economic philosophy, and the ways that this philosophy seems to silently drive its representation of West Africa – through forestry. This thesis, then, is a study of the historical and contemporary intersection of neoliberal economic ideas (that privatization and a free market will help everyone through the market and protect the environment by promoting rational, capitalist behavior) and forests within the FAO.

I limit my study to West Africa because academics have challenged Western forestry within environmental discourse in West Africa specifically, and because academics and the FAO alike claim that forests are essential to the financial and nutritional wellbeing of rural West Africans. Others have studied the idea of environmental issues throughout Africa, but academics that study forests and forestry have focused more specifically on West Africa. This region has provided academics like Fairhead, Leach, Bassett, Zueli, Mearns, and several others, with mounting evidence against the claims of international development's environmental discourse. This could be described as a struggle over the authority to describe (or "know") West African forests. My goal is partly to illustrate some aspects of this struggle, but primarily to call attention to areas that academics writing discursive analysis have, thus far, ignored: namely, the economic themes that silently justify many actions within international development.

### **The FAO's justification for intervention**

According to the FAO, forest products are an important source of fuel, raw materials, and nutrition for rural populations throughout West Africa. Senegal may be taken as a case in point. Senegal's dependence upon wood products is lower than that of other West African countries, but still very high. Wood fuel fulfills over 60% of Senegal's energy needs overall and a much

higher percentage in rural settings.<sup>8</sup> The FAO claims that people in the whole of West Africa perceive a decline in wood availability: “Already most rural communities [throughout West Africa] rely on trees outside forests as the foremost source of wood fuel, poles, construction materials, etc.”<sup>9</sup> This is part of another environmental crisis narrative. Once there were plentiful trees nearby, but now people have to travel further and further from cities or villages to obtain wood, and at some point there will be shortages and suffering. These crisis narratives form an image of a uniformly dark and suffering Africa. This discursive device helps the FAO legitimate its claims to other development bodies and states receiving FAO advice concerning environmental issues.<sup>10</sup>

The FAO believes that in order to improve the material conditions of people in West Africa, it must help the Africans preserve their environment as a natural resource, because “reversing the downward spiral of this degradation is essential to any strategy for reducing poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>11</sup> Here, the FAO treats the environment as a resource to help the poor. The FAO describes forests purely as a resource, although at times nominally discussing the value of biodiversity. Although one might think of a discussion of “sustainable development” and rational forest management as environmental in subject, in this thesis I will discuss economics and power as much as (if not more than) forests. I will use FAO forestry as an illustration of the intersection between global popular concern for the environment and Western economic interests.

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<sup>8</sup> Senegal actually uses less wood for fuel than many other West African countries. Jesse Ribot. “Forestry policy and charcoal production in Senegal,” *Energy Policy*, 21 (1993), 561.

<sup>9</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa. Subregional Report – West Africa*, African Development Bank, European Commission, 2003. Page 8.

<sup>10</sup> The FAO’s version of crisis narratives often works in the form of a widening supply gap. There is an underlying assumption (within international development) that a particular region has a “carrying capacity,” and that when this population density is met, the land will no longer be able to support the population.

Beginning in the 1970's, the World Bank took note of popular worldwide concern about the environment, then began to incorporate environmental issues into its policies, and forced other institutions like the FAO to follow suit.<sup>12</sup> Henrik Marcussen argues that the World Bank incorporated environmental issues into the lending process in order to improve its image to the rest of the world.<sup>13</sup> Elaine Hartwick and Richard Peet offer another interpretation of environmental concern within international development. They claim that at this time states were trying to reconcile economic growth through free-market economics (already in place as a powerful philosophy) with environmentalism, which appeared to be “two contradictory political imperatives.”<sup>14</sup> States found it necessary to displace “political power upward away from elected national governments and toward international agreements and nonelected global governance institutions.” In this way, Hartwick and Peet argue, “environmental concern has been ideologically and institutionally incorporated into the global neoliberal hegemony of the late twentieth century.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of individual states forming responsible policy, the economically powerful ones could relegate that responsibility to international agencies while maintaining the right to reject any particular plan. The World Bank's vocal concern for the environment, beginning in the 1970's, may be the result of such national tendencies. During the next few years, the World Bank asked the FAO to publish a series of large-scale reports that would

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<sup>11</sup> World Bank. “Towards Environmentally Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Findings: Africa Region*. 78 (1997), Online. [article on-line]; available from <http://www.fao.org>; Internet; accessed 15 December 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Philippe Le Prestre. *The World Bank and the Environmental Challenge*. (Toronto: Associated Univ. Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Henrik Marcussen. “National Environmental Planning in the Third World: Sustaining the Myths?” *Transdisciplinary Environmental Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 1 (2003), 7. Hartwick and Peet argue that international organizations took on the responsibility of environmental protection to alleviate national guilt for promoting economic growth, which is perceived as mutually exclusive to environmental protection. See: Hartwick and Peet, “Neoliberalism and Nature,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 590, No. 1 (2003), 189.

<sup>14</sup> Hartwick and Peet, “Neoliberalism and Nature: The Case of the WTO,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 590, No. 1, (2003), 188-211

<sup>15</sup> Hartwick and Peet, “Neoliberalism and Nature,” 189.

describe the state of the world's forests. These reports were originally supposed to incorporate environmental concerns, and they nominally do, but are primarily economic in nature.

### **The FAO's version of neoliberalism**

My work departs from the corpus of environmental discourse analysis because, as I read the 2003 FAO *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa*, I did not find some of the tools (described below) of environmental discourse that I expected to see. For example, there were no derogatory labels describing “irrational” people wasting their resources (despite the appearance of these labels within other FAO documents).<sup>16</sup> There is blame for environmental ills within the report, but it is hidden. Instead of illustrating “irrational” behavior, the FAO shows examples of “rational” management and “sustainable use” that all correspond to privatization. Blame is divested from a specific group (the poor) to all non-privatized, capitalist economies. While many academics who contribute to the literature of environmental discourse analysis argue that the FAO and World Bank both blame the poor, actually finding any reference to agency within a selection of three FAO reports (primarily the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* but also the two *Tropical Forest Resource Analysis* reports) has been difficult. One of the main goals of this thesis then, is to find out why the FAO does not blame deforestation on the poor in this report. In fact, the FAO hardly seems to blame anyone at all. Instead, it describes what appears to be a “natural” state of things in West Africa: states are too weak to protect their resources, armed conflict perpetually ravages the land and prevents states from creating effective policies, and there is no economic stability within the region. These three FAO reports, which are intended to advise state policy makers and other international development organizations on

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<sup>16</sup> Not within the report-proper. Asst. Director General El-Lakany used “irrational” to vaguely describe all of West Africa in the Foreword.

forest management, hide the FAO's neoliberal economic agenda behind a distinct *lack* of blame in their description of West African deforestation.

The FAO does not hide its economic philosophy. On the contrary, the FAO has advertised the less idealistically charged portions of its economic philosophy with great success, by promoting increased production and consumption of agricultural goods to as wide a market as possible, claiming that this will increase overall nutrition. That was the motivation for founding the FAO, the belief that better nutrition would promote peace. However, the method that the FAO promotes is primarily privatization. Roe describes international development's push to privatize in his article "Development Narratives." He argues that privatization persists in development economics not because it protects the environment and increases profits (it does neither), but because it is an easy solution with a lot of momentum. Emery Roe cites several cases where the World Bank has forced privatization upon various agricultural groups (farmers, herders, and the rural poor), and where the resulting privatization has actually hurt both the environment and profits.<sup>17</sup>

The FAO discusses "success stories," "failures," "threats," "production rates," and "opportunities" for West African forest management. In this thesis, I describe an agenda to promote certain aspects of neoliberal economics, including privatization, embedded within these FAO discussions. Elaine Hartwick and Richard Peet describe neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism sees markets as optimally efficient means of organizing economies. State intervention, especially in social-democratic forms, disturbs the natural tendency for competition, specialization, and trade to generate economic growth. So neoliberal economic policies favor an outward-oriented, export economy, organized entirely

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<sup>17</sup> E. Roe. "'Development narratives' or making the best of blueprint development," *World Development*. Vol. 19, No. 4 (1991): 289.

through markets, along with privatization, trade liberalization, and limited state budget deficits.<sup>18</sup>

From a neoliberal economic view, markets have agency because they promote rational behavior. As long as the government does not interfere with business, neoliberalism argues, people will act rationally and efficiently in the name of profit, and to the benefit of all. In the case of West African forest-based production, this would mean that private industry should manage forests.

It is important to note that the FAO never actually says that control over West Africa's public resources (e.g., those of Senegal and of several other West African countries where forests are public land) should be privatized. Instead, the FAO creates imagery and narratives that depict a region that is simply failing to manage its natural resources. The FAO describes state governments as too weak and inefficient to effectively manage their forests in light of the many "challenges" they face: war, famine, economic instability, drought, and any number of large-scale calamities, while presenting "success stories" that all depend directly on private economic interests. The pessimistic narratives, data, and imagery, when read alongside the FAO's "success stories," all paint a picture of a region that can only be saved from inevitable crisis through privatization of national forests. Also, the FAO's version of neoliberalism is different from that of the mainstream because it has not promoted free trade internationally, but only within individual states. "The FAO," according to Noam Chomsky, "is warning 'developing countries' to reverse the [international free trade] policies imposed on them by the 'Washington consensus,' policies that have had a disastrous impact on much of the world, while proving a great boon to subsidized agribusiness."<sup>19</sup> It only promotes free market economics within

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<sup>18</sup> Elaine Hartwick and Richard Peet. "Neoliberalism and Nature: The Case of the WTO," in *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Eds Pearson, Heston, and Fernando. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 189.

<sup>19</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, (New York: Seven Stories, 1999), 71.

countries. Simply advocating an economic framework is not a terribly bad thing. The FAO, however, is promoting its economic agenda through fear and its position within environmental discourse.

### **FAO “synthesis reports” within environmental discourse**

The FAO has created a series of three “synthesis reports” that study the forests of many countries simultaneously over the last thirty years. These reports, (the two *Tropical Forestry Outlook Study* reports from 1982 and 1990 and the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* from 2003) vary in their scope. The two earlier reports summarized forestry in tropical countries throughout the whole world. The last report focuses on only Africa, and has five subregional reports describing different areas. In this thesis I focus on the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa*. In order to create these reports, the FAO collaborated with state forestry departments, who wrote national forestry reports, which the FAO then compiled and synthesized into a summary of West Africa forests. The reports, therefore, are syntheses of many national-level reports describing forest product production and consumption. Or, when national level reports were not available, FAO “experts” met to analyze satellite imagery and make estimates. The most recent report for West Africa, the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: sub-regional report, West Africa* was published in 2003. Non-FAO foresters who faithfully use FAO reports to repeat FAO data, narratives, and imagery within academia (like Allen, Barnes, Mather, and Needle, who are discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis), heralded the 2003 report as more comprehensive and reputable than the earlier two. The *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* reports of 1982 and 1990 attempted to include all tropical countries on a country by country basis. While the FAO ascribes nominal importance to environmental issues involving

forests (such as biodiversity and watershed management), the reports focus primarily on production and consumption. The 2003 report portrays West Africa as a region suffering severe and universal deforestation. I focus on the 2003 *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, which is the newest of the reports and which the four foresters mentioned previously describe as much more reliable than the previous two reports.

The FAO presents itself as an authoritative repository of information regarding forests in large regions and attempts to situate itself as a powerful institution within international development's environmental discourse. Its reports are meant to advise states and other international agencies (largely the World Bank). The FAO's 2003 *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa* generalizes over a very large region to create a generalized and pessimistic view of West African forests. It represents West African forests to the West (and even to West African policy makers) in Western terms and attempts to recreate Western ideas about West Africa within West Africa.

The FAO, while attempting to incorporate local West African ideas into environmental discourse, may have unwittingly silenced the most important (because they are the most vulnerable) voices of all: the poor. According to Jesse Ribot, international development and states have systematically excluded the voices of the poor by forming relationships with powerful local elites, who may have been in positions of authority before colonialism, but whose positions were reinforced by European colonial leaders to facilitate order and control.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, even the notion that "locals" represent their particular area is complicated by the fact that those who give voice to "local" concerns may not actually represent the majority of people who live there, and these voices may simply shadow colonial power structures.

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<sup>20</sup> Jesse Ribot, "Decentralisation, Participation and Accountability in Sahelian Forestry: Legal Instruments of Political-Administrative Control," *Africa*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (1999), 23-65.

FAO forestry provides an example of how using a dichotomous view of traditional (Africa) versus modern (the UN, FAO, and World Bank—in short, the West) can silence certain voices and have real economic and political consequences. In his essay on orientalism as it applies to literary criticism Paulin Hountondji argues that Western universities have reserved for themselves the right to theorize, “while Africans are confined to the gathering of raw information. Africa provides materials (like palm oil or literary texts), which European institutes process into finished commodities (like Palmolive soap or works of criticism of African literature).”<sup>21</sup> FAO forestry provides a case in point of producing the finished product, where West African countries produce the raw products. West Africa produces forests, people, cultures, and markets, and the FAO produces “synthesis reports” that describe them.

### **Environmental discourse analysis**

Academic literature incorporates FAO data in different ways, depending on the authors’ willingness to accept international development’s claims and according to the level at which the academic authors engage their disciplines’ methodology and theoretical backing. The corpus of scholarly studies that I cite is not intended to summarize all academic opinions of the FAO. The disciplines of sociology, anthropology, geography, and environmental studies are too varied. The studies I have chosen present some cases where academics have challenged or adopted FAO data, depending upon their connection to development and their theoretical engagement of the role that science and technology play in society and politics. It has become very clear to me that some academics do actively engage both the political implications of science and technology, and political theory (such as that of Michel Foucault) that can inform their work. Here I review

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<sup>21</sup> Paulin Hountondji, “Reprendre,” in V. Y. Mudimbe, ed., *The Surreptitious Speech: “Présence Africaine” and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, forthcoming. As cited in: Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans*, (Chicago: U.

works by Fairhead and Leach, Bassett and Zueli, Leach and Mearns, Wood, and Ribot as representative of the corpus of environmental discourse analysis.

