
Forests and Forest Peoples at the World Social Forum 2004

Deforestation is commonly perceived as an environmental issue, resulting in biodiversity loss and in impacts on water and soil resources. That is, however, only part of the problem.

Forests are in fact inhabited by millions of people, whose livelihoods depend on the resources provided by them: food, wood, fuel, medicines, fibres, fodder, etc. Forest conservation is therefore crucial for providing to the survival needs of all those millions of people –in India alone estimated in some 150 million.

Government-promoted deforestation and forest degradation -resulting from industrial logging, dams, mining, oil exploitation, shrimp farming, plantations, export-oriented agriculture- continues unabated in most countries, thus resulting in serious impacts on huge numbers of people.

Governments' response to deforestation -the demarcation of protected areas- also impacts on forest and forest dependent communities, who are either evicted from their territories or banned from using the resources contained therein. In most cases, the absurdity and injustice of this approach to conservation lies in the fact that those evicted are precisely those who for centuries ensured the sustainable management of the forest which is now declared "protected."

We therefore felt that the forest issue needed to be addressed at the World Social Forum, as a means of highlighting the social aspect of forests and within this context, to try to move forward in the protection of forests and forest peoples' rights. The activities carried out -summarized in the articles below- brought forest people and forest activists together, allowing for a lively exchange of experiences and ideas on the subject.

Even more importantly, they led to a draft statement of principles (the "Mumbai Forest Initiative"), aimed at creating a global movement based on a common approach to forest conservation and to the respect of forest peoples' rights (see article below).

That common approach is based on acknowledging forests peoples' rights and on the need to strengthen their role as guardians and managers of the forest. Within this approach, the main role of the state is to create an enabling environment for communities to adequately manage their forests. Civil society -benefiting from the services and products provided by forests- also has a role to play in supporting forest communities in their efforts to manage and conserve the forest.

We strongly believe that the Mumbai Forest Initiative constitutes an adequate response to the plight of forest peoples, who wish to conserve their forests, who need to protect from outside agents and who have the necessary knowledge to adequately manage them. We hope that all those who share this approach will join in this process, thus strengthening the struggle for forest conservation and for the protection of forest peoples' rights.

