
Colombia: Carbon sinks deals, territory and communities

A few days ago, the 12th session of the Conference of the Parties on Climate Change – COP 12 – came to an end. The closing session confirmed the scant will of governments and parties in seeking real solutions to the climate crisis. However what did stand out was interest in promoting the use of strategies invented to solve the climate problem based on market mechanisms. Among these, the group of tree plantation projects as greenhouse gas sinks were the most notorious.

Among the Clean Development Mechanism (MDL) projects, monoculture tree plantations allegedly acting as sinks carbon are attracting the attention of contaminating agents in industrialized countries, among other reasons because they make it possible not to change the consumption pattern (causing the climate crisis), they can be carried out in impoverished countries at significantly lower costs than in their own countries and ultimately, they are another source of profits.

Obviously these kind of projects require vast tracts of land, land that today is still largely in the hands of the Indigenous, Negro and Peasant communities of the world, which in turn become an obstacle to plans for the expansion of monoculture plantations.

While at the COP there is talk of vulnerability and the fund for adaptation to climate change, perhaps they should start thinking about the extreme vulnerability of local communities involved in such projects which, as we will see further on, already have negative impacts on territories and communities.

The case of Colombia is not removed from this picture. This can be understood from the declarations by members of the official delegation, who stated that they were taking part in the COP encouraged by the possibility of accessing resources arising from CDM trade.

The Colombian Government's Climate Change Office is located within the Ministry of the Environment, Housing and Land Development – MAVDT. Forestry projects approved as CDM, that is to say, as carbon sinks, are registered with this office. So far there are 8 projects – although they should in fact count as 12 as one of them, the National Forestry Project, covers 5 of the country's zones.

Implementation of these 12 projects involves the use of 222,885 ha, representing approximately a 150% increase of the country's plantation area. However, this figure is possibly much higher if we consider that one of these projects intends to use over 100,000 ha with no available precision on the area to be occupied. As could be expected, the main species to be used are exotic, such as pine, eucalyptus, teak, gmelina and acacia.

If we look into one of the projects under implementation since 2002 and known as Procuencia, it will be seen that in April 2006 it had 3,200 ha of established plantations, 60% corresponding to pine and eucalyptus. However, how is this project being carried out? Mention should be made of "contracts for accounts in participation," a definition indicating that the project involves the landowners so that they can provide the land where the plantations are to be established and are granted a loan aimed at

commercial reforestation, with money coming from the Certificate for Forestry Incentives (CIF, standing for Certificado de Incentivo Forestal).

The above implies that the establishment of plantations is being financed from Colombian State resources, but at the same time, it will be done with resources from the sale of bonds for the reduction of emissions within the CDM framework. In this respect, this project is one of the most advanced, if not the most advanced project of its kind in the country's bond negotiations. Regarding this income, the owners are aware of how the resources from CIF aimed at covering part of the debt are finally distributed, but have no information on how the resources from carbon bonds are to be distributed, as these will go to the project and not directly to those implementing it.

Furthermore, among the actors involved in this sink are those identified in the international framework as agents with clear interest in the carbon business and trade and, just to mention a few, in addition to private consultants we have FAO, which has been called to fulfil administrative and technical assistance functions as a concession to the transparency of the project. There are also the major NGOs such as Conservation International (CI), responsible for the "additionality" component represented in the design of biological corridors. At the same time, this organization and the World Bank appear as the two main clients for the sale of bonds on the CDM market.

Regarding projects in the pipeline, we find one corresponding to the National Paramillo Natural Park where, to start off with, the implementation of productive forestry activities in a territory whose use -- tacitly restricted to research, environmental education and passive recreation -- is to be questioned. The objective submitted in this case is the establishment of tree plantations as a strategy to generate income for small landowners, guarantee the protection of the national park and strengthen conservation. It would seem absurd to consider this possible on assessing the impacts generated by tree plantations, their management and use and in general by this model.

Finally we have the projects designed for establishment in indigenous community territories. One of them is located in the flat area of the Department of Cordoba, on the site of the Paramillo Park. The objective is to establish 1,500 ha of plantations allegedly to generate income for indigenous communities, probably of the Zenu people who inhabit this region.

Another project, the Renacimiento de la Orinoquía, intends to establish over 100,000 ha of oil palm, eucalyptus, rubber tree and acacia plantations, among other species, in the eastern plains, specifically in the department of Vichada with the alleged aim of generating economic alternatives for the local indigenous population. What attracts our attention in the first place is the use of territories belonging to indigenous communities involving the areas of Marandua, Carimagua, Cimarron and the Wacoyo protected area.

Another issue is the lack of specificity regarding the area to be used: a few months ago a proposal was submitted to the European Union for the creation of the largest carbon sink in the world, 3 million ha. This proposal was prepared under the responsibility of Carlos Gustavo Cano, a member of the board of directors of the Banco de la República, but who had previously been Minister of Agriculture, responsible for submitting the current forestry law to Congress. This law eliminated the need for any control in plantation establishment and management and facilitated private capital investment in the exploitation of Colombian forests.

The two last projects represent a series of hazards for the country's indigenous communities and territories. Primarily we find the scenario set by the forestry law which suppresses the obligation of obtaining licenses to establish plantations limiting requirements to registering the plantations. This

implies that no check is made of whether the monoculture plantations encroach on collective territories, protected or conservation areas, a condition that would make these projects unviable. The same goes for the issue of plantation use and management.

Furthermore, the legitimate right of indigenous communities to “prior consultation” has been violated during the present period of government through the creation of a new regulation restricting consultation to those projects requiring “Environmental Licences” which, as we have seen, were eliminated in the case of forestry law plantations. In this way the communities do not have the possibility of deciding on activities devised by third parties to be installed on their territories, with the foreseeable impacts we have already described.

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