
The "Mexican version" of pulpwood plantations

The increased activities of the "maquiladora" industry (installed within Mexico and based on imported inputs and external export markets), have resulted in an enormous deficit in packaging papers --which are currently being imported from the US and Canada-- used in the necessary packaging of the industrial goods for the supply of external markets. Responding to pressures from the country's industrial sector, the Mexican government is now paving the way for the promotion of large scale pulpwood plantations to provide industry with raw material to produce cheap pulp and paper to fill in that gap.

The adopted strategy has three components: 1) to introduce changes to the legal framework; 2) to profit from the "comparative advantages" of Mexico for producing cheap pulpwood; 3) to promote plantations through direct and indirect subsidies.

The first component was already implemented in April 1997, with the passing of the Forestry Law, which was approved after strong lobbying from high ranking federal officials, parliamentarians linked to the national paper industry and the active participation of International Paper's CEO. This new law provides plantations with a clear legal framework, including the right of association with the peasants who own the land. As a result of pressures from peasant, environmental and civil organizations --and to a lesser extent from political parties-- plantations are not allowed to be established in forested areas and some conditions are established for large-scale plantations, including management plans and impact assessments.

The second component has also been addressed by the federal government, though the Environment Agency (SEMARNAP), which has incorporated the proposals of the national and transnational companies as if being its own. Its implementation has consisted of a discourse to convince the public about the alleged advantages for the country of tree plantations subsidised by public resources, cheap labour with no rights, and with the lack of requirements concerning social and environmental impacts. Nor surprisingly, one of the most active high-ranking officials promoting this strategy is a former employee of one of the large paper transnationals. As much of this propaganda has not convinced the majority of the Mexican people --particularly the peasants-- the plantation proponents have established new alliances and created a "National Committee from Tree to Book".

The third component is half way through. The Environment Agency has created a "Support Programme for the Development of Commercial Forestry Plantations". Under this programme, plantations will receive subsidies covering 65% of the plantation and management costs for up to seven years, and will also be exempted from taxes. However, there are still some problem areas. The first is that the distribution of resources wasn't as easy as imagined and some companies were left out. Another issue, linked to the drop in oil prices and oil revenues, is that the tax holiday will still need some time to be implemented, as well as some additional subsidies which were expected to be in place. Additionally, a new and unexpected problem has arisen: now other forest-based enterprises and peasant organizations are demanding subsidies to assist them in taking care of the forest, so as to be kept in line with state support to the plantation sector.

In sum, the Mexican version of plantations holds nothing new. Its aim is to integrate the transnational productive process, to subordinate the environmental policy to the needs of the transnational demand of the export-oriented industrial capital and to ignore the rights of indigenous peoples and peasants and their environmental culture. The new logic has imposed itself as a result of the official abandonment of other people-based alternatives.

However, the above is only part of reality. Peasant and indigenous peoples' reactions are surfacing, such as in the case of the recent massive action of peasants from the state of Guerrero against the US wood and paper company Boise Cascade or the complaints of Tabasco peasants against the unfair contracts of the plantation companies. These are also part of reality.

Source: Alejandro Villamar.- Datos de la "version mexicana" de la estrategia global de la industria maderera-papelera internacional bajo el TLCAN, April 1998.