
Forest peoples: A ray of hope

Tropical rainforests are among the world's most diverse and at the same time most threatened ecosystems on Earth. While governments have agreed on the diagnosis, they have failed in the implementation of global and national measures for ensuring their conservation. Within that context, it is important to highlight some fundamental issues which have yet to be truly taken on board for forest conservation to be possible.

The first issue is that forests are not empty. Tropical forests have been inhabited by indigenous and traditional peoples for hundreds of thousands of years, well before the creation of most of the modern national states. Each of those peoples have a very precise knowledge of the boundaries of the territory used, managed and owned by them.

Linked to this knowledge, the second issue to highlight is that forest peoples hold the rights to those territories by virtue of first settlement. However these rights are not recognized by most national governments, which declare that forests legally belong to the state. This legal injustice --in most cases concocted by colonial rule-- paves the way to forest destruction through government concessions for large scale exploitation, including industrial logging, mining, oil drilling, plantations and many other destructive activities.

The third issue is that forest peoples hold the knowledge about the forest. Proof of this is that for centuries they managed to live with the forest while fulfilling all their material and spiritual needs through skillful management. The causes of most modern destructive practices is usually found in external pressures on forests from government policies rather than in forest peoples' themselves.

The fourth and perhaps most important issue regarding the future of the forests is that forest peoples are the ones more directly interested in their conservation, because forests not only ensure their livelihoods, but are an integral part of their way of life, where respect for nature is at the core of their culture. They are not mere "stakeholders" but "rights-holders" and as such they are the most willing (and able) to protect their resources in the long term.

Forest peoples thus constitute a ray of hope for the forests' future. They hold the rights and the knowledge and their physical and cultural survival depends on ensuring their conservation. In many cases, forest peoples are adapting their knowledge to a changing situation, working out and implementing alternatives for sustainable and equitable livelihoods, away from the official and already meaningless "sustainable development" discourse which governments and TNCs have emptied of the meaning it initially carried.

The ray of hope represented by those peoples is, however, still not strong enough and needs support from all organizations working for human rights and forest conservation. Being the main on-the-ground opposition to forest destruction, forest peoples form a basis for the establishment of worldwide alliances of people willing to support their struggle. Such support should not be seen, however, as "us" assisting "them", but as a collaborative effort to ensure present and future livelihoods for all people on Earth.

The Johannesburg Summit is an opportunity for governments to re-commit themselves to forest conservation. The way to prove their political will would be to explicitly acknowledge the territorial rights of indigenous and other traditional forest peoples and to commit themselves to incorporating this in their national legislation. This would be the first step in the right direction, because it would create the necessary basic conditions for making forest conservation possible. Will governments finally do what needs to be done and allow this ray of hope to shine?