
Bribris: a people never conquered who are standing up to REDD

Continuous cycles of rebellion and resistance have characterized the history of a people living in the Costa Rican South Caribbean. Every 50 years, there are records of all types of actions carried out by the Bribri people in order to keep that that define them as such, the land. The burning of churches, resistance to monoculture banana plantations and struggles against dams, oil and gas have woven the history of this people. Their current adversary is not much different than the others, so the Bribri are standing up to them.

In United Nations conferences on climate change, Costa Rica is one of the countries that comes up when talking about the “Green Economy,” and it is seen as a testing ground for the multiple UN-fomented mechanisms that promote the commodification of nature. REDD+ is one such mechanism. Yet on the national level indigenous peoples are expressing their opposition and rejecting imposition of REDD+ in their territories. Meanwhile, the government has not respected indigenous people's right to self-determination in their territories.

Proof of this occurred last October 15th 2015, when over 250 people from the 24 indigenous territories convened in the Costa Rican capital of San José, in order to meet with Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís. The Bribris, Terrabas, Ngobes, and Cabecares peoples unanimously expressed their opposition to REDD+ in their territories and in all parts of the country.

This mobilization was not the first. For over five years the Bribri people have been holding workshops, meetings and press conferences in which they have discussed the specific impacts of various projects that commodify nature. Among these projects is the REDD strategy, which successive governments have tried to impose since 2008. The Bribri's central claim questions the legitimacy of these projects, which are imposed by international bodies and directly oppose their customs and worldview, especially their care and respect for nature.

According to Bribri stories and spirituality, the forest is sacred. It is the place where Sibù (the main spiritual being) created the universe, and with it corn, the origin of the Bribri peoples. Its center is Cerro Namaso, a sacred and important site, along with the entire forest, which covers much of their territory. The universe is represented in the Ûsure, the traditional conical house: it contains the sky, the stars, the Earth's surface and underground. The Bribri are responsible for safekeeping all of Sibù's creation.

For the Bribri and other indigenous cultures in the world, forests are of utmost importance; everything within them is considered sacred and therefore is respected and cared for. Using traditional methods, they hunt only what they need for subsistence. They take from the forest only what is necessary, without a market-oriented vision. They do not poison the earth, air or water.

Furthermore, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to which Costa Rica is a signatory, states that indigenous peoples must be consulted anytime legislative or administrative

measures are foreseen to directly affect them. These consultations must be free, prior and informed; and carried out through appropriate procedures and in good faith. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also supports the principal of Free, Prior Informed Consent.

The REDD+ strategy development process began in Costa Rica in late 2008, with support from the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). Since its inception it has ignored the rights of indigenous peoples at the national level.

Reviewing the events, we observe the history of imposition:

In 2009 the REDD+ strategy was developed with the complicity of alleged indigenous representatives—individuals who had not been chosen by popular vote, nor by their customs. These imposed representatives never informed their communities about what they were negotiating.

In 2012 an indigenous consultation plan was developed with alleged indigenous leaders—appointed by the national government, not by the indigenous peoples.

In 2013 an Executive Decree created a REDD+ Steering Committee and Executive Secretariat. The latter has only one indigenous member representing all indigenous groups in the country (8 groups in all, distributed throughout 24 territories). Again, this appointment occurred without broad participation.

In September 2015, the government presented the program of Indigenous Fees for Environmental Services (PSA) in the framework of “pre-consultation.” This was simultaneously seen as laying the groundwork for REDD+. Once again, the same story was repeated: the program was developed without people knowing where it originated, who was involved, or how agreements were reached.

The National Forestry Financing Fund (FONAFIFO) is the agency responsible for implementing the national REDD strategy, and it plans to do so between 2016 and 2020. A consultation process with indigenous peoples is expected to occur, yet it should have happened prior to the current implementation process. Consequently there is a huge information gap. Communities have many questions: How and Why has this sprung up? How does it work? What would the benefits and impacts be?

For over 530 years the same story of domination has repeated itself: trying to erase their language, which is essential to keeping their culture intact; imposing outside educational systems; and imposing governments and laws that have nothing to do with their traditional leadership structures and forms of government. This paves the way for mega projects that destroy the forest and pollute the rivers. Highways and electrical lines that cross through indigenous territories are being built, constantly invading their lands, and finally evicting them. REDD is no different than any other tool of colonization, but simply a new twist on capitalism.

REDD+, as conceived, prohibits the use of forests and thus all “resources” within. Those who marched in front of the Presidential Palace last October 15th are well aware of this: “REDD disrespects our worldview by placing a price on and commodifying our forests, our sacred sites, our rivers and all beings that inhabit them...We demand that our way of taking care of forests be respected, as it goes far beyond projects that come from outside. Those projects divide the fabric of our ancestral communities, which has enabled the mountains to remain intact today. As indigenous peoples we say: We cannot sell the air, the water, gold or the mountain...if we drain the lifeblood of the forest, it will die.” (1)

Despite indigenous people's demands that implementation of the REDD strategy be halted, the government's deaf reply at the Presidential Palace meeting was "REDD will happen, because it will." Consequently indigenous groups are demanding a true dialogue, in which all the population of the territories can access complete and transparent information about the REDD objectives, and in which priority is given to the indigenous agenda, which seeks autonomy over their land, food, and culture.

The same afternoon of October 15th, the indigenous peoples present reaffirmed their conviction to continue building autonomy without asking permission to exist; and to continue to denounce the true culprits of the climate crisis: governments and corporations. This is one way to protect the forest and their communities, and move towards true territorial sovereignty.

Mariana Porras, mariana@coecoceiba.org
Henry Picado, henry@redbiodiversidadcr.info

(1) Manifiesto delivered at the Presidential Palace against REDD. October, 2015