
Ecosystem health, our health

The forest is the cradle of biodiversity, that is to say, the origin of life. When the forest is healthy, water springs from it, the air is purer and more fragrant, we can obtain shelter from its many resources, it gives us food, art is expressed in the myriad of colours and hues that are cyclically unfolded and concealed and in the midst of all this beauty and prodigality, it is possible in some way to feel the love that nature shares with all its beings.

We, as individuals of the human species are also part of this ecosystem insofar as we are interrelated with it; not only the indigenous peoples that inhabit the forest, but also the inhabitants of cities, of deserts and hills depend on forests, on the fundamental role they fulfil on the planet. However, at some time in history, processes started taking place that separated us, very often wiping out the memory of the systems' eco. And thus, we allowed health to stay outside us.

This is why talking about the defence of forests is talking about health. However, it is also pertinent to define what health we are referring to when we talk about health.

Very often health is equated to the absence of disease and the way to achieve it is based on medical care and/or drugs. Thus, when talking about the right to health in general the reference is to the right to have access to medicine – the official and dominating one – and its resources. The indicators register quantitative data – the number of doctors and hospitals per inhabitant, birth, death and nutritional state indicators, descriptions of the distribution of infectious or chronic diseases – in order to measure the health of a population.

In this neo-liberal stage of capitalism we are living in, – like so many other things – health has become merchandise. Laboratories and the pharmaceutical industry grow in the shadow of wars and, brandishing the flag of peace and health, they assault the forest and appropriate the curative properties of its plants and trees, benefiting gratuitously from the knowledge accumulated by the communities through trial and error, generation after generation. The healing properties of forest products, formerly free, have been patented, bottled, labelled and marketed by companies, at a high cost for the consumers.

The indigenous peoples' concept of health is in general holistic and dynamic. For the Amazonian Matsigenkas from the Urubamba River basin in Peru, health is being healthy and feeling well and in this, physical health is only one of the elements. For them "being healthy" reflects aspects of life that western science could separate into biological, environmental, social and psychological aspects and not only bio-medical ones. Affected by the Camisea Gas Project -a group of consortia devoted to the exploitation and transportation of gas in the Urubamba River basin (see WRM bulletin No. 62)- the Matsigenkas relate the worsening of their state of health to the new anxieties and social conflicts that have arisen with the "development" of the area (the repeated efforts since the beginning of the eighties to find and exploit hydrocarbons), the dramatic social changes that have taken place and the effort to maintain their values and their ways of life.

In Mexico, for the Mixes of Santo Domingo de Tepuxtepec, for the Zapotecos of San Juan Tabaá, for

the Chatinos of Nopala, the energies of nature are understood as having an influence and being responsible for the health of the surroundings and the community – consequently, of individuals too. Their culture is deeply related to nature, understood simultaneously as the natural and supernatural worlds. For them, the hill is their life; the trees are brothers; the forest is a place to respect; flowers and plants are sources of help to cure; water is the blood that nurtures their fields; the rocks are protection and strength; the sun is the father of life; the earth is the mother who gives what is necessary to live. Around these images of surroundings are all the spiritual elements inherited from their forefathers and learnt as children in the bosom of their families and their community. When all this is in balance, there is health - that is the way they see it.

One of the definitions of the World Health Organization states “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not only the absence of illness or disease.” This is a concept that implies a major step forward with respect to the limitation that equated health with access to medical care. However, it is worth asking what State puts this into practice in its health policies. And, up to what point, do the policies and positions of WHO itself represent a vision in which the absence of disease is inextricably united to economic, political and socio-cultural factors?

On the other hand, the WHO definition offers a general framework that can be acceptable to many cultures, but it does not cover the specific habitats and health traditions of the Planet’s diverse cultures. For example, the concept of mental health varies. For many indigenous peoples, persons who hear the spirits talk are looked at with reverence and live with the community. However, in western and urban culture, they are qualified as schizophrenic, medicated and perhaps confined to a psychiatric institution.

When meeting for the first time, the indigenous peoples of various cultures are amazed because they share the same basic originating culture, in spite of the fact that they have major differences. They consider that what makes them different from the dominating western society is a relationship with nature, in which they are not outside it but a comprehensive part of it, together with the notion that there can be no economic interest above the need to preserve ecosystems because the bonanza of the present cannot be achieved through the desolation of the future.

In western societies, or in societies that have been invaded and impregnated by their dominating vision, “developmentism” places human beings outside Nature and even against it and health problems are addressed by fragmented science, increasingly backing commercial interests and parading a dominating attitude.

The recovery of ecosystem thinking, thinking in function of the health of the ecosystems, enables us to understand that peoples’ health and life are related with the health of all the ecosystem’s components: soil, water, flora, fauna, air and of course, human beings, with their social, political, economic and environmental relationships. This notion of interrelationship produces ethics that are different from those of the dominating system, ethics that respect life. And also a rationale that obliges the focus of policies, strategies and plans to be centred on ecosystem health.

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