
Mexico: The loss of forests for the community and for women

Chiapas is a zone that is very rich in natural resources, where water and forests are abundant, and who says forests, says diversity, fruit, seeds, flowers, wild animals, fish, medicinal plants, materials for various uses --for firewood, building, crafts, implements, etc.

Who benefits from all of this? The region is now suffering from the brunt of "development" policies, for which development is synonymous with incorporation into the international market. Usually the South has the function of producing raw material or food, providing natural resources --among which, oil, water, minerals-- and is a place for the settlement of industries that use the supply of cheap labour, favoured additionally with exemption from labour and/or environmental protection requisites.

Under the aegis of article 27 of the progressive 1917 Constitution, in 1936, President Lazaro Cardenas had launched an agrarian reform, setting up the "ejidos", or communal lands. However in 1992, President Salinas de Gortari, carried out what at the time hundreds of peasant organizations called a counter agrarian reform, modifying the article in the Constitution, which guaranteed access to land by peasants, and allowed it to be sold privately. "And now they want to privatize tourist locations too, where there is great natural wealth that Mother Earth herself has given to indigenous peoples and peasants, and that is what they want to privatize," said Maria Angelina, a Franciscan missionary who works for the Diocesan Coordination Office for Women in San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas, Mexico.

The peasants are always in inferior conditions, because they end up by producing for markets whose prices they do not control. Furthermore, the forest that has always been a source of resources, is taken away from them. For many years now, in the region of the Tojolabal de San Miguel community in Los Altos de Chiapas, logging companies and large sawmill companies have felled the forest, seeking pine, mahogany and other fine timber. It is hard for the trees to grow back, say the inhabitants. The same inhabitants also end up by cutting wood to make chairs, beds, furniture, trying to make a living out of this, but at very low sales prices.

Maria Rosario (Chayito) from the community of San Miguel, tells how in 1996 the Mexican army, as a strategy in its war against the insurgents used the burning of large areas of forest, to justify eviction of the Zapatista bastions. Her community was directly affected by those enormous forest fires. Chayito tells us how, from the four cardinal points, four fires surrounded the community. It was lucky the houses were not burnt down, but all the rest, the 282 hectares of cultivated lands, were lost.

From an agricultural standpoint, the lands of the San Miguel community are not very productive as it is an area of rocks and mountains covered by forests. However, the community had made an effort and after a lot of work had its plantations of corn and beans, the staple foods of the Indigenous People's diet. They were also "happy to have mountains with the freshness and joy they bring," in addition to finding in the forest a complement to their diet with small animals and obtaining a supply of firewood, water, flowers that the women sold, to obtain a complementary income.

The fires burnt everything down: the corn and bean plantations, the coffee plantations, and the forest.

Together with the forest, the orchids, wild flowers and animals disappeared. "It is all finished," says Chayito. There is no more firewood nearby, and they have to seek it far away. This also contributes to poorer housing conditions, as traditionally homes were built using trees for wood and poles and palms for the roof. When the palms disappeared, the community housing deteriorated enormously as they had to build the roofs out of building materials, purchased in the city and for which money --always scarce-- is required. As women no longer have forest flowers to sell, family incomes have dropped even further.

Many nearby rivers and wells that used to supply water to the community have dried up. This implies more work for women who traditionally procure water. They have to go further to fetch it, increasing their tiredness and taking time from other tasks --that in themselves are many. All conspires to make a woman's day exhausting. "There is still a lot of "machismo". Few families are aware and help women."

The community has had to overcome the shortages and seek ways of solving the problem. For this purpose, it has sacrificed its cultivation plots so that the land can regenerate. "It is only now that the forest has started to recover, the mountains to turn green again, but the trees are still small," while the large trees are still falling, with their burnt roots.

On this side, sacrifice, and on the side of the government the solution could not be worse. They come with tree plantation projects with other types of trees that are not from the community, alien species, trees that "drink more water," the eucalyptus, jacaranda, pines, that are not "lasting" and "destroy the land because they need a lot of water." These are surely trees that will end up feeding gigantic paper mills, which in turn will feed gigantic packing companies, which in turn are linked to gigantic trading companies, which in turn...How far back has the community been left! How broad and alien has the world become for them!

Article based on information from an interview held in July 2003 with Maria Rosario Gomez (Chayito) secular diocesan missionary from the Parish of San Miguel Arcangel and Maria Angelina Miranda, Diocesan Women's Coordinator (CODIMUJ), Chiapas, Mexico, e-mail: codimuj@yahoo.com.mx