Another forestry profession is possible

Forestry science first appeared in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century and provides the clearest example of the way forests were removed from local rural economies and redesigned to serve the needs of an industrialising state economy.

European woodlands formed a part of agriculture, providing not only another area for pasture but also fertilizers, foliage as fodder and to thatch roofs, food for domestic animals and people, bark and roots for medicine and tanning, sap for resins, and wood for fuel and building, among others.

Formerly communal property, between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, feudal lords gradually restricted peasants' access to forests, charging dues and tithes for forest pasture, fuel wood collection, and hunting of forest animals.

When the State became stronger, it took on the objective of appropriating communal goods for commercial purposes. In the midst of persistent conflicts between the State (its forestry department) and the rural population, systematic legal restrictions on the customary rights of local communities, repression and even violence, State control was established over forests and their management with the aim of timber production.

Forestry science developed as a sub-discipline of "cameral science" –named after the chamber in which a prince's advisors planned the economic affairs of the land. Demand for timber for various uses led to more restrictions on local use of forests for subsistence in favour of industrial production.

The main interest in forests was represented by a single number –the revenue yield that might be extracted annually by cutting down trees. Mathematicians helped to calculate the usable volume of timber from a standardized tree of a known species, age, and diameter. Foresters could more accurately predict the value of a forest if the trees growing in it conformed to a standardised average. A forest containing fewer species of more commercial value was easier to measure and of more value to the state economy.

The next step in the evolution of forestry science was therefore to replace the "untidy, unpredictable, chaotic" forests which produced a wide range of products for a wide range of different people, with logical predictable plantations which produced consistent, predictable and large quantities of timber for industrial use.

Today, very little remains of Europe's forests. Although statistics of forest cover indicate that over 30 per cent of Europe is currently forested, they are misleading as they do not reveal that much of this "forest" is in fact plantations grown to produce timber or to supply pulp and paper mills. Foresters have been specialized in studying those subjects that contribute to consolidate this model.

Facing this scenario of the forestry profession, other voices are now being raised –from the profession itself– questioning the traditional forestry paradigm based centrally on the extraction of timber for industry, considering that it is not adapted to the true social and environmental needs of

our society: eradication of poverty, conservation of natural resources (water, soil, biodiversity) and conservation of the planet's climate.

In the framework of the World Social Forum, the World Rainforest Movement organized an event with the title of "Another forestry profession is possible," aimed at promoting a wide-ranging discussion among professional foresters, technicians and other people interested in reflecting on a change in the paradigm of the forestry profession.

Many of the participants were students and some pointed out that in their curricula no chair exists involving social and political affairs that would provide them with a vision of the rationale and the needs this profession is addressing. They are only trained to produce and exploit timber resources and this situation of the forestry profession is repeated in several countries.

The participants considered that the profession should respond to a social and environmental responsibility and have professional ethics, which today are missing. The students' training is based on a grid, responding to very technical parameters, but no reflection is made on the questions of: what are they producing for, for whom, what should be exploited and how far? At whose service is Forestry Science? What interests are involved? Where do the policies guiding the forestry profession and timber business come from? All these are questions that professionals and technicians should ask themselves.

With an orientation of social responsibility, various participants at the workshop considered that foresters should have an attitude of respect and humility towards peasants and forest communities. A forester cannot go to a forest community and tell the people how it has to be managed. Who better than those who have lived there and used it for years to know what to do? The professional should not be a stranger who dictates what has to be done but a person who is walking together with the people, valuing and respecting their knowledge, learning from them and trying to work in a coordinated manner.

It was also denounced that the forestry profession has endorsed and promoted large-scale monoculture tree plantations, imposed in various countries using the same model. Socially it is a process that increasingly evicts rural workers. Environmentally, it affects various ecosystems and causes major problems with water. Economically it is an activity that responds to the insertion of the countries of the South as exporters of raw material with scant added value, reproducing the large landowner-monoculture-export cycle, with profits ending in the hands of national elites.

The vast eucalyptus plantations are part of agro-business and are unrelated to solving hunger or poverty –not due to a lack of food but to a lack of access to resources. Moreover, areas of land that could be used in an agrarian reform programme benefiting vast social sectors are being occupied by eucalyptus plantations for export, generating scant labour under poor conditions and compromising soil use for the future generations. This model is strengthened with the majority position of the forestry profession which states that eucalyptus, pine, teak and acacia plantations are forests.

It is time for the forestry profession to undertake a major internal and open debate, putting a distance between it and the powerful economic agro-business interests and placing it in a context of social responsibility. For this purpose it should work on the construction of an educational project promoting debate and the construction of sustainable production models where the aim is neither the extraction of timber nor the strict conservation of forests, but their sustainable use.

In this respect, some steps towards the construction of a new paradigm implying the understanding of

forest functioning have been taken, thus getting to know how to benefit from what they offer. The concept of Community Forest Management covers pioneer projects that constitute a real forest policy and that can truly establish a difference.

Furthermore, another possible world already exists. It is the world of the communities that live in a sustainable way within the possibilities allowed to them by the larger world. The mission of forestry professionals and technicians committed with people and with the environment is to achieve that these other possible worlds are maintained and expanded.

Article based on opinions expressed by participants at the event. The first part of the article is based on information from: “Blinded by Science: The invention of scientific forestry and its influence in the Mekong Region”, Chris Lang and Oliver Pye, Watershed Vol. 6 No. 2, http://www.terraper.org/watershed/pdf/vol6no2.pdf