Academics who critique environmental claims within international development use the idea of discourse to frame their studies. Leach and Mearns summarize some of the mechanics of environmental discourse, and describe how (potentially erroneous) ideas are perpetuated as “received wisdom.” “By received wisdom as applied in African environmental change and policy, then, we mean an idea or set of ideas sustained through labeling, commonly represented in the form of a narrative, and grounded in a specific cultural policy paradigm.”<sup>22</sup> Labels and narratives are major focus points for academics who study environmental discourse.

Wood describes labeling as a powerful tool used by international development agencies and states to promote environmental discourse. “Labeling” refers to defining groups of people according to a particular characteristic. Although labeling may not always appear in its most violent, derogatory form (for example, “irrational” or “wasteful,” which are terms that establish very clear derogatory tones), it does establish a particular way of seeing, and defining, groups of people. “Labels are put on ‘target groups’ as passive objects of policy (e.g. ‘the landless’, ‘sharecroppers’, ‘women’), rather than active subjects with projects and agendas of their own.”<sup>23</sup> Labels define people and attempt to identify their interests. The danger inherent to labeling is that it implies some essential characteristic as a natural trait, which is then used to represent a group of people. Wood finds that: “Labels misrepresent or more deliberately falsify the situation and role of the labelled. In that sense labels...in effect reveal the relationship of power

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of Chicago, 1990), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Leach and Mearns, “Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa,” 8.

<sup>23</sup> Leach and Mearns, “Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa,” *The Lie of the Land*. Eds. Leach and Mearns. (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996): 7.

between the giver and the bearer of a label.”<sup>24</sup> Wood argues that labels are a discursive tool, and should be analyzed as such, for insight into power relationships.

Roe describes environmental crisis narratives as another major tool used by international development agencies, which facilitate cooperation between international development and states. The other authors discussed in this section (see below) use crisis narratives (along with labels) as signposts for unbalanced power relationships. Roe describes how crisis narratives work, and then describes how they are used to motivate policy within international development. In “‘Development Narratives’ or making the best of blueprint development,” Roe describes several cases where old narratives, despite their dubious truth-value, are somehow perpetuated within international development. Roe’s conclusion is that, because of the persistence and legitimating power of incorrect narratives, we cannot simply ask policy makers to dismiss incorrect narratives. Instead, social scientists (or “local” Africans, Latin Americans, etc.) must present new narratives that are simultaneously simple and predictive.<sup>25</sup>

Fairhead and Leach challenge the simplified view of West African forests created by the World Bank and the FAO. The authors study a well-defined region within West Africa (their region spans several countries but only in a narrow strip) and find that the rate of deforestation in this region is much lower than international development agencies (particularly, but not exclusively, the FAO), and the particular countries, had reported. The original estimates, produced both within the individual countries (usually with the help of the FAO) and by various international development agencies (including the FAO), all used FAO data and French and

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<sup>24</sup> Geof Wood, Ed. *Labelling in Development Policy*. (London: Sage, 1985): 11. Cited in: Leach and Mearns, “Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa,” 7.

<sup>25</sup> E. Roe, “Development narratives’ or making the best of blueprint development,” *World Development*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1991): 290. Roe also describes the World Bank’s push for privatization, despite the absolute failure of privatization to solve problems in many different situations, indicating that the FAO is not alone in its quest to privatize resources.

British colonial reports. Fairhead and Leach argue that the original estimates for deforestation rates in West Africa were much too high, and were the result of an environmental discourse based upon faulty narratives and erroneous data. The authors argue that environmental agencies like the FAO must incorporate history and anthropology in their methods in order to create a more realistic interpretation of West African forests.<sup>26</sup>

Bassett and Zuéli challenge the view promoted by the FAO, World Bank, and even the government of Cote d'Ivoire, that deforestation is a homogeneously region-wide problem in West Africa. In their article "Environmental Discourses and the Ivorian Savannah," the authors first establish that FAO data created deforestation imagery, which the state of Cote d'Ivoire reproduced in the form of a public awareness campaign and forestry policy. Then the authors argued many farmers in Cote d'Ivoire do not perceive deforestation problems. Bassett and Zueli create their own data that corroborates the views of local farmers, and that challenges the accepted view that all of West Africa suffers from rapid deforestation. Instead, they find that many farmers and herders believe that there are actually more trees in the present than they remember in the past. The authors are, in effect, creating a counter narrative. Like Fairhead and Leach, they perform interdisciplinary research based on surveys, small group meetings with farmers, aerial photograph analysis, GIS mapping, and vegetation transects to give voice (albeit in Western modes) to local farmers and herders. By illustrating a discrepancy between the FAO's universalized imagery of West African forests and dissenting opinions of local farmers combined with more localized data, they challenge the persistent view, within international development's environmental discourse, that Africa is plagued by universal environmental

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<sup>26</sup> James Fairhead and Melissa Leach. *Reframing Deforestation: Global Analysis and Local Reality, Studies in West Africa*. (New York : Routledge, 1998).

degradation.<sup>27</sup> In effect, they challenge the orientalizing discourse in the West that portrays Africa as a “Dark Continent” by showing that Africans can, contrary to FAO (and even Ivorian!) expectations, manage their natural resources.

Environmental discourse analysis is a literature that, so far, has focused primarily on the discourse’s legitimizing tools: the data, narratives, and claims of organizations like the FAO and World Bank. Many of its authors have not critiqued the economics of neoliberalism that underscores international development.<sup>28</sup> All of the authors who have influenced my own view use critical theory to inform their own work and to challenge prevailing discourse in fashions that correspond to their particular areas of expertise. These academics, who critique environmental discourse, are also critiquing the West’s negative imagery of Africa. By questioning Western power-knowledge systems that define West Africa in strictly Western terms, these authors are helping to do away with the Eurocentric intellectual elitism that Western Europe and the United States have long employed in order to relegate African thought to the periphery and to define Africa as traditional and primitive.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas J. Bassett and Koli Bi Zueli. “Environmental Discourses and the Ivorian Savannah.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 90, No. 1 (2000), 67-95.

<sup>28</sup> A notable exception is Roe who, in his article “Development Narratives,” discusses the role of the “tragedy of the commons” narrative that is used to justify privatization in World Bank schemes.

<sup>29</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

## **Organization of chapters**

In this thesis, I examine the FAO's involvement in international development's environmental discourse. I argue that the FAO panders to, and promotes, western environmental fears by promoting a homogenized and overly homogenized version of West Africa's forests within its texts. At no point in this thesis do I argue that deforestation is not taking place in some places, or even that West Africa experiences deforestation on average. Rather, I argue that the FAO's generalizing analysis of West African forestry, along with potentially homogenizing policy recommendations reflecting alleged region-wide trends, contribute to an environmental discourse wherein Westerners claim a stake in West African forests.

In Chapter 1, I will examine how the FAO has attempted to establish itself as a guardian of health and the environment within international development by looking at the history of the FAO's creation and some of the more important changes that it has undergone. I illustrate how the FAO has used fear, since its inception, to create, and reinforce, its position of power within environmental discourse. Then, in Chapter 2, I analyze one FAO document in particular (the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa*). Here, I study how the FAO has used several of the techniques that academics criticize to promote its economic agenda. These include crisis narratives, lack of agency, labels, and "success stories," all of which the FAO combines to form an image of West Africa as suffering and backwards, and that can only be saved by private industry. Finally, in Chapter 3, I study how specific academic writers have either employed or criticized the FAO's data on and depiction of West Africa, depending upon their level of theoretical engagement, and upon their ability to distance themselves from international development's neoliberal ideology.

## **Chapter 1: The FAO and Western Fears**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) functions largely as an advisory body, providing countries with technical assistance in agriculture and marketing, but it also functions as a relief organization in agricultural emergencies. Other development agencies, such as the World Bank, US AID, etc., consider the FAO an authoritative source of information for several agricultural fields, including farming, fisheries, and forestry. During the last years of World War II, the Allied states formed the FAO in response to a combination of fears and hopes, including the fears of another World War and of worldwide starvation, and the hope that technology and cooperation could prevent these catastrophes. While these fears and hopes were justified, the immediate actions of the United Nations member nations, who feared a loss of national sovereignty and hoped that science and technology alone could solve these problems, severely limited the scope of this organization's power, preventing the FAO from succeeding in its initial goal of reshaping the global agricultural economy to promote equitable access to food. This chapter will illustrate several cases where American and Western European anxieties have shaped the course of the FAO, especially with respect to the environment and natural resources in West Africa. The FAO has continually, although not always unreasonably, used fear as its major legitimization.

### **1.1 Pre-History**

For several years prior to the first international meeting to establish the FAO, the Australian agricultural economist Frank McDougall<sup>30</sup> marshaled support for his ideas concerning globalized (but regulated) trade, nutrition, and increased production. Slowly shifting his

arguments from imperial protectionism to freer trade during a period of economic stagnation for Australian farmers, McDougall sought to protect Australian agricultural production while opening the door to global markets and potentially increased profits for Australian farmers.<sup>31</sup> Tied into McDougall's new economic philosophy was his belief that a substantial portion of the world was undernourished and that his ideas would increase the availability and diversity of food to the people of the world.<sup>32</sup> McDougall proclaimed a need for an international organization that could control the world's food production and trade in order to manage the world's food supplies in an equitable fashion. McDougall envisioned an international organization to control the global food market. While he argued that an international body would help everyone in the world, he also knew that Australia, which had a predominantly agrarian economy, would benefit specifically from an increase in international trade. It was thus simultaneously an act of altruism and of national self-interest. He did not foresee, however, how arduously rich, industrialized countries would protect their own agricultural producers and national sovereignty, even at the cost of continuing widespread malnutrition and starvation in the rest of the world.

While there are many definitions of development, the declared goals of the FAO have revolved around increased agricultural, forestry, and fishery production and marketing. From its inception, the FAO held that increased production and consumption on macro-economic scales would improve peoples' material standard of living.<sup>33</sup> This is a common theme in development theory, and both "developing countries" and development agencies have used it to sell the idea of development to the West. Development in this sense means creating markets for international trade. In an earlier example, China convinced the West to invest in Chinese railroads and

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<sup>30</sup> Frank McDougall was an Australian agricultural economist.

<sup>31</sup> John O'Brien. "F.L. McDougall and the Origins of the FAO." *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. Vol. 46, No. 2 (2000): 172.

<sup>32</sup> O'Brien, "F.L. McDougall and the Origins of the FAO." 170.

infrastructure, which would open Chinese markets to America's surplus production following the First World War.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, McDougall wished to increase Australian farmers' capacity to consume foreign-produced goods by increasing their production and providing foreign markets. He was openly interested in promoting Australian agriculture and helping farmers in a changing economic environment. Finding international markets for farmers in a largely agrarian country would raise the material standard of living of a large portion of the population.

McDougall's proposal for a Food and Agriculture Organization also represented changes in how the world viewed the profitability of colonies during the 1940's and 1950's. Frederick Cooper argues that the French and British were both analyzing their colonial holdings in terms of costs and benefits during this period and finding that, in many cases, it was simply not cost-effective to maintain economic and social development programs within a colonial setting.<sup>35</sup> Cooper argues that the contemporary idea of development first took hold within the British and French colonial systems as a means of increasing the productivity of, and control over, colonies. Because of labor problems, the expense of industrializing and modernizing projects, and administrative duties, however, the costs of maintaining a colony outweighed the benefits accrued in terms of profit, prestige, and power. Furthermore, instead of improving imperial control over colonies, development actually convinced the colonial elites that self-rule was necessary. In many cases colonial development did not have clearly defined scientific, rational goals and outputs, indicating to British and French administrators that colonies were headed towards anarchy and chaos. In the end, both the British and French gave up the bulk of their

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<sup>33</sup> O'Brien, "F.L. McDougall and the Origins of the FAO." 170.

<sup>34</sup> H. W. Arndt. *Economic Development: the history of an idea*. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1987): 16.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Cooper, "Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backwards Africans, and the Development Concept." In *International Development and the Social Sciences*. Eds. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard. (Berkeley : University of California Press, c1997): 78.

colonies and the latter would have to be responsible for more of their own economic and social development, while remaining closely connected to the British and French economies.<sup>36</sup>

That is similar to FAO actions throughout this period: giving advice, often to newly independent African governments on how to produce more and better exports.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the FAO could be said to play the role of a neo-colonial power. It did not have the massive expenses of actually administering colonial governments, but it attempted to improve exports of agricultural products through marketing and technical services. By investing in the FAO, an industrialized country was effectively investing in the exporting and importing power of ex-colonies all over the world. From the 1940's through the 1960's, then, we should expect to see increased production, increased exports, and increased international marketing of local farmers' goods as a major goal – and we do. In fact, the theme of increasing farmers' production and consumption remains prevalent in FAO literature.

Is this inherently bad? Frank McDougall's rationale for the FAO's focus on international markets was based on a desire to help farmers increase productivity, deliver wider varieties of foods to people, and increase farmers' purchasing power. McDougall saw the potential for promoting equity among different types and sizes of economies in an international organization. It would help the populations of the world receive a more nourishing, diverse diet and improve the lot of Australian farmers. The organization would accomplish this by controlling the international food markets, thus ensuring reciprocal international markets for agricultural countries' produce and for industrialized countries' goods. It would have the power to ensure equitable distribution of food throughout the world.

