Ecuador: Disputes against shrimp farming contribute to women's lib

In Muisne, on the Northeast coast of Ecuador, the inhabitants have developed a lifestyle adapted to mangrove ecosystems, based on fishing and gathering shellfish and crabs. However, their livelihood has been under threat since the eighties, when shrimp farming started expanding in the region (WRM Bulletin nº 51, October 2001).

Until the sixties, mangroves were considered as useless and valueless swamps by the Government, allowing the local inhabitants to carry out their traditional activities, such as hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants for food, medicines and building. Then and even now, the mangroves were public State-owned lands, under local community management. In this framework, mangrove destruction and privatization by the shrimp industry were illegal. The shrimp farmers took over the land for their own benefit and the Government even granted them concessions, sometimes based on false reports (WRM Bulletin No. 14, August 1998, No. 21, March-June 1991, No. 36, July 2000).

As a result, from 1989 onwards, the inhabitants organized themselves against mangrove destruction and privatization and claimed recognition of their traditional rights to use this ecosystem. The first group was set up in 1991 in Muisne, which became the Ecological Defence Foundation (Fundación de Defensa Ecológica - FUNDECOL). Later on, the dispute spread to the whole canton and become a social movement upheld by the mangrove communities and in particular by the women shell-gatherers, who gather shells and other molluscs from mangroves.

The movement grew, thanks to the establishment of "user groups" in the various villages in the canton. These groups started denouncing illegal mangrove clearing to FUNDECOL, which later submitted these complaints to the administration. Thus an efficient monitoring network was set up submitting over 20 years, some one thousand complaints and in 2003 obtaining an important achievement: the creation of a 5,000 hectare mangrove reserve managed by FUNDECOL and user groups. Unfortunately, between 60% and 90% of the mangrove cover had already been lost. However, FUNDECOL and the user groups had already started reforestation and other activities aimed at promoting the revival of local culture: cookery competitions based on mangrove products, murals explaining their struggle, the creation of music and poetry groups, literacy courses, etc.

Several members of these groups composed songs. One of these composers was Tania Bone Cagua, who lives in the village of Bolivar where a group of "concheras" (women shell gatherers) were determined to struggle and protect their livelihood and environment. These women feed their families and earn some money from gathering shellfish, mainly a clam-like shell. Tania learnt to read and write thanks to FUNDECOL's literacy classes. Her capacity to express herself in writing and to have the courage to speak in public, are among the main talents that she discovered in herself thanks to the struggle and she is very grateful for this. She wrote several militant songs and we are attaching three of them: "Tristeza del manglar" (Mangrove Sadness), "Conchera soy" (I am a shell-gatherer), and "Benditos camaroneros" (Damned shrimp-farmers). They can be accessed at http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/Canciones.html

The women from Bolivar explained that they have simultaneously had to face two problems: shrimp

farming and domination by men. In fact, during the demonstrations that took place to protect the mangroves, the village women were more active than the men. They started action on a public level, hitherto undertaken by men, such as leaving their homes and usual chores to take part in demonstrations, meetings and reforestation activities or to cover many kilometres to complain to the authorities about the illegal clearing of mangroves by the shrimp farmers. This phenomenon led to many cases of domestic violence, as the husbands were opposed to such activities. However, the group and the aim of the struggles gave the women the necessary support to question and re-negotiate power relationships in their favour. Now it is they who "know" the mangrove ecosystem, it is they who struggle successfully to protect it. This gives them considerable material and symbolic autonomy.

Here below are some excerpts from Tania Bone Cagua's three songs

Mangrove sadness
How sad it has been to live without the mangroves
that the shrimp-farmers wanted to cut down
And now it is up to us shell-gatherers
to struggle and struggle and reforest again

I am a shell-gatherer tells us of the devalued status of shell-gatherers, as it is a poor woman's task.
So what do they want, what do they want me to do?
To be happy like on a holiday
while the mangroves are disappearing?
Do they want me to laugh?
For laughter to split my face like a fool?
For even governments have negotiated mangroves
I am a shell-gatherer and don't pity me.

Damned shrimp-farmers
I*n the world the most wonderful thing that happened to me*
Is to watch the group of women struggling for mangroves
They say we are tomboys but this is not true
We defend our ecosystem because we find species in it
We find shellfish there, our livelihood
We also find crabs, tasqueros and snails

Although mangrove inhabitants have struggled all these years, in the autumn of 2009, the government of President Correa legalized the illegal privatization of mangroves by shrimp farmers, ratifying their rights in a legal writ. Two previous governments had attempted to legalize the shrimp industry in Ecuador but the social movement organized by associations for mangrove defence had halted the process. This autumn, FUNDECOL and user groups also organized big demonstrations in several cities, including Quito, to protest against this law that will forever undermine their possibility of claiming the mangroves. However, the Government has no intention of changing its decision or of allowing the local inhabitants to collectively manage mangrove areas. The policy of President Correa's government is framed in the conventional line of export economy, based on ransacking natural resources, without caring for their sustainable use or for the promotion of food security and sovereignty, considering that 95% of the shrimp production is for export. Thus it is the western countries that benefit from this luxury food, while the ecological and social impacts are localized in the producer country and are mainly a burden on the poorer population. Along these lines, the present Government also promotes industrial tree plantations and major open cast mining projects,

against the will of the people represented as a whole by the National Environmental Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Ambiental).

Sandra Veuthey, e-mail: Sandra.Veuthey@campus.uab.es. Article based on the author's field observations.