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## Bolivia: concern over the fate of forests

During a meeting held on March 16th in La Paz, with the participation of NGO representatives and government officials on the situation and perspectives of forests in Bolivia and on the draft decree for awarding concessions for the exploitation of most forest lands, a number of concerns were raised on the policy regarding forest conservation in that country. It was pointed out that there are no clear objectives in this regard. The participation of civil society was considered vital in the formulation and implementation of such a policy, that should always give priority to the interests of local communities and to the promotion of sustainability. Revealing mistakes were detected in the draft version of the decree. It was detected that even if a Forestry Law and other norms exist on paper, there is a lack of political will to implement them. In the meantime, the country's forests are being destroyed. It is feared that new concessions will mean uncontrolled exploitation and further deforestation.

Additionally, communities of the provinces of Beni and Pando have denounced that the problem of property rights on forest lands has not been adequately solved. Community property rights over forests are not recognized, while large landowners occupy more and more lands and threaten peasants' livelihoods. The process of land concessions in that province lacks transparency and usually large companies invade peasants lands, as recently happened in the region of Puerto Rico and Conquista.

The Bolivian lowlands are covered by 440,000 km<sup>2</sup> of rain tropical forests which represents 57% of the lowlands total surface. The country's deforestation rates are of 168,000 hectares/year (0.3%/year) and the promotion of export crops has been identified as its main cause.

Source: Bolivian Forum for Environment and Development (FOBOMADE), 5/4/99. Pablo Pacheco B., "Extent and causes of deforestation and forest degradation in Bolivia", Case Study. Underlying causes of deforestation and forests degradation, 1998.