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<sup>36</sup> Cooper, "Modernizing Bureaucrats:" 79.

<sup>37</sup> The FAO also worked extensively in Eastern Europe just following World War 2.

## 1.2 Marketing despite fears

While McDougall wanted to “[marry] health and agriculture”<sup>38</sup> rhetorically, his ideas actually linked national self-interest and agriculture. National self-interest continues to play a role in the FAO’s policies because wealthy member nations fear hurting their own agricultural production. One of the first major proposals by FAO member countries, which the wealthy countries immediately rejected, would have formed a World Food Board, giving the FAO the ability to set worldwide price maxima and minima on internationally traded food. It would also have given the FAO the ability to control food surpluses and emergency stockpiles. The United Nations immediately rejected this plan in favor of one that would help countries market surpluses, should they want to.<sup>39</sup> This initial limitation placed on the Food and Agriculture Organization meant that there would be no unified, worldwide front against hunger. Instead there would be a worldwide, unified marketing network. The FAO continues to focus on marketing, production, and consumption. The FAO works within international development ideology, believing that improving markets will help everyone.

There was a fundamental conflict between those who wanted to help ensure the nutritional equity of the world and those who wanted to protect their own nation’s interests and sovereignty. Ross Talbot explains:

The politics of national self-interest as practiced by the member states of FAO at a low (secondary or tertiary) power level is the most authoritative explanation of policy-making in FAO... The North – meaning primarily the member-nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – is one dominant coalition in FAO,

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<sup>38</sup> O’Brien, “F.L. McDougall and the Origins of the FAO,” 170. This phrase is attributed to McDougall in many documents involving the history of philosophy of FAO. It purportedly gives insight into his beliefs that improved agricultural production will improve the overall health of the people of the world.

while the South – meaning primarily the member-nations of the Group of 77 – functions as a challenging, influential coalition in opposition.<sup>40</sup>

The vision of a World Food Board was the ultimate expression of the FAO’s challenge to national sovereignty but, as Talbot notes, the FAO had to settle for the “authority to ‘circulate recommendations’” because of wealthy nations’ fears concerning national sovereignty.<sup>41</sup>

The fear of war, however, was such a powerful driving force that creating some sort of organization was unavoidable. In this regard, Franklin Roosevelt is one of the singularly most important people in the inception of the FAO because of his desire to create the United Nations and promote peace. When Frank McDougall met with Roosevelt in 1942, Roosevelt appeared primarily concerned with the name and structure of the United Nations. McDougall’s proposal that the United Nations’ first task be “something perhaps not too controversial...such as an international agency for food and agriculture” was practically an aside.<sup>42</sup> According to R.J. Hammond, Great Britain’s official World War II historian: “The President appears to have been prompted by the thought that food would be a suitable subject for initiating United Nations collaboration, rather than by any consideration of food problems as being especially urgent.”<sup>43</sup>

The fears of starvation and loss of sovereignty flow throughout FAO history and are punctuated by specific events that may warrant those fears. The droughts, insect plagues and subsequent famines affecting Africa during the 1970’s, for example, showed that large-scale starvation merits real consideration and planning. The refusal of countries like the United States to pay annual FAO membership fees unless their demands were met, along with their lobbying

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<sup>39</sup> Sergio Marchisio and Antonietta Di Blase. *The Food and Agriculture Organization*. (Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1991): 17.

<sup>40</sup> Ross Talbot, *The Four Food Agencies in Rome*. (Ames: Iowa State, 1990): 15-16.

<sup>41</sup> Talbot, *The Four Food Agencies in Rome*: 19.

<sup>42</sup> O’Brien, “F.L. McDougall and the Origins of the FAO,” 174

<sup>43</sup> Michel Cépède, “FAO –The First Twenty-Five years,” in Food and Agriculture Organization, *General Commemorative Conference* (Rome: FAO, 1970), p. D3. As cited in Talbot, *The Four Food Agencies*, 17-18.

for weighted voting shows their fear of loss of sovereignty. Promoting equitable access to the world's food would have fundamentally challenged national sovereignty. It would require that an organization control the world's surpluses.

The fear of another World War was a fundamental driving force in the creation of both the FAO and the United Nations, and was perceived as a prerequisite for peace. This belief guided the early history of the FAO. The rhetoric in FAO speeches illustrates the FAO's (and the West's) belief that a "war on hunger" would help prevent another World War. Dodd, Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization in 1951, is quoted as saying in a speech:

Nations at last seem to be preparing for a genuinely large-scale war against want. I am confident that such a war can be won, and that it is a necessary part of the counter-strategy to prevent another war of nations against nations, which none can really win... I believe this movement which FAO helped to foster can effectively counteract the forces that work to undermine freedom and threaten world peace.<sup>44</sup>

Early FAO leaders portrayed direct links between hunger and war, nutrition and peace. Gove Hambidge, in *The Story of FAO*, describes a speech he gave while serving as Executive Secretary of the Interim Commission (wherein representatives from Allied countries planned the fundamental organization of the FAO), just prior to the Quebec Conference (where country representatives gathered to formally join the FAO and ratify its constitution): "We have just finished a world war. In about a month from now another one will begin. It too will be waged by the United Nations, standing together... It will pit nation against a dictator who is the enemy of men in every country. His name is hunger."<sup>45</sup> The idea and imagery of war were deeply

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<sup>44</sup> Gove Hambidge. *The Story of FAO*. (New York: Van Nostrand, 1955). Page: 87

<sup>45</sup> Hambidge. *The Story of FAO*. 86.

rooted in the creation of the FAO, and represent an enormously important driving fear of Western countries.

Beginning in the 1970's, the environment became a major concern within development agencies. Their environmental concerns included the fear of forest degradation and desertification. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, according to Philippe LePrestre, indicated to international development agencies the widespread support for environmental issues, and gave the FAO yet another popular fear to which to pander. The World Bank, which funds development programs through the FAO and also incorporates much FAO research into its own work, showed a markedly increased interest in environmental issues during the next few decades. Because of the World Bank's importance in the lending process, other international organizations have followed their lead.<sup>46</sup> Environmental issues like deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion were driving fears of the FAO and its member nations. Increasingly, fear of global climate change, along with the ongoing interest in production and consumption, has caused the FAO to advocate environmental sustainability in their rhetoric.

The new rhetoric resulted from new popular fears, spurred by the World Bank's stated interest in protecting the global environment. The FAO soon began studying the world's environment. It has published a series of reports on deforestation. As explained in an article in the FAO's online forestry journal *Unasylva*,

Since the first United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm (1972), forests in general, and tropical forests in particular, have been receiving increasing attention from the world community. A high point was reached at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (1992) which

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<sup>46</sup> Le Prestre, Philippe. *The World Bank and the Environmental Challenge*. (Toronto: Associated Univ. Press, 1989): 21.

devoted a full chapter of its Agenda 21 (entitled “Combating deforestation”) to forest conservation and development and adopted the “non-legally binding, authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests.”<sup>47</sup>

The FAO’s concern about the world’s forests largely stemmed from international concern, and the FAO perceived its role within forestry as the logical repository of knowledge and technical expertise. The FAO is an advisor to the countries of the world. Over the next three decades, the FAO created three large-scale studies in order to assess the world’s forests. I examine these reports (two *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* reports, one from the early 1980’s and the other 1990, but primarily the *Forestry Outlook Study For Africa* from 2003) throughout this thesis. The fear of war is a minor issue in these reports; although it is argued to cause forest degradation, it is not a driving force in FAO forestry writing during this period. These contemporary reports primarily focus on economics. Perhaps the FAO has given up on promoting peace.

### **1.3 Channeling Western Funding**

The FAO’s budgeting system allows its wealthy member nations to exert an enormous amount of influence over its activities. This system safeguards the sovereignty of wealthy nations and leads some to call the FAO a charity institution through which particular schemes are funded. The FAO effectively has two budgets. The FAO assesses a Regular Budget from its member nations based on their GDP. This budget typically covers administrative, research, and publishing costs. It also helps cover some collaborative regional programs between countries.

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<sup>47</sup> K.D. Singh. “The Tropical Forest Resource Assessment: Tropical Countries 1990,” *Unasylva* Vol. 44 (1993), Available: [http://www.fao.org/documents/show\\_cdr.asp?url\\_file=/docrep/v0290e/v0290e04.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/docrep/v0290e/v0290e04.htm). Accessed 10

The second, larger source of money is voluntary, covering aid and technical assistance costs. This money comes from the United Nations Development Program, which consists of countries channeling aid to specific recipients, and from other international organizations.<sup>48</sup> The level of funding for both budgets has increased over the years, from a combined total of \$8,361,000 (not adjusted) in the 1946-47 budgets<sup>49</sup> to \$1,564,930,000 in 2006-2007.<sup>50</sup> Member nations (especially with the United States) who want more control over the operation of the FAO through weighted voting have battled within the FAO for weighted voting. These countries have occasionally attempted to coerce the FAO by withholding or delaying payment of the assessed Regular Budget.

Ralph Phillips, who worked on the FAO staff for several decades,<sup>51</sup> describes the changes that the budget underwent from 1946-1981. The earliest FAO work consisted largely of holding meetings where representatives from different countries could discuss common problems like rinderpest,<sup>52</sup> and the preservation and storage of grain. During the first few years the FAO performed studies in many countries to see what future assistance was needed, Phillips writes, “the basis was laid for what was to become FAO’s very large Field Programme.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, in its earliest years, the FAO studied potential areas for future aid, provided counsel to individual nations and groups of nations, and began to create and distribute data around the world. The FAO attempted to establish itself as a repository of scientific agricultural knowledge from its

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April 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Ross Talbot, *The four world food agencies in Rome*. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Phillips, *FAO: its origins, formation, and evolution, 1945-1981*. (Rome: FAO, 1981). Page: 78. The assessed budget for this first session was \$7,500,000 US (not adjusted). See also: FAO. *Report of the Conference of FAO Second Session*. (Copenhagen, Denmark, 2-13 September 1946). Online: [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org). Accessed 8 May 2006

<sup>50</sup> FAO, 33<sup>rd</sup> conference, 2006 online: [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org). Accessed 23 March, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips, *FAO*, foreword

<sup>52</sup> Rinderpest is a disease that kills livestock and has caused widespread famine throughout Africa. See Alfred W. Crosby’s *The Columbian exchange; biological and cultural consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972) for a historical look at the widespread consequences of rinderpest and other diseases in Africa.

inception. The programs that developed later would follow suit, but on a much larger scale. The FAO quickly became a portal for technology and expertise, using its initially very limited budget to send experts to countries throughout the world.

Until the 1970's, the extra-budgetary funding came primarily from international organizations like the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the UN's Fund for Population Activities, and especially the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). During the 1970's, the extra-budgetary funding levels had increased to between \$350 and \$400 million (not adjusted). These funds increasingly came from trust fund contributions for specific countries and from other sources besides the UNDP. Phillips points out that the UNDP continued to increase its funding, but trust fund sources increased much faster, "so that by 1975 the latter funds approximately equaled those available to FAO from UNDP."<sup>54</sup> These extra-budgetary funds provide opportunities for wealthy countries to help less technologically advanced nations selectively.

One might infer several motivations for the increase in extra-budgetary funding as opposed to increasing the assessed budgetary funding. The first possibility is that contributors trusted FAO expertise and wanted to use it to help developing nations. Member nations' policy makers generally regard the FAO as an authority on the fields it studies. A second possibility is that wealthy member nations wanted to channel their funding in ways that allowed them to control their money. The United States has lowered its assessed contributions repeatedly because it wanted weighted voting. In fact, all of these are true, and this is largely how the FAO works. Through struggles early on, the FAO had formed into an organization with technological

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, *FAO*, 70-71.

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, *FAO*, 74.

expertise, through which countries could channel their funding, information, and people. The FAO's current role is the result of the refusal of its founding nations to concede sovereignty.

The FAO follows the lead of external forces, including the World Bank and powerful countries, while its stated goal remains ensuring the availability of food to the world. Wealthy member nations defined its functions according to their hopes and fears, and according to their perception of important issues within development. The FAO maintains underlying themes, however, including the desire to promote technological and educational advancement, in the hope that this will promote better agricultural yields in its poorer member nations.

A cynical student of the FAO might see some of its actions, especially regarding forestry, as neo-colonial. The FAO channels funds according to the wishes of wealthy nations, influences poorer countries' forestry policy according to the scientific and economic philosophies of powerful states, and promotes international marketing. However, as noted in the introduction, the FAO does not promote free trade internationally, but simply encourages increased marketing. The FAO does not have the power to ensure equitable access to food, fuel, or any other forest product. It does, however, provide publications and recommendations, which are often based upon the FAO's fears and its perceptions of global fears.

#### **1.4 Chapter 1 Conclusions: Fear legitimates intervention in West Africa**

Worldwide popular concern over poverty and the global climate has led to foreign intervention in West Africa. The British and French have worried about West African forests and soils since early in their colonial periods. The FAO maintains Western perceptions of environmental problems in West Africa through crisis narratives, which serve as justifications for intervention. As explained by Roe, "crisis narratives are the primary means whereby

development experts and the institutions for which they work claim rights to stewardship over lands and resources they do not own. By generating and appealing to crisis narratives, technical experts and managers assert rights as ‘stakeholders’ in the land and resources they say are under crisis.”<sup>55</sup> A deforestation crisis narrative begins with some assumed natural state represented by “virgin” forests that existed before humans degraded the land, then describes the current degradation of once pristine forests, and finally predicts that the forests will be utterly destroyed or degraded unless someone intervenes. The FAO presents crises throughout its reports and uses the perceived crises to justify intervention. For example, the description of the “Current Situation” of West African forests clearly indicates that the FAO perceives deforestation as a problem:

Forests and woodlands cover only about 72 million ha or 14 percent of the land area of West Africa. Most Sahelian countries have very low forest cover. Owing to a combination of several factors, West Africa is experiencing rapid deforestation, estimated at about 1.2 million ha per year.<sup>56</sup>

In an instance that is very reminiscent of the process at work within Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Bassett and Zueli describe cases in Cote d’Ivoire where the state created public awareness of deforestation through billboards and policy. Generalized worldwide fears motivated forest research that created a homogenized view of West African forests, and eventually came back to actually re-create a (politically) homogenized view of West Africa in a particular location through policy. These national policies were based on the inherited wisdom of international development’s environmental discourse and, as Bassett and Zueli argue, may not

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<sup>55</sup> Roe, E.M. (1995) Except-Africa: postscript to a special section on development narratives. *World Dev.* **24**, 1064 – 1069. As cited in: Ribot, Jesse. “A history of fear: imagining deforestation in the West African dryland forests.” *Global Ecology and Biogeography*. Vol. 8 (1999): 295.

