
Chile: Community forestry as an alternative model

The Chilean forestry model is known in Latin America because of its use of frontline technology in large scale pine and eucalyptus plantations, the rapid growth of wood-related exports and State subsidies for the promotion of plantations. Little is said of the social and environmental impacts of these fast growing plantations.

The challenge of finding alternatives to this model, having a higher level of sustainability from the economic, environmental and social standpoints and a greater level of cultural relevance leads us to examine other ways of forest management practised by peasant and indigenous communities.

Since pre-Hispanic times, the indigenous communities used their forests to satisfy a wide range of needs. Many products were harvested and gathered including fruit, mushrooms, stems, medicinal plants, firewood, wood and forage. The forests were also part of a cultural landscape where traditional rules regulated access to forest resources, leaving excluded zones and avoiding the problems of what has been called “the tragedy of the commons.”

Following the colonisation of indigenous territories, only a small part of the native forests remained under community control and deforestation spread extensively in the Centre and South of Chile. In spite of this, there are still wide areas of forest inhabited by indigenous and peasant communities who have inherited part of the tradition for multiple forest use. In a silent way with very little external support, community forestry continues to be practiced and has contributed to the persistence of the communities and of their native forests.

In the multiple use of forests and in the community rules for controlling and accessing this resource, we can find some keys to the sustainability of community forestry. To obtain various products and services from the forests, biodiversity needs to be maintained in addition to healthy ecosystems. If rules exist regulating access to various forest zones and areas, conservation and equity in the distribution of benefits will be easier to achieve.

The continuity of this way of using the forest is no longer guaranteed, particularly in the present context of strong external pressure on forests. The cities in the South of Chile are increasingly demanding firewood for domestic and industrial use, forestry plantations are widespread, surrounding communities and replacing native village forests and major projects are established for the exploitation of native forests for boards or chips.

Furthermore, the indigenous and peasant communities themselves have undergone severe changes. Obtaining income and employment based on the forests is in stronger demand than in the past. The traditional rules for forest use are weaker in the new generations.

The subject is even more complex if we consider the demands made by national and global society for communities to continue preserving their forests because of their increasing value as a source of environmental services such as landscape values, biodiversity, production of water and carbon storage.

In response to this situation, over the past 5 years various initiatives have arisen, supporting community forestry in Chile from international cooperation agencies associated to national governmental and non-governmental organizations. The idea is to set up a different forestry development model that will contribute to forest conservation and improve community quality of life.

This is an incipient movement compared to the predominant model, and requires much systematisation of experience, participatory research, dissemination and promotion. If this initial effort is successful, it will demonstrate the urgent need of support for community forestry, both by the State and by individual citizens. The universities should include it in their curricula and research programmes and consumers should start to prefer forest products and services that are sustainably managed by the communities.

The Chilean situation would not appear to be an exception among the countries with forests in the Southern Hemisphere. In the same way as the industrial forestry model which builds international networks enabling it to exist, community forestry should advance in setting up networks that will effectively contribute to generating a movement having an impact in this field, becoming incorporated into public and private agenda and entering the universities and research centres and installing itself in citizen awareness.