
Mexico: REDD+ in Chiapas finances disease, death and intercommunity conflicts

In Mexico, deforestation is advancing at a rapid rate alongside various megaprojects: the expansion of industrial monoculture plantations of oil palm and jatropha for biofuel production, the building of dams, mining concessions, the creation of resettlement centres of prefabricated housing complexes strategically established in locations of resource extraction and land conversion, large-scale tourism development, and highways to facilitate these projects.

This so-called “development” is impacting not only on the country’s forests but also on autonomous indigenous communities and peasant communities whose resistance to being expelled “physically and culturally” from their lands, as they describe it, has been violently repressed, resulting in a dramatic toll of imprisonment, injuries and deaths.

The search for new sources of profit has now turned to the exploitation of the serious problem of climate change, one of the causes of which – although not the main cause – is deforestation.

The interests who are bound and determined not to change the economic system that has given rise to this global threat have turned the problem into an opportunity and come up with, among other false solutions, a mechanism known as REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). This strategy, which assigns a financial value to the carbon stored in trees – in the form of “carbon credits” – is presented as an economic incentive that will make it more profitable for developing countries to protect forests than to cut them down.

The other side of the coin is that, on the one hand, the wealthy countries that purchase these carbon credits will continue polluting, while on the other hand, communities that depend on forests for their survival will be evicted from them and denied access to what they have always considered to be their lands.

The Mexican government has aligned itself with this market-based vision of forests, viewed as mere carbon reservoirs, and enthusiastically embraced REDD. As noted by Gustavo Castro Soto (1), the state of Chiapas “has thrown itself head-first into the race for climate change business, placing its forests, jungles and monoculture plantations at the service of the carbon market. Once again, in the climate change business, government subsidies for private companies are materialized with the participation of corporate transnational conservationist NGOs at the service of environmental profiteering. For instance, in 2009, the government of Chiapas began work on the Climate Change Action Programme for the State of Chiapas (PACCCH), financed by the British Embassy, with Conservation International as a key actor in its implementation.”

Castro Soto reports that the pilot projects planned by Conservation International for 2011 in Chiapas – where there are 1.3 million hectares of land considered natural reserves, of which almost 50% are in the Lacandon jungle – fall under the framework of an agreement signed in November 2010 between US California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mexican Chiapas Governor Juan Sabines Guerrero and Brazilian Acre Governor Arnobio Marques de Almeida Junior at the Third Governors’

Global Climate Summit, held in California, USA. The agreement establishes the bases for initiating a carbon credit market incorporating REDD and other forest carbon schemes into the regulatory frameworks of the United States and other countries.

This means that the Chiapas authorities must create the conditions for the sale of carbon credits.

And this is what led to the agreement signed in December 2010 between the governor of Chiapas and communities in the Lacandon jungle, who will be used by the government, according to Castro Soto, "to confront other organizations and indigenous and peasant communities while facilitating their eviction, even with violence." As the governor is quoted as declaring to the communities involved in the agreement, "You are going to be committed to protecting the reserves, to making sure no one goes in them, making sure no one cuts down the trees, making sure no one goes in there to hunt, you are going to protect them for the whole planet, for all of Chiapas, for all of Mexico, for all of humanity." Nevertheless, immediately outside the area designated for the sale of carbon credits, the government will continue to promote the expansion of agroindustry, tourism development, industrial plantations of oil palm, and other activities that lead to deforestation.

In the region where this REDD project is planned, as described by Jeff Conant in an exhaustive report following a recent visit to Chiapas (2), peasant farmers have long coexisted with the rainforest by clearing productive spaces to plant maize and beans, while maintaining a strong stance on protecting the jungle from destructive agroindustrial activities like cattle ranching, illegal logging of precious hardwoods, and exploitation of oil reserves.

The authorities have responded by implementing arbitrary "forest protection" programmes. They have created exclusive protected areas like the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, and expropriated neighbouring lands. However, the peasant movement initiated by the communities of Amador Hernández, which forms the core of the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, and dozens of outlying settlements, succeeded in halting their forced eviction and appropriation of their land in 2008.

