
Forests and food sovereignty: Voices of the sons and daughters of the forest

Food sovereignty, which is centred on local autonomy, local markets and community action, and encompasses issues like agrarian reform, territorial control, biodiversity, cooperation, health and many others connected to food production, has become a process of grassroots resistance. And, as we noted in WRM Bulletin 115, its conceptualization is not only deeply rooted in the social movements fuelling these struggles, but is also an opportunity to bind them together in a common agreement over objectives and actions.

We also stressed that the same processes that are threatening peasant farming – the advance of agroindustry and large-scale monoculture plantations for export; the destruction of biodiversity through the imposition of transgenic crops; the oil-dependent energy model involving production processes that poison and destroy everything around them; the fencing in of areas of high biodiversity for use in the tourism industry or for biopiracy (the appropriation of the knowledge and genetic resources of local communities by corporations who seek exclusive monopoly control over these resources and knowledge through patents or intellectual property) – also threaten and impact on forest communities. And when a forest is destroyed, a space for food sovereignty is also destroyed.

This means that the struggle in defence of forests also becomes a struggle for food sovereignty, because for forest communities, the forest is everything. Among other things, it is the place where they obtain food, in ways that are environmentally, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their particular circumstances, as recognized by the concept of food sovereignty.

At WRM, for many years we have denounced the fatal deception initially put forward by FAO, and then endorsed by other international agencies, of classifying industrial monoculture tree plantations as a type of “forest”. While this could seem to be a simple error in its definition, it has extremely serious consequences, because it has paved the way for replacing valuable and biodiverse ecosystems, including real forests, with alleged “planted forests”, that is, monoculture tree plantations.

This year we undertook a campaign to “define forests by their real meaning”, which included the production of a testimonial video to record the voices of people who live in and from the forest in different countries and continents – men and women, indigenous people and peasant farmers – who talk about the importance of forests in their own lives. We consider it to be a faithful reflection of the voices of the forest.

And these voices need to be heard. From the rainforest (in the state of Paraná , Brazil), Jonas Aparecido de Souza tells us:

“The forest gives the community everything it needs, from good quality water, and the food that can be gathered from it, to the wood from the forest that is used to build the homes of most of the families. The forest gives plants that can be used as medicine, for communities who have the

knowledge of how to use them. It gives seeds for making crafts, which means it generates income for families. It also gives soil. Its soil is always enriched by the way the families use the forest to grow their own food. And so the forest is everything that is good for the community. (...) If they take the forest away from us, these families will completely lose their autonomy, they will not be able to survive here. They will have to leave, to move somewhere else that is not compatible with their way of life, they will have to migrate to the city, move to the outskirts of the city and build a new way of life that they are not accustomed to. (...) When these families leave the forest areas and move to other places that are not in harmony with their way of life, their culture, they go through a process of dehumanization, they lose their identity as forest peoples.”

The chief of a Bakumbule community in the Walikale territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) tells us:

“The forest has many benefits for us. The forest protects us, it gives us air; we cultivate the land there and this allows us to feed ourselves. In the forest we eat meat, the meat of wild animals. There is meat of all kinds, and all types of edible plants. We eat all of this and we also gather other things to be well nourished and get all the proteins we need. After eating, we go to the forest to wash ourselves. When we look at the forest, we know that our happiness is there. Right now our situation is difficult because there was a war and we are going through a very complicated time, but as soon as I can get back to my forest, we will all be healthy, because there we will find everything we need to feed ourselves and live well.”

For Francisca, an Arara indigenous woman from the rainforest in Acre, Brazil,

“the forest is important because it is where we get our fruit, our food. It is where we get our clean drinking water, and where we raise our children. Our parents raised us here all together, getting our sustenance from the forest. (...) We are very frightened that the forest will disappear and the Arara will have to move to the city. Life is very difficult there. We will have to buy industrialized food, or beg or prostitute ourselves because we don't have enough money to buy food. Today we breathe the clean air from the forest and we have clean water and food, and what we need to build our houses. (...) Even though we still have a big forest, we can feel the effects on our land of other forests being cut down, of the plantations, of the changes that are taking place. The rivers are already not like they used to be. We are worried, we don't know what we are going to do even if we preserve this small amount of forest compared to all the trees that are being cut down. Some say that they are going to reforest, but we know that a reforested area can never be like the virgin forest that was born there. It is very different.”

On different continents, from different communities, in different languages, the feelings and visions they express are nonetheless very similar.

From a Pygmy indigenous community in the province of Kivu Norte, in the Walikale territory of the DRC, a community leader who works in defence of the province's indigenous peoples tells us that the forest and the indigenous peoples could be described as “inseparable friends” because:

“the life of a Pygmy depends 100 percent on the forest, because the forest is our home par excellence. I can state that without the forest, there can be no life for indigenous peoples. In addition to all of the activities for the production of food, we indigenous peoples use our traditional knowledge to protect and manage the forest, and we carry out activities in the forest that are part of our own unique culture. This means that the disappearance of the forest would mean the total disappearance of the indigenous peoples.”

Lucas, of the Manchineri indigenous people, lives in the rainforest in Acre, Brazil. For him, the forest is important because:

“it is where we live, it is where we get our sustenance. The forest is life for us. (...) While the forest is standing, there are various types of animals that we can eat, and we also have our crops that we carefully manage.”

If the forest disappears, he says,

“we will have nowhere left to go to look for the resources we need, we will be left without a protector, because for the Manchineri people, the forest is our protector. There will be a lot of health problems and a shortage of food in our indigenous territory.”

Mijak is an “Orang Rimbo”, which in the Jambi language means forest people. He lives in Makekal Ulu, one of the areas inhabited by the Orang Rimbo around Bukit 12 National Park in Indonesia. Mijak believes that:

“our community life depends on the forest. If it is damaged or destroyed, then our traditions and our culture will disappear.”

Finally, a woman from the community of Katobo in the Walikale territory of the DRC stresses why women especially need the forest:

“Because that is where we find everything we need to feed our families. And if someone tells us to leave the forest, we would be very angry, because we can't imagine a life that is not in the forest or next to it. In the forest we gather firewood, we plant crops. We have different types of vegetables, and also edible plants and fruit. Women catch crabs and fish in the streams. There are all kinds of animals to hunt and all kinds of things that we eat and which give us strength and energy, proteins and everything else we need to live well.”

The concept of food sovereignty has grown, deepened and transcended beyond agriculture to reach the forest, one of the most diverse and prolific land ecosystems, a source of nutrition and food for the people who live with the forests and for the entire planet. That is why the struggle for food sovereignty is also the struggle for the defence of forests. And defending the forests requires, among other things, defining them by their true meaning.

We invite you to watch and share the video produced for the WRM campaign for a true definition of forests – “Forests, Much More Than A Lot of Trees” – at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/forests/Forests_Much_more_than_a%20lot_of_trees.html (currently subtitled in English, available soon in other languages)