

SLEEPING UNAWARE ON HEAP OF GOLD

A United Nations Food & Agriculture Organisation Report

Like the starving man of legend many developing countries are sleeping, unaware, on a heap of gold. Most of the largest and richest tropical rain forests are located in the "Third World", but for the most part they are unexploited, ignored, unattended or poorly managed. And it is in these regions that hunger and poverty are most acute.

There would seem little- if any- connection between developing forest land and solving the hunger problem. But it has become increasingly clear to economic planners and developing experts that the two are so closely linked that in the years ahead forestry would be a key factor in the fight against hunger.

True, it takes between eight and thirty years for a tree to grow big enough to be cut down and sold on the wood market, and hunger does not wait. But if rationally exploited, the forests can become a major source of profit, a starting point for booming industries which will increase national income and raise living standards.

The potential role of forestry as a foreign exchange earner for developing countries ~~was~~ is high on the agenda of the Second World Food Congress in The Hague, Netherlands, when 1200 participants from all over the world discussed urgent priorities, methods and lines of concentrated action to increase agricultural production.

"The increased processing of agricultural, fishery and forestry commodities in the developing countries where they are produced appears to provide an important potential for sustained increase in the foreign exchange earnings of these countries", a paper prepared for the Congress points out.

It seems in fact that the prospects for rapid progress in developing countries are greater in forestry than in any other field.

A recent trend which has radically altered the picture in

favour of developing countries is the greatly increased demand for wood and wood products.

In 1967, for instance, their value in terms of world production - including that of Soviet Union and estimates for mainland China - reached a total of 45.5 billion U.S. dollars, almost doubling the 1950 figure. There was a corresponding rise in the per capita consumption of wood products in practically all countries.

The rise in demand was due to expansion in all kinds of wood industries - pulp and paper, paper and paper boards, wood based panels, plywood and fibreboard.

Another encouraging factor is the increasing trend of the major wood industrialists who are tapping the developing countries forest resources to set up plants and wood factories close to the tropical rain forests themselves. The advantages of this 'integrated approach' to the developing countries are obvious. The establishment of sophisticated wood industries on their territories provide work while a ready market for their products awaits them in neighbouring countries. At the same time national exchequers are increased through taxes and by sharing in operating companies' profits.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's Forestry Department is now preparing regional plans for forestry education and training development in Latin America, Africa and the Far East. This will add impetus to forestry training school centres already operated or supported by FAO in various parts of the world.

These efforts are already showing results as a recent FAO forestry report indicated. This showed that 1967 the output of plywood, fibreboard and particleboard had been growing relatively faster in the developing regions than in the developed ones.

Forestry, once largely neglected in most developing countries, today emerges as one of their major profit-making activities and foreign exchange earners and, ultimately, as a key factor in the fight against hunger and poverty.