But heavy pressure is being exerted. Investors in the REDD+ project promoted by the state and federal governments, which was to be presented at the COP 16 climate conference in Cancún, demanded legal demarcation of the territory involved. As a result, according to a statement from the Council of Traditional Indigenous Doctors and Midwives for Community Healthcare in Chiapas (COMPITSCCH) (3), in April of 2010, with no prior warning or explanation, the government withdrew all medical personnel and suspended the supply of medical supplies and the aerial evacuation of the gravely ill in the Amador Hernández region, undoubtedly with the aim of punishing and weakening communities that have historically fought back against the attempts to seize their land. In a region that also has a history of indiscriminate medicalization and a lack of health promotion and education efforts, this measure has sparked an upsurge in illness. Clearly, the authorities are attempting to use the dependence on the medical system created in the region as a means to force the rebels into surrender, beginning with children and the elderly.

According to the COMPITSCCH statement, "Hundreds of children have fallen ill due to the lack of vaccines, and have had to be urgently transported to hospital centres, such as San Carlos hospital in the neighbouring municipality of Altamirano. They suffer from persistent fevers and continue to spike high fevers for weeks. Some present symptoms of asphyxia and blueness of the fingers, while others develop a persistent dry cough typical of whooping cough. There have also been cases of children having convulsions due to difficulty breathing, which sometimes leads to fainting. In these cases, the cause appears to be a sea of parasites that floods the upper respiratory tract."

Earlier this month, the community assembly of Amador Hernández sent an open letter (4) calling on the federal and state public health officials to re-establish health services and asking the governor of Chiapas to “suspend the state REDD+ project in the Lacandon Community Zone, as it constitutes a counterinsurgency plan that promotes conflicts between neighboring communities” and to “stop lying to the indigenous peoples regarding the climate-related objectives of the REDD+ Project in Chiapas, and declare its true purpose: to conserve and recuperate biodiversity in the areas of greatest biological wealth in order to turn it over to the control and exploitation of transnational interests.”

The letter has been circulated as an international action alert by a group of social organizations from around the world. To sign the alert, send your name, organization (if any), country and email to: contact@globaljusticeecology.org

The community assembly of Amador Hernández in Chiapas clearly recognizes what REDD+ signifies: “For the indigenous peoples, who have freely and bravely decided to walk our own destiny on a different path from that of the political regime and the economic system that turns everything into merchandise and thievery, the bad government sends illness and slow death, and projects that fortify intercommunity conflicts, paid for now by the resources associated with REDD+. And all in the name of service to humanity.”

This article is based information gathered from:

(1) “EnREDDar a Chiapas”, El Escaramujo, Gustavo Castro Soto, Otros Mundos AC/Amigos de la Tierra

México, <http://www.otrosmundoschiapas.org/index.php/component/content/article/118-el-escaramujo/897-el-escaramujo-enreddar-a-chiapas.html>

(2) “A Broken Bridge to the Jungle: The California-Chiapas Climate Agreement Opens Old Wounds”, Jeff Conant, Communications Director at Global Justice Ecology Project, email:

jefeconant@gmail.com, <http://climate-connections.org/2011/04/07/a-broken-bridge-to-the-jungle-the-california-chiapas-climate-agreement-opens-old-wounds/>

(3) “La salud como instrumento de represión y exterminio: El caso de la región Amador Hernández, Reserva de la Biosfera de Montes Azules?”, Consejo de Organizaciones de Médicos y Parteras Indígenas Tradicionales por la Salud Comunitaria en Chiapas

(COMPITSCCH), <http://wrm.org.uy/paises/Mexico/COMPITSCCH.pdf>

(4) “REDD Alert: Urgent Action Needed – Medical Services in Amador Hernández, Chiapas

Withdrawn in Advance of REDD+”, <http://www.globaljusticeecology.org/connections.php?ID=544>