
Guatemala: Indigenous rights and logging licenses

The municipality of Chichicastenango is located in the department of Quiché, one of the most populated departments in the country and the one possessing the greatest number of Maya tongues, such as Uspanteco, Ixil, Sacapulteco, Quekchí and Quiché. To reach this municipality, you have to take a road that goes through steep slopes with sharp turnings and deep ravines, some covered by mixed forests mainly consisting of pine and oak trees. This municipality is located in the country's western high plateau and the climate is temperate and cold. In addition to being an important religious centre, it is a strategic point for trade in handicrafts, vegetables, fruit, textiles, woollen goods and animals, among others. One of the largest markets in the country is held there.

The forests of Chichicastenango have undergone severe degradation and presently it is only possible to find well-conserved forests in the northern part of the municipality. The rest of the forest ecosystems are fragmented, forming associations of trees with agricultural crops.

In this context, it is relevant to analyse the conflict that has arisen over the past few months between the Chichicastenango Indigenous Mayorship and the National Forestry Institute (Instituto Nacional de Bosques - INAB) regarding authorisation for logging licenses.

By law, only municipal mayors' offices can issue logging permits, and the volume cannot exceed 10 cubic metres per year. Logging operations can only be undertaken within the urban perimeter.

Putting into practice the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, the Indigenous Mayorship has taken on the issuing and authorisation of logging permits and licences, which INAB considers to be interfering in its functions, as in this case it would be the issuing of a legal document that in theory should only be issued by this Institute.

The Indigenous Mayorship argues that INAB authorises logging permits in excess, with many errors of procedure, such as a lack of verification and follow-up on the number of trees authorised to be logged. It also states that the authorities ignore the rights and regulations governing indigenous society.

This conflict has been submitted to the Quiché Executive Justice Committee, a forum for dialogue and consensus, seeking concrete solutions to problems of justice. The Committee has taken on the role of mediator and facilitator between the parties involved endeavouring to reach an agreement. Thus, several dialogue roundtables have taken place, at which stakeholders from civil society, justice authorities, governmental institutions related to environmental issues and protected areas and local authorities have participated, with the aim of finding a solution.

As a result, various preliminary agreements and conclusions between the two parties have been reached, and dialogue and discussion has taken place on a crucial issue regarding the present and future welfare of the environment at Chichicastenango. It is hoped that this process will finally end in recognition of the rights of the indigenous peoples and in a better management of forest resources in the region.

