Colombia: Local communities affected by shrimp companies

From 1982 onwards, the shrimp industry has been settling in the Cispatá bay, an ecosystem harbouring one of the most exuberant mangroves in the Colombian Caribbean. Presently there are four shrimp industries fully established in this site, covering an extension of approximately 700 hectares. The semi-intensive productive system these farms apply has a daily water recharge in its ponds, reaching an average of up to 15% of its volume, leading to a daily dumping into the estuary of large quantities of water saturated by organic waste.

After 14 long years of carrying out this practice uninterruptedly, in 1996 the Soledad marshes, one of the most important bodies of water associated to the estuary, started showing the first signs of unbalance: the appearance of filamentous blooms of algae and the subsequent death of fish and shell-fish. This phenomenon was to be expected if we consider that the estuary of Cispatá bay, due to its hydrodynamic characteristics, has a low level of daily replenishment of its waters, particularly in the extreme south-west of the estuary. Evidently the shrimp industry located in the area was most affected, as its production dwindled, but the serious prejudice to local artisan fishers should not be forgotten.

The shrimp industry's response was quick to come. Far from generating a change of attitude regarding the considerable dumping of waste water into the estuary, it promoted and started to build, with the endorsement of the environmental authorities, an artificial channel that was to communicate the Soledad marsh directly to the Caribbean sea, in order to increase its daily replenishment of water based on high and low tides. There is no doubt that the water quality conditions in this part of the estuary would improve, giving the shrimp industry peace of mind. However the greater inflow of salt water directly from the sea involves a disproportionate amount of salinity in the estuary and therefore the imminent penetration of a saline band (through the water table) towards neighbouring agricultural zones, sustaining almost 2,500 families that live in nine rural communities.

Such a blunder caused the local communities to complain about the situation to the local and regional authorities, without achieving any attention on their part. The power of the shrimp industries involved was such that the works not only had a permit from the environmental authority without any prior technical assessment but were also using public machinery. Once all the possible legal mechanisms had been exhausted, and in view of the imminence of the work, the communities resorted to force to stop the construction, achieving their purpose after various days of struggle, in which about 400 peasants took part. Faced by the public scandal caused by the peasant protests, the shrimp companies halted the project.

It is worthwhile stressing the misleading arguments used by the shrimp companies to convince the authorities and local leaders of the soundness of their project. They talked of "restoration of the drainage system" to improve the operation of the estuary as an ecosystem, and of the generation of hundreds of jobs that would benefit the poor local communities. None of this was true, given that the underlying interest of the project was to get rid of organic waste that was being dumped every day into the estuary.

On having to abandon the project for a channel to the sea, they were obliged to improve their internal systems for the management of organic waste, having to build an artificial wetland as a bio-filter. In spite of the considerable investments made and an aggressive advertising campaign leading to a national prize for ecology, the environmental situation of the Soledad marsh and the rest of the estuary grows worse every day.

Five years after the first attempt at increasing the flow and ebb of water in the estuary, the shrimp companies are insisting again with their project. What happened to the bio-filter that won the prize? The project is essentially the same “Restoration of the drainage system,” with the same Good Samaritan purposes: generation of employment and improvement of ecosystem functions. The major difference now lies in the fact that the project managers are no longer the shrimp industry, but the environmental authority itself, in this case the Regional Autonomous Corporation of the Sinú and San Jorge Valleys (CVS) and the municipality of San Antero.

“We have about 800 million pesos (approximately 348,000 dollars) to restore the drainage system in the estuary,” explained a CVS official to the peasant and fisher communities, as part of the permanent invitation to participate in the project.

Should the project be implemented, its effects on the peasant agri-systems in the nine rural communities located in the municipalities of San Antero, San Bernardo del Viento and Lorica, will be devastating, as the regulation of the Sinú river channel by the URRA I hydroelectric plant has significantly decreased the flow of fresh water towards the estuary. Faced by this new regional scenario, the salinity of land used by the local communities for agricultural and animal husbandry activities will be hastened, inducing the displacement of thousands of families to the neighbouring urban zones.

Presently the interest of the shrimp industry is not only to increase the capacity for water flow and ebb in the estuary, but to expand towards agricultural zones that have become saline due to the effect of the URRA I hydroelectric project and the “drainage system restoration” promoted by the environmental authority.

For this reason, the peasant and fisher communities, members of ASPROCIG, who have ancestrally used the lands in the Sinú river delta, are calling all people, NGOs and grass-roots organisations throughout the world to join in their struggle and to state their rejection of the project to the Colombian authorities.