
Josefina and the Water Springs against Pine Plantations in Ecuador's Páramos

Twenty years ago, a Dutch company paid communities to establish pine tree plantations in the high mountains of Ecuador. The aim was for the trees to absorb carbon dioxide to "offset" the emissions generated by a thermoelectric plant built in The Netherlands. In 2001, the community of Mojandita de Avelino Ávila signed an agreement with Ecuadorian company Profafor, a subsidiary of the Dutch consortium FACE. The project changed the use of the lands formerly used for livestock grazing and agriculture, while destroying important water sources and sacred sites.

Josefina Lema lives in the community of Mojandita de Avelino Ávila, in Ecuador's northern mountains. She belongs to the Otavalo people of the Kichwa (Quechua) nation. About 200 people live in her community. Twenty years ago, people arrived in their territory offering money in exchange for permission to establish plantations of pine trees in the páramos, a unique ecosystem in the Andean highlands. They promised jobs, income and benefits. But these never materialized. Quite the contrary: not only did the community lose money, the negative social and environmental impacts from planting pine trees have persisted to this day.

Josefina's community is not the only one to be affected. The Dutch-Ecuadorian company FACE-Profafor planned at least 20,000 hectares of tree plantations in Ecuador. Contracts for a significant proportion of these (8,000 hectares) were agreed with 39 local communities in the Ecuadorian sierra, according to the company's managing director. A resident in the community of SigSig, one of the supposed beneficiaries of FACE-Profafor's plan, told how his community signed up for plantations on their land in exchange for the promise of a great deal of money:

"A stranger appeared, saying that they (the company) had heard that the community possessed extensive areas of páramo, and they wanted to put a plantation there. He turned our heads, saying they would pay I don't know how many thousands of dollars. You know that we country people sometimes do not know about such things, we are naive and easily convinced. There was a meeting and the engineer was present. He said thousands of dollars would come into the community, and we would be paid to go and plant the seedlings. We would have jobs until the final harvesting of the trees, and we would be paid I don't know how much money, and we agreed. The community council signed." (1)

The Dutch foundation, Forest Absorbing Carbon Dioxide Emissions (FACE), was created in 1990 by NV SEP, the Dutch Electricity Generating Board. FACE planned to grow trees on about 150,000 hectares around the world "to absorb large quantities of carbon dioxide." With the motto "More Forest. Less CO₂," the foundation promotes the mistaken notion that monoculture plantations are equivalent to forests. (2) Profafor is an Ecuadorian service company dedicated to supporting the establishment and management of forestry plantations to capture atmospheric carbon dioxide. Profafor also conducts projects related to other "environmental services," recently including REDD+ projects.

In 1994, Josefina's community was offered US\$ 21,450 to plant pine seedlings on 130 hectares of páramo. Operating costs were deducted from that amount, and only US\$ 11,700 was eventually handed over. One of the clauses in the contract signed with the company stipulated that in the case of contractual differences or non-fulfilment, the indigenous community would have to pay the Dutch-Ecuadorian company US\$ 35,100 - much more than the community had received.

Under the agreement, FACE-Profafor keeps 100% of the carbon credits generated by the pine plantations. These credits were originally intended to "offset" emissions from a new 600 MW coal-fired electric plant to be built in Holland, which would have continued to emit CO₂ into the atmosphere for the 25 years of its lifespan. The plant was not built but FACE continued to invest in carbon offset projects and sell the carbon credits to other corporations and individuals. (3) While FACE-Profafor gets the credits, the community of Mojandita is left with the obligations arising from the maintenance and the environmental impacts of Profafor's plantation. As Josefina explained:

"The FACE-Profafor company is now our boss. They have been exploiting our labour. We had to carry on working for free as our contribution to the project. We had to cut firebreaks and thin and prune the trees, without payment." (4)

In addition, FACE-Profafor obtained use of the community's land, appropriated the labour of community members and their collective efforts known as "mingas," (5) and also drained money from the community and its members, as the community council had to pay for agricultural materials and hire technicians. They were also obliged to rent land for their own animals to graze on, and the plantations dried up several of their water sources, depleted soil nutrients, destroyed large areas of the páramo, and robbed them of cosmic energy centres and sacred sites by destroying springs and pools.

"In my community, we realised the pine plantations were poisoning our native plants. They were poisoning the grasses which retain and store water. And the pine trees were drying up the springs of water. (6) That is why, about eight years ago, Pachamama (the Earth Mother) turned against the pine plantations and about 70 hectares were burned in a fire. After some time there was another fire which consumed the rest. Now we see that the water springs are being recreated." (7)

Although it was Pachamama in her wisdom that destroyed the plantation, Profafor attempted to exact penalties from the community, but its claims have not prospered. A few days ago, the community of Mojandita sent a letter to Profafor terminating the contract. The struggle of the women of this community in defence of the páramo, led by Josefina Lema, has been a remarkable example. (8)

"Were it not for the water in the páramo
There would be no life in our planet and our country.
Some talk of god, but we do not see him:
We see our Pachamama and our nature." (9)

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(1) Testimonial from the community of SigSig, one of the "beneficiaries" of FACE-Profafor.

(2) Riofrancos, T. 2015. Pines on the Páramo: The disastrous local effects of the carbon market, NACLA, <https://nacla.org/news/pines-páramo-disastrous-local-effects-carbon-market>

(3) Acción Ecológica/WRM. 2005. *Carbon Sink Plantations in the Ecuadorian Andes: Impacts of the Dutch FACE-Profafor monoculture tree plantations project on indigenous and peasant communities.*

(4) Josefina speaks on Acción Ecológica's video: "*La Pachamama no se vende*" (Pachamama is not for sale) (in Spanish),

<http://www.accionecologica.org/servicios-ambientes/multimedia/1503-video-la-pachamama-no-se-vende>.

(5) Minga: the term for community efforts where the entire community carries out work for the common good.

(6) Springs of water, called "pukyu" by the Kichwa people, are sacred sites, charged with cosmic energy.

(7) Personal communication. Josefina Lema. 2013.

(8) For more information on the impact of the plantations on women, see: Bonilla, N. and Ramos. I. 2008. Women, Communities and Plantations in Ecuador: Testimonials on a socially and environmentally destructive forestry model, Acción Ecológica,

http://www.wrm.org.uy/oldsite/countries/Ecuador/Women_Ecuador.html

(9) Josefina Lema.