Environmental Human Rights Advocates Challenge REDD+ in Chiapas and in California

With efforts to negotiate a new climate mitigation instrument within the UNFCCC on hold until 2020, focus on REDD+ has shifted from the global arena toward sub-national agreements such as those being advanced by the Governors Climate and Forests Task Force (GCF). One of the agreements at the forefront of the GCF agenda is that between the states of California, USA, and Chiapas, Mexico.

But critics at Friends of the Earth U.S., Otros Mundos (Amigos de la Tierra, Mexico), the Indigenous Environmental Network and allied groups hope to prevent a Chiapas-California REDD agreement from going forward, citing the potential for increased emissions in California on the one hand and landgrabs in Chiapas on the other.

When the GCF brought together government officials from six countries in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the old colonial capital of Chiapas, Mexico, this September, they may not have anticipated protests by local indigenous groups and civil society organizations. The goal of the Governors' Climate and Forests Task Force, after all, is not to promote oil drilling, bio-prospecting, free trade, or any of the other activities that have long sparked protest and even open insurrection in Chiapas – but to promote forest conservation in order to absorb runaway climate pollution.

But one of the concerns about REDD often expressed by communities who oppose it is that, in fact, that distinction isn't as clear as REDD promoters would like it to be.

When indigenous peasant farmers from the Lacandon jungle get wind of rumors that they'll receive payment to stop growing traditional crops in favor of reforesting with African palm trees – a program the governor of Chiapas calls 'Productive Reconversion of Agriculture' – they see a familiar pattern at work. And when they receive word that that they may have to leave their jungle villages to allow the forest to recover from centuries of degradation – many villages in the Lacandon have been resettled already – they hear echoes of economic counter-insurgency and the ongoing theft of their lands by government and transnational forces.

Both projects – the planting of biofuel crops and the resettlement of forest communities – are linked to the local implementation of a project that the Chiapas state government refers to as REDD+, though as yet the project has no formal criteria or financial ties to California markets. And no one should be surprised by the eruption of protest – in Chiapas, land rights, rural development, and the struggle for indigenous autonomy generate constant tensions, and no region of the state is more conflictive than the Lacandon Jungle – precisely the area where the Chiapas government is engaged in what it calls REDD+.

"For 35 years, all the programs in the Lacandon have been imposed by the government," Florencio Cruz Gómez, a peasant farmer from the village of Frontera Corazal, told officials at the GCF meeting. "There has never been a process of consultation. This leads us to ask the government, when you abandoned your child 35 years ago, why do you want to take care of him now? What condition do you think he's in now, and why do you suppose he doesn't want anything to do with you?"

Cruz Gómez was one of a small minority of campesinos at the GCF meeting, and his frustration was evident. Acknowledging the tensions, William Boyd, Director of the GCF, said, “Any broad public policy is going to generate opposition. We understand that, and we see the need to do a better job at communicating our objectives.”

But, in the case of Chiapas, poor communication appears to be accompanied by questionable objectives.

“We have launched a veritable green revolution in Chiapas,” state governor Juan Sabines told the GCF plenary. “In Chiapas, like in many places around the world, our forests become subject to destruction as the rural people need to grow crops. In many cases this production doesn’t even reach the market, because it is used by the people to feed themselves. This is a travesty.”

“To address this problem, we have approved a law of climate change. An important part of the program is REDD+. In 2010 we made a pact with the indigenous owners of the jungle. The jungle was occupied by over 900 communities. Now we have cleared them from the jungle. The Reserves are being conserved and protected by their legitimate owners, who will soon have access to the carbon markets.”

Among the communities slated for ‘clearing from the jungle’ is the village of Amador Hernández – 1500 Tseltal Mayan peasant farmers who have lived inside the protected Montes Azules Reserve since long before it was ‘protected’. On the first day of the GCF meeting, several campesinos from Amador Hernández entered the auditorium and requested a few minutes at the microphone. Chiapas State Minister of the Environment and Natural History Fernando Rosas denied their request, telling them that, if they wanted to consider joining the REDD+ program, he would be glad to meet with them at a later date.

Unsatisfied with this response, the campesinos raised a protest. They handed out flyers to GCF delegates declaring “The government is lying to you – they have neither informed us nor consulted us!” Eufemia Landa Sanchez, from the municipality of Marques de Comillas, a deeply deforested region on the edge of the Montes Azules Reserve, took the floor and read a long message to the plenary.

“Transnational businesses have had plans for the rural areas of Chiapas for some time now,” Sanchez said. “The natural wealth of biodiversity and water, of mines, of biofuels, and of course of petroleum, have led to the displacement of people, the poisoning of the earth, and have made the peasant farmer into a serf on his own land. And in every case they blame us and criminalize us. Our supposed crime today is that we are responsible for global warming.”

“With REDD+, businessmen and their government lackeys have one more business – the trading of carbon in its most polluting form – and peasant farmers have one more thing to fear: that the jungles and forests of Chiapas will be used for absorbing their CO2.”

“Why don’t they consult us?” she continued. “Why do the wealthy want to impose their will by force? The jungles are sacred, and they exist to serve the people, as God gave them to us. We do not go to your countries and tell you what to do with your lives and your lands. We ask that you respect our lives and our lands. Go back where you came from, merchants of life!” [Below you can read the full statement.]

The speech, and a concurrent protest in the street outside, made a strong impression among GCF

delegates. Iwan Wibisono of the Indonesian National REDD+ Task Force remarked, “I think the demonstration outside is not unique to Chiapas, but is faced by us also in Indonesia and in other countries. And we can understand it, because these are very serious concerns.”

A month after the Chiapas GCF meeting, Friends of the Earth US collaborated with the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) and allied groups from Chiapas, Acre (Brazil), and Ecuador, to bring these concerns to legislators and the general public in California.

The delegation, which included IEN Director Tom Goldtooth, Jose Carmelio Alberto Nunes (Ninawa), President of the Huni Kui Federation of Acre, Brazil, Berenice Sanchez of the Global Alliance of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Against REDD and for Life, and Gloria Ushigua of the Association of Sapara women (Ecuador), as well as representatives of California groups the Asia Pacific Environmental Network, the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, and the California Environmental Justice Alliance, and allies from Greenpeace International, took its concerns to the capital of California, speaking with the California Air Resources Board (the body charged with implementing California’s emission reduction legislation), California Environmental Protection Agency, and the state governor’s office (see FOE news release at http://www.foe.org/news/news-releases/2012-10-californias-global-warming-trading-scheme-could-endanger).

Along with concerns about the lack of ecological integrity of the projected California REDD program, the activists also raised serious concerns about delegates’ safety, as REDD-type projects are already resulting in deaths, violent evictions, forced relocation, imprisonment, and prohibitions to access and use land essential for the survival of Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities (see FOE news release at http://www.foe.org/news/news-releases/2012-10-indigenous-leaders-rejecting-california-redd-hold-go).

The REDD Offsets Working Group, a quasi-governmental body charged with developing REDD protocols, is expected to release its scoping report at any time; the California Air Resources Board will vote in 2013 about whether or not to pursue REDD credits as part of the state’s mandated emissions reductions.

By Jeff Conant, Friends of the Earth/US, e-mail: jeff.otherworlds@gmail.com