
Ecuador: Sharing experiences against monoculture tree plantations

During the second half of September this year, the Ecuadorian NGO Acción Ecológica organized a national meeting in Quito on the subject of “Plantations are not forests.” On 20 and 21 September, approximately 40 organizations representing Ecuadorian Indigenous movements, peasants, people of Afro-Ecuadorian descent, NGOs and parliamentarians, together with representatives from Brazil, Chile and Uruguay analysed the issue of plantations and exchanged experiences. The gathering took place in the framework of the on-going discussions in Ecuador regarding the government's forestation plan that may imply the promotion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations in wide areas of the country.

Paulo Cesar Scarim, in representation of the Network Alert Against the Green Desert in Brazil, shared the experience of struggles in resistance against the expansion in his country of what they call the “green desert” – enormous expansions of commercial eucalyptus plantations. He visited communities in the Province of Esmeraldas, a region that originally had abundant tropical forests and mangroves, and the communities of Muisne and Daule, where companies – such as in the case of Eucapacific, a Japanese consortium that has bought up much land for the plantation of eucalyptus – arrive with the promise of jobs in a jobless environment. However, deforestation, settlement projects and more recently, shrimp farms and the plantations of oil palm, teak and eucalyptus have left the region bereft of its original wealth. The result is that unemployment is rife and there is increasing rural exodus towards the suburbs.

Sergio Alcaman, an Indigenous Mapuche delegate, shared experience from Chile with monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations, not only involving impacts on the soil, water and biodiversity, but also the appropriation of wide areas of Mapuche territory by plantation companies during the Pinochet dictatorship. In spite of this, Mapuche resistance increases day by day.

In turn, the representative of Uruguay (Ricardo Carrere, from the WRM Secretariat) told of the experience of his country and of many other tropical and subtropical countries, where the social and environmental impacts of monoculture tree plantations have given rise to struggles against them and, which, little by little are becoming united on an international scale, thus widening and strengthening the opposition movement.

The meeting in Ecuador provided an opportunity for the exchange of experience among countries that already have hundreds of thousands (Uruguay) or millions of hectares (Chile and Brazil) of monoculture tree plantations, with a broad group of Ecuadorian organizations, where the area covered by plantations threatens to be increased. Both in these and in other countries, it has been shown that homogeneous tree plantations for commercial purposes end up in traditional communities losing land, a radical change in the economic and social structure of the zone, deforestation and intensive land use and use of chemical products that destroy soils, rivers, mangroves and the biodiversity of very rich tropical ecosystems.

It was also concluded that present world strategies such as certification, environmental services and wildlife corridors, should be observed with caution to avoid falling into a trap.

Movements of resistance with diverse tactics and rhythms are arising everywhere and the solidarity and search for the organization of resistance in its multiple stages, has led to various agendas and the prospects of working as a network. With this aim, the Latin American Network against Monoculture Tree Plantations (Red Latinoamericana contra los Monocultivos de Arboles – RECOMA) was created in January 2003. Accion Ecologica, the Alert against the Green Desert Movement and WRM are all participants in this network. A few days before, RECOMA had held a meeting in Cartagena, Colombia, in order to prepare common strategies to face the threat of plantations. The exchange of experience during the Ecuadorian meeting is an important component of these strategies and the positive assessment of this meeting augurs the continuation of this type of exchange.

Article based on information from: Report by Paulo Cesar Scarim – Association of Brazilian Geographers- ES / Red Alerta Contra el Desierto Verde, sent by the author, e-mail: pscarim@hotmail.com ; with complementary information by Ricardo Carrere.