
Chile: establishment experts and reality

During the "Intersessional experts meeting on the role of planted forests in sustainable development" held in Santiago, Chile, from 6 to 10 April 1999 several voices, from governments and forestry companies, advocated in favour of tree plantations (See "Our viewpoint" in this issue). In this regard, the representative of CORMA (Wood Corporation of Chile) Mr Fernando Raga made a presentation highlighting the role of "forest plantations" as "an effective and ecoefficient response to the human beings with sustainable volumes of timber, as they are established on relatively small spaces of land". He also stated that tree plantations "contribute to the conservation of vast expanses of natural forests that satisfy the need of soil conservation, biodiversity, recreation and other services". The harmonization between tree monocultures and natural forests, that seems to be the new strategy adopted in the discourse of the promoters of plantations, can be considered interesting and even appealing. Nevertheless it does not correspond to what is happening on the ground.

While the meeting was taking place in the capital, the conflict resulting from the expansion of plantations in the Southern region of the country, which invaded territories that traditionally belonged to the Mapuche people was going on: land occupations by groups of indigenous men, women and children; confrontations between the occupants and police forces that defended the interests of forest companies; unrest among peasants that feared occupations; a peaceful demonstration by a group of Mapuche in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Santiago during Easter trying to call the attention of the Catholic Church on their tragedy; the hunger strike of seven Mapuche people at the Workers Union headquarters in Concepcion, supporting their peoples' struggle; arbitrary detentions, violation of Human Rights and accusations of subversion against Mapuche activists. Nevertheless the "experts" as well as Chilean authorities -the CONADI (National Indigenous Corporation) included - chose to turn a blind eye to such reality.

In an open letter dated April 11th Arnaud Fuentes, researcher of the University of Perpignan, France, who visited the southern IX Region of Chile as part of his study of the historical process of land expropriations to the detriment of the Mapuche people, denounces the abuses performed by the police against the Mapuche of Temulemu and on himself during his one and a half month long stay in the region. The area, that is the scenario of strong conflicts between the indigenous communities and Forestal Mininco, belonged to the Mapuche till 1979. A law promoted by the military dictatorship dispossessed the communities of their land and paved the way to its appropriation by the company. As a result of Mr Fuentes' declarations, the authorities of the IX Region started procedures for his expulsion from the country, accusing him of subversion. In spite of those pressures, the Chilean Court of Justice ruled in his favour.

Conflicts caused by tree monoculture plantations in Chile are not new. Nor is the tragedy of the Mapuche nation, now linked to their expansion. Chilean temperate forests have suffered a severe reduction in their area to the hands of plantation companies. Their biodiversity is being progressively substituted by green deserts of trees. The claimed harmonization between plantations and natural forests does not actually occur, neither in temperate nor in tropical areas. As a matter of fact --as stated by the members of the NGO Forest Working Group present at the Santiago experts meeting-- large scale commercial plantations are a major direct cause for deforestation in many Southern

countries. Additionally, the argument that plantations only occupy "small spaces of land" is false; on the one hand, because the area of plantations has been rapidly increasing and on the other hand, because the problem is not how many hectares are planted at the global level, but to what extent plantations affect people and the environment at the local and regional level, regardless of their area in absolute or percentual figures.

The Chilean case exemplifies --among many other things-- the role of hired "experts": to justify "scientifically" what needs to be justified to favour either the forestry profession's corporate interest or, more importantly, the interests of large forestry corporations. All arguments against plantations --their impacts on people, water, biodiversity, soils-- will be dismissed by them as "scientifically unproven", even when supported by empirical evidence. Fortunately, there are also in Chile other experts, whose work is aimed at protecting the environment and at supporting local peoples' rights. Among these, we wish to highlight Rodrigo Catalan and Ruperto Ramos, whose presentation at the Latin American Workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation (available in WRM's web page), highlight the negative social and environmental impacts of plantations in Chile. This proves that, in spite of the establishment experts' hard work, reality is proving hard to be hidden much longer and the Chilean people are becoming increasingly aware of the lies which they have been fed with to support a socially and environmentally unsustainable forestry model.

Sources: "Plantations and sustainable development: the case of Chile", Fernando Raga, CORMA, March 1999; "How to see the forest through the trees", A contribution of the NGO Forest Working Group, Santiago de Chile, 6-10 April 1999; Mapulink, 13/4/99; Jorge Calbucura, 1/4/99, 3/4/99, 7/4/99.