
Integration can aggravate deforestation

A group of NGO representatives from many countries of the region met in the Environmental Forum of the Peoples' Summit of the Americas held in Chile and analyzed the forest issue within the framework of the trade-related integration process being promoted by governments through ALCA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas).

The results of the analysis clearly showed that deforestation and forest degradation constitute a common denominator in practically all the countries of the region and that the current integration process, which emphasizes on the economy in detriment of the environmental and social issues, will do nothing but aggravate the situation.

Given the enormous importance of forests both for the peoples that inhabit them and for the maintenance of a number of vital functions they play both at local, regional and global levels (biodiversity conservation, water and climate regulation, etc.), participants decided to present a number of demands to governments to ensure forest conservation in the region. What follows is the synthesis report prepared by the Forest Group of the Environmental Forum:

"FORESTS"

During the month of April 1998, civil society present at the Peoples' Summit demand governments to carry out an evaluation of the risks that the current model implies for the conservation of native forests, which hold the largest part of existing terrestrial biodiversity in the hemisphere and that play a number of essential ecological functions, both at the local and global level. In such context, it is important to take into account that industrial tree plantations, frequently treated as forests, have very few of the latter's characteristics and thereby must not be considered as such. Plantations are not forests.

Past experience shows that commercial liberalization agreements which do not include environmental and social safeguards have more negative than positive effects. The Free Trade Agreement between the USA, Canada and Mexico has weakened forest protection measures and standards, has resulted in the loss of employment in the US forest sector and has intensified the exploitation of native forests in Canada, without upgrading its inefficient and destructive logging practices, and has put Mexico in clear disadvantage in relation with its commercial partners. Consequently it must not be assumed -as is being done by governments in the region- that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between trade liberalization, market opening and sustainable use of forests.

The promotion of international trade and economic liberalization, exclusively based on market opening, has not taken into account the environmental consequences in the short, medium and long term. The citizen organizations of the hemisphere understand that it is necessary to urgently promote, in all international, bilateral or multilateral negotiations, the respect for the principles and criteria of sustainable development.

Within this context, the organizations present at the Peoples' Summit call on governments to consider:

1. That forests are varied and complex ecosystems, depositories of great biodiversity and that must therefore be used with respect to the balance of the biotic and abiotic elements which compose them. In the Americas, forests are the home of multiple peoples, particularly indigenous, forest-dependent peoples and other traditional communities. Their territorial, social and cultural rights, their style of life and civilization and their use of natural resources must be guaranteed. That is an essential condition to build more equitable and sustainable societies and to ensure the conservation of forests and of the environmental functions they perform.
2. That forest conservation must be prioritized in a true integration process. Commercial and investment agreements must be subordinated to international environmental agreements and to the relevant national, regional and local legislation.
3. They must promote and support broad and effective citizen participation in decision-making which affect forests.
4. They must design and implement territorial management systems contributing to link agrarian policies to forest policies, incorporating the needs and priorities of local populations.
5. They must adopt criteria and indicators to verify if forest use is sustainable in their respective territories and to evaluate if commercial integration affect them negatively or positively.
6. They must eliminate existing environmental and economic subsidies which favour the unsustainable use of forests and accelerate their destruction, while establishing subsidies for environmentally beneficial technologies, sustainable practices and particularly remove subsidies to large-scale tree monoculture plantations.
7. They must implement an in-depth institutional reform which subordinates the institutions in charge of forests to national environmental institutions which should ensure the effective implementation of forest protection legislation and be provided with the necessary economic resources to carry out such task.
8. They must include legislation in order that investments which might affect forests contemplate prior evaluations of their potential environmental and social impacts, in which all interested groups, particularly local populations, are able to participate in the final decision.
9. They must protect forests from large-scale exploitation and avoid all substitution of native forests for plantations. Special emphasis must be put on the protection of endangered species.
10. They must ban the export of non-processed wood, particularly logs and wood chips."