
Regional networks: A step forward in the struggle against plantations

Large-scale rubber, oil palm, eucalyptus and pine tree plantations are being promoted by governments in Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. However, affected villagers are openly protesting against them. At a meeting held last month in Cambodia we learned that local communities are strongly opposing these plans because they see that these plantations are encroaching on their lands and impacting on their livelihoods. During field visits in Cambodia and Laos, we were able to witness that their forests have been cut down, their upland rice fields destroyed and their grazing lands occupied to make way to monoculture tree plantations.

As well as in other Southern countries facing similar projects, NGOs in the Mekong region have an important role to play in supporting local communities' right to make their own decisions over the use of their lands and resources. However, some NGOs appear to believe that opposition to plantations is not possible and that the only option is to try to improve them.

That assumption is simply not true. As an example in this respect, it is worth mentioning that a concrete plantation project - Pheapimex- has been recently stopped by local communities in Cambodia itself. In many other cases, the expansion of plantations has been either halted or greatly scaled down –such as in Thailand and recently in Ecuador- as a result of organized opposition.

Struggles at the local level have been strengthened by a number of activities carried out over many years by people and organizations throughout the world that have supported local communities, generated awareness, disseminated information and analysis, carried out research, lobbied governments and international institutions and organized campaigns against large scale tree monocultures.

Although opposition at the local level is the necessary starting point, it is clear that the combined power of governments and corporations –assisted by a large number of “expert” and “aid” agencies- require strong opposition movements and that this implies the need to create broad networks at the national, regional and international level.

Such networks already exist in many Southern countries and a more recent development has been the creation of formal and informal regional networks to oppose plantations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In the case of Latin America, the Network Against Monoculture Tree Plantation was created at the World Social Forum in January 2003 and today is actively campaigning in almost all the countries of the region.

As respects to Asia, two meetings have been held –first in Thailand in 2003 and last month in Cambodia- between representatives from organizations working in the Mekong region, which have resulted in agreements for working together to oppose the spread of plantations (see article below “Cambodia: Mekong Regional Conference on Tree Plantations”).

In Africa, anti plantation campaigners in South Africa are now working in close contact with organizations in Swaziland and Mozambique and establishing contacts with organizations in other African countries where plantations either exist or are being promoted. (see articles on South Africa and Mozambique below).

People participating in those networks are convinced that plantations can be effectively stopped and –in spite of the difficulties- are actively working for achieving that objective. The creation of regional networks constitutes a major step forward in this struggle and their success will ultimately depend on their capacity to create a broad peoples' movement against plantations. If that is achieved, plantations will no doubt be stopped.