
Ecuador: Forests and biodiversity are being privatised

Within the rationale for privatisation in Ecuador, the Ministry of the Environment is intending to delegate its functions and responsibilities to a private law body, CORFORE (Corporación de Promoción y Desarrollo Forestal del Ecuador – Ecuadorian Corporation for Forestry Promotion and Development).

The Board of Directors of CORFORE would comprise representatives from the following institutions: Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, CORPEI (Corporation for export and investment promotion), AIMA (Association of Timber Industrialists), CONIFOR (National College of Foresters), Federation of Chambers of Agriculture and CODEMPE (Council for the Development of the Peoples of Ecuador).

Among its tasks CORFORE would be responsible for the establishment of development policies and strategies and promoting productive forestry management programmes and projects; determining the zones for permanent forest use and forest lands; promoting a system of forest land titling; developing carbon sequestration programmes and environmental forestry services and even defining the criteria and values for granting incentives to manage native forests, promoting voluntary certification.

The justification for the creation of CORFORE states that Ecuador possesses “availability of native forests.” Are they referring to the remaining 4% of forests on the Ecuadorian Coast or perhaps to those registered as State Forest Heritage, or to the indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian territories or to the Protected Areas? This new step towards privatisation --where now forestry interests would have a legal power of decision they were so far lacking-- means the loss of the enormous biodiversity existing in the various forest ecosystems in the country and the promotion of substitution of forests by tree plantations.

The accelerated process of deforestation the country is suffering --calculated at around 300.000 hectares a year-- one of the highest in Latin America, will be made worse due to the fact that the main cause of this dramatic situation, the timber industry, will be issuing policies from CORFORE in conformity with its economic interests.

The Corporation will obtain its income from the exploitation of timber (stumpage), through funds-in-trust (US\$ 600,000 for the sale of Cotopaxi tree plantations) funds from public and private donations, allocations from the State’s general budget, foreign debt exchange, environmental services, etc.

Furthermore, this industrial sector will have access to economic resources coming from the concept of carbon sequestering through the Kyoto Protocol’s so-called “Clean Development Mechanism.” This mechanism is under questioning because, instead of contributing to the reduction of carbon emissions by the industrialised countries, this responsibility is delegated to the countries of the South through monoculture tree plantations that will supposedly act as “sinks” for carbon emissions from the countries of the North.

Through CORFORE an attempt is also being made to determine land use, in accordance with the

interests of industry, with the consequent loss of the right to use the land by the local populations and to the detriment of Ecuador's Forest Heritage and forests in general.

The project is being dealt with secretly, there is no transparency and the idea is to impose it on the country in the same way as for the privatisation of the State's strategic resources.

As if this were not enough, at this time the National Congress has before it a proposal for the establishment of another private law body, CORPROBIO (Corporación para la Promoción de la Biodiversidad – Corporation for the Promotion of Biodiversity). Its main objective is to place biodiversity on the international market. In the words of the Ministry of the Environment itself, the entity will seek to “generate synergy between the State, society and the private sector, to boost and promote bio-trade through the generation of sustainable impact investments, that will enable Ecuador and its biodiversity resources to be positioned with comparative advantages on a global level.”

Whatever the meaning of this statement is (what does sustainable impact investments mean?), what is certain is that the proposal was prepared by the Ministry of the Environment, behind the back of civil society and the local governments. It is very probable that the proposal will be presented with pomp at the forthcoming Conference of the Parties to the Biodiversity Convention, as a step forward. For Ecuadorian ecologists, to place the country's rich biodiversity in the hands of those who are destroying it is, without any doubt, a major step backwards.

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