Forest peoples' health depends on the health of forests

Forests provide for the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people worldwide and particularly in the tropical areas. Whatever activities are carried out that imply deforestation or forest degradation will therefore impact directly on the means of survival of those people and thus also on their health.

One of the immediate effects of forest loss is a decrease in the availability of the food provided by forest plants and animals, such as fruit, seeds, roots, honey, vegetables, mushrooms, insects, meat, and so on. The result will be malnourishment, which generates conditions for disease, particularly –though not only- in children.

At the same time, some of the activities leading to deforestation and forest degradation add other problems which impact on local people's health. Such is the case of oil exploitation, which brings in air and water pollution over huge forest areas. Local communities are left with no option but to continue drinking, cooking and bathing in contaminated water and breathing the polluted air, all leading to increased illnesses. The same happens with open-pit mining and pollution linked to the poisonous chemicals used by this industry.

Industrial logging, hydroelectric dams, commercial shrimp farming, large-scale agriculture, cattle-raising, monoculture tree plantations are also important activities leading to forest loss. In many cases, these and the above activities are imposed on communities against their will, thus generating a situation of social stress that also impacts on people's physical and mental health. More than often, they also lead to repression and to the ultimate blow on health: murder.

There is also a toxic war that is unleashed against local communities. Perhaps the worst case is the current herbicide spraying being carried out by the US-backed Colombian government allegedly to combat coca cultivation. But a "low level war" is also being staged in numerous countries through the use of toxic chemical spraying in large scale agricultural or tree monocultures. This results in yet additional impacts to local people's health by polluting their water and air, while plantation workers are even more at risk by manipulating those toxic products.

For some forest peoples, the main threat is bacteriological. Isolated indigenous forest communities are facing –though they are unaware about this- the most serious health hazard: the introduction of new diseases to which their organisms are not adapted. In the past, the introduction by Europeans of smallpox, measles, typhus and other diseases proved much deadlier than the European's weapons used against the Amerindian population. In the past, the colonizers may have had the excuse of ignorance but today's governments and corporations certainly don't.

In the case of most forest peoples, who traditionally use a wide variety of medicinal plants available in forest areas, the most immediate cause of concern is the loss of medicines. Deforestation and substitution of forests by other commercial activities (such as agriculture, cattle raising, timber and oil palm plantations) result in the scarcity or even total disappearance of some of those plants at the local level, thus eliminating this vital resource when it is most needed to cure the illnesses resulting from those same activities.

It is important to underscore that for indigenous peoples, health is not constrained to the narrow concept of lack of illnesses but is a dynamic process that covers social and economic aspects. For them, the forest is part of their identity, their cultural practices and beliefs; they coexist with the forest through interdependency. If the forest is gone, also their identity is gone which is to say their life, their health.

In sum, the health of forest and forest-dependent peoples is highly dependent on the health of the forest ecosystem. If governments are serious in their discourse about the importance of health, then this is an additional reason for generating the necessary conditions for forest conservation.