Community Forest Management: A feasible and necessary alternative

Ten years after the Earth Summit, deforestation continues to advance in most of the countries of the world, and in particular in tropical regions. In our successive bulletins we have abundantly recorded cases and processes of destruction, behind which in one way or another, it is possible to perceive the hand of the North.

Although this is the predominant model, advancing with all the force of globalisation and the power mechanisms it has at its disposal (namely multilateral financial institutions, the World Trade Organisation, credit conditionalities etc.), there is also another model or other different models. These are the systems that indigenous peoples and local forest-dependent communities have developed over hundreds or thousands of years. These societies have a rich tradition in forest management on the basis of totally different parameters from those of the predominant model, based on the community and with the objective of conservation. They have been ancestral custodians of this ecosystem as it is an intrinsic part of their way of life and undoubtedly, they have become an obstacle to the economic forces which, following their profit-making equation are attempting to destroy it. For this reason, these forces have tried to silence these traditions and to make them invisible.

For many years, forest policy has been based on the notion that local forest users were ignorant and destructive. The State authorities in capital cities, responsible for policy-making, looked down on the knowledge and capacities of the indigenous peoples and local communities, overlooking what was obvious: they were the most interested parties in the sustainable management of the forests as these were their source of life --no one better than these peoples knew forest ecosystem functioning and management.

It is thus that the so-called experts classified indigenous forest management practices, implying a sustainable rotation system, together with those of settlers-farmers herded by governmental policies towards tropical areas (and for whom the forest was more of an obstacle than a resource), accusing them all --indigenous peoples and farmers-- of being the main agents causing forest degradation.

This prejudiced vision prevailed for a long time, but recently forest communities have launched a process of empowerment, making their positions known, setting up local, regional, national and international alliances, linking themselves with other sectors of civil society with similar positions, demanding respect for their rights, dialoguing, defending their territories, expressing their positions in international fora.

And at this time, when the economic, social and environmental impacts of the industrial and Western development model are revealed as more than sufficient proof of unsustainability, when the loss of the ancient harmonic links between humans and nature --which up to now had enabled the life of our species on the Earth-- hurts and is felt in its tragic dimensions, a change becomes imperious, a change implying a return to the sources. And it is in this sense, against the prevailing power that the community-based natural resource management systems become visible once again and arise with the force of an alternative to be followed.

In 1978, during the World Forestry Congress "Forests for People," a gradual change of perspective started to gain acceptance on an international scale, insofar as people started recognising that those who most know about forests are those living in them.

On the basis of successful cases and of the analysis of others that were not so successful, a movement has been established, both at national and international level, gathering those who seek to promote community forest management. At the level of international processes --and in particular the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)-- this current has materialised in the Community Forest Management Caucus, which met in June in Bali, Indonesia, at the same time as the last preparatory meeting for the WSSD. Those who participated in the Caucus --among which the WRM-- have committed themselves to actively promote community forest management as an alternative which is not only feasible, but its incorporation into the WSSD would be socially and environmentally desirable, as a solution to the forest crisis.

Beyond more or less elaborate technical definitions, the name itself of "community forest management" already expresses its characteristics quite precisely. However, it might be useful to identify at least some of the minimum assumptions for it to be considered as such.

In the first place, the community management system seeks to guarantee access and control over forest resources to the communities living in them, but mainly to those who depend on the forest to satisfy their economic, social, cultural and spiritual needs. Forest management should be aimed at offering security not only to the present generation but also to coming generations, and also at increasing the possibility of sustainability. It therefore is based on three principles:

- the rights and responsibilities for forest resources should be clear, safe and permanent.
- forests should be managed in an appropriate way so that they can supply benefits and added value.
- forest resources should be handed down in good condition to ensure their future viability.

In general terms, the concept incorporates basic defining elements that do not attempt to refer to a single model but to a diversity of models. Each one will have its own special characteristics, as a result of the culture and the environmental characteristics of the site, but all of them within a conceptual framework transcending the merely technical.

Such a conceptual framework includes a holistic vision of the world, spanning ecological, social, political, economic, moral and spiritual factors. Its moral values are based on harmony and not on conflict; social values are seen in links based on co-operation and association among community groups; ecological values seek to integrate people and their environment with economy on a local scale through the adoption of a multifunctional and multiproduct approach. In this framework, the economy seeks to reduce poverty, promoting equity and self-sufficiency; and social integration aims at promoting local development based in the communities. Furthermore, democracy in decisions on local resources implies that measures should be adopted by the community itself, in the ways it decides to. In turn, spirituality and culture are an integral part of the forest communities who consider the forest to be the home of their ancestors, of spirits and sacred gods, giving it a much wider dimension than that of a purely commercial one.

It is important to note that this is not a theoretical suggestion, but a description of real situations existing throughout all the continents. Community forest management exists and is increasingly visible, in spite of the opposition or insufficient support it receives on the part of governments and international organisations.

In this framework, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg offers a good opportunity to disseminate this approach as an alternative to the predominant destructive model. The Forest Community Management Caucus is working to gather forces and to try and have an influence on governments as a way of having an impact on how the texts of international agreements are drawn up, on identifying strategies and mechanisms to create a world movement that will go beyond summit meetings, establishing links with other similar groups, making the most of the presence of the mass media to reach public opinion and thus be able to create awareness.

In Johannesburg the governments have the possibility of taking the community forest management system as a reference and of attempting to change the predominant course of forest policy. Whether they take these suggestions into consideration or not will reveal the degree of commitment they have with forest conservation.

Article based on information from: "Forests, People and Rights", by Liz Chidley, edited by Carolyn Marr. Down to Earth, International Campaign for Ecological Justice in Indonesia, Special Report, June 2002, http://dte.gn.apc.org/srfin.htm ; "When there's a Way, there's a Will", Report 1: Developing Sustainability through the Community Ecosystem Trust, by Michael M'Gonigle, Brian Egan, Lisa Ambus, and Heather Mahony, David Boyd, Bryan Evans, Eco-Research Chair of Environmental Law and Policy, University of Victoria, Canada, and the International Network of Forests and Communities, July 2001, http://www.forestsandcommunities.org/PDF/CET%20Flyer.pdf