
Food sovereignty, forests and biodiversity

This month, while another meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity was taking place in India, we also celebrated, on October 16, World Food Sovereignty Day.

For peasant farmers, indigenous peoples and other traditional peoples who live in and depend on forests and other biomes, biodiversity is intrinsically linked to food sovereignty and, in a broader sense, to their autonomy and freedom. For example, the diversity of traditional seeds that they use for small-scale agriculture has guaranteed these peoples, generation after generation, a significant part of their sustenance. Access to the forests and to the diversity of foods that they provide has also been crucial to their food sovereignty.

The time has come to denounce the veritable “war” that is being waged in numerous countries with tropical forests against the traditional agricultural practices of forest peoples, and particularly against the practice of planting small areas of crops in forested areas to grow food, as in the case of upland rice cultivation, a common practice in the mountainous regions of various Asian countries.

Governments and international organizations consider this practice to be one of the main causes of deforestation, and as a result, they maintain that it should be rigorously combated. In fact, however, numerous studies contradict this claim and demonstrate that it is a sustainable activity. Moreover, prohibiting this practice would not only plunge the communities who practice it into a state of hunger, but would also entail the disappearance of a way of life.

It is noteworthy that the same governments that oppose this non-destructive practice continue to grant concessions for forested areas that now add up to millions of hectares in countries like Indonesia. These concessions are granted to big private companies for the establishment of acacia and oil palm plantations or mining projects, to mention just a few of the most common activities, giving them free rein to destroy forests and biodiversity in order to earn quick and easy profits. This type of destruction, despite numerous denunciations by communities and local organizations, is not combated, or only minimally.

Today, the big companies that cause this destruction, as well as the financial institutions and governments who support these projects, use the logic of the “green economy” to argue that the destruction caused by their activities can be “offset” by “protecting” forests in other locations. However, their idea of “protection” turns out to be new threat to communities who live in these forest areas and practice shifting cultivation as a means of ensuring their food sovereignty. For these communities, the “green economy” does not imply “protection”. On the contrary, it represents even more pressures and restrictions, and on many occasions, leads to their expulsion from the forest. In any event, it is obvious that destruction in one place cannot be “offset” in another.

The governments that freely give forest concessions to private companies and also promote REDD projects for forest conservation generally claim that they are doing so as a means of promoting “development”. But these projects in fact tend to increase inequality and hunger. The small number of jobs offered by plantation or mining companies or in REDD projects do not even begin to

compensate for the losses suffered by the communities – something that we have heard a great many times from representatives of these communities during our field visits. While capital gains ever greater control over nature, forests and biodiversity, local communities suffer a decrease or even complete loss of control over their territories, as well as the loss of their ways of life.

We are confident that the struggle for food sovereignty will gain ever greater strength. And we believe that it is vital for this struggle to be interconnected with the struggle for these communities to remain in their forests, with the guarantee of being able to use and control their lands, forests and biodiversity and to practice their traditional forms of agriculture that help to maintain biodiversity and feed their people.