



March 31, 2016 - Polytechnic University of Valencia

WORKSHOP 2: FOREST TERRITORIES

Translated from French by Lauren Broome, Translators Without Border

EVALUATION

In the same way as other resources, forest territories are being grabbed. Companies, often with the support of States, degrade these territories and deprive local people of their homes or resources on which their living conditions depend.

These territories have been endangered by concessions for extraction of forest and mineral resources, hydroelectric or transport infrastructure projects, tourism, hunting concessions, by the expansion of farmland or even illegal harvesting of wood. It also happens that local populations or some forms of small-scale slash-and-burn agriculture, subject to increased restrictions, contribute to the degradation of these territories.

'Conservation' and carbon sequestration projects are also a threat to forest peoples. The REDD+ mechanism¹, promoted within the action of the States against climate change was discussed in particular. Still at the experimentation stage, the mechanism involves issuing certificates for the carbon dioxide emissions reduction that is supposed to be allowed by conservation, forest management or plantations projects². The certificates given to companies and NGOs can be resold and serve to highlight the recipients' involvement in the fight against climate change. Some proponents of REDD+ hope that they can one day be sold on carbon emissions markets to other companies wishing to maintain or increase their rights to pollute. Which makes the REDD+ mechanism a system to legitimize the current overall level of emissions of greenhouse gases, much more than to decrease it.

Many REDD+ projects exacerbate land grabs and restrict local people's access to the forest, jeopardizing their food security. In Madagascar, the creation of 6 million hectares of protected areas has led to the exclusion of local communities and to the restriction of areas available for agriculture and the collection of firewood. Financial compensation is often minimal.

Very generally speaking, projects aimed at forest territories represent a serious threat to the survival of indigenous and Aboriginal peoples whose cultures are intrinsically linked to their natural environment. The commodification of nature is the cause. The use of the term 'natural resources' is significant in this respect, since it empties nature of its sacred character and contributes to spreading the idea that it can be sold as an object.

The forest peoples are rarely involved and are more often excluded from decisions that affect the forest. Dispossessed populations are sometimes relocated to non-arable land³ with paltry compensation. Members of communities who are fighting these projects are criminalized, detained and suffer intimidation and physical violence. In Indonesia, 106 activists are in jail for trying to protect their territories. In Nicaragua, 15 to 20 leaders are being prosecuted for their activities. Berta Caceres and Walter Manfredo Méndez Barrios were murdered at the beginning of 2016 because of their activism, in Honduras and Guatemala respectively, like so many others in many countries.

The big winners of the projects in forest territories are private, often multinational, businesses that often degrade the environment (soil and water pollution, drying up of rivers, massive deforestation) without any consideration for local populations, with the consent of States and international organizations.

Some political advancements were discussed by the participants, such as the ratification by many South American countries of Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization or, more locally, the recognition of Aboriginal ownership of territories in Nicaragua and Honduras, or the organization of community forestry in Mexico and community forest management in Senegal. But, generally, national laws favor private economic interests rather than those of local and indigenous populations, and so-called advances

1 "Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions linked to Deforestation and Forest Degradation".

2 The participants denounced the definition of forest used in the framework of REDD+ pilot projects, that makes palm oil plantations eligible for certification.

3 In Madagascar, the crop yields of populations displaced following the creation of a mine were divided by 10.

in the recognition of the rights of communities may prove to be traps. In Nicaragua, for example, the form under which ownership of the ancestral domains of indigenous and Aboriginal communities has been recognized has not prevented abuses on the part of national or regional authorities nor the sale of land rights by some community members.

PROPOSALS

Citizen action must be designed to support communities and strengthen their capacity to resist against what threatens them and to obtain full recognition of their rights over forest territories:

- Knowledge and information sharing among different groups and movements. This action includes, in particular, making local populations aware of the mechanisms employed by multinationals to take over the territories. The tools and methods of mapping the territories of indigenous and Aboriginal communities must, for example, be shared,
- The globalization of the struggle. Greater cooperation among movements is needed along with the adoption of an international agenda. This last item is imperative given the multinational nature of the companies,
- Alert on "round tables for sustainable exploitation/production". Organized by the multinationals to pass off harmful practices as virtuous in the eyes of the public and of consumers, they must be exposed.
- Strengthening links between indigenous/local communities and urban citizens/consumers. Consumers can be allies of local and indigenous communities in their fight against the companies by deciding not to buy their products. Whether they be products made from palm oil or wood sold illegally, for example, consumers must be informed about the conditions of production.

Citizen actions must be structured around common political demands which must lead to the adoption by States of the following **political measures**:

- The implementation of international declarations on indigenous and native peoples (including Convention 169),
- Recognition and the effective respect of the customary law of the communities living *on* or *from* forest territories. In this regard, the participants were very reserved on the subject of the market mechanisms that have been established in the wake of land rights securitization programs. Formalization of property and usage rights, both individual and collective, is not a guarantee that the living conditions of indigenous people will improve, if it is conceived as a pre-condition for their possible sale on land markets.
- The creation of national public institutions so that indigenous people may easily attain documents which formalize their land rights (usage and property),
- Protection of forest territories for the survival of native and indigenous peoples, which may come about in particular by a halt in deforestation and the prevention of further environmental degradation by private companies,
- Ceasing to repress/criminalize indigenous activists and leaders opposed to government and private companies projects,
- Involvement of local communities in decision-making processes, the obligation to seek their advice before the implementation of any so-called 'development' projects, and giving their voices a predominant weight during these consultations,
- Recognition of the skills and knowledge of local and indigenous communities in protecting the environment and, for this, granting tangible benefits and support. In this regard, several participating organizations are claiming the allocation of REDD+ funding directly to communities in respect of their continued contribution to the preservation of the forest, with the freedom to use these funds as they wish.

Many examples of citizen/community movements having achieved concrete results were raised during the workshop. Two are mentioned for example here:

In Senegal, the forests had practically disappeared. Through the advocacy of the communities which included former logging firms employees, the government was made aware of the environmental damage made by these companies. New measures were adopted, such as priority use of forest areas for communities organized into Economic Interest Groups (GIE), within the framework of reforestation programs, and the strengthening of their rights.

The struggles of the COICA in Peru have halted the encroachment of agriculture on forest territories and deforestation.

INTERVENTIONS

The following list is not exhaustive. We apologize to the speakers at this workshop and to the participants whose names do not appear, and we ask you to make contact at the following address, so that we can update this synthesis with the full list: secretariat@landaccessforum.org

Introductory interventions (the names of two speakers are missing):

ROBINS, Taymond, Mayangna Nation, Nicaragua Mayangna Nation, Nicaragua

SOMBOLINGGI, Rukka, Coordinator of the Indigenous People's Alliance of the Archipelago, Aliansi insurance Adat Nusantara (AMAN), Indonesia's Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN), Indonesia

VASQUEZ, Edwin, Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), Peru, Coordinadora las Organizaciones Indígenas of the Cuenca Amazonica (COICA), Peru

Interventions of the participants:

PEACOCK, Peter, Community Land Scotland, UK Community Land Scotland, United Kingdom

Moderator:

LAFORGE, Michel, consultant, France

Reporter:

RAKOTONDRAINIBE, Mamy, President of the Collective for the Defence of Malagasy Land, TANY, France