
Food sovereignty and struggles for territories and forests

October 16 is World Food Sovereignty Day. At its last international conference in Indonesia, this past June, La Via Campesina placed heavy emphasis on food sovereignty as a “global alternative”, not only for peasant farmers but for society as a whole. This emphasis is well deserved, because the threats to food sovereignty are many.

Transnational corporations pose the greatest of these threats, due to their insatiable “hunger” for ever more land and “natural resources” around the planet. In an attempt to “control” their activities, corporations are called on to adopt instruments like “certification” or “safeguards” – usually on a voluntary basis – promoted by banks, governments and big conservation NGOs. For example, the latter may ask for respect for the land rights and way of life of local communities, or demand the consent of the communities affected by the corporation's plans.

One of the reasons that corporations have been able to deal with “certification” and “safeguards” with very few problems is the strong and powerful alliance they continue to share with national governments. This allows companies to simply impose their plans, thanks to government-granted concessions that overlap with community territories and forests – concessions that are granted without informing anyone in the community in question, much less obtaining their consent. This has been the general rule, despite the adoption of “certification” or “safeguards”. Another corporate tactic used to undermine community rights has been to take control of the land of peasant farmers without necessarily acquiring ownership of it. For example, companies have enticed peasant farmers with promises of attractive income if they allow monoculture plantations on their lands, with the obligation of turning over their production to supply the companies' processing plants. Through schemes like these, the companies are supposedly “respecting” the community's land rights and “sharing the profits”.

However, the companies hold an enormous advantage in these types of arrangements, and usually negotiate individual contracts with local community members. Moreover, in the long run, this type of outsourcing poses a threat to the communities involved, particularly with regard to their food sovereignty and that of the neighbouring population. As is clearly demonstrated by the current situation in various parts of Latin America, Asia and Africa, where agribusiness has heavily expanded, the resulting trend is reduced local food production accompanied by price increases for the food available locally, which is increasingly imported from outside. This is great for corporations in general, since it benefits the lucrative food trade, which they also control. For local communities, it has a perverse impact that totally undermines their food sovereignty.

Historically, peasant communities have ensured their food sovereignty by practising ways of life based on control over their territory, as well as over the forests on which they also depend for food. Therefore, struggles to guarantee people's rights to their territories and to these forests are also struggles to guarantee food sovereignty. When they explicitly incorporate the struggle for food sovereignty as well – through proposals headed up by communities in which they aim to maintain, strengthen or regain community control and management of their territories – these struggles gain

greater power and solidity. They can serve as an important example, as an inspiration for other communities, even for those who have not managed to hold back the advance of companies over their territories.

The interconnection of struggles for territories and the struggle for food sovereignty is urgently needed to fight back against the dominant model of production and consumption that seeks to turn us all into mere consumers dependent on the market, with the promise of bringing “development” and “modernization” to entire regions. But we know that in practice this model does not live up to its promises. Reality demonstrates that it results in greater poverty, environmental destruction and hardship, leading humanity into an ever deeper crisis, while the corporations continue to rake in profits. The “alternatives” proposed as a solution to this crisis under the banner of the so-called “green economy” are not actually alternatives, because they are in no way aimed at structural changes in this model; they are therefore false solutions.

In this edition of the WRM Bulletin we have sought to present a series of inspiring examples, from different continents, of communities who are fighting for their territories and carrying out inspiring initiatives based on community management of forests and other biomes that comprise the immense and rich biodiversity of the different regions of the global South. We believe that greater interconnection and exchange among these communities and others who are waging similar struggles could contribute to advances in popular struggles and the attempt to halt the advance of agribusiness and its corporations, for the good of food sovereignty and of local and regional economies and societies. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of the global campaign underway to dismantle corporate power and end the impunity of transnational corporations.