
Costa Rica: Lessons learnt from the struggle against plantations

Monoculture is the main tool used by the large trans-national capitals to appropriate and control land resources and cheap labour in the countries of the South, causing enormous impacts on biological and cultural diversity. Homogenization and the dramatic simplification of the agro-ecosystem enable them to maximize soil exploitation and labour through mechanized tasks that are easy to control and supervise. Sustainability is defined on the basis of codes of profitability and depending on the crop, cycles of ten, fifteen or twenty years are completed and then the land is abandoned. The results are a depleted or poisoned soil, serious social impacts, a considerable decrease in wildlife, a loss of traditional knowledge, among other cultural impacts, together with impacts on the local economy arising from an enclave economy. In spite of the above, the companies always recover the money invested and do so with interest, satisfying both their expectations and those of the financial market. Following this they abandon it all and leave, as shown by the case of the banana plantations: from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast, and then again in the eighties, from the Atlantic to new areas.

In Costa Rica, approximate data indicate that there are one hundred and twenty thousand hectares of tree plantations, the largest in the country. Some areas have been transformed to other monoculture plantations or have been felled. Banana plantations cover approximately forty thousand hectares and orange groves some twenty-five thousand. Pineapple is the new and expanding crop, causing serious labour, social, economic and environmental impacts, and from nine thousand three hundred hectares in 1998, it was covering twenty-three thousand hectares in 2004.

In the struggle against plantations, several lessons have been learnt by the Costa Rican grassroots movement (a community and ecologist movement). Such is the case of a campaign against an industrial project involving twelve thousand hectares of gmelina tree plantations together with the construction of an industrial complex in the southern part of the country. This struggle occupies an important place in people's memories due to the lessons it taught. This industrial complex was to be located in the south and would have affected one of the country's most important and beautiful ecosystems: the Golfo Dulce, one of the few fjords existing in the world.

The lessons learnt from this struggle can be summarized as follows:

- local resistance is a key factor and essential in any struggle, without it no success is possible. This resistance must be strengthened, so that once the struggle is won, the community organization can work in various local aspects related with sustainability and the improvement of the quality of life of the community in general. The external organizations providing support can improve their action considerably if, from the start, they believe that the success of their collaboration will be measured insofar as their work will not prove necessary and this results in the strengthening of the local organization;
- the work plans must be discussed and drawn up jointly on a local level. All the guidelines should be issued from this level as well as all the decisions taken regarding resistance work and the construction of sustainable proposals;

- international work in this scheme is of great importance, not only in the search for support and solidarity, but also in forging relationships that strengthen sustainable proposals for resistance arising at a local level. This work is of great importance in the contacting of specialized human resources that can collaborate in the technical analysis of areas where it is required and in the search for financial resources facilitating resistance work.

- the mass media play an important role and we must endeavour to have them on our side. It does not matter if the large media do not cover our struggle at the beginning, provided the smaller ones do. This will enable us to reach our main public, in the knowledge that the large ones always monitor news covered by the small ones and at some point will cover our struggle. It is important to appear in the news, but not vital and most of the media respond to the same interests as those we are struggling against;

- legal and scientific aspects are only instruments, important but instruments. This struggle is above all a political struggle, in demand of the local role in the definition of the development model desired by the communities;

- public institutionality should not be neutral although they claim that they should. For this reason, we inserted several of these public institutions in our struggle to have them on our side. We did this when analysing the political situation, we found that their role would be along our lines. Neutral institutions do not help in the struggle;

- safety must be taken seriously in all planning. The ecologists Oscar Fallas, María del Mar Cordero, Jaime Bustamante and David Maradiaga lost their lives in this struggle. This aspect should be a part of all activity planning.

- the community and ecologist sectors are new social actors that can play a leading role in the construction of alliances for grassroots movements. These alliances are very important and all the time in the world should be invested in achieving them, based on respect, mutual understanding and the establishment of channels for dialogue that will provide opportunities, on a medium and longer term, to start weaving what is necessary to build the country we want;

Experiences of struggles such as this have provided an opportunity to work in Costa Rica through campaigns that today teach us that community forest management and biodiversity, as well as peasant and indigenous construction of the rights these social actors possess over their traditional knowledge, are possible. They also enable new movements to be set up, such as those that now exist in the Atlantic and northern area of the country against pineapple crops, a new threat to the environment and local Costa Rican communities. These are dreams that, dreaming and driving, become more real every day.

By COECOceiba-AT, e-mail: gavitza@racsa.co.cr