<sup>56</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: xi.

have reflected a real problem at the local level in this area. In this case, the state used FAO and World Bank data and narratives<sup>57</sup> to promote policies that one might argue are unjust. On a local scale, for instance, farmers actually reported perceiving more forestland than in previous times. They do not challenge the word of farmers who report more trees, but focus on the idea that policy would impact land access, and that farmers felt this restriction. The authors' specific example is the loss of herders' mobility through Ivorian policies that restricted herders' access to pasture.<sup>58</sup> This is an example of how FAO data and narratives could actually hurt people through influencing state forest access policies.

Large-scale FAO synthesis reports, like the *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* series and *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, result from increasing fears of environmental degradation. The reports, consisting of data from different countries at different times, attempt to forecast the productive potential for forests. The findings are presented in homogenizing, simplifying terms. For example, the FAO summarizes its forestry findings for tropical countries worldwide:

The annual loss of forest cover by ecological zone were: the tropical rainforests 4.6 million ha (0.6 percent), the moist deciduous forests 6.1 million ha (1.0 percent), the dry and very dry zone forests 2.2 million ha (0.9 percent) and the upland formations 2.5 million ha (1.1 percent).<sup>59</sup>

This citation actually describes very little of use, although it does describe deforestation in scientific terms. The FAO describes zones comprising many countries (or parts of countries), Using ecological zones assumes that, without human interaction, that area's ecosystem would

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<sup>57</sup> Bassett and Zueli focus on the World Bank NEAP's, which are in turn heavily influenced by the FAO.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas J. Bassett and Koli Bi Zueli. "Environmental Discourses and the Ivorian Savannah." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 90, No. 1 (2000): 67-95.

look a different way. It also assumes a certain level of consistency within a particular zone. A humid zone, according to this model, would have a much higher percentage of tree coverage than a very dry zone if humans did not interact with the environment, for example. This summary of the FAO's findings in 1990 actually tells us very little, except that every ecological zone in the tropics is being deforested on average. The FAO's 1990 *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* also describes deforestation according to region: "The annual loss of forest cover by region was: Latin America and Caribbean 7.4 million ha (0.8 percent), Asia and Pacific 3.9 million ha (1.2 percent) and Africa 4.1 million ha (0.7 percent)."<sup>60</sup> This description of tropical forests also tells us very little. It presents data as though it represents a linear change over time, whereas a linear description may not reflect any particular place in time. Linear, global models also tell us little about deforestation on smaller scales. Is deforestation a problem everywhere, or very severe in some places but not a problem at all in others? These reports create an image of the "developing world" destroying its natural resources and potentially impacting the global climate. They maintain the FAO's generalized view of West Africa as an area where forests are perpetually threatened.

The FAO's large-scale "synthesis reports" are problematic because they attempt to influence state policies while creating a homogeneous picture of the world. The FAO presumes that describing the world's forests simultaneously "on average" is worthwhile. The FAO amasses data from different places that many different people created at different times. For example, the *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* briefly describes the hundreds of participants involved in the data's creation. The FAO *Tropical Forestry Resources Assessment* is an assemblage of data from around the world in an attempt to describe the forest resources available

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<sup>59</sup> FAO. *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment: Tropical Countries 1990*. Online: [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org). Accessed 20 April, 2006

to all the tropical countries of the world. In Africa alone, this report compiles information for 36 countries over periods of 28 months. Both reports have the character of puzzles with thousands of pieces. The data are presented in charts, apparently summarizing the state of the world's forests at a particular time. These reports create a homogeneous, pessimistic view of the world's forests and forest product economies: "forests cover only about 72 million ha or 14 percent of the land area of West Africa. Most Sahelian countries have very low forest cover. Owing to a combination of several factors, West Africa is experiencing rapid deforestation, estimated at about 1.2 million ha per year."<sup>61</sup> This is the FAO's view of West African forests: degraded and disappearing almost uniformly across West Africa. The FAO does not actually look at any particular location; it tries to simplistically depict the forests of areas that are too large to have any real uniformity. This enables them to create homogeneously pessimistic images and narratives of the world's forests.

Dubious data that are reinforced by a positivist ideology maintains the FAO's homogenized view of the world's forests. The FAO often works with states to create state-level reports. When these are not available, however, the FAO estimates levels of deforestation and land degradation. In *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment*, the FAO acknowledges that state-produced data are often insufficient or incompatible with other data. In these cases, experts interpret what data does exist and make estimations. The exceptions (which are inconvenient, and which, according to many academics may be more representative than the word "exception" denotes) in the data are glossed over, especially in *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, in such a way as to make the FAO's imagery appear seamless, despite an acknowledged lack of data. The FAO discusses "the region's forests" in general terms, but with frequent specific examples

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<sup>60</sup> FAO. *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment: Tropical Countries 1990*: online.

<sup>61</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 16.

provided as either reinforcement of the norm or exceptions to the rule. For example, this quotation shows a generalization about a large area, punctuated by specific examples to show the severity of deforestation in specific locations and to reinforce the generalization:

Forests in the humid part of West Africa are highly fragmented and degraded. In Ghana, of the 6 million ha considered to be forest, only 1.6 million ha is considered to be “intact closed forest” and the rest is mostly degraded forest. In Nigeria, of the 13.5 million ha described as forest, less than 1 million ha is considered as productive and 2.3 million ha partially productive. In Côte d’Ivoire 2.5 million ha of the humid dense forests is largely degraded.<sup>62</sup>

This exemplifies the FAO’s homogenizing presentation of West Africa to the West through forestry. It fits neatly into the FAO’s role in an orientalizing environmental discourse by maintaining a thoroughly pessimistic view of Africa.

Of course, state governments could possibly benefit from, and even promote, deforestation imagery. A combination of technical expertise, ignored gaps and inconsistencies in data, broad generalizations, and the use of scientific assumptions that have become standard (like the relevance of ecological zones) all work together to help the FAO promote a pessimistic image of rapidly disappearing West African forests. The FAO is recreating and perpetuating the idea of a “Dark Continent.”

In the foreword to the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, Assistant Director-General M. Hosny El-Lakany, of the Forestry Department, presents an excellent example of the homogenizing and oversimplifying views of the FAO regarding forest management:

West Africa has a long history of forest management, in some countries dating back almost a century. However, increasing pressures on forests are undermining the

sustainable production of goods and services in the subregion....Problems like desertification, loss of biological diversity and watershed degradation have become very critical. The increasing pressure on forests and woodlands manifests as rapid deforestation and degradation. At the same time, new opportunities are emerging, depending upon the effectiveness of policy and institutional changes, regional and subregional cooperation and developments in science and technology.<sup>63</sup>

This statement works on multiple levels to impart value to forest management. First, this statement de-politicizes “almost a century” of forest management, stripping historical and political complexity from an area that, until the 1960’s, was defined to outsiders by colonialism. It fails to acknowledge that foresters in West Africa for the majority of the twentieth century worked within colonial power relationships. Those were apparently times when forests were safe. El-Lakany implies that, where once there was sufficient control over forests to protect them, they are now in danger. The FAO repeats environmental discourse’s pessimistic and homogeneous imagery of a quickly deforested West Africa and emphasizes the importance of strong policies and institutions to manage the forests. Significantly, El-Lakany did not say that countries need to strengthen policies and institutions, but to change them. In the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, the FAO advocates decentralization of authority over forests, proposing a shift of power to local governments as part of its economic agenda and its global solution to irrational forest management.

The FAO continuously ties nutrition and economics to forest management and environmental protection, but the FAO also calls for environmental protection for its own sake. “The level of endemism is also high, and some species are facing significant danger of global

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<sup>62</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 5.

<sup>63</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: Foreword.

extinction. The subregion is also important for global bird biodiversity” because migratory birds use West African water systems.<sup>64</sup> The forests must be protected for the sake of these species. Concern for the environment for its own sake is downplayed in the report; the environment is a resource. The idea of the environment is important to the FAO, as evidenced by the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*. The main thrust of FAO environmental concerns is not to protect the environment for its own sake, but for the sake of the people and industries involved.

### **1.5 Chapter 1 Conclusions: legitimization through fear**

The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* does not blame individuals, like the poor, for environmental ills. Instead it blames the inability of states to manage their resources, along with a weak market. A strong market, it is supposed, will support both economic growth and ensure environmental protection. The FAO presents problems as natural and endemic in West Africa. Also problematic is the idea that deforestation is caused by the same problems everywhere in West Africa. The use of exceptional anecdotal evidence in the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* to reinforce the diagnosis of regional problems does not provide enough insight. Any study attempting to cover as much terrain and as many different people as these large synthesis reports is inherently limited in the level of detail it can offer. The problem is not simply a matter of having fine enough resolution that one might “zoom in” on the report to see local conditions and details. The idea of synthesizing is fundamentally limited because it necessarily must generalize over large areas. The FAO’s attempt to influence state policy through a series of generalized reports that promote a homogeneous view of West Africa is troubling. These synthesis reports describe crisis narratives in the form of widening supply gaps that create a sense that intervention is needed. The FAO acts out of public fears, at the same time reinforcing these fears.

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<sup>64</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 13.

Environmental issues have simply replaced the fear of war and starvation as a motivation and legitimization within the FAO's *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*.

## Chapter 2: FAO Forestry, Decentralization, and the Neo-Liberal Agenda

The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* and the *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* reports are synthesis-style publications that are intended to advise state policy makers, international development organizations, and other branches within the FAO on trends in the production and consumption of forest products. The FAO does not have the power to control international markets, but attempts to shape them through recommendations and synthesis reports. In these reports, the FAO gives supposedly interchangeable advice regarding forest and market management strategies to large groups of countries. These large-scale reports thus maintain part of the FAO's original goal of promoting increased production, trade, and consumption. The FAO does not want the peoples of the world to stop using forest products and leave the environment to return to some supposedly "natural"<sup>65</sup> state. Rather, it wants people to practice "rational" and "sustainable" forest management so that forest products can be increasingly incorporated into markets. Discussion of production and consumption in the forestry sector of West African economies constitutes the bulk of the report. As noted at the end of my previous chapter, the motivation behind the FAO's interest in the environment environmental is not to protect the environment for its own sake, but for the sake of the people and industries involved.

The FAO's *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* and the two *Tropical Forest Resource Assessment* reports were, as was mentioned in Chapter 1, created because of external pressure to focus on environmental issues within international development. However, these are not, strictly

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<sup>65</sup> An important clarification regarding terminology is the FAO's definition of "natural" forests: "The adjective 'natural,'" J.P. Lanly and J. Clement explain, "is used only in relation with plantations which can be considered as a purely artificial vegetation. This does not mean at all that there is no human or, more generally, biotic interference. On the contrary, a significant proportion varying with countries of 'natural vegetation' corresponds indeed to degradation stages (after fires, clearings by shifting cultivation, overexploitation for wood, grazing) or reconstitution stages after degradation, or to forests disturbed by logging, with or without management." See: J.P. Lanly and J.

speaking, environmental reports. They are economic studies of forestry and forest-based industries, which regard the environment as a capital asset. Contrary to the critiques of academics that call for more environmental and social data in order to create more humane policy (as will be discussed in Chapter 3), these particular reports were never intended to give detailed analyses of forests in West Africa. Instead, they are macroeconomic reports that are written for state policy makers, and that forecast the productive capabilities and consumption trends of forest products in large regions. In this chapter, I will focus primarily upon the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Sub-Regional Report, West Africa* because it is the most recent and the most limited in geographical scope; it deals with West Africa and was published in 2003.

Academic critics<sup>66</sup> have illustrated the FAO's shortcomings in data gathering methods, the data themselves, the FAO's homogenized (and homogenizing) views, and the FAO's use of crisis narratives to legitimate its claim as a stakeholder in the West African forests. They have not looked at how these shortcomings are tied to the economic philosophy of the FAO in general, and therefore have not challenged the idea of international development. The FAO presents a particular economic philosophy as a solution to forestry and poverty problems in the developing world. The FAO attempts to legitimate its belief that people act rationally within a competitive, capitalist society by presenting crises and fears in the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, and contrasting them with success stories that illustrate examples where people protected the environment because it was profitable. Crisis narratives, along with the promotion of decentralization and privatization all work together in this report to convey the FAO's complicity

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Clement. "Tropical Forest Resources Assessment Project: Part 1 Regional Synthesis." [report online] Rome: FAO, 1981. Accessed 29 March 2006. Available from FAO: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/ad909e/ad909e00.htm>

<sup>66</sup> See Chapter 3 of this thesis, which describes, and critiques academic criticism of FAO practices.

with neo-liberal capitalism. In this chapter I examine forestry as a tool of the FAO to promote its neo-liberal agenda.

