Latin America's forests: the time is ripe for change

The Climate Change Convention meeting held in Argentina is a good opportunity to highlight the issue of forests and tree plantations in Latin America. We have therefore focused this issue of the Bulletin on a number of representative examples of the problems and struggles which are currently occuring in the region.

Government double-speak is exemplified -though by no means monopolized- by Brazil. While championing forest protection in global fora, its policies and actions continue resulting in further forest loss. Government-sponsored migration to the forest, conversion of forest lands to agriculture and cattle raising, forest fires, dam building and illegal logging continue unabated, while its global international discourse clearly pertains to the area of virtual reality, with little in common with what is actually happening at the ground level.

Large-scale tree plantations -one of the cherished solution of global technocrats to climate change- are increasingly being opposed by local people affected by their social and environmental impacts, as well as by most environmental NGOs. Struggles against them are mushrooming from Mexico to Argentina, but governments seem to be deaf and blind to peoples' opposition to such forestry model. We are improving the environment! they say. We are planting forests and countering the greenhouse effect! they add. Impacts on people, on water, on soils, on biodiversity are quickly dismissed as scientifically unproven facts. Supported by multilateral development institutions, bilateral aid agencies, northern consultancies and machinery providers, Latin American governments increasingly subsidize transnational wood-based companies with both Northern and Southern taxpayer money to increase the area of fast-growing tree monocultures. In most cases, such policy results in the substitution of forest ecosystems by plantations (therefore becoming a direct cause of deforestation), while in some few countries (particularly those located in temperate areas such as Uruguay and certain regions of Argentina), plantations substitute grassland, thereby implying the total destruction of the native prairie ecosystem.

Government-sponsored "development" projects continue resulting in further deforestation and forest degradation and in most cases the only visible change has been the inclusion of the word "sustainable" to the same type of projects which have proven to be detrimental to forests in the past..

Guyana's and Suriname's forests, for instance -some of the more well preserved forests in the region- are being destroyed by foreign mining and logging companies through concessions awarded by government, without the approval and with the opposition of indigenous peoples and other local communities who struggle to preserve the forest.

Mangroves throughout the region continue to be destroyed -with government support- by shrimp farming, with the aim of increasing exports to obtain foreign currency to pay back loans from international credit institutions. Local peoples, whose livelihoods depend to a large extent on products obtained from the mangroves, are deprived access to them and only receive back a completely degraded ecosystem once the shrimp farms are abandoned.

Oil and and increasingly gas exploitation are being promoted throughout the region, both by governments and multilateral institutions, with the resulting destruction of forests, (including water and air pollution and biodiversity loss) and peoples' livelihoods. Local communities are opposing such activity and a number of struggles are under way to halt it. Among them, we wish to highlight the successful struggle of the Cofan indigenous peoples in Ecuador (see article in this issue), who have recently closed down an oil well in their territory.

Deforestation is further increasing the consequences of natural disasters. The tragedy which recently happened in Honduras and Nicaragua during the occurrence of hurricane Mitch could have been much lesser if forests areas had not been cleared. Mudslides and deadly floods were the result of years of deforestation. Clearance of forest land in the region is always a direct or indirect result of government policies and not -as they try to portray- the result of ignorance and poverty. Unfair land-tenure policies, the promotion of logging and of the substitution of forests by other "more productive", export-oriented activities, as well as many other policies leading to deforestation, are all the result of government-led "development".

Road-building, now acklowledged as one of the major underlying causes of deforestation, continues being promoted both by governments and multilateral agencies. In Ecuador, a large tract of primary forest belonging to the Chachi indigenous peoples will be soon affected by a new road linking the area to southern Colombia and to other Ecuadorian provinces.

Even in cases where governments seem to have finally decided to protect the forest by creating reserves, they break their own rules whenever their economic policy decides that the economy comes before conservation. Such a case is highlighted by the struggle of local communities in Venezuela, fighting to protect the Imataca forest reserve, which the government is destroying to export electricity to Brazil and to produce cheap energy for mining companies which will further destroy the forest.

Indigenous peoples are struggling throughout the region to achieve the official recognition of their territories, which constitutes a basic step to ensure forest conservation. Such struggle has achieved some important successes in specific cases, but almost always against a background of lack of political will from the government and the frequently violent opposition of local or transnational economic interests.

In general terms, the protection of local communities' human rights and the conservation of forests and other ecosystems are dangerous activities in the region. The long list of people murdered increases every year and we sadly inform in this bulletin about the most recent deaths in Colombia.

Within such context, there are however positive signs. Both at country and international level, more and more people are becoming aware about the vital need to protect the forests and are taking action to support the rights of forest peoples and forest-dependent peoples as a means to ensure such aim. At the local level, more communities are standing up to defend their rights and their forests. Even though governments' discourse is clearly divorced from their actions, the adoption of such a discourse is a clear sign that the time is ripe for change.