
WTO: will corporate interest prevail over forest conservation?

When the 1992 Earth Summit took place, it seemed as though governments had finally recognized that the world's environment was in trouble and that something needed to be done to save it. A number of important conventions were agreed upon regarding biodiversity, desertification and climate change, while forest conservation was taken up by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Although economic interest was present in all those processes, it seemed to be in relative balance with environmental concerns. But now the World Trade Organization has taken over the scenario and -unless opposition shows sufficient strength- will wipe out all the positive -though weak- steps taken during the past seven years for the protection of the environment.

Regarding forests, the WTO has become the chosen arena to protect corporations' interest threatened by environmental rules. Some few powerful corporations have managed to introduce their agenda by means of some few powerful governments. Their message is clear: if forest protection implies less profits, then it must be declared illegal. Corporate interest must prevail and current national and international environmental legislation will be considered as anti-"free" trade and subject to reprisals.

The corporate agenda includes the elimination of a number of "barriers to trade" in forest products. Those so-called barriers are tools that countries use to either protect their economy or the environment, or both. For instance, import and export tariffs increase forest products' prices and therefore lead to less consumption. Although clearly insufficient to address current overconsumption patterns, this is good for forests and bad for corporations. They are thus proposing further tariff reductions on forest products.

There are also a number of measures which governments use to protect forests, such as import or export quotas, or even log export bans, which result in less logging. Again, these measures are good for forests and bad for corporations. Their proposal is therefore that these should be considered as "non-tariff measures" against free trade and should be banned. Even certification schemes and legislation requiring recycling and waste recovery could be seen as barriers to free trade and considered illegal.

All the above -and much more- will be put forward in the coming ministerial conference which will take place next month in Seattle, USA, amid strong opposition from thousands of civil society representatives coming from all over the world to make their voices heard. The struggle will not be against trade in itself, but against the prevalence of corporate interest over the interest of peoples and their environment. People and nature are not mere "resources" for the achievement of profits regardless of the consequences to the local and global environment. Forests are not stands of timber waiting to be logged to increase corporations' profitability. They are the home of many peoples, the habitat of countless animal and plant species, a crucial element for climate stability, for ensuring fresh water supplies, for the conservation of soils. Their conservation must therefore prevail over corporations' economic profits. This is the message which will be present outside the meeting rooms and in the streets of Seattle. Government delegates will have to hear -whether they like it or not- the voice of the peoples. The future of humanity is at stake and they will have to define whose interests

to defend: their peoples and nature or corporations and environmental destruction.