
Forests at the World Social Forum

Predominating ideology has tended to divorce social issues from environmental issues and even to make them antagonistic. Such is the case with the question of forests, where while governments recognise their environmental values, they frequently present them as an obstacle to "development", and "poverty" is used as an excuse to carry out deforestation of increasingly wider areas of forests, with the alleged objective of improving people's living conditions.

However, the result of the application of this approach has been the contrary to that allegedly sought: the destruction of forests has not resolved serious issues such as poverty and hunger, but it has greatly increased the number of poor and hungry people, on depriving the forest inhabitants of their means of survival. Hundreds of millions of people are involved in this process.

In spite of accumulated experience, a false analysis is insisted on, blaming "poverty" for the destruction of forests, to hide that in fact it is "wealth" that is evicting peasants from agricultural areas, obliging them to open up forests to survive, wealth represented by the major companies building highways or large hydroelectric dams, carrying out large-scale logging operations, exploiting mineral and oil wealth, substituting forests by agricultural and tree monocultures. This wealth is destroying the forests.

It is important to stress that all the environmental impacts generated by this model promoted by "wealth" --for its own and exclusive benefit-- lead to social impacts. It is therefore an unsustainable model in every respect. More important still is the fact that it is not the only model possible, as presented by its beneficiaries. There are other ways of addressing production, with maximum socio-economic benefits and minimum environmental impacts, such as seen in various articles in this bulletin, in particular those on India and Papua New Guinea. It is necessary and possible to move on from the large-scale industrial model benefiting major companies to the detriment of local populations, to a small-scale community based participatory model.

The sustainable use of forests is compatible with the improvement of people's quality of life, provided it is based on this latter approach. Of course, it is not only applicable to forests, but to productive activities of all kinds, and the ideal place to discuss the issue is obviously the World Social Forum, which is meeting for the third time in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre.

The World Social Forum, with the slogan of "another world is possible," arose from the idea of some Brazilian organisations as a way of establishing a forum for proposals, seeking concrete answers to the challenge of building "another world," in which economy would be at the service of human beings and not the other way round. It arose in opposition to and is symbolically held on the same dates as the World Economic Forum in Davos, a small, luxury skiing station in Switzerland where, funded by the 1,000 foremost corporations of the world, those who have taken over the world meet annually to theorise and advance their system of domination.

It is expected that over 50,000 people from all over the world will attend this third forum, coming from the widest spectrum of organisations (trade unions, political, indigenous, gender, environmentalist

organisations, etc.). There is no doubt that it is a unique and plural environment with an enormous diversity of visions and interests, but with one common objective: to create the conditions for "another possible world." The Forum has gained its own life and Davos has deservedly passed into second place.

So far, the subject of forests has occupied a relatively marginal space in the framework of the Forum, reduced to the Amazon and the Mata Atlantica forests. Without neglecting the enormous importance of these two forest ecosystems, it is clear that the subject is much wider and that forest degradation in all the continents not only affects local populations (which we insist, are hundreds of millions of people), but also the planet as a whole.

The responsibility for this relative marginality corresponds of course to those of us who develop tasks in this area and who have not placed sufficient emphasis on the issue to have it incorporated in the Forum debates. It is for this reason that WRM is convening two meetings in Porto Alegre: one is aimed at generating the opportunity for coordination and cooperation with those who are interested in the subject; the other is to address specifically the increasing problem of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, resulting in serious socio-environmental impacts.

But above all, we will attempt to establish horizontal links making it possible to incorporate the issue of forests in the different specific subjects (from land tenure by peasants to recognition of the territorial rights of the indigenous peoples, from the gender issue to the loss of biodiversity, from the rights of forestry workers to human rights in general). In this way we hope to make, from the perspective of forests, a modest contribution to the common struggle for this "another world is possible." Which it is.