Cherishing community wisdom to strengthen the struggle for land and forest

When a forest area is replaced by a eucalyptus monoculture, a dam or a mining project, the destruction is evident and in plain sight. However, what is often invisible - and therefore little understood - to those who look in from the outside - are the combined deep impacts that this destruction inflicts upon the lives of communities that have lived in that place for many generations, as well as on the forest itself and on the countless interconnections between the living beings that are part of it, including the community itself. With the forest, the community generated a set of knowledge and wisdom that helps guarantee their well-being, physical, mental and spiritual health, culture, identity and self-esteem. Because of this, the actions that seek to recover and cherish the wisdom, health and well-being of communities affected by destructive projects, are in a broad and comprehensive sense fundamental for strengthening the resistance struggles of these communities. They are also fundamental when communities seek to revert the process of destruction, capturing and giving more strength and sense to the struggle for the recovery of their territory.

In the WRM Bulletin we have denounced several times the new “offset” mechanisms for placating the climate crisis, proposed by “specialists” from the transnationals, governments and financial institutions, as well as major NGOs. We denounce them for their lack of wisdom, for being false solutions to the climate crisis, and because, for example, REDD+ assigns value to a forest only on the basis of the carbon it stores. Simultaneously, the offset mechanism for biodiversity loss values a forest only on the basis of the presence of certain plants and animals. This vision collides directly with the views and wisdom that communities that depend on the forest have built through time. They always consider their place as something unique - for them no two places are the same. It is in this place that a community lives that it has established its connections, its stories that are told and retold, its knowledge, its collective identity and its culture. It’s in that place where they find the conditions to live well, through the food and nutrition that the forest provides, be the plants, sources of water and animals, which help treat, and more importantly prevent, physical and mental illness.

This bulletin issue seeks to reflect on that broader dimension that place has for communities, without them turning to measuring certain pre-established categories, like carbon. Furthermore, in their wisdom, the communities feel they’re part of the forest. That is radically different from the assumptions of those who develop policies that promise to ‘save’ the forests, which are being imposed today on those communities. Whereas the communities speak of their place with affection and respect, the official policies speak about the same place in terms of ‘categories’ like, for example, the presence or absence of ‘high conservation value forests’ or ‘forests with high carbon value’. Under this logic, a ‘high value’ forest, for example, could be replaced by another with similar characteristics in terms of particular plant species, while the rest of the forest is considered of little value, that is, it can be destroyed for not being within the high-value ‘category’. While communities speak of places as a whole that encompasses many beings and meanings, including themselves, the ‘specialists’ that develop ever more mechanisms to ‘solve’ the deforestation and climate crises, speak today, for example, of ‘landscapes’, that is, something they observe and use from a distance according to their interests, and which they do not feel a part of.

Our intention here is not to romanticize the relationship that communities have maintained with their places, with the forest. What we want is to call attention to the fact that destructive projects not only destroy forests. These invasions of community territories also put at risk and tend to destroy wisdoms and a set of customs, stories, relationships, traditions and practices that establish the link between communities and their places, and that also give form to their identity and assure their well-being. By destroying the forests, they end up destroying knowledge that is indispensable for the comprehension and conservation of these forests. But beyond the particular project that is invading and destroying their territories, communities must also deal with other 'attacks' on their livelihoods, more focused on the sphere of their collective identity as peasants, indigenous peoples and the inhabitants of river banks. For example, the constant messages that propagate a 'monoculture' of a given consumption standard, many times with an urban vision, is dominated by major transnational corporations. Their propaganda seeks, through a process of globalization, to transform any inhabitant of the world into a 'consumer' of their products- in many cases, products that are very harmful to the health of the consumer.

All this contributes to breaking the link between communities and their place, and to destroy their wisdom, identity and culture. When this happens, it becomes very difficult to resist and maintain the struggle. In the cases in which a community recovers its devastated territory, devastated by monoculture, mining or some other destructive activity, it tends to end up bereft of reference, since it cannot simply retake its way of life because the conditions for doing so do not exist anymore. The result can be a profound crisis in the communities that manifests itself in different ways, one of the strongest of these being the phenomenon of suicides among indigenous youths in various countries.

Seeking to elaborate on these more intrinsic challenges that confront communities when they are subject to invasion and destruction of their territory and forests, we produced this issue of our bulletin. Not only do we want to show and reflect upon this more complex reality experienced by communities that depend on the forest so that these can be better understood. We also sought out some stories that are inspiring and full of strength from regions of Latin America, Africa and Asia, of how these communities resist and struggle to maintain and reencounter their sense of living and health, even in extremely adverse situations.