## 2.1 An economic report with crisis narratives

The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* incorporates data from 15 countries in West Africa. The FAO attempts to summarize the state of all of West Africa's forests at a particular time in a way that focuses on their productive potential. For example:

[T]here has been an overall decline in the value of forest product exports [in West Africa], especially since 1990. At the same time there has been an increase in the value of imports. This has significantly reduced net export earnings, which registered a notable decline between 1990 and 2000.<sup>67</sup>

The FAO does comment on specific countries, but even then in general terms. For example, exceptions, and those countries that receive more attention, are “countries that are major producers and consumers, whose internal demand tends to be high largely owing to the high population; a typical example is Nigeria.”<sup>68</sup> This type of generalization is repeated throughout the report. The FAO is not concerned with the forests in any particular place. It is concerned with a group of countries' production and consumption trends.<sup>69</sup>

The report provides examples of specific regional markets, like the sawmilling industry, and difficulties they face because of allegedly endemic forest degradation.

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<sup>67</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 12.

<sup>68</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 12.

<sup>69</sup> More detailed information is presented in the form of data. The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* lists country based data concerning the quantities and types of forest products that are both imported and exported. I analyze the text describing the data because, with neither a comparative basis nor an economic background, the data themselves are of little use to this analysis.

Most sawmills are geared to the processing of large logs. However, as most old growth is harvested, there will be increasing reliance on secondary forests and plantations producing small logs. While some sawmills are adapting to the change, several are unable to do so. This will result in lower production.<sup>70</sup>

As unseen forces degrade West African forests, claims the report, the sawmilling industry will have to use different sources and types of wood. Here, the FAO is acting as an economic advisor because it is attempting to help industries adapt to changing market conditions and maintain (or sustain) production. The FAO's language and data are explicitly concerned with production and consumption of wood products. Wood products are important in West Africa (especially to the rural poor), and it is not unreasonable to desire to protect the forests as economic and nutritional resources.

The catchphrase “sustainable development” is ubiquitous in the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*. Although sustainable development may connote environmental concern, it is a strictly economic issue to the FAO, which is concerned with ensuring the continuation of production into the future. Sustainable development in forestry involves matching the production and consumption of forest products, and is portrayed by this report as inherently worthwhile. “West Africa has a long history of forest management, in some countries dating back almost a century. However, increasing pressures on forests are undermining the sustainable production of goods and services in the sub-region...”<sup>71</sup> The FAO portrays sustainable development as necessary, but not sufficient, for improving the economies of developing countries on a macroeconomic scale.

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<sup>70</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 11.

<sup>71</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Foreword*.

Emphasizing its belief in the agency of free markets to help everyone within an economy, the FAO argues that, unless the economies of developing countries improve, even the forests will not be able to help the poor:

Although forestry [planning] will not be able to address the issue of poverty alleviation in a substantial way, it will have to take into account its safety-net function of providing basic-needs goods and income to people who have limited access to other sources of goods and income.<sup>72</sup>

The FAO's solution is to improve national markets on macro-economic scales. The poor are dependent upon forests for nutrition and capital, but forests alone will not significantly help the poor. The FAO continues, showing its belief in the market as a solution to poverty and environmental ills. It is private investment and "other sectors" that will help both the poor and the forests:

...unless other sectors grow and address the problem of poverty, forestry's capacity as a safety net is likely to be undermined, especially since many of forestry's poverty alleviation functions lie in the informal sector and seldom attract any investment by the users or owners of the resource.<sup>73</sup>

The use of the term "other sectors" hints that the FAO's economic philosophy relies upon some vague notion of markets helping everyone involved, including the poor. Without stronger markets and private investment, the report implies, sustainable development is impossible and forests will fail to help the poor.

Forests serve as capital to both industry and the poor. By claiming that West Africa's forests are uniformly deteriorating, the FAO simultaneously depicts West African forest-based

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<sup>72</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 53.

industries and the poor who depend on them as endangered. The FAO treats forestry as an inherently economic terrain, and speaks in the economic terms of profitability and production. The report does mention environmental issues in regional and global terms, noting that forests protect watersheds, promote biodiversity, fight desertification, and may affect the global climate. Even these environmental issues, however, are presented in economic terms: the report claims that biodiversity loss affects the availability of meat,<sup>74</sup> that desertification impacts the regional economy,<sup>75</sup> and that watersheds are important both socially and economically.<sup>76</sup> The FAO creates environmental crisis narratives that use the fear of economic hardship and suffering to create a sense of urgency and to depict itself as a stakeholder in West African forests.

## **2.2 State weakness as a motivation for decentralization**

Generalizing over all of West Africa, the FAO describes drought, armed conflict, AIDS, population growth, and industrialization as factors that limit the extent to which states are able to manage forests. The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* presents deforestation's causes as complex and closely linked, and describes state governments as ineffectual at managing these crises. The FAO portrays states as too weak to protect forests from people and crises throughout the region, and depicts forest management as too complex for state governments because of the manifold interests of diverse stakeholders. The report uses complexity as an excuse for the failures of past efforts, and then argues that forest management is inherently so complex that states will not be able to effectively protect their forests.

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<sup>73</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 53. This also shows a rather Malthusian outlook; the users of the resource are perceived as consumers without any productive function.

<sup>74</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 14.

<sup>75</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 15.

<sup>76</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 15.

The FAO presents these crises as representative of all of West Africa. For example, “An outcome of the absence of a just and widely acceptable process of government is the persistence of wars and internal conflicts, largely stemming from resource use conflicts.”<sup>77</sup> The FAO describes West Africa as a region that is constantly and uniformly plunged into military conflict. Armed conflict and economic conflict over resources reciprocally cause one another. Forests, rivers, and other natural resources are all related to conflict, as is the weakness of state governments:

Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone are involved in conflicts that have destabilized a major part of the subregion, creating refugees and displaced persons. The recent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire clearly demonstrates how latent problems could intensify over time reversing the progress on the economic and social fronts. The impact of these conflicts on forestry includes... social disruption, including the undermining of agriculture and traditional livelihoods, depopulation of disturbed areas, and the impact of internally displaced people and refugees on forests and woodland adjoining refugee settlements and camps.<sup>78</sup>

This picture of West Africa is fairly grim. Are there any countries without armed conflict? Even in countries with no current military conflict, the FAO perceives the very threat as a limit to states' ability to manage forests: “There are also dormant conflicts in countries such as Senegal and Nigeria. The recent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire clearly demonstrates how latent problems could intensify over time reversing the progress on the economic and social fronts.”<sup>79</sup> The FAO presents armed conflict as a perpetual and endemic crisis. The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* paints a hopeless picture; West African states will never be stable or powerful enough to manage their own forests.

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<sup>77</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 20-21.

<sup>78</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 20.

The answer to these FAO fears has been decentralization of authority. Earlier large-scale planning, the FAO claims, did not work because of its inability to account for the vastly complex interactions of governments, people, forests, and markets. The FAO argues that increasingly participatory planning is important because: “existing evidence suggests that these various [large-scale] forestry strategies have not had the desired impact because they did not adequately address the social, economic, institutional, and political arrangements instrumental in the success of such plans at the local, national, regional and international levels.”<sup>80</sup> The FAO uses the terms “decentralization” (of institutional power) and “participation” (of local stakeholders) almost interchangeably. The idea of decentralization appears to be an acknowledgement that large-scale planning failed because of the complexity involved in forest management, production, and consumption.

The FAO’s view of states and international development organizations describes institutions that provide opportunities for private investment in forest products. “It is evident,” the FAO claims, “that several factors outside the forest sector have a critical impact on forests and forestry. It is the collective impact of these factors that will define the path of development of forestry in the subregion.”<sup>81</sup> These factors are largely economic, “including the conversion of forest land to agriculture – cash crops as well as subsistence crops - logging, mining, infrastructure development and fire.”<sup>82</sup> “Several factors” glosses over all the businesses and people, in both urban and rural settings, who depend on forests for capital. It also simplifies

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<sup>79</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 21

<sup>80</sup> Bekele. “Synthesis Report: Experience of Implementing National Forestry Programmes in Gabon, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.” FAO: Italy, 1998. (Online: Accessed 30 March 2006)  
[http://www.fao.org/documents/show\\_cdr.asp?url\\_file=/docrep/005/ac915e/ac915e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/docrep/005/ac915e/ac915e00.htm)

<sup>81</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*. 17.

<sup>82</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*. 4.

complex market and political forces. The FAO limits the level of complexity with which it looks at markets.

### **2.3 Blurring decentralization and privatization**

The FAO presents both decentralization and privatization of control over forests as inherently worthwhile and promotes these ideas simultaneously. The line between the ideas of decentralization and privatization of control over forests blurs in the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*. The two separate ideas are treated as mutually requisite. Decentralization involves divesting control over forests to localized governments, and privatization involves relinquishing control over forests to businesses and individuals. “There are more signs of the delegation of administrative responsibilities to provincial, district and local bodies. Increased economic efficiency and the encouragement of local involvement in decision making are the most important objectives of decentralization.”<sup>83</sup> Businesses, villagers, and farmers with economic interests are more effective agents of forest management than governments, within the FAO’s intellectual framework. Encouraging local involvement could be described as both allowing and forcing communities to take care of their own resources, and represents the FAO’s efforts to promote rational forest use. Both businesses and “local communities<sup>84</sup> [that] take the initiative” to manage forests and forest products represent private interests acting out of profit, and are the only rational actors that fit within the FAO’s underlying economic philosophy.

The FAO provides exceptions to the rule of deforestation. These all require decentralized authority over forests, which then provides opportunity for private investment and management. It describes a “success story,” where profitability drives resource management:

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<sup>83</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 13.

In the Sahel, the first implementation of community management took place under the Forestry Land-Use and Planning Project in the highly degraded Guesselbodi Forest close to Niamey in the Niger. A cooperative incorporating the nine villages surrounding the forest was set up in 1986 and a management plan was developed and discussed with representatives of the cooperative. Under agreed conditions for restoration work and guarding activities, the village was offered a share in the sales of fuelwood as well as access to the forest for grazing and the collection of forest products.<sup>85</sup>

Note that the FAO does not actually mention any improvement in the level of forest degradation. Success stories and areas where there is not a deforestation problem are treated as exceptions to the rule in the *Forest Outlook Study for Africa*: “Although there are some success stories, a large extent of the woodlands in the Sahel remains an open-access resource, with customary systems becoming increasingly inadequate to deal with the emerging problems.”<sup>86</sup> The success stories that the FAO describes are the result of private enterprise. It portrays governments as too weak to manage forests. Decentralization puts more localized actors in charge of resources and, in the eyes of the FAO, is the first step to protecting forests by allowing people with capital to invest in, and control, forest resources. Decentralization blurs with privatization and the neo-liberal agenda.

The call for decentralization is really a call for privatization of forest resources: “Many past efforts have been top-down, and this has necessitated resource mobilization at the national level to support all the activities. The system did not provide adequate opportunities for the

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<sup>84</sup> In some cases in West Africa, including Senegal, these are “Communautés Rurales,” which function largely as a corporation.

<sup>85</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 6.

<sup>86</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 5.

initiatives of the private sector and for tapping the savings of large numbers of people.”<sup>87</sup> This quotation clarifies that large-scale forest management schemes have been unsuccessful, and will continue to be unsuccessful, because of the complexity involved in forest management. It goes further, however, and connects decentralization to privatization. The FAO believes that only private interests, which are made possible by decentralization, can effectively protect forest resources. The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* promotes private control as indispensable to effective sustainable forest management.

Privatization takes on an important role in FAO texts, which promote it as a solution to forest misuse. The FAO advocates giving individuals or groups with financial interests in forests long-term control over their resources, arguing that economic self-interest will promote rational and sustainable forest use.

In areas where tenure conditions are uncertain or where the [non-ligneous] products are seen as less important (as in the case of most government owned forests, where management is largely focused on wood production), there is considerable degradation and resource depletion. Domestication efforts largely depend on commercial potential.<sup>88</sup>

Once again we see the FAO’s portrayal of governments as weak, while profitability as motivation will ensure the rational management of forests. In another example individual farmers, rather than communities, provide an exception to the rule of deforestation: “There are, however, indications of increasing private sector involvement in tree growing, often on a small scale in woodlots and home gardens and especially in the humid zone, where growth and profitability are perceived to be higher [sic] – particularly on account of the growing urban

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<sup>87</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 58.

<sup>88</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 13.

demand.”<sup>89</sup> The FAO believes that privatization will help people capitalize on the profitability of forest products to simultaneously increase production and protect trees.

The overall framework of FAO forestry about West Africa is that deforestation is an economic problem everywhere in the region, and that turning forests over to private, capitalist interests provides the only reasonable solution. The FAO depicts government’s role in forests as that of a protector of capital; states must protect forest resources for the people and businesses involved. While it supports privatization domestically, the FAO’s liberalizing philosophy does not extend to international trade:

Despite the efforts of the countries to add value to products, they have not been able to diversify into products such as paper for a variety of reasons. Increasingly, the scope for investment in such value-added items looks less promising on account of [international] trade liberalization and the small size of the markets.<sup>90</sup>

West African countries have failed to protect their industries, in this case, from the industries of other countries. This is yet another example of the FAO’s belief that state governments are too weak to protect forests.

## **2.4 Chapter 2 Conclusions: the neo-liberal agenda does not help the poor**

The FAO’s “success stories,” presented in their reports as exceptional cases where forests are managed rationally, all involve management by private interests. The version of capitalism that the FAO presents only allows for rational behavior in instances where people act for profit. It links rationality and profit, by insinuating that rational behavior within a capitalist system will protect the forests. According to this logic, the best form of government, therefore, is one that

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<sup>89</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 19.

<sup>90</sup> FAO. *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*: 12.

protects and promotes industry. The FAO's economic philosophy includes the idea that improvements in large-scale markets (those "other sectors" that add complexity to the forestry issue) will invariably help everyone, including the poor. Private investment is only possible, the FAO argues, through decentralization.

