
Ecuador: The people said no to plantations at a ministerial meeting

In nearly all countries, large scale monoculture tree plantations have been imposed and implemented once the laws of each country have been changed in such a way as to enable national and foreign companies to obtain all kinds of benefits, such as direct and indirect subsidies, tax breaks and even soft loans and refunds for large-scale plantations. In this way, the companies have transferred their costs to already impoverished peoples in a business in which they only obtain profits, they freely use resources, good lands, water, cheap labour, and additionally, are protected by the law so no one can complain. In nearly all the countries, this has been achieved through a campaign of lies, deceiving governments and peoples and, if necessary, using methods that are not quite "democratic" such as threats, attacks and death to those who oppose them. Presently, in Ecuador, the companies are putting pressure on the government to take measures favouring them. However, the task will not be easy and the process is already showing some interesting aspects.

Contrary to what has happened in other countries, the Ecuadorian Ministry of the Environment took the excellent initiative of convening a Seminar/Workshop to formulate a "National Plan for Forestation and Reforestation", which was held between 28 and 30 April in the city of Quito. The objective of this workshop, according to the invitation sent out by the Ministry, is to formulate the plan "with comprehensive community participation," and to have the "active work of all the actors," "integrating socio-environmental and productive-economic components." In this respect, it would seem that fortunately, it will be different from other national forestry plans approved behind peoples' backs in many of our countries.

In most countries where so-called forestation plans have been imposed, these have been the product of foreign consultancies. Only as an example, it should be remembered that the Mexican National Forestry Plan was prepared by the Finnish consultancy firm INDUFOR, that the "Master Plan for the Thai Forestry Sector" was prepared by the Jaakko Pöyry consulting firm (also Finnish) and the Uruguayan Master Plan was prepared by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency. Participation was totally absent in these processes.

In spite of the Ministry's good intention of having the plan prepared in a participatory way, the business sector ensured limitation of such participation. The invited national and international conference members, mostly "experts" in large-scale monoculture tree plantations, were charged with the task of demonstrating the success of the model in countries such as Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. Amidst half-truths, graphs and numbers, in summing up they were only able to state that in their countries the areas under plantation had increased and that some companies had made a lot of money. Accentuation of economic crises in those countries, conflicts with local communities and negative economic, social and environmental impacts resulting from the expansion of monoculture tree plantations, were shown in the presentation of the only international representation that was not convened by the business community, a member of the World Rainforest Movement, specially invited by the Ministry. Thanks to this invitation, the audience had access to documented information on the countless socio-environmental impacts of monoculture tree plantations (and of the countless local struggles against them in many countries of the world), absent from the presentations of the other panel members. This strengthened the participation of indigenous and peasant communities, which in

Ecuador already have sufficient examples of the impacts of this type of plantation.

Paradoxically, the community members were not invited to present their points of view. Worse still, their voices were silenced on most occasions when they stated their disagreement or attempted to include changes in the "Workshops" on "Social Forestry and Agro-forestry Activities," and "Protection Forests." However, it was in the workshop on "Industrial Production Commercial Forests" (which should have been called "large-scale monoculture tree plantations") that all opposition was limited, censured and distorted by a moderator openly inclined in favour of tree monocultures.

The few representatives of Ecuadorian civil society, peasant and indigenous organizations participating in the event with the support of the local organization "Acción Ecológica," indignant over the manipulation that most of the participants were subject to, decided to prepare a declaration that was read a few minutes before the closing of the event, in spite of the opposition of Mr. Montenegro, company director of the logging company ENDESA / BOTROSA, who shouted that "although I do not know what the organizations are going to talk about, they have no right to the opportunity to do so, as they had enough time to do so during these three days" (sic).

This declaration (the full text can be found on our web page at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/DeclaraciondeQuito.rtf>) the signatories made public their gratitude to the Ministry of the Environment for the initiative but lamented the fact that the methodology did not facilitate participation and that the logging companies had monopolized the event, which had turned into a "forum to promote industrial plantations, ignoring complaints, arguments and proposals made by the communities which recognize industrial tree plantations to be one of the major threats to our native forests, our welfare and even our survival."

Furthermore, the declaration provided concrete examples in which large-scale commercial tree plantations in Ecuador have not been a development alternative, but on the contrary, have caused problems such as deforestation, diminishing water sources, reduced soil fertility, biodiversity loss, appropriation of community lands, increased risk of fires and reduction of conservation areas.

The signatory organizations also considered that "a participatory process should be initiated, in which the communities take part with a view to preparing a National Plan on Conservation and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, which would include conservation, regeneration and restoration strategies for forests and other natural areas, particularly for the protection of water sources, flora and fauna and soil, because plantations are not forests."

Summing up, the recent event held in Ecuador has been a very important experience. On the one hand because the government sponsored a participatory process opening doors to actors normally left out, such as indigenous and peasant communities. On the other, because it showed the manipulating powers of the logging sector, which took over the event and attempted to place it at the service of its corporate interests. Also because the sectors really interested in environmental conservation and in the equitable distribution of benefits from the sustainable use of natural resources were finally able to overcome the obstacles and make their voice heard. It is hoped that the government --that will surely be subject to enormous pressure by the logging company sector-- will consider these positions and incorporate them in its policies to enable them to benefit the local communities and the country as a whole, while ensuring environmental conservation.

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