
Ecuador: Forestry Law for the enrichment of loggers

In spite of the experiences accumulated during all these years with regard to the damages caused by large-scale tree plantations, the draft bill of the so-called Special Law for Sustainable Forestry Development in Ecuador is inspired in the Chilean legislation of the 1970s, which has been the model for the legal framework that regulates forestry activities in other South American countries. Such model is based precisely on the promotion of tree plantations, while forests occupy a secondary place in importance.

Article 15 of this Ecuadorian draft forestry bill establishes that the state will promote the implementation and management of tree plantations for production and protection. According to Article 23, subsidies, tax exemptions and the provision of public security services will be provided as incentives.

This scheme will be useful to make forestry companies -to a large extent responsible for the high deforestation rates in Ecuador- rich, given that only plantations of more than one hectare will receive such subsidies. In this way agroforestry, natural fences, windbreaks and other projects that can benefit small farmers, peasant communities, indigenous peoples and afroecuadorian communities are excluded.

An original aspect of the law -if compared with the Chilean model- is the way in which it intends to raise funds to pay such subsidies. Sources mentioned in Article 28 are related to taxes for the use of fossil fuels and with negotiations on carbon sinks, in accordance with the Clean Development Mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol. The rationale underlying this proposal is coincidental with the one that Northern countries and transnational oil companies have imposed in the process of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This logic, which leads to the commercialization of nature is not operative but helps to make essentially unsustainable projects look "green".

Based on this rationale, those who are most responsible for the increase in the level of greenhouse gases associated with global warming have proposed different activities in Southern countries, so that Northern countries do not have to reduce their emissions, which would allegedly negatively affect their economies. The promotion of tree plantations and the manipulation of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems -especially the oceans- to capture atmospheric carbon are two of these measures. Even though this kind of initiatives lack serious scientific basis (in fact the latest research findings on the issue consider that tree plantations are not useful as carbon sinks), several Southern governments -now including Ecuador- seem to have found the magic wand to increase their countries' incomes. Forestry companies have obviously accompanied them. Nevertheless, social and environmental effects of such "brilliant ideas" -already proven in several countries- are ignored.

Environmental NGOs and some academics are proposing instead a change in the present production and consumption pattern based on oil, whereby oil would be left in the subsoil and humanity would resort to clean, renewable and low impact energy sources. At the same time, they are proposing the need to protect watersheds and forests, since primary and secondary forests are respectively carbon

reservoirs and sinks, apart from providing multiple benefits at the local and global levels. Unfortunately, it seems that Ecuador has got on the bandwagon of the easy but useless solution of plantations as carbon sinks. In case the law is passed this will be a lost opportunity for Ecuador, but a good one for forestry companies which -with the help of the state- are ready to make big money out of tree monocultures.

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