
Forests and plantations: An essentially social issue

In an increasingly fragmented and specialized world, very often social and resistance responses are inevitably fragmented and specialized. Many social organizations are devoted to an issue, very often removing themselves from the whole.

In this whole, like converging circles, the various issues have coinciding zones that are translated into issues on social movement agendas. In its defence of forests the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) has, for instance, incorporated into its action strategy the gender issue and is endeavouring that women's organizations incorporate the subject of forests and plantations in those aspects related with their area of work.

In an effort to depict this geometry of resistance in an integration of struggles for another possible world, WRM and Friends of the Earth International, in the framework of the World Social Forum, organized a workshop on "Forests and plantations: an essentially social issue."

Following a brief presentation by panel members from various walks of life, a wide spectrum of representatives from numerous countries had the opportunity to contribute with their experience through a participative group working methodology. Members of NGOs working on very diverse issues (ranging from trade to transgenic crops) from peasant and indigenous peoples' organizations, trade union organizations, the academic community and human rights organizations, were able to exchange ideas on common subjects. The results of the group discussions were later presented in plenary and relationships with forests and plantations were identified.

We consider it to be symbolic that the issue of forests and plantations is included in the World Social Forum. What is involved is breaking up schemes, de-fragmenting ourselves and placing the defence of forests in its true social dimension.

The disappearance of forests directly affects the indigenous and peasant populations that use them and are generally displaced from the territories their ancestors had occupied and which are their right by tradition. Their forms of life and subsistence are totally dismantled, slowly eroding their culture. Deforestation also alters the water cycle which in turn undoubtedly affects even more seriously the most underprivileged social sectors, thus contributing to increase their poverty.

The essentially social nature of forests makes the struggle for their defence into an essentially social struggle, merging with other social struggles for human rights, land and land tenure, food sovereignty, local economies and local control, health, job defence, just to mention a few.

The way forests are perceived is also a cultural construction insofar as biological diversity is not accidental but has to do with the type of relationship human beings establish with their surroundings, with a certain form of knowledge and its use. The communities that have known how to care for forests have not established a purely commercial and individual relationship with the soil, the water and forest products, but have conceived the right to the use of a territory as a collective right.

Thus, this rethinking of ways takes those who struggle for agrarian reform to ask themselves now: An agrarian reform to plant what? What for? And by whom?

The new visions interweave new ideological frameworks in which concepts spring up such as agro-ecology vs contamination of life with agrochemicals, diversity vs monoculture plantations, small scale vs large scale, local trade vs economic globalization (“another trade is possible”).

In a framework of the advancement of major trade interests in all walks of life which, according to Friends of the Earth International places “nature on sale,” monoculture tree plantations are swooping down on forests and savannahs. They bring contamination from agrochemicals, slave-like working conditions, destruction of ecosystems, soil erosion, rural eviction and an increase in poverty. That is to say, essentially social issues.

Forest activists, peasants, trade-unionists, members of indigenous peoples, of landless movements, human rights activists, community health workers, ecologists, and women’s organizations will surely build linking platforms expressing those issues on which they agree and from where they can muster forces.

The workshop was a drop that joins the many others that we trust will form a shower, which sooner or later will end up by clearing tomorrow’s horizon.

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