
Colombia: Black communities defend mangroves

Colombia, one of the megadiverse countries in the world, holds a total area of mangroves of 365,902 hectares, of which 80% extend like a green necklace in the Pacific Ocean coast.

A recent decision of the Colombian Ministry of the Environment has provoked a controversy related to the use of natural resources and territorial and cultural rights of ethnic minorities in that region. The authorities denied land titles on mangrove areas in the Choco region, in the Pacific Ocean coast, to the black people communities which have occupied it for centuries. The government considers that mangroves and other coastal areas have to remain under public domain. Nevertheless, such point of view ignores the fact that black people communities have made of mangroves their geographical space, managing them in a sustainable way, thus ensuring their conservation. Powerful interests -as those of the logging and the shrimp farming industries- are looking forward to enter the mangroves, which would result not only in their degradation or destruction but also in the loss of the livelihoods of traditional black communities.

The affected communities consider that the questioned decision is merely based on ecological aspects, disregarding other relevant aspects involved, such as their ancestral interaction with the environment and natural resources. By stating that mangroves and coastal areas of the Choco region should not be considered communal lands, the Ministry of the Environment ignores the complexity of a problem where not only natural, but also historical, anthropologic and sociological elements are involved. Mangroves are vital for local communities living in the coastal area from Candelillas del Mar to the country's border with Panama. Most of them live in small villages all along the coast and the river margins. Their life in close contact with nature is founded on traditions originating from their African ancestors. Their existence is possible thanks to economic activities that use the mangroves and its resources -charcoal and firewood, fishing, shell collection, etc- and have proved to be in harmony with this fragile ecosystem.

Several international fora -as the UN Conference on Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972), the Rio Agreement, the Vienna Declaration and the Ramsar Convention- have clearly expressed the necessity of considering environmental issues with a human-centred view. At the same time, the Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992 -adopted as Law nr. 162 in Colombia in 1994- underscores the need to take into account ecological, social as well as cultural values of biological diversity and its components.

Additionally, the Law for Natural Resources, that is already 50-year old, and recent Colombian legislation guarantee the participation of Afrocolombian communities with regard to decision making in projects and activities that could affect their cultural integrity, and recognizes the rights of black communities of the riverine areas of the Pacific Ocean.

The polemic decision has been questioned at the government level itself. An official internal memorandum dated 6/7/99 concludes expressing that a proposal regarding mangroves and coastal areas should involve the active participation of such communities, since they have inhabited and developed their lives there, and should be aimed at harmonizing the communities' collective rights

with the conservation of natural resources at the national level. It also points out that traditional knowledge can contribute with creative elements to formulate policies for mangrove conservation, preventing the action of other agents who want to exploit them at the commercial level.

Involved communities of Alto and Bajo Mira, Frontera, Palenque Narino and Patria Grande are defending their rights and have expressed that they will not receive land titles with the restrictions established by the Ministry of the Environment which are at odds with the national Constitution. They presented to the national authorities a document titled "The mangroves: the habitat where we have established our culture". Their representatives met officials of the INCORA (Colombian Institute for the Agrarian Reform) who expressed their recognition of the ancestral rights of such communities on these territories as well as the intention of INCORA of allocating lands to traditional communities in the region. Nevertheless a solution is still pending and the conflict is increasing.

The Ministry's decision is yet another example of the incorrect and frequently biased view of nature void of people, that is unfortunately still predominant in official circles. Reality shows -in the case of forests in a very clear way- that ignoring the existence of traditional or indigenous communities in such areas, the sustainable use they usually make of them and their territorial rights, only serves to pave the way to powerful actors' takeover of those territories and resources to their own benefit, resulting in environmental degradation and social strife.

Source: Gonzalo Diaz Canada, Fundacion Beteguma, 19/8/99.