The alternative forest treaty: NGOs complied with their commitments

It is worth remembering that during the 1992 Earth Summit (or United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) two processes took place simultaneously: the official summit and the parallel forum of non governmental and indigenous peoples organisations.

Governments were unable to reach an agreement on forests and they ended up by adopting a "Non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests". Still, they did agree on Agenda 21's chapter 11: combatting "deforestation". Ten years later, however, forests keep on disappearing at the same rate as then.

On their part, civil society organisations and social movements agreed on a number of commitments in Rio, enshrined in the so called alternative treaties, one of which was the "forest treaty". It is very enlightening to re-read it now, because it is possible to verify that NGOs have basically fulfilled their commitments, in contrast with the almost complete failure from governments to comply with theirs. As an example, we will quote some of the commitments taken on by the NGOs in the alternative treaty, summarizing the relevant actions they have carried out. However, we recommend reading the entire document, which is accessible at the web address provided at the end of this article.

Among other commitments, NGOs agreed on the following:

* "Take the initiative in supporting local populations in the management, conservation and recovery of forests, with regard for the integrity of the forests, preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, promotion of social justice and democracy and improvement of the quality of life of the local people".

That has precisely been one of the main activities carried out by NGOs during these past ten years. Both local communities and NGOs have had to do it in confrontation with governmental policies which would impact negatively on both biodiversity and social justice.

* "Formulate ... global proposals about forestry and climate policies, and will apply pressure so that government decisions on these subjects be taken jointly with other governments".

Among the many actions carried out in all the relevant international fora to implement this commitment, it is worth noting that NGOs and IPOs were in charge of implementing one of the Proposals for Action developed by the official process of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests: the implementation of a global workshop for the analysis of the underlying causes of deforestation. Among the more that one hundred proposals for action agreed upon by governments in that Forum, this was the only one to be truly implemented. Furthermore, the global workshop in Costa Rica was the culmination of a series of seven regional workshops and an Indigenous Peoples' workshop, which included a number of case studies and synthesis documents. The full results of the process were finally presented to the following United Nations Forum on Forests, which proceeded to first thank the organisers and then to immediately shelve the documentation.

* "Campaign for the conservation of forests, for survival and improvement in the quality of life for people living in forests, the implementation of development projects which reduce pressure on forests, and the elimination of pollutants".

Both the WRM and many other environmental organisations (Global Forest Coalition, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Oilwatch, Third World Network, International Network of Forests and Communities, Mangrove Action Project, to mention but some whose positions are included in this bulletin) and Indigenous Peoples' Organisations (including the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests), work on a permanent basis in this respect, and have carried out numerous campaigns on this issue.

* "Fight against political pressures caused by external debt, that increases the rate of deforestation and degradation of forest ecosystems; and suggest and encourage alternative economic models compatible with conservation of forest ecosystem".

NGOs from all over the world have been denouncing the destructive effects of market deregulation and trade liberalisation on forests and forest peoples --imposed by the power of transnationals within the globalisation framework-- which has in fact resulted in a further increased external debt.

Furthermore, the community forest management approach, originating from the social movements and the indigenous peoples' resistance, is also gaining strength as an alternative model, and within the WSSD process it is expressed in the Caucus on Community Forest Management.

* "Denounce forest practices that accelerate soil erosion and cause desertification, hydrological destabilization or habitat damage".

NGOs have constantly denounced large scale forestry practices promoted by governments and implemented by logging companies. They have also made strong efforts to find alternative management practices in the areas most prone to erosion and desertification.

* "Encourage coalition making and information exchange at regional, national and international levels for the purposes of this treaty".

This has been a permanent activity during the last ten years, where the existing networks have been strengthened and new ones have emerged --both among NGOs and with other organisations, particularly indigenous peoples and local communities' organisations-- which has broadened the range of a national, regional and international movement oriented towards the protection of forests and forest peoples' rights.

The above is just a very brief synthesis of the thousands of examples regarding the actions that social movements have been carrying out in their defence of forests, in line with what they had committed to in Rio. Their merit in having fulfilled this --and keeping on doing it-- is still greater taking into account that most actions have been carried out precisely against the policies of the same governments and international agencies that in Rio committed themselves to protecting the forests.

In sum: NGOs have fulfilled their commitments while governments have not complied with theirs.

The "Forest Treaty" is available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/WSSD/treaty.htm