Ribot<sup>91</sup> and Moore and Thiongane<sup>92</sup> challenge the policy of decentralization within international development, however, and argue that the decentralization process, as it is enacted in West Africa, does not actually empower locals. The authors argue that decentralization, as it is currently practiced, does not actually result in popular power, but rather in reinforcement of centralized state authority. Local representation, according to Ribot and Moore and Thiongane, is not local representation in the sense that those in power locally are accountable to their subjects. Instead, local representatives answer to the central authorities that control the decentralization process (the World Bank and state governments), and in turn reinforce centralized power. Ribot argues that downward accountability is the only acceptable solution because it encourages popular control. By giving off the illusion of divesting power to local populations, development organizations themselves can potentially increase their influence over how people in close proximity to forests interact with their environment.

Differences in perception of the environment between local actors further problematize upwardly accountable forest management. Robbins explores different groups' different definitions of and interactions with the environment: "Foresters, it is often supposed, see forests quite differently than the farmers who live at the forest edge and the indigenous people who

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<sup>91</sup> Jesse Ribot. "Decentralisation, Participation and Accountability in Sahelian Forestry: Legal Instruments of Political-Administrative Control." *Africa*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (1999): 23-65.

<sup>92</sup> Keith Moore and Soukeye Thiongane. "Rural Senegalese Perceptions of Environmental Quality." *Journal of Technology Transfer*. Vol. 25 (2000): 307-317.

dwell within.”<sup>93</sup> Robbins goes on to argue that despite knowing of this complexity, states do not actually exclude local views, but rather adopt some of them through relationships with powerful locals. However, the version of “decentralization” that appears in World Bank and FAO literature is complicated because “locals” speaking for the people may not be acting in everyone’s best interests. As Ribot states, “to view chiefs as indigenous, ‘traditional,’ local, and accountable representatives of rural populations is to assume too much.”<sup>94</sup> Assuming that a particular chief, or even a local social structure, is “traditional” may overlook historic relationships between colonial governments who favored powerful locals, for example. Therefore simply assuming that local power structures represent the people living there could overlook complex social structures that actually prevent their representation of economically vulnerable locals.

Although the FAO claims that local, democratic representation is essential to empowering indigenous peoples to better protect and utilize their environments through decentralization, academics claim that the FAO has essentially failed thus far. Instead of looking at any number of very small-scale problems and then proposing unifying theoretical and practical approaches, the FAO appears to have described another problem as region-wide and with a geographically interchangeable solution. The FAO argues that, because weak governments exist everywhere and cannot protect their forests, decentralization and privatization together are a generic, interchangeable solution. The FAO co-opts the concept of local, democratic representation, and gives it the form of privatization. Local representation in the FAO sense does not mean democratic (or participatory) processes are involved: it means privatization.

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Robbins. “The practical politics of knowing: State environmental knowledge and local political economy.” *Economic Geography*. Vol. 76, No. 2 (April, 2000): 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ribot, Jesse. “Decentralization, Participation and Accountability in Sahelian Forestry: Legal Instruments of Political-Administrative Control.” *Africa*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (1999): 37.

### **Chapter 3: Pushing the Academic Critique of FAO Forestry**

The FAO represents developing countries to the rest of the world through data and narratives, which then appear in the documents of disciplines and institutions, including universities and other international development organizations and lending institutions. The foundations and current status of international development are too complex in origin to come from any particular social class (and so a strictly Marxist interpretation may not work), although there is definitely a hegemonic group claiming to represent American and Western European economic interests. The ideas of development have found their way into so many fields that it is easier to think in terms of an environmental discourse within international development, even if that discourse functions primarily to bolster the credibility of an economic agenda. This discourse relies upon a positivist mindset that if data is produced within post-Enlightenment science (and vaguely reproducible) it is reliable. Academia represents one part of this discourse, which incorporates many institutions. Here, I critique how specific academics' (working in fields including forestry, anthropology, sociology, and economics) critique or incorporate international development's environmental discourse as it relates specifically to forestry. I argue that, while there are some academics who inform their work with critical theory in order to challenge environmental discourse, even many of the best critics do not distance themselves enough from the claims of development organizations like the FAO. These academics do not reject the discourse's narrative style, used to describe very large regions, and take much of the capitalist economic philosophy within international development for granted.

A large part of each writer's critique centers on the reliability of the FAO's forestry data. Whether the data are correct or not, they become one of myriad symbols reinforcing the general

ideas of science and international development. The data become texts representing the “natural” state of things, including the necessity of international development. In this case, the data help the FAO convey its belief that deforestation is a worldwide and universal problem. The sorts of studies that the FAO undertakes are enormously large-scale in scope. The two primary sets of FAO reports used in this thesis (the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa: Subregional Report, West Africa* and the two *Tropical Forest Resources Assessment*: 1981, 1990) present largely economic data representing all of West Africa and are compiled from many state reports.

This type of data is applicable to linear models that represent worldwide deforestation’s causes and effects through mathematical models. These recreate a homogenized vision of the world’s forests. Even if a mathematical model gives a good estimate of the world’s (or a large region’s) forests on a macro-scale, it still has the fundamental flaw of overgeneralization. Much of the academic literature argues that more and better data (including data acquired through interdisciplinary methods on varying geographic scales) are required to make more accurate macro-scale models. Despite this, some academics still produce mathematical models with admittedly suspect data. In these models, foresters use FAO data to re-create a pessimistic and homogeneous view of developing countries everywhere. This ominous view of developing countries [spelling] justifies the need for development through a moral call to help the hungry and poor of the world and to protect the global environment.<sup>95</sup> The data are symbols of the need for foreign intervention in forestry.

This chapter shows that academics can interact with FAO data, narratives, and policy recommendations in different ways, but still work within the environmental discourse of

international development. Some, like Allen and Barnes, employ FAO information, use global data to make universalizing statements and homogenizing models, and subsequently reproduce the FAO's image of the world. Others challenge the data within small conversations that have important implications. They produce localized data within well-defined regions that do not fit into the FAO's standard framework, often showing that deforestation is not a significant problem in specific locations. Whether or not deforestation is actually a significant problem in West Africa is not the point here; in many places it probably is. The point is that academics have either adopted data unquestioningly in order to reproduce the FAO's homogeneous view of the world, or have performed new studies that show the complexity of an issue like deforestation. Whether authors use FAO data or argue that more data are needed for humane policy, however, they are still working within the discourse of international environmental development.

### **3.1 Uncritical academic writing**

First I will illustrate some of the ways that the Food and Agriculture Organization's data and ideas are repeated and used in academic literature uncritically. I am looking specifically at two articles that are prime examples of uncritical, fetishistic work. These authors essentially let data and methodology think for them in order to produce mathematical models representing global deforestation. The first, entitled "The Causes of Deforestation in Developing Countries," was published in 1985. This article illustrates academics using FAO data to make linear mathematical models. Not every article will receive such close examination, but as the worst and most extreme case this article exemplifies academics reproducing (possibly erroneous) FAO data in order to reinforce and legitimate the dark imagery of Africa that pervades environmental

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<sup>95</sup> This describes part of the system described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (New York, Pantheon: 1978), where scholars create a homogeneous and foreign view of huge regions, which is then passed down through literature into the general population and public policy. This analysis would only reflect a small part of that system.

discourse. The authors are, in effect, promoting the image of a “Dark Continent.” It is interesting to note that, at the time of publication, one of the article’s authors, Julia Allen, worked in both Geography and Environmental Studies departments at UC Santa Barbara and the other, Douglas Barnes, worked at the World Bank. These authors, and their ideas, are linked to both academia and international development, showing just how closely different disciplines can work together within discourse to reinforce one another, and the apparent rationality of the discourse itself.

Allen and Barnes attempt to use FAO data in an academic setting; they produce a linear model of deforestation based upon global forestry and economic data. The authors compare several sets of data, including the FAO’s *Production Yearbook*, and eventually decide that the FAO data are “the most comprehensive” because they treat more types of forests.<sup>96</sup> This article has two distinct problems. The first is a logical problem involving the reproducibility of data within positivist science. The authors claim that, if the FAO’s data are strongly dissimilar to data produced in other studies (they compare the FAO *Yearbook* data to the U.S. Interagency Task Force on Tropical Forests<sup>97</sup> and the National Academy of Sciences’ data),<sup>98</sup> then the reliability and value of the data decrease. There were discrepancies between the data sets, however, and “There [was] no obvious systematic explanation for the disagreement between the FAO and the other two sources of deforestation estimates.”<sup>99</sup> They established that discrepancies would debase their data, found differences (but could not find a reason for them), and then used the data

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<sup>96</sup> Julia C. Allen; Douglas F. Barnes. “The Causes of Deforestation in Developing Countries.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 75, No. 2 (1985): 167.

<sup>97</sup> **U.S. Interagency Task Force on Tropical Forests**. 1980. The world’s tropical forests: A policy, strategy and program for the United States. Report to the President. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. As cited in: Allen and Barnes. “The Causes of Deforestation.” 184.

<sup>98</sup> **Myers, N.** 1980. *Conversion of tropical moist forests*. A report prepared for the Committee on Research Priorities on Tropical Biology of the National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences. As cited in: Allen and Barnes. “The Causes of Deforestation.” 183.

<sup>99</sup> Allen and Barnes. “The Causes of Deforestation.” 170.

anyway:<sup>100</sup> “For more than two-thirds of the countries in the sample, the FAO *Yearbook*’s implicit definition of deforestation as a loss of forestland seems to capture the relative severity of losses in closed forest areas.” The authors totally disregarded the importance that they had claimed lay in testing the data against other sources. They then included the outliers in the data pool and claimed that the *Yearbook* data was strong enough to stand on its own: “The disagreement does not seem to warrant either the exclusion of some countries or the use of more than one source of deforestation estimates in the analysis of causes of deforestation.” Finally, reflecting the authors’ desire to describe problems associated with forests across a homogenized world, they describe their motivation to use the *Yearbook* data: “Because the FAO *Production Yearbook* data are available for more countries and for a longer time period than are the FAO/UNEP data, the FAO *Yearbook* data were used in this analysis.”<sup>101</sup> Because the authors had determined beforehand to create a model of global deforestation (they actually produced a model to represent all of the forests in the entire world), they did not realize that they were using bad logic and data by their own standards.

The article is an academic reinforcement of the FAO’s role in environmental discourse. The Allen and Barnes article is an example of fetishistic academic writing that blindly reinforces the FAO’s role in the environmental discourse of international development. Determined to create a global model, the authors quite literally let their methods and the FAO’s data think for them; the authors picked a method and then looked for numbers to grind. The reproduction of FAO data in an academic setting reinforces the validity of FAO claims. Fortunately, the authors use FAO data so recklessly as to make their claims appear unfounded. The article does show, however, that the FAO’s data and narratives lend themselves readily to incorporation into global,

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<sup>100</sup> Although the FAO *Yearbook* had more data than other samples, the authors excluded data to make the set look more reasonable and then included it again afterwards to draw conclusions.

linear models that then generalize about the world's forests. In this case, the model found "that deforestation...is significantly related to population growth, agricultural expansion, and the past rate of wood production in a sample of 28 countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America."<sup>102</sup> Their model reinforces the FAO's role in international development's environmental discourse by using its ideas in another discipline and even repeating several of the FAO's ideas.

Another article that uses FAO data to make models of the entire world's forests, is Mather and Needle's "The Relationships of Population and Forest Trends."<sup>103</sup> These authors argue that, while there are serious problems with the FAO's data (especially the two *Tropical Forest Resources Analysis* reports), there is no reason to simply dismiss the idea that a relationship between population growth and deforestation exists. After reviewing different approaches to bad FAO data, they describe potential ways to react. The first is to reject any sort of analysis of "macro-scale relationship between population and forest trends" because the data is simply not sufficient. "This strategy of despair, however, is unhelpful, especially since assertions continue to be made in verbal, qualitative terms about the nature of the relationship." In other words, because the topic is currently discussed on a worldwide scale, we must continue to do so. This hints at a desire to stay within a particular discipline's accepted methodologies.

A second possible reaction is to analyze the relationship solely on the basis of countries for which data are regarded as reliable. The obvious weakness in this approach is that such countries may be atypical of the world as a whole, and hence that generalization is impossible.

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<sup>101</sup> Allen and Barnes. "Causes of Deforestation." 170.

<sup>102</sup> Allen and Barnes, "Causes of Deforestation." 180.

<sup>103</sup> A.S. Mather, C.L. Needle. "The Relationships of Population and Forest Trends." *The Geographical Journal*. Vol. 166, No. 1 (2000): 2-13.

The authors reject this idea because they believe that there is inherent value to global summaries of the world's forests through generalizations. Another idea of Mather and Needle's is "to undertake a form of sensitivity analysis, whereby a relationship is re-examined using an alternative dataset. An apparent relationship that is purely a function of one dataset is obviously less robust than one that survives substitution of datasets." By comparing data sets and looking for similarities, therefore, one can assess the value of the data. As long as the data come in a form that is relatively reproducible, they represent science and are inherently valuable.

Mather and Needle then use FAO data to construct linear models of the world's forests deforestation and population trends. They examine 111 countries and find that: "Over the long sweep of history, forests have obviously retreated as the human population has grown, and at the global scale an inverse relationship continues to operate."<sup>104</sup> What does their global model tell us? Does it tell us that humans cause deforestation everywhere uniformly? No. It actually tells us very little of value. What it succeeds in doing, instead, is to promote a homogeneous view of the world's forests and people. It fetishizes mathematical models and reproducible data. It also promotes the idea that large-scale synthesis are useful; they help us make global models.

