
Colombia: Forestry as a business

It seems important to learn why for the past few years the issue of forestry in Colombia has been at the hub of the main debates and the government agenda. This article endeavours to reply to this question and to show some political elements that allow us to affirm that the issue of forestry and its environmental services are just another business, not only at national level but also at a global level.

The present Government's National Forestry Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Forestal – PNDP), conceived for the next 25 years, seeks to establish 4 million hectares of monoculture tree plantations. This year the plan is to plant 17,000 hectares, mainly of oil palm. In spite of the fact that these are clearly monoculture plantations, they are presented as “reforestation”. However, it is interesting to point out that the forestry development plan does not mention the real figures for deforestation, that are much higher than the data supplied by the government on this matter.

Among the reasons given to promote monoculture tree plantations is the fact that the country's geographical and environmental characteristics are extremely suitable for the development of productive plantations with a high production of timber, due to the short felling cycles (7 – 15 – 20 years) among other advantages.

The Government is promoting commercial tree plantations through the so-called “Productive Chains” which have been promoted since 1995, seeking to sign Competitiveness Agreements with the private sector, represented by producer organizations and entrepreneurs. In this context, the Government encourages various policies, plans and projects aiming at improving the competitive environment of the various links in the chains and the companies' own conditions of competitiveness.

With the development of these Chains, it is expected that “forestry development” cores will be identified and consolidated, making it possible to reactivate investment in new productive projects under conditions of competitiveness, promoting regional agreements and establishing strategic partnerships between the public and private sector and with the community in general. Thus the base of timber resources will be widened, consolidating the productive chain scheme and placing forestry products and services on national and international markets.

This seems to us to be a matter for extreme concern as the reorganization under way in Colombia, not only at institutional level but also at the territorial level, involves these Productive Chains. That is to say, national production is conditioned to the demands of external markets and therefore, of the transnational companies that are the buyers. In other words, Productive Chains are linked to international trade, which in turn dictates what each country should produce. This explains the reason for monoculture palm, palmetto, eucalyptus, pine, etc. plantations. The Chain thus becomes the way of producing, and it should be noted that small producers are left out of it, as the interest is on large-scale production.

This means, among other things, insecurity and loss of food sovereignty, as land use and production are not based on the needs of the population, but on the contrary, are aimed at ensuring the business

of transnational companies promoting these Chains. From our point of view, there is no doubt that land use must in the first place benefit the population and not be considered as simply another business.

Hence the inadvisability of monoculture tree plantations, as their profitability is directly associated with the commercial and extensive nature of the plantations, without any concern for eviction from and expropriation of collective lands, traditionally inhabited by peasants and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

It should be noted that President Uribe himself has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the forestry sector, as a pillar of the new “development” in rural areas, promoting tree plantations. Thus one of the National Development Plan’s major programmes, known as “Forestry Warden Families” receives strong economic support from International Cooperation to carry out projects related with land planning and conservation and restoration of forest ecosystems, promotion of productive forestry chains and institutional development.

Although this may seem positive, what is hidden behind it is that by means of economic incentives, these families become incorporated into the large-scale extraction chains. These finally favour the multinational company owning the plantation while additionally, the national Government endorses and creates the right conditions for the application of this policy, channelling resources directly from International Cooperation to these Productive Chains and to the business.

Simultaneously, through this model of forest warden families, the establishment of a relationship of salaried workers with the local people is sought and it is expected that the communities will cease to relate with the forest as in the past, and more particularly the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Furthermore, the Government strategy aims at appropriating community territories that will end up in the hands of forestry companies.

All this is hidden behind nice-sounding words, such as “reforestation” “land planning” “conservation” and “restoration” when in fact what is really happening is the substitution of diverse ecosystems and communities by homogeneous plantations and societies, tied to the interests of the large companies.

By: Paula Alvarez Roa, CENSAT Agua-Viva, Friends of the Earth – Colombia, e-mail: agua@censat.org