
Brazil: Hope is born for peoples and forests

In 2002, hope overcame fear. In 2003, hope may result in a political agreement between the middle class voters who, devastated by unemployment and impoverished by the economic policy, lost their fear of change, and the worker voters who, hounded by poverty and violence, no longer fear being happy.

Intrinsically linked to the expectations of a change in the deteriorated social situation, is the possibility of environmental policy taking a turn for the better. According to the declarations of the president of Brazil, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva: "It is clear that today the main pressure on natural resources is caused by the misery affecting part of the poorest population. The Workers' Party (Partido de los Trabajadores - PT) does not consider environmental protection to be set apart from other structural policies fighting against poverty, such as the agrarian reform, the agricultural policy, the restoration of rivers and springs, the national environmental sanitation policy. There is no doubt that many situations giving rise to human and ecological risks in our country would be avoided if the people who are obliged to emigrate to urban belts or environmentally protected zones, could remain in their place of origin, protected by suitable public policies.

For this reason, our proposals are aimed at reconciling environmental protection with generation of employment, based on the many experiences that have been developed by farmers' associations and cooperatives, municipal and state governments, social movements and NGOs. It is necessary to carry out a socio-environmental survey by zones in Brazil, to identify the most appropriate solution for each ecosystem and social sector. As is public knowledge, in general, the poorest population lives in areas at risk and ends up by causing more impacts on the environment in order to survive. In this case, we will have programmes for environmental restoration providing jobs for these people.

Regarding the Amazon, which is a strategic natural, cultural, economic and social heritage of Brazil and of the planet, it is important to make clear that we will change settlement and agricultural policies that so far have devastated without generating employment or income for the local population. The Amazon is seen as a frontier where rapid and easy profit can be made, without stopping to consider the consequences for the environment or the communities. When mention is made of 'Amazon occupation,' frequently the prevailing and erroneous idea is that this is a demographic void, a sort of no-man's land. In fact, no less than 20 million Brazilians live there, and there are many experiences reconciling environmental protection, social objectives, institutional and technological innovations and significant economic benefits."

As a first step, giving out promising signs, the new government appointed Senator Marina Silva as Minister of the Environment. According to the Minister, her arrival at the ministry is a result of a historical process, starting with the experience of the environmentalist and former leader of the rubber-tappers, Chico Mendes, murdered in 1988, and the PT governments in the State of Acre. The minister lived with the environmentalist from the age of 17 to the age of 28 and participated in all the actions undertaken against the devastation of the Amazon that Chico Mendes organised, and also those in defence of the Acre rubber-tappers. "What is happening today is only a demonstration that Chico Mendes' dream was not in vain and that the seeds he planted will certainly bear much fruit,"

she declared.

Marina Silva promised to follow a policy for rationalisation in the sector. She has stated that the new government cannot be bound to the "rationale of what is possible," but that it must adopt a different position to face challenges. According to her: "we must put the stage of 'it can't be done' behind us, and go on to a stage of how we are going to do it." She considers her appointment to be a "sign that the issue of the environment is going to play a strategic role in the Lula government, due to the fact that Brazil is an extremely diverse country and for this reason needs an ethical relationship between those who have the technology and the money and those who have the traditional knowledge and the natural resources."

According to Marina, the priorities of her Ministry are the Amazon, preservation of water resources, the struggle against deforestation and the problem of urban settlements. "First of all we want to get the environmental policy to act jointly with the other Government actions, and secondly, we must have an environmental policy giving priority to sustainable development," stated the minister.

She underscored the importance of civil participation in decisions on environmental policy and criticised the lack of monitoring to enforce laws in the sector. According to Marina, institutions need to be "empowered to enforce the law."

Article based on information from: "Em defesa do meio ambiente", Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Linha Aberta. Brasil, 11 June, http://www.lainsignia.org/2002/junio/ecol_007.htm ; "2003 promete ser um ano "quente", Correio da cidadania, <http://www.correiodacidade.com.br/ed327/editorial.htm> ; "Para Marina, Lula mandou recado para Bush com anúncio de ministério", Ricardo Mignone, Folha Online, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fofha/brasil/ult96u43391.shtml>