
A message from the Amazon against “environmental services”

The experts at the service of transnational corporations have proved to have an unlimited inventive capacity to better serve those who are paying them. Among their most recent achievements is having managed to put up for sale nature itself under the guise of so-called “environmental services.” Expressions such as “oxygen sale” and “sale of carbon sinks” are now common currency, in particular in the countries of the South. Hundreds of government officials, consultants, certifiers, national and international conservation NGOs, United Nations organizations, cooperation agencies, private and multilateral banks, stock brokers and businesspeople – among others – eagerly await their slice of the pie, estimated at billions of dollars. At the same time, they or others buy and sell biodiversity, traditional knowledge and conservation of water resources. Whatever. For money and for power.

The problem they face is that a major part of these “goods” (the services provided by forests) are not their property but are in the hands of the peoples inhabiting the forests. However, this is no obstacle for the sellers and buyers of “environmental services,” who resort to two mechanisms to appropriate what is not theirs. On the one hand, large companies –wrongly named environmental NGOs– such as The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International, among others, acquire rights and control over the territories, either by purchasing land or by the management of so-called conservation projects and evict the local inhabitants (usually indigenous or traditional peoples). Ownership of the “services” then lies entirely in their hands, to be promptly sold on the international market.

The second mechanism consists of obtaining, through signature of a contract with community representatives, the right to usufruct the forest and therefore its “services.” Such contracts, usually obtained in a fraudulent way from peoples that are uninformed about the real scope of the contracts, grant the purchasers unlimited rights of use over some or all of the forest-provided “services.” For a pittance, the misled forest inhabitants lose their sovereignty over their territories, which are then “managed” by the sellers and buyers of “environmental services.”

However, while this process advances, these two mechanisms are increasingly being challenged by the affected communities, that are raising their voices in defence of their rights.

This situation became evident a few days ago in Ecuador during an international meeting on “Environmental Services: Nature as a Merchandise”, held on 19 and 20 May in Puyo in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The meeting was attended by representatives of all the country's indigenous nationalities, other traditional peoples and national and international NGOs. The participants took part in an informed debate, analysing the issue both on a global and local level and concrete cases of fraudulent contracts imposed on communities were exposed. After a detailed discussion of the issue, the participants unanimously declared:

- “The NULLITY of contracts, agreements and projects that contemplate the sale of environmental services.” Their declaration (available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Ecuador/Puyo.html>) included many other aspects, among which the following:

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- “We reject all the initiatives that involve the sale of Environmental Services in the territories of indigenous peoples, peasant and Afro-Ecuadorian communities.”
 - “We reject the use of the Kyoto Protocol's so-called Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in projects affecting the communities, such as hydroelectric dams, monoculture tree plantations and others.”
 - “We reject the signing of further contracts in our communities for the sale of Environmental Services with national or international NGOs, municipalities or individuals.”
 - “We exhort CONAIE and CONFENIAE [confederations of indigenous peoples in Ecuador] to submit the corresponding complaints to the courts, to have punitive measures taken against the notaries, contract promoters and NGOs that participate in these activities.”
 - “We categorically reject the presence in the territories of the Indigenous Peoples and peasant and Afro-Ecuadorian communities of organizations such as GTZ, Conservation International, the Nature Conservancy, Ecolex, Ecociencia, Fundación Natura, Arco Iris, Antisana and others.”
 - “We reject bio-prospecting and bio-piracy projects carried out under the disguise of scientific research, in their attempt to take over our natural resources and their associated ancestral knowledge.”

In short, this declaration is an important and very timely message from the Amazon to the world, alerting the peoples about the dangers of this trade in “environmental services” and denouncing those who intend to take over the territories of indigenous and traditional communities. The deception of these traders in life has started to become visible, to be denounced and fought against. Peoples' rights and sovereignty are confronting these merchants' theft and deception by declaring that nature is not a merchandise nor is it for sale. The message is that simple... and that profound.