C. Wright Mills describes the potential for research that goes beyond disciplinary limitations in *The Sociological Imagination*. There he argues that scholars should focus on creating politically and academically aware texts that are limited by neither discipline nor scale. Scholars should attempt to link the minute and large scale. This would involve linking the local and global by looking at how the minute details of life are representative of some larger framework.<sup>105</sup> These four authors could use critical theory to engage their disciplines. Although

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<sup>104</sup> Mather and Needle, "The Relationships of Population and Forest Trends," 10.

<sup>105</sup> C Wright Mills. *The Sociological Imagination*. (New York: Oxford, 1959).

their models may be correct globally or even on a large scale, they give absolutely no insight into forests on an experientially or politically meaningful scale.

These four authors, although attempting to analyze various sources of data within an academic setting, failed to distance themselves from the object of their critique. Their articles lie within environmental discourse of international development, which appears in the form of deforestation and degradation narratives. That is not to say that a good report would refute this; a good article would be theoretically informed and extricate itself from the trap of focusing on models. The creation of a model as the pre-determined goal of a study foregoes looking critically at the subject matter, discipline, and methods. These authors were bound up in the methodology and ideology of development and positivist science, and were therefore unable to effectively critique the data. The authors were severely limited in how they saw and used FAO data. Blind acceptance of information from the FAO (or anywhere) without meaningful critique reinforces that information's ability both to interpret and to represent the world for us. These two articles exemplify fetishistic writing; methodology, deforestation data, and models think for the authors.

### **3.2 Critical theory's challenge to academics**

Critical theory is the study of the oppressive mechanisms of the world. By studying and writing texts that engage critical theory, scholars are engaging in the political act of studying power. Several critical theorists have discussed the role that symbols play in the reinforcement of the normalcy of activities. Roland Barthes described how symbols work on multiple semiotic levels in his book *Mythologies*. Barthes studied bourgeois ideology and its promulgation in everyday actions. His examples revolved around French life and politics, but one could look

analogously at the symbols produced within development discourse that create an aura of rationality. For example, one might look at data showing less worldwide forest coverage today than in the past. On the surface, this indicates that the developing world's forests are declining. The secondary message tells us to do something: perhaps international organizations (like the World Bank or FAO) should teach the locals to manage their natural resources.<sup>106</sup> Going further, the uncritical appearance of FAO data and narratives in other disciplines could be read as a symbol reinforcing the FAO's perceived role in international development and environmental discourse. One of the main goals within *Fast Capitalism*, by Ben Agger, is to expose the political power of everyday objects and actions. Agger argues that when these objects are read correctly as political texts, they will be unmasked as the "nucleic units of an everyday life only entrenching its domination by the imperatives of capital, patriarchy, and racism."<sup>107</sup> I suggest that FAO data functions as such an object, which must be read as a political text.

Certain scholars of environmental and social studies engage critical theory in their work. Different disciplinary techniques can work to unmask various aspects of power, but Agger feels that they should work together. Fortunately, several scholars have critiqued FAO forestry in general with interdisciplinary approaches. These are the best critiques available. These authors also approach the data on multiple scales; that is to say, they look at very localized data and explore its ramifications to the overall picture of deforestation. Instead of gloomy, homogeneous predictions for the world, they present inconvenient facts that demand scrutiny of FAO and academic claims regarding the world's forests.

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<sup>106</sup> It is important to note that simply because the data creates a negative image, it is not worthless or non-objective. Similarly, it is not worthless because it is laden with ideology. In Foucault's words, "Ideology is not exclusive of scientificity. Few discourses have given so much place to ideology as clinical discourse or that of political economy: this is not a sufficiently good reason to treat the totality of their statements as being undermined by error, contradiction, and a lack of objectivity." In other words, it does not work to argue that because people make science, it is meaningless and non-objective. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. Smith, Sheridan. (New York: Pantheon, 1972): 186.

Scholars critiquing FAO publications and data attempt to prevent the naturalization of the FAO's image of the world, and the data producing it from becoming "everyday texts" that evade critique because of their acceptance and proximity in everyday life. Agger's *Fast Capitalism* grapples with the meanings of everyday texts and the need to distance oneself from one's object of critique by holding true to utopian ideals and using critical theory to meaningfully examine the world. Unfortunately, Agger argues, this is impossible within a fractured and disciplined academic setting. Writers such as Michel Foucault are rare; where would they work? Foucault's craftsmanship would not fit within many individual academic disciplines. Instead, Agger argues, academics have labeled themselves "Marxists" and "Feminists," have the appropriate books on their shelves, and do not actually engage their political and theoretical approaches. This may be true of Allen and Barnes and Mather and Needle, but several scholars studied in this chapter actually do engage critical theory. They present well-crafted scholarship despite working within a discourse. The authors discussed throughout the rest of this chapter explore various political aspects of FAO data and narratives.

Within academic literature, there are a few key criticisms of FAO practices, including accusations of dubious data, top-down management, and a technocratic approach that depoliticizes information. I explore these critiques using representative articles and books, which generally approach the topic thematically instead of according to disciplines, and some of which even devote serious energy to promoting interdisciplinary work. While academics use many methods similar to those of the FAO, including satellite imagery analysis and tree sampling, all of the critical writing treats much smaller geographic areas and are peer reviewed (neither of which holds for FAO publications). I therefore take for granted that data which does not readily fit into the mold of international development is more reliable. A caveat here, of

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<sup>107</sup> Ben Agger. *Fast Capitalism*. (Urbana: U of Illinois, 1989): 29

course, is that the authors may have carefully selected regions that go against the norm. These academics critiquing the FAO distance themselves to varying degrees from the subject of their critique, and all take on the idea of power by examining different ways that people assume control over forest resources. One of the key political agents in forest control struggles is the application of blame for environmental ills. Many of these more critical authors are writing in defense of different groups. For example, James Fairhead, Melissa Leach, and Jesse Ribot, all defend the poor to some extent. Adger et al. argue against blaming growing populations uniformly. Thomas J. Bassett and Koli Bi Zuéli argue that “shifting cultivation” may not be as bad for forests as is commonly believed. In the next section, I discuss academic critiques of FAO data and narratives applying blame. The authors presented in this section do not fetishize data and methods, but still do not extricate themselves from discourse. Instead, they provide an alternative, more humane, avenue for environmental discourse.

### **3.3 The current limits of critique in the social sciences**

Dubious data could be the most damning evidence against the FAO. The FAO uses data to legitimate all of its narratives and recommendations and to create international development’s objective and rational aura through mathematical models and predictions concerning the world’s forests. Fairhead and Leach challenge the belief that deforestation is as widespread and fast paced as the FAO believes it to be by bringing to light the ubiquitous and dubious nature of certain often repeated, and highly suspect, data. These authors argue that any policymaking or planning that is informed by suspect data may be ineffectual, unethical, or inhumane. They begin by introducing critical theory and interdisciplinarity into their studies. James Fairhead is

Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Melissa Leach is a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

In their book *Reframing Deforestation*, Fairhead and Leach argue that whereas the use of data by itself may misinterpret the world, data combined with local and historical perspectives can give a more accurate description of what is really happening. It is also a first step to empowering rural populations. Their critique looks at the backwardness of the environmental discourse within international development by linking the large-scale, homogeneous picture of deforestation in West Africa that is portrayed in development literature with findings in several regions that disagree with that image. One of the main differences between this book and other articles that critique the FAO is that, instead of simply clamoring for more data, the authors describe fundamentally different ways to acquire them. Data should be gathered through localized, democratic processes that involve multiple disciplinary approaches and multiple voices. In *Reframing Deforestation*, Fairhead and Leach present data from several methods that include surveys, measurements, satellite imagery analysis, and historical analysis, gathered from within a well defined region (the forest regions of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin), which does not fit within the standard deforestation framework. West Africa, they argue, was not a region of "virgin forests" in the early 1900's, as is commonly claimed, but a region that had been repeatedly forested and deforested.<sup>108</sup> Fairhead and Leach contend that international development has promoted the image of deforestation through erroneous data and crisis narratives over the last century. International development agencies have essentially used their role as demagogue in order to influence national policy in inhumane ways. The authors'

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<sup>108</sup> James Fairhead; Melissa Leach. *Reframing Deforestation: Global analysis and local realities: studies in West Africa*. (New York: Routledge, 1998): 192.

solution is not abandonment of development or forestry, but inclusion of interdisciplinary and more democratically gathered data.

Fairhead and Leach give examples of how, despite brief discontinuities in post-colonial West Africa, crisis narratives maintained deforestation knowledge about West Africa within international development and state policy. Often, erroneous data formed the basis for these narratives. For example, the authors describe a popularized case where foresters compared aerial photography taken during a severe drought to earlier photographs that were not taken during droughts. This photographic sequence helped legitimate and reify the desertification narrative (where once there were forests, now there is dry savanna, and in the future, unless something is done, deserts will sweep across the savannas) in West Africa. Adding history and anthropology to the forestry studies produced by the FAO, Fairhead and Leach argue, would eliminate erroneous data that did not account for historical and environmental anomalies. Dubious colonial reports are also used to form the basis of forest cover change analysis. In other words, the “starting point” of the FAO’s data may be bogus.<sup>109</sup> Fairhead and Leach argue that data should be historicized and that localized data must be incorporated into the corpus of available forest data.

Bassett and Zuéli describe cases in Cote d’Ivoire where the state created very public awareness of deforestation through billboards and policy. These authors found that, on a local scale, farmers reported perceiving more forestland than in previous times, whereas the scientific framework claimed that deforestation was a ubiquitous problem in West Africa. The authors do not challenge the word of Ivorian farmers. Instead, they focus on the idea that policy impacts

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<sup>109</sup> Fairhead and Leach. *Reframing Deforestation*, 173.

land access and argue that farmers felt threatened.<sup>110</sup> In this case, data and narratives created by international developmental organizations like the FAO and World Bank<sup>111</sup> promote policies that may be seen as unjust to herders through a loss of herd mobility.<sup>112</sup> Like Fairhead and Leach, Bassett and Zueli acknowledge the role that deforestation data and narratives play in determining land access. They argue that, in order to recommend humane policy, forestry data must include the inconvenient facts that do not easily fit into the generalized image of West Africa that shows rapid deforestation and environmental degradation. It is not a rejection of large-scale planning and modeling, but a call to incorporate small-scale data into the larger framework.

Fairhead and Leach and Bassett and Zueli do not argue that data should not describe the whole world. They create new data that does not fit into the overall picture of deforestation promoted by the FAO in an effort to change scientific institutions like the FAO that already exist. They work within the discourse of international development. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If they can change the discourse so that it is more humane and less homogenizing, their work is valuable. Even with the inclusion of better and more localized data and the rejection of crisis narratives, however, using large-scale reports to describe the world's forests will over-generalize and promote the use of mathematical models that present the world in simplified terms. Taking critique further would mean rejecting positivist science and the usefulness of large-scale planning and modeling.

Crisis narratives imply blame for environmental ills, which then become one of the key factors regarding land access. According to Adger et al.: "In Africa, small-scale subsistence

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas J. Bassett and Koli Bi Zueli. "Environmental Discourses and the Ivorian Savannah." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 90, No. 1 (2000): 67-95.

<sup>111</sup> Bassett and Zueli focus on the World Bank NEAP's, which are in turn heavily influenced by the FAO.

<sup>112</sup> Bassett and Zueli. "Environmental Discourses and the Ivorian Savannah," 173.

farming is generally identified as the most important cause of deforestation.”<sup>113</sup> These authors claim that, in the eyes of international development groups, the rural poor are major agents of deforestation. Either as villains destroying their own land or as victims being forced into new and unfamiliar territories, the Adger et al. say that the World Bank and FAO describe the poor as irrational and wasteful. Adger et al. seek to complicate both parts of the “poor as victims” and “poor as villains” dichotomy. The image of the poor as victims is modified by authors such as Lambin et al. who state, “In some cases, these ‘shifted’ agriculturalists exacerbate deforestation because of unfamiliarity with their new environment; in other cases, they may bring new skills and understandings that have the opposite impact.”<sup>114</sup> In other words, international development organizations like the FAO should not generalize the problem in order to deal with “shifting agriculture” in general. In the *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa*, however, the poor are not explicitly blamed. Instead, cases where people have protected or planted trees, when faced with the possibility of profit in private industry are given as evidence that privatization will encourage West Africans to protect their resources.

Another major assumption within academic critiques of FAO claims concerns the idea that growing populations are inevitably bad for the environment. Growing urban populations will supposedly put increasing strains on wood supplies. This, according to Ribot, manifests itself in a fear that there will be urban wood shortages as forests are degraded and demand increases. Instead of wood shortages, Jesse Ribot found urban bias and exploitative business practices such as creating artificial shortages in Senegal in the early 1990’s. Ribot explored the workings of the charcoal market in Senegal and found that charcoal producers had too much

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<sup>113</sup> Neil Adger et al. “Advancing a Political Ecology of Global Environmental Discourses.” *Development and Change*. Vol. 32 (2001): 686.

<sup>114</sup> Lambin et al. “The Causes of Land Use and Land Cover Change: Moving Beyond the Myths.” *Global Environmental Change*. Vol. 11 (2001): 263. See also: Adger et al. “Advancing a Political Ecology,” 687.

power over both forests surrounding villages and urban markets. They were able to deforest areas surrounding villages, and then create artificial shortages within cities. Villagers were relatively powerless to remove charcoal producers from (nationally controlled) village forests. Charcoal producers stayed in villages, ran up debts, degraded village forests while producing charcoal, and then left. The villagers, in this case, had no recourse to centralized power.<sup>115</sup> Fuel shortages and perceived environmental problems were not the result of a growing population, but the result of complex market interactions and a lack of government control over businesses.

