
Who do you think you are cheating?

Three important international forest-related events took place during 2002: the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity; the World Summit on Sustainable Development; and the Eighth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change. They were not much use. Beyond the rhetoric and the commitments agreed on at these and previous meetings, no positive impact can be noted. On the contrary, every day reality is showing how the forests continue to be destroyed and monoculture tree plantations continue to expand to the detriment of forests and other native ecosystems.

Furthermore, the situation shows that the countries of the South continue getting poorer and becoming more indebted, which seems to oblige them to exploit more and more resources in the hope that they may eventually "develop themselves." Many of these resources are to be found in forest areas (wood, minerals, oil, hydroelectric energy, etc.) involving a permanent contradiction between discourse on forest protection and the action leading to its destruction.

Additionally, the formal independence of the governments is increasingly being hampered by the power of multilateral credit agencies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the regional "development" banks, which continue to impose the same cures that have already shown themselves to be worse than the sickness. To these must be added the increasing power of the World Trade Organisation and of the transnational corporations.

In this context, it would seem that there is no solution and that the forests --and the means of survival of local peoples-- will continue to be destroyed to pay an unredeemable foreign debt and to achieve a "development" that does not arrive and that never will. However, this conclusion suffers a basic fault: it does not consider the active role that the people are taking on, not only seeking, but also finding solutions. The crisis itself is encouraging people to seek alternatives at local level and to unite on a global scale to face a type of "development" that is leading to social and environmental disaster.

In forest areas, the indigenous peoples and local communities are demanding --and increasingly conquering-- their right to community forest management. Many successful experiences already prove that this type of management is not only feasible, but also socially just and environmentally sound. If we intend to protect forests and improve the quality of life of their peoples, this is clearly the path to be taken.

In spite of this, there are very few governments willing to hand over forest control and management to the peoples who live there. Beyond the trite technical arguments on the supposed incapacity of the local population to manage forests, what is at stake is the economic interest of the national and transnational actors --supported by political actors and multilateral agencies - who are not willing to lose unrestricted access to the wealth found in forest areas.

This is why the governments resist acknowledging the territorial rights of the people inhabiting the forests, which implies their right to manage them according to criteria opposing environmental and social rationale to the maximising exploitation of economic benefits rationale that has been the

standard up to now. Given the enormous power of these actors, it is essential to make progress in ways of local, national and international organising and mobilising to oblige the governments to finally adopt the measures that they resist adopting but which are necessary to ensure forest conservation and the welfare of forest inhabitants. These measures necessarily involve accepting and legalising the right of the communities to forest control and management.

In the context of this struggle, governments must understand that they are not fooling anyone with their empty discourse and unfulfilled promises. Ten years have gone by since they committed themselves at the Earth Summit to adopt measures that they have still not adopted. Since then millions and millions of dollars have been spent on unending international meetings and national processes, with results that cannot be seen anywhere. What is more, retrocession is much more evident than progress.

The situation was perfectly defined by a well-known Indian religious leader --Swami Agnivesh-- during the recent conference of the parties to the Convention on Climate Change held in New Delhi. At the end of a multitudinous demonstration demanding solutions to the climate crisis, the authorities reluctantly authorised entry of a small delegation of its representatives to the Conference building. Among them was Swami Agnivesh, who --after showing that the Convention process was not adopting the necessary measures to avoid climate change-- rebuked the government representatives present, saying, "Whom do you think you are cheating? You are cheating your children; you are cheating your grandchildren." The cheating is over. It is time for solutions and these are to be found at hand.