
Those who protect and those who destroy the forests

For years the mainstream "experts" were wrong in the identification of the main causes leading to deforestation and they were thus equally wrong in the solutions they put forward to save the forests. According to them, one of the main causes of deforestation was the use of fuelwood by "the poor". Their solution was thus to put in place eucalyptus plantations to provide "the poor" with firewood. According to them, people living in the forests were responsible for deforestation and therefore needed to be removed from the forest in order to protect the latter from the former. People were thus expelled from their homelands under the pretence of protecting the forests. This simplistic "blame the poor" approach did not even come up with the solution that if the poor were the main cause of deforestation, then all efforts should be focused on the eradication of poverty. Instead, major efforts were dedicated to eradicate the poor from the forests!

While those experts were hard at work, so were the true agents of deforestation. Logging companies continued to log --legally and illegally. Dam builders continued damming the rivers and covering millions of hectares of forests under the dams' reservoirs. Mangrove forests continued to disappear at the hands of industrial shrimp farmers. Export-oriented agricultural crops and cattle raising cleared increasing areas of forests. Industrial tree plantations --pulpwood, timber, oil-palm and others-- resulted in the substitution of vast areas of diverse forests by alien tree monocultures. Mining and oil companies continued to destroy and pollute the forests.

All those processes have resulted --and still result-- in severe local and global environmental impacts and all those impacts result in human suffering. Millions of people either live in the forest or their livelihoods depend on the forest. Deforestation thus generates poverty, simply because all those millions of people are deprived of their livelihoods once the forest disappears or once they are "resettled" elsewhere. It also generates widespread human rights abuses and many people have been killed --and are still being killed-- for defending their rights and for protecting the same forests that the world's governments declare to seek to protect.

However, it would be wrong to highlight only direct causes of deforestation such as logging, shrimp farming, plantations, dams and so on. It is important to go deeper into the matter and to realize that behind those causes are other --underlying-- which constitute the root cause of the problem. Among these is the issue of overconsumption in the North, which results in an ever increasing demand of cheap raw materials --wood, oil, minerals, etc.-- and equally cheap farm products such as soy beans, meat or shrimps. Making supply of those commodities possible are crucial actors such as the IMF, World Bank, Regional Development Banks, Northern consultancies, export-credit agencies, bilateral "aid" agencies. And in between are corrupt government officials and equally corrupt northern and corporate corruptors. The end result is deforestation and the violation of the rights of local peoples.

This issue of the WRM bulletin includes --as most of the previous ones-- many of the typical situations, where forests are under threat because of the combined action of actors such as governments, corporations, multilateral and bilateral agencies, while they are being protected by indigenous and other local peoples. Reality is thus showing that it is not the "poor" who are destroying the forest, but very powerful interests --local and transnational. Protecting the forests

therefore implies supporting local peoples' struggles for their rights while at the same time working to generate conditions to address the root causes of deforestation at both the national and international levels. Only when that happens, forests will be saved and forest and forest-dependent peoples will be able to live in peace and harmony with nature.