
Mangroves and shrimp farming: deeds, not words

There are clearly two conflicting international agendas, one positive and another negative. The former, officialized in international fora such as the 1992 Earth Summit and its related conventions and processes, is aimed at the sustainable use of resources for the benefit of the present and future generations. But there is another international agenda, aimed at increasing production, trade and consumption of all types of products, regardless of their sustainability, for the benefit of private business and governments. Industrial shrimp farming constitutes an example of how local people try desperately to implement the former agenda, while governments, corporations and international financial institutions support the latter.

The importance of the environmental services provided by mangroves is undisputed and so is the need to ensure their conservation and rehabilitation. At the same time, they constitute a vital economic resource for local people, whose livelihoods are directly dependent on this ecosystem. It would thus seem obvious that governments and international agencies that have committed themselves to environmental protection and to poverty alleviation should ensure the conservation of mangroves. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case.

On the contrary, many tropical country governments are strongly supporting the development of industrial shrimp farming, as a means to increase exports and thus obtain much needed hard currency. This necessity is on its part linked to pressures from international creditors and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, that promote export-oriented economies to ensure payment of external debt servicing. As a result, increasing areas of mangroves are destroyed and local people become either poor or poorer. While the macroeconomy grows and corporations increase their profits, the local economies are negatively impacted or destroyed.

Differently from governments and international agencies, many local communities are truly committed to protecting the mangroves on which they depend. Throughout the tropics, they are trying to halt the spread of a destructive shrimp farming system that provides unnecessary food to the well fed and takes the food away from the table of the hungry.

In this struggle, the answer has in too many cases been repression. People have been killed, injured, imprisoned, displaced. Among those who have fallen, we would like to pay homage to Korunamoyee Sardar, a brave woman killed in Bangladesh on November 7, 1990, for defending local land rights against their appropriation by an industrial shrimp farmer. Korunamoyee has become a symbol of resistance and her example is being followed by increasing numbers of people throughout the world.

At the same time, Korunamoyee is a symbol of consistency between words and deeds. When declaring that mangroves and local peoples' rights need to be protected, then the only possible course of action is, regardless of the consequences, to work for the achievement of those objectives. This is what she did. Governments have not only expressed their commitments: they have signed relevant international agreements. The World Bank has not only said this orally: it has included environmental protection and poverty eradication in its own mandate. It is now their obligation to make deeds coincide with words. They therefore need to halt further support to an activity such as

industrial shrimp farming, which is clearly contradictory with international environmental treaties and with the stated aim of eradicating poverty.