
For and against forests conservation and climate stabilization

Deforestation and forest degradation worldwide have been and are cause of concern. Rates of loss in tropical as well as in temperate and boreal areas are alarming. All tropical forests have suffered an increase in the rate of deforestation, while the few remaining primary temperate forests, as well as boreal forests are under severe threat.

Forests are not empty. They are the home of million of indigenous people and local communities, which live in or near them and depend on their resources. Besides the services forest ecosystems provide at the local level, they are a major factor for the stabilization of the global climate. This function is of course not new, but the ongoing process of discussions and negotiations on global warming have emphasized its importance. In effect, the UNFCCC in its Art. 1.7 defines “reservoirs” as “a component of the climate system where a greenhouse gas or a precursor of a greenhouse gas is stored”. Since, according to the above mentioned definition, mature forests are enormous carbon reservoirs, their conservation is capital for avoiding an increase in the atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration. On the contrary the destruction of primary forests, through fires for example, adds considerable quantity of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Deforestation and changing land-use patterns also add other greenhouse gases to the air. The conversion of forest to rangelands increases the liberation of methane and the burning of forests adds nitrous oxide to the atmosphere. It is out of discussion that forest conservation worldwide would be an effective way of achieving the ultimate objective of the UNFCCC, that is “the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (Article 2). Article 4.1.d of the Convention establishes –among the commitments of all Parties- their obligation to promote and cooperate in the conservation and enhancement of sinks and reservoirs, including forests.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the official conferences, consultations and workshops happening here and there, that result in nice declarations and recommendations, very little has been done to stop this destructive process and avoid its detrimental effects. This cannot reasonably be attributed to the evil nature of the stakeholders involved, but to the logics of the dominating economic system. The market oriented approach has completely ignored the negative effects of forest destruction on the forests themselves as a natural resource, on global climate and, for sure, on the people that live in and on them. Promotion of cash-crops, ranching schemes, tree monocrops, commercial logging, oil exploitation, large dam projects are showing that deforestation is not casual or “natural” but the consequence of such an approach. Some cases shall be mentioned.

- Southern countries are being more and more pushed to deplete their natural resources –forests included- to generate funds to pay their foreign debt. Indonesia, for example, aims at becoming the first oil palm exporter in the world. Local communities and indigenous peoples are deprived of their land and forests by oil palm companies, that do not hesitate even in setting fire to natural forests to clear up land for plantations. The increase of paper consumption in the North is causing the expansion of tree plantations for pulp in lands previously occupied by natural forests that are substituted after logging, as it is happening with pine plantations in the temperate forests of Chile. Paradoxically in Tasmania, Australia, center of origin of the genus Eucalyptus, massive native

clearance and replacement by monoculture plantations are underway.

- Local communities and environmental organizations are denouncing and facing destructive logging activities. In Gabon, for example, the primary tropical forest of the Okano River Basin are being felled down by Malaysian logging companies. Environmental groups of Guatemala have recently succeeded in disuading the US logging giant Simpson Forestry to continue its logging activities in the Rio Dulce area. These kinds of activities are not limited to the South: logging is also destroying the Pacific old-growth rainforests of Canada and the USA and environmentalists have suffered even physical violence for their activities.

- Oil exploration and exploitation is an important factor for the destruction of tropical forests, which adds yet another negative point to the performance of oil companies in relation to global warming. The Yasuni National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Ecuador, and Kithar National Park in Pakistan, are being menaced by oil exploration by Perez Compact of Argentina, Elf of France and Premier Oil. In Nigeria, Shell has not only been depleting the forests and encroaching native peoples lands, but also using the apparatus of State security to threaten those who oppose its activities. At the same time Shell is setting up tree plantations in the South, with the aim of creating a “green image”.

- Mining activities are also an important factor of forest degradation. Virgin rainforest of Suriname are threatened by the increase of mining concessions that the Government is granting to foreign companies. The Grasberg gold mine in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, is polluting water resources and provoking the loss of local forests. Similar effects is having copper exploitation in Bougainville and Ok Tedi, in Papua New Guinea.

The above mentioned examples are a token of the present discouraging situation and illustrate what the text of the UNFCCC really means by “human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere” (Article 1.2).

At the opposite side, other people are confronting these destructive schemes in their everyday actions to conserve their land, resources and cultures, and are thus positively contributing to climate stabilization:

- The Dayak, indigenous ethnic groups of Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia), have been leading a long struggle, started in the late 1980s, to stop the destruction of their rainforests by “development” plans such as commercial logging and plantations, large dams and industrial shrimp farming.

- The Cofanes indigenous people, who have recently occupied the Dureno 1 oil well in the Ecuadorian Amazon; the ‘Uwa struggling against Occidental Petroleum in Colombia, and the Kolla of Salta, Argentina, opposing the San Andres gas pipeline to protect the “yungas”, a mountain forest ecosystem rich in biodiversity

- Small farmer communities of Pucallpa, Peru, who are reverting crops and pasture lands to secondary forests, that provide fuelwood and timber for domestic use, and offer environmental benefits such as biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration.

- Nigerian environmentalists and indigenous peoples, which are defending the Okomu Forest Reserve, an area that still boasts of pristine forests in spite of economic pressure from the huge mono-crop plantations established in it by Michelin Rubber Company and Okomu Oil Palm Company and the

logging company Africa Timber and Plywood.

- Environmentalist groups in the North American Pacific Coast, who are bravely facing logging companies to protect the remaining old growth boreal forests.

These people and many others in similar conditions should be regarded as the authentic contributors to the achievement of the “ultimate objective of this Convention” (Article 2). Several international legal instruments and initiatives mention the role of indigenous peoples and local communities in forest conservation. For instance, the Indigenous Peoples Convention, introduced by the ILO in 1989, calls upon the signatory states to take measures to protect and preserve the environment of the territories indigenous people inhabit and to recognize their land rights. The “Call for Action” issued during CBD COP2 in Jakarta, in 1995, stressed “the need to develop and implement methods for sustainable forest management which combine production goals, socioeconomic goals of forest-dependent local communities, and environmental goals”.

Unfortunately, the present trend of global negotiations on climate change does not seem to go in this direction. The Kyoto Protocol is being regarded more as a trading agreement than as an environmental agreement, since Northern countries and private corporations –main responsible for the alteration of the world’s climate- are the most relevant actors in the diplomatic scene and seek to impose their points of view. The “promotion of sustainable forest management practices” –as stated in Article 2.ii of the Kyoto Protocol as an obligation of Annex I countries- seems to be only dead letter.