The struggle of the people who depend on mangroves: A struggle for visibility, for rights, and against destructive consumption

(Photo: Greenpeace International)

Mangroves, which are a type of forest, could be considered the most forgotten or invisible tropical forests on the planet. And their inhabitants, in turn, could be the most forgotten or invisible of the communities who directly depend on forests for their survival.

Yet the importance of mangroves and the communities who preserve them is undeniable. One need only look at the recently released statement from Redmanglar Internacional, a network devoted to the defence of mangrove ecosystems, announcing International Mangrove Action Day on July 26. The statement stresses the fact that mangroves in coastal regions serve as areas of reproduction, feeding and shelter for the large majority – 75% – of tropical animal species. They are also a source of livelihoods for millions of families around the world.

Communities and NGOs who defend mangroves and the way of life of the people who live there undertake enormous efforts every day of the year to combat the “invisibility” of mangroves and their inhabitants. They are forced to confront an endless wave of privatization and projects including shrimp and fish farms, large-scale ports for export, large-scale tourism activities, iron and steel plants, wind parks, oil drilling, mining, and hundreds of hydroelectric dam projects, as well as industrial monoculture plantations of oil palms, sugar cane and other crops, which invade,contaminate, and often destroymangroves.

The struggle for the defence of mangroves implies, first of all, defending the rights of local communities over the territories, rivers and mangroves on which they depend. But for the promoters of the current destructive model of development, this has no importance, despite the fact that they claim to be concerned about the environment, that they are working towards a “green” and “sustainable” economy, using more and more “renewable” energy sources. A good example of the contradiction between these claims and the actual reality can be found in the coastal region of the state of Maranhão, Brazil, near the city of São Luís, where the Brazilian company Suzano Papel e Celulosa plans to build a port for the export of wood pellets produced from their industrial eucalyptus plantations. While these “biomass” plantations are already invading and destroying the territories of the traditional communities of the Baixo Parnaíba region in the interior of the state of Maranhão, the planned port would invade and destroy an area of rivers, mangroves and ocean which also provide a source of livelihood for 500 families. This raises the question: how can words like “renewable”, “green” or “sustainable” be used in connection with a project that destroys vegetation and will destroy more mangroves in Brazil to contribute to the increased use of “renewable” energy in Europe, where the wood pellets will be exported and used to generate electricity to meet high (some would say, excessive) levels of energy consumption?

The present model of production and consumption drives the ever-growing concentration, privatization and destruction of lands as well as the expulsion of communities to guarantee profits for

elite of few stakeholders in banks and corporations. Instead of refraining from those types of projects and tackling the underlying causes of the destruction of mangroves what has emerged as a novel “solution”, is the proposal of “blue carbon” initiatives, considered the “REDD+ of mangroves and coastal regions”. But this false solution runs alongside the continued destruction of mangroves except for a few areas preserved as coastal parks.

If what the promoters of “blue carbon” say is true – that mangroves and other coastal ecosystems store huge amounts of carbon – then nothing could be more urgent than ensuring their conservation worldwide. Fighting for the territorial rights of the communities who depend on these ecosystems would be the most effective way to conserve these highly endangered forests while guaranteeing the livelihoods of the people who depend on them. Nevertheless, on the websites of the various “blue carbon” initiatives, there is no mention of rights. In general, they claim that local communities will be “engaged” in or will “benefit” from carbon projects, i.e. through the expected sale of the “stored” carbon. There are no guarantees of this, however. In fact, REDD+ itself is in crisis. But this does not seem to get in the way of carbon funds now offering “blue carbon” as well, encouraging private companies to invest with the promise of “good returns” from the sale of the carbon “assets”. But how can the mangroves be preserved with investors who form part of a model that is based on destruction and continuously promotes the abovementioned activities, which are precisely the ones that threaten the survival of mangroves?

Instead, we believe that efforts should be focused on supporting the community organizations, NGOs and different networks who are struggling for the territorial rights of the people who depend on mangroves and who highlight the important role of women in the communities. This is also a struggle for the recognition of the way of life of these people and their identity as a distinct population, of the importance of artisanal fishing for the food sovereignty of these communities and the regions they live in, and of their contribution to the conservation of the environment.

As a parallel struggle, with a strong sense of solidarity with the people of the mangroves, there are campaigns aimed at raising consumer awareness about products that are directly connected with the destruction of mangroves. A good example is a campaign being carried out in Sweden (see the article in this issue) with a clear message: do not buy a product – shrimp – whose industrial production is responsible for the destruction of something as important as mangroves. It should be stressed that this campaign does not suggest the consumption of “certified” shrimp as an “alternative” – something that the “blue carbon” promoters would consider a “solution” to avoid the continued destruction of mangroves. For their part, community organizations and networks strongly oppose the false concept of “certified” or “sustainable” shrimp (see the Redmanglar declaration in this issue).

We join with those who clearly state that there can be no such thing as “sustainable” industrial shrimp production, just as there is no such thing as sustainable pulp and paper produced from large-scale monoculture tree plantations. These are forms of production that are, by definition, unsustainable and destructive for the future of forests and the people who live there. What is really needed is a change in the predominant models of production and consumption in the world today.