

False economy for rainforests

by Ricardo Carrere
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The future of the world's forests was up for discussion last week as policy makers gathered at the climate change conference in Poznan.

On the agenda was a proposal to issue carbon credits for countries that stop deforestation. While it sounds good on paper, Ricardo Carrere of the World Rainforest Movement argues that such a market mechanism bodes ill for indigenous peoples

Lead article photo

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Denuded rainforest in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Photograph: Bruno Domingos/Reuters

Historically, when you have governments that say they are going to protect forest areas, what they usually do is to go into forest areas that are still intact. Those areas are intact precisely because forest people are living there and have been protecting their natural habitat.

Yet when governments set up a protected area or a natural reserve, they often evict the local people. Alternatively, they establish conditions on what forest peoples can and cannot do. This is well documented around the world in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

At the climate change conference, we saw exactly this process continuing. In last week's current climate change talks, policy makers were looking at how to reduce carbon emissions from deforestation. These account for about 20% of the total emissions they hope to eliminate.

There are two angles that governments are considering: the grant angle and the carbon market angle. In Brazil, for example, they are pushing for the grant model. Brazilians say that they want to protect the forest, but that means losing money from forest-dependent commercial initiatives such as logging and soya. So they suggested that if foreign countries paid them, they could use the money to protect the forest.

However, most policy makers appear to favour the carbon market model. Under discussion is a scheme called Redd, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation of forests. Through this approach, companies can emit say, 1,000 tonnes of carbon into the air. They can then offset this by paying for a halt to deforestation that would have created 1000 tonnes of carbon.

Redd is essentially about giving money to an area where, unless compensatory funds are made available, the rainforest is going to disappear. Take the example of a logging company. If that company receives enough money to make it worthwhile not to log, then it won't log.

Yet in a case where local people are already looking after the forest, there's no risk of deforestation. Still, they wouldn't receive money from Redd, because Redd is focused only on reducing emissions from areas threatened by deforestation. It's a perverse logic. The money goes to the bad guys, not the good guys; it goes to those who are deforesting, rather than those who are not. Money should be given to those who protect the forest, not to bribe those who would otherwise destroy it.

It's all about money, not about people's rights or necessities. They are turning forest conservation into a market mechanism. And absurdly, it's the same market that destroyed the Amazon through the export of soya and timber.

Indigenous people are set to lose their right of ownership over their forests at an even faster rate than at present. They don't have land rights and they are vulnerable. National governments do not recognise ancestral lands, preferring to claim that forests belong to the state. The governments then assume the legal right to give concessions for logging and mining and the like.

Obviously, there's a lot of money involved. If a government acknowledged the rights of the forest people it couldn't issue a logging concession. It would have to negotiate an individual agreement with the indigenous community.

This has to be seen as a human rights issue. These forest communities need their land in order to survive; they need their ecosystem. To destroy the land is to destroy the people.

At the climate talks, the sole indigenous presence was a handful of representatives. In individual countries, there have been no workshops or seminars to inform people about the current proposals and explain

what they may lose or gain from them. Indigenous people are treated like the animals of the forest; they are subject to the decisions of local and national governments.

If forest people are left to their own devices they will protect their habitat; they pose no threat to the rainforests. Deforestation occurs because of government policy and investment; trees are felled to make way for dams, roads, industrial logging, shrimp farming, etc. It is the world's governments that are responsible for destroying the forests.

If the proposed market mechanism goes ahead, indigenous people will almost certainly see their rights diminish and control over their lands disappear. In most cases they will be evicted to make way for companies and large conservation organisations.

Local people are being evicted already. As with anything, where there are billions of dollars at stake, there is going to be interest. One thing is for sure: whatever governments say, the money from market-based conservation will not go into local peoples' hands.

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