
Indigenous Peoples: Guardians of the Forests

Brazilian military dictator Emilio Garrastazu Medici may well be considered as one of the most prominent examples of the racist and destructive approach to forests that prevailed during the second half of the 20th century in most tropical countries, where similar examples of promoters of such approach can be easily identified throughout Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America. When inaugurating the Transamazonian highway in 1970 --the beginning of the end for many indigenous groups and large expanses of Amazon forest-- he stated that this would open up a "land without men to men without land". For him, indigenous peoples did not even exist, while forests only meant land to be cleared for "productive activities". Women --indigenous or not-- apparently did not exist at all.

Much has changed in thinking since then, though much still needs to be changed in practice. But the fact is that no-one in his/her common senses --except perhaps the President of a very powerful nation-- can think of expressing him/herself in that way without having to pay a huge political price. Although many policies are still aimed at depriving indigenous peoples of their rights and exploiting their forests, they now have to be disguised under a "green" and "humanitarian" discourse, precisely because the situation has changed.

These changes are the result of long struggles at the local, national and international levels. Some of those struggles began under the environmental banner and were aimed at protecting the world's forests. Other struggles originated in the defense of indigenous peoples' rights to their territories. Increasingly, people and organizations fighting under the environmental or social banners, began to realize that the struggle was one: that forests contained peoples and that those peoples were the guardians of the forests. This new perception greatly strengthened the struggle by uniting many more people around a common aim.

The struggle has been carried out in different arenas, ranging from local opposition to specific "development" projects --logging, mining, oil exploitation, dams, plantations, shrimp farming-- to national and international lobbying and campaigning efforts. At the same time, indigenous peoples were creating their own organizations and networks in order to participate directly at all levels, ensuring that their specific viewpoints were reflected in the debates, especially in international human rights fora. These parallel campaigns led to the establishment of formal and informal alliances between the Indigenous Peoples movement and NGO movements willing to work together for the common aim of empowering forest peoples as the more just and practical way of ensuring forest conservation.

The result of these activities is impressive. In relatively few years, indigenous peoples have become increasingly visible and influential and many of their concerns have been incorporated to international and national legislation. They have become an actor to be taken into account. Although some or many of their rights may be still unrecognized in different countries--either in law or in practice-- neither governments nor corporations can ignore them any more.

The Amazon of the Brazilian dictator has now become a "forest with peoples" fighting for their rights, while his "men without land" have created a powerful landless peasant movement struggling for land

held by the local elite outside the forest. Similar changes have occurred and are occurring in many other countries throughout the world and all the articles contained in this bulletin reflect many of the processes and struggles now taking place.

But despite those impressive advances, much still needs to change in order to match theory with practice. As indigenous peoples know by experience, legal recognition of their rights is a necessary but usually insufficient condition to ensure full respect of those rights, particularly within the framework of the globalized model now being imposed on the world's peoples by corporate power. In that context, empowerment of indigenous peoples and other local communities is the way forward to confront corporate control over people and resources. Within the forest, this means that responsibility over forest management needs to be transferred back to the traditional guardians and owners of the forest: the indigenous peoples. Although still in its initial stages, this is starting to happen, which opens up hope for the future of both forests and forest peoples.