
The “development” model at the apex of deforestation

Agriculture and cattle-raising are direct causes of deforestation. However they should be looked at in depth in order to be able to understand what promotes them, who benefits from them, how they arise. It may be said that it is a funnel-like process. What is most visible is on the outside, the disappearance of the forest as a consequence of these activities. Delving deeper, a series of policies and programmes promoting them may be identified, together with the actors who apply them and benefit from them, even deforestation actors who are not necessarily the beneficiaries, but rather the victims of such policies. Finally, at the apex of the funnel is the origin of the process: a development model of an industrial nature, sustained on unequal structures in which the concentration of wealth on one hand causes poverty on the other, having a philosophy of relating with the world – and with nature – of a strictly commercial vision.

We have already discussed the more visible manifestations of deforestation due to the expansion of agriculture and cattle-raising (see the article on “Deforestation by agriculture and cattle-raising” in this same issue). As to the policies encouraging the sector, a series of government measures may be identified on a national scale, such as subsidised credits (at lower interest rates than commercial rates), rebates on income and commercial taxes, exemption from paying import taxes on agro-industrial machinery, research and rural extension activities by the State, all acting as powerful factors to legitimate and consolidate the cash crop production model.

The problem of land tenure is also one of the underlying causes of deforestation. The processes have been varied in the different parts of the world, but a common trait has been that the lands that traditionally were in the hands of indigenous or peasant communities are allocated to national or foreign commercial agents.

Among the various problem situations regarding land tenure linked with agriculture and deforestation, two main ones may be identified:

* when the situation of disregard for the community’s rights over its territories occurs in the forest itself. In general this implies the eviction of the communities inhabiting the forest to allow for the entry of external agents, who launch the process of deforestation, while incorporating the area into the intensive production circuit aimed at exports.

In general this has been a characteristic process in Asia and to a certain extent in Africa.

* when the disregard of rights over land takes place in zones outside the forest. This process leads to migration –either spontaneous or promoted by the government– towards the forest, with the consequent process of deforestation.

In the case of Latin America for example, governments have used the forests as a sort of “safety valve” for pressure on land and the consequent social and economic problems. Thus in some settlement plans, free access to forest lands has been offered, often accompanied by road building with multilateral bank funding (increasing foreign debt) in order to open up and “develop” the forests.

In other cases, as part of “development” projects, settlement programmes have been implemented, stipulating that the settlers must “clear” the land in order to have access to the deeds, which implies cutting down the forest. In this case, deforestation ends up by being considered as land “improvement” and the expression of the willingness of the occupants to “improve” their property. This same process is repeated, in another situation, with cattle-raising.

Central America is one of the best-known regions where the expansion of cattle-raising has caused severe deforestation. Cattle-raising has been part of the culture of the rural areas of Central America since Spanish Colonial times. In the hands of large landowners, cattle-raising was concentrated in the fertile lands of the highland valleys of the isthmus and along the Pacific Coast. With the opening up of the United States market for cheap beef and the improvement of local facilities during the second half of the twentieth century, the cattle ranchers increased their operations, encroaching on the rainforests of the North Coast. Many took possession of large tracts of forests and hired workers to clear them with chainsaws and by burning them. However, the most common way of acquiring new pasture lands was that of purchasing on-farm “improvements” that the slash-and-burn farmers had made on deedless land. These so-called “improvements” were no more than a small forest area that the farmers had cleared to plant their crops. After having obtained the rights of those occupying the land, the rancher finished off clearing it, planted grass and fenced in the property. Once the land was transferred to the rancher, the farmer moved on further into the rainforest to repeat the same deforestation cycle.

International policies have also been decisive in the expansion of the cash crop model. Such is the case with the structural adjustment programmes designed by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Their application conditioned the granting of further loans and moratoria on the debt weighing down the impoverished countries of the South. Structural adjustment policies have promoted the expansion of export crops, directly accelerating the clearing of forests for agriculture or cattle-raising, as a recipe to obtain foreign currency. And, as we have seen, very often this has implied the displacement of small farmers or subsistence farmers, who have been pushed into the forests, where they practice slash and burn agriculture.

This system introduces, sooner or later, the idea that is at the centre of the development model, that is that worthwhile activities are those that lead to short-term economic profit. Activities that do not generate monetary value are scantily estimated in such a market oriented context. For this type of system to operate, three things are necessary and closely linked: large-scale production, monoculture production (either of crops or animals) and the concentration of land and capital.

Thus, ways of relating with the earth, water, plants, animals, seeds, are no longer “sacred”--to define a way of feeling that is characteristic of cultures that are closely linked with nature and natural cycles-- and become mere “resources” to obtain profit from. The ways of social relationship in this system also perpetuate inequity through unjust land tenure models, neglect of the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples, an unjust international trade system that does not consider the real value of the products and that takes advantage of monopolistic domination and unsustainable consumption models that are one of the pillars of international trade. Now, for the dominant ideology, everything becomes merchandise that must be given as a tribute to the new god of the globalized market, well custodied by the new high priests: the transnational corporations, multilateral institutions and local elites in power.

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