
Ecuador: government tries to hand over mangroves to the private sector

Ecuador is currently facing an extremely serious social situation as a result of a number of unpopular economic measures adopted by the government -in line with IMF and World Bank recommendations- which have resulted in workers' strikes, peasant and indigenous peoples' demonstrations, road blockades, violence in many parts of the country, rumours of a possible military coup and generalized chaos within the country.

Among those measures, there is one which has received strong opposition from the environmental community and from the affected communities and which would further affect the country's mangrove ecosystems, many of which have already been destroyed by commercial shrimp farming.

In July 1998, the former Minister of the Environment, Flor Maria Valverde, had promised that she would take steps to ensure a permanent ban on mangrove clearcuts by the shrimp farming industry. By that time, the environmental NGO Fundecol had registered 745 cases of mangrove destruction by shrimp farm operators. However, far from disappearing, menaces on mangroves have increased since.

On March 2nd President Jamil Mahuad announced on a national broadcast that he had sent to the National Congress a draft bill for the so called Rationalization of Public Finances, that --among other measures to face the budget deficit-- establishes that shrimp farmers that use public lands would have to pay a fee for this use. In prior days, various newspapers warned that this measure was paving the way for shrimp company operators to purchase 60,000 hectares of land --apparently beaches and bays- along the Pacific coast. The operation would mean an income of US\$ 60 million dollars to the State budget. At the same time, the government added that the idea of opening new concession areas for shrimp farms would not be discouraged. Traditionally, concessions to shrimp entrepreneurs were in most cases (95% according to Fundecol) not granted in "beaches and bays" but in mangroves as well as in agricultural areas. This was possible because of the existence of false reports and generalized corruption rampant in public administration, which allowed the companies to declare --once the pools were already built-- that there were no mangroves or agricultural lands in the area.

Even though the text of the draft bill did not explicitly mention the possibility of coastal areas being sold to the shrimp entrepreneurs, the project caused justified alarm among environmental organizations in Ecuador and worldwide, since it was not difficult to realize that this was its final goal. In this regard, Sandra Cogliatore, President of the Chamber of Aquaculture publicly stated: "We will be the owners of the lands." In previous days, the Chamber of Aquaculture had strongly lobbied for the presidential draft bill to be passed on to the parliament. The industry even discussed the contents of the norm with the Minister of Trade, the Undersecretary of Fisheries, and the Merchant Navy (DIGMER).

Civil society quickly reacted to oppose this project, requesting international support to protest against this measure, that would worsen the already fragile situation of mangroves in Ecuador and would legalize the flagrant unlawfulness and predatory practices with which the shrimp industry has

always operated. Paradoxically, the economic crisis itself in which the country was plunged as a result of the announced economic measures halted, at least for the time being, the project. "It appears to us to be adequate that U\$S 1,000 is paid per hectare, but the time period and the form or mechanism of payment need to be discussed. At this moment, no one has U\$S 1,000 to pay ..." The serious political events and social unrest happening later diverted politicians' attention away from this issue. Nevertheless, the risk still persists.

Some reflections can be made in relation to these facts. The attitude of the Ecuadorian government needs to be highlighted. It has not hesitated in literally auctioning the natural resources of the country –in this case mangroves- to show its willingness to comply with the dictates of the international financing institutions, which demand a "balanced fiscal budget". In its view, the country's economy is completely divorced from the sustainable use of natural resources. Regarding the shrimp industry itself, it must be said that, after having obtained high profits through the depredation of coastal resources, it now tries to portray itself as cooperating with "development", since shrimp is one of the country's important export. The present situation is ideal for the industry, because it could result in it becoming the owner of a significant area of mangroves that would disappear to give place to shrimp farms. Coastal populations are not taken into account in decisions such as the one being put forward by the government. On the contrary, much of the shrimp industry's infrastructure has occupied and destroyed areas that are part of ancestral territories and until then occupied and managed sustainably by traditional communities that had found there food and shelter. Additionally, the intended boosting of shrimp farming --and consequent mangrove destruction-- does not take into account that mangroves act as natural barriers against the rise of the Pacific Ocean's water. Floods occurring during 1997 and 1998 as a consequence of "EL Niño" phenomenon, showed what is to be expected in coastal areas if mangroves continue to disappear due to the irresponsibility of the authorities and the greed of a few powerful and influential entrepreneurs.

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