Fairhead, Leach, Bassett, Zueli, Ribot, Jama, and Robbins argue that in order to develop ethical policy, commonly accepted data and narratives produced by institutional discourses concerning natural resources must be re-politicized and historicized. They argue, in different ways, that local, democratic input is indispensable to the interpretation of, and proposed solutions to, environmental problems. While localized data may drastically change the large-scale picture of forests in developing countries, none of these authors reject the notion of large-scale generalizations of data or planning outright.

Paul Robbins and Bassett and Zueli problematize the very objectivity of scientifically produced data. Robbins argues that not only does mechanically produced data de-politicize issues of forest access, but that the classifications and applications of the technology require subjective decisions on several levels.<sup>116</sup> The incorporation of more scientific, as opposed to traditional or local, data, therefore, will not necessarily help create more humane models. Bassett and Zuelli argue that technology tends to depoliticize environmental issues in the name of rationality. This becomes an issue in cases like Côte d'Ivoire, where it is scientifically known (through inherited wisdom) that deforestation is prevalent, but Bassett and Zuéli, like many

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<sup>115</sup> Ribot. "Forestry Policy and Charcoal Production in Senegal." 559-585.

locals do not perceive a problem.<sup>117</sup> They argue that without a chorus of multiple views to define environmental problems and policy formation, policy will not have the power to ensure that people have adequate access to resources.

### **3.4 Chapter 3 Conclusions: Critique can go further**

As academics distance themselves from FAO claims, they still must speak the scientific language of the FAO in order to speak to the FAO. Therefore academic critics incorporate data and empirical reports into their critiques of FAO practices. Because the FAO data are so widely used within development, academics who manage to distance themselves from the FAO's data and actually critique it could do some good to the developing world by demanding more humane data acquisition through the use of anthropological and historical methods. Individual sets of data themselves will not help, but together they may create a new counter-narrative. They could also potentially improve the usefulness of the FAO, simply by pushing the issue of complexity (if one assumed there were inherent value to the FAO's work). They do not work outside of environmental discourse, but within it in order to change it. After all, is discourse itself necessarily a bad thing? Western medical discourse, for example, has given us many invaluable technologies, even if they are distributed inequitably. This requires more than more technicians and better satellite imagery, however, and depends on involving actors with interest in their surroundings. It also requires an ability to look beyond standard narratives at new evidence. Deforestation is a problem in some areas, as Ribot described regarding charcoal production in Senegal, but not because the FAO said it was a problem. In this case, people in several areas

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<sup>116</sup> Paul Robbins. "Fixed Categories in a Portable Landscape: The Causes and Consequences of Land Cover Categorization." *Environment and Planning A*. Vol. 33 (2001): 161-179.

<sup>117</sup> Bassett, T.; Zuéli, K. "Environmental Discourse and the Ivorian Savanna." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 90, No. 1 (2000): 67-95.

who were connected through a political and economic framework that supported charcoal producers at the expense of villagers believed that there was a problem and acted against it. Just as Agger longs for critical texts to have the ability to actualize ideas in *Fast Capitalism*, many of the academic authors that I have studied here hope to challenge the image of the developing world common in international development.

Academic critique should go further than it does by not assuming that there is inherent value to large-scale modeling, and by noting the economic agenda of international development institutions. Large-scale generalizations and planning may have value, but assuming they do is insufficient grounds to support them. The academic critics discussed here (those who do not reproduce FAO data in global deforestation models) feel compelled to stand up against the FAO in order to defend the weak and poor from international development's homogenizing and global view. Here is an example of where C. Wright Mills' argument is useful. If someone suffers a particular problem that seems to be connected to problems encountered by many others, scholars should look for a broad connection that may cause similar and widespread problems.<sup>118</sup> In this case, the broad connection is global vision and planning. The discourse of forestry is political, but not inherently bad. The homogenizing practices of the FAO's Forestry department, including the use of global models and narratives, promote inherently flawed and limited portrayals of the world. Whether or not academics use FAO data to make linear models or to critique FAO policy recommendations, the assumption that the FAO should create data (even better and more data) in order to influence state policy indicates a failure to distance oneself from this discourse.

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<sup>118</sup> C Wright Mills. *The Sociological Imagination*. (New York: Oxford, 1959).

## **Conclusions: FAO Forestry Illustrates Neoliberalism and Orientalism**

In this thesis, I have attempted to explore how the FAO has been able to produce a pessimistic view of West African forests that may, or may not, be based on reality. The important factor here is that, whether or not some areas in West Africa are experiencing severe deforestation (as some specific areas almost certainly are), the FAO has described all of West Africa in terms of environmental crisis narratives. Despite mounting evidence that the FAO's deforestation narrative may not adequately represent the region, the FAO's depiction and forecast of West Africa's forests is uniformly bleak; so bleak, in fact, that state governments will be helpless to halt deforestation. The FAO has been able to represent West African forests in such a generalized, negative way because it fits into an accepted Western framework for describing Africa that is based on racism and neoliberalism.

The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* describes more than just forests: it describes West African peoples and governments. It depicts problems in West Africa (war, famine, drought, and governmental instability) in general terms that give the illusion of universal and interminable crises. West African states, in the eyes of the FAO, will always face overwhelming problems that will prevent governments from solving alleged deforestation problems. The FAO's solution to its environmental crisis narratives is to privatize resources in order to keep them away from irrational and weak governments, and to put forests in the hands of people with the energy and motivation to protect them: private investors. While the FAO's *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* ostensibly describes West Africa's past, contemporary, and future forest production, it is rich with other types of Western knowledge about West Africa. I argue that, while this report describes West African forests, it simultaneously represents West Africa as a backwards place and reinforces the Western orientalist discourse of a "Dark Continent" in order to promote its

particular version of neoliberal capitalism. Backward West African states, in the eyes of the FAO, should relinquish control of forests to decentralized bodies that promote private investment.

It is difficult to dissociate environmental discourse from international economic development, and academic critics of environmental discourse should not treat them separately. While the key themes FAO's major forestry reports may stem from Western concern about the global environment, these are essentially economic reports. The FAO's predictions for West African forests are based on the neoliberal assumptions that governments should not interfere with private industry, and that macroeconomic growth will benefit all, including the poor. These are overly simplifying assumptions and, unfortunately, markets are much more complex than the endpoints, supply and demand, would suggest. The FAO encourages involvement in international markets, and promotes increasingly globalized trade. While the FAO promotes privatization and free trade within countries, it does not promote free trade internationally. The FAO's Director-General Dr. Jacques Diouf has spoken out against international free trade, distinguishing the FAO from other versions of neoliberalism. The FAO helps agricultural producers who would normally work within localized, isolated markets form marketing networks both globally and regionally. The FAO promotes the privatization of natural resources through decentralizing policies and increased, but not free, international trade.

Forests are tremendously important to the rural poor in West Africa. This dependence upon wood products and the vulnerability of the poor necessitates critique of the FAO's forestry recommendations and philosophies. The demands of some academics, that the FAO change its practices regarding forestry data acquisition and presentation, are relatively new. The FAO's published reports that advise states are new themselves. One might wonder whether, given more

time, better technology and more data, the reports would improve. But how might they improve? The only real improvement in these reports would be a more theoretically informed study that incorporates histories and political studies of myriad villages, cities, markets, and governments. A “synthesis report” that makes generalizations to sustain a particular narrative about a very large region is fundamentally limited in its utility. Improvement would necessitate eliminating the FAO’s incorrect assumption that problems are ubiquitous and that solutions are interchangeable.

The academics who critique the FAO have focused on the FAO’s methods and data in order to challenge the FAO’s homogenized view of West African forests. Academic critics have begun to use critical theory to study the FAO’s narratives and images of Africa as tools of environmental discourse. They are challenging the dominant discourse’s weaponry with new data in the form of history, sociology, localized forestry studies. These authors have specific political goals. They seek to challenge the FAO’s and other international development agencies’ generic recommendations to West African countries by showing that the very framework for these recommendations, namely that deforestation is a problem everywhere in West Africa, is flawed.

Whereas the academics who critique international development’s environmental discourse call for more data, I have attempted to critique the underlying social and economic assumptions that have continued to drive the FAO’s actions, using forestry reports about West Africa as an example. The FAO’s version of West Africa is so readily accepted within the West because the FAO simply applies old Western images of Africa as a fundamentally different and backward place to forestry. The FAO has used its pessimistic narratives and imagery of West Africa as discursive tools in order to promote a broader, overarching economic ideology.

Whereas the FAO presents privatization of natural resources as a “natural” solution to interminable problems, I argue that this is a lazy and irresponsible philosophy. The FAO claims to want to help the poor and rightfully should with a budget of \$1.5 billion. Its underpinning philosophy and general methodology, however, are dubious. That is to say, presenting generic forestry solutions that involve decentralization and privatization everywhere, uniformly, may not actually serve anyone but policy makers, and the rich, who need justification for otherwise insupportable policy. The FAO’s discursive tools, therefore, justify policy and enable closer interaction between states and international development agencies, but in economically and socially irresponsible ways.

An electronic database would much better serve the needs of policymakers and academics who wish to make policies at appropriate scales. The Constitution of Kenya Review Commission’s web site<sup>119</sup> is one example of a valuable database which categorizes and presents an astounding volume of localized information concerning changes in Kenya’s constitution through town meeting minutes and government publications. The “Virtual Jamestown” web site is another example, wherein historians present a sizeable amount of primary information on colonial Jamestown Virginia, through court records, labor contracts and other official and unofficial documents, in searchable databases. These web sites give open access to valuable resources and allow people to make generalizations concerning Kenya or colonial Jamestown on reasonably small geographic and chronological scales. Both allow users to see and compare data that is presented by subject and region. It may occasionally be difficult to interpret the meaning, value, and authenticity of information, however. This and the sheer volume of such web sites

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<sup>119</sup> Kenya Constitution Review Commission, (2001) Resource online: <http://www.kenyaconstitution.org/enter.htm>, accessed 15 May 2006.

raise the question of guidance. Academics and policy-makers alike would find such a resource useful for forestry.

The current “synthesis reports” are only useful for making macro-scale models of the world’s forests, economies, and populations. Even these, however, have limited usefulness, except potentially for demagoguery. They certainly do not promote ethical policy on any reasonable scale. Forest access is important to the health of the poor, and regional forest trends should have little bearing on local policy. Why, for example, should an average deforestation rate over all of West Africa prevent people in a particular location from exploiting forest resources? The academics who use large-scale synthesis reports are stuck in a particular method and do not think critically about the worth and implications of their studies. They have not actively engaged their discipline.

Even those academic writers discussed in this thesis who criticized the FAO did not argue that the FAO should stop producing data and large-scale reports. Some, like Fairhead and Leach, Ribot, Robbins, and others, argued that there are flaws in the data and assumptions of the FAO. They argue that better reports on the world’s forests require more data on smaller scales and that data should be historicized. This, they feel, will produce better recommendations that do not present a continuous picture of deforestation in West Africa. Interdisciplinary work that includes more types of data and historical analysis, they argue, will help create more ethical and humane policy. These academics do not challenge the idea of international environmental discourse within development; they challenge the data and methods of the FAO. Because their work could be co-opted by international development organizations, and because they do not distance themselves from the idea of international development, even the academics who critique the FAO are part of international development’s environmental discourse.

The global shift within international development to include environmental concerns represents an interesting point of departure for historical work because it could represent a significant discontinuity in this discourse. Powerful participants in environmental discourse, including the United States and the World Bank, changed its emphasis only superficially. The creation of the FAO's reports on Forestry, which began in the 1970's, are an indication of this. Digging deeper, however, I find that these reports simply use environmental terms and issues to maintain the legitimacy of international economic development through decentralization and privatization of forest resources.

The *Forestry Outlook Study for Africa* provides an example of Western economic goals within development, and should be read as such. It is not intended as an environmentalist document, although there are occasional examples of people protecting the environment out of profit. It does present data that was acquired "scientifically," but this data is presented in the economic terms of production and consumption. Economic growth, as measured by macroeconomic increases in production and consumption, is the FAO's main goal. Privatization and decentralization are presented as the natural answer to the problems in West African countries, which apparently face ubiquitous and constant armed conflict and famine, and whose governments are too weak to effect positive change. The FAO presents a free market as a system that will encourage people to act "rationally" and maximize their long-term profits, thereby desiring to protect their natural resources.

Because top-down natural resource management schemes of both colonial governments and independent states working with international agencies has generally failed in the past, decentralization and privatization became powerful ideas. Many of the forests in West Africa are public domain. The FAO feels that states have failed to adequately manage their forests

because of the complexity involved and because states are too weak. Sustainability and environmental issues are, to a certain extent, justifications for privatization. Within the FAO's economic framework, people only act rationally if they are within a capitalist economy and if there is the potential for profit. These "synthesis reports" are a specific example of a wider phenomenon in international development: the spread of neoliberal economics.

Whether or not one sees the FAO as a tool of Western countries exploiting less industrialized countries depends on how one perceives international development as a whole. It is unarguably, however, a form of orientalism where free trade capitalism (instead of Baptism or an education in the classics, as in the era of European colonialism) is presented as the answer to an irrational "other." The FAO's forestry publications present an orientalist, negative image of the FAO. The FAO presents a homogeneous view of the world; influences state forestry policy in less powerful nations; and acts as a support mechanism for more powerful, and more contested, organizations such as the World Bank. With regard to forestry, FAO publications could be interpreted in a fairly negative way. These reports appeal largely to American and European interests in forests as both natural resource and global ecosystem. The FAO even admits that any real management of forest resources in poorer countries will not help the poor who depend upon the forests because they do not have the money to invest in forests. The FAO's Forestry Department concern for the poor is obscured by its overwhelming belief in neoliberal economics and its orientalizing depiction of West Africa.

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