
Forests and Monocultures: Change something so that nothing changes

For centuries, forest and forest-dependent peoples were able to carry out agricultural and cattle-raising activities in a way that was compatible with forest ecosystem conservation. What was later described in pejorative terms by Western experts as "slash-and-burn" agriculture was in fact a system that had proven to have minor and reversible impacts on the forest while providing livelihoods to the communities involved. A system that in today's language would be termed "sustainable".

Everything changed with colonization, which not only deprived local peoples of their freedom, but also disrupted their production systems through land appropriation and the introduction of large-scale monocrops, both accompanied by production systems alien to local cultures and societies. Tea, coffee, rubber, cocoa, sugar cane, bananas were some of the new crops, which were not aimed at providing people with food and other necessary products -as traditional systems did- but at exploiting local environments and peoples to serve the colonizers' economic interests.

The situation worsened with the development of Western science and technology and particularly with the imposition of the "Green Revolution" and its technological fix. Modern machinery allowed for the destruction of the forest (by means of tractors and chainsaws), while the use of so-called "high-yielding" varieties of seeds opened the door to the application of highly toxic chemicals (pesticides) and chemical fertilizers which degraded even further the forest ecosystem and its peoples' health.

Large-scale cattle raising came in later in the tropics, but also within the framework of Green Revolution thinking. Different races of cattle and different species of grass were identified to adapt to tropical and sub-tropical environments, resulting in widespread deforestation wherever the correct choice of animal and grass was successful.

The result is dismal, both in social and environmental terms. The Green Revolution has resulted in widespread hunger, poverty, agrochemical-related diseases, displacement and human rights abuses; it has also resulted in soil erosion, salinization, water pollution and depletion, natural and agricultural biodiversity loss as well as in global deforestation.

The world -and particularly the Third World- is still waiting for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization -the main promoter of the Green Revolution- to come up with a serious assessment of all the suffering it has caused to millions of human beings and to the world's ecosystems.

To make matters worse, the mass production of the same agricultural commodities in scores of countries, coupled with the tight control over prices by a few transnational companies and northern governments, has resulted in ever diminishing prices for those commodities and increasing prices for northern-controlled machinery and agricultural inputs. To meet external obligations, southern governments have promoted the expansion of the agricultural frontier, thus increasing the problems inherent to the Green Revolution model and pushing the prices further down due to higher levels of production.

In spite of all those problems, the fact is that the system is working very conveniently to serve the

interests it was intended to serve. The North is increasingly affluent and so are the local elites in the South. The fact that there are important numbers of poor in the North and massive poverty in the South does not seem to matter much in international commerce and trade. What really matters is that transnational corporations (TNCs) are extremely happy with the profits they manage to achieve.

The above partly explains why such a destructive model is still in place. Another part of the explanation lies in the contradicting interests within different TNCs. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the official solutions to deforestation focus more on the implementation of protected areas than on addressing the real problems. Why? The fact is that some TNCs need biodiversity conservation (as an input for the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries) while others need abundant and cheap supplies of commodities from large-scale monocultures. At the same time, some TNCs are focusing on the appropriation and commercialization of water resources -and therefore are interested in the conservation of water sources- while others depend on the commercialization of products (such as agrochemicals) that result in water pollution. Protected areas offer a solution to both: conservation of biodiversity and water inside and widespread environmental destruction outside.

This situation brings to mind one of the masterpieces of Italian cinema -*Il Gattopardo*- where one of the main characters -belonging to the feudal class- explains to his uncle his reason for embracing the struggle against the Monarchy by saying: "Let something change so that everything goes on the same as before."