

The construction of a diverse world: A reflection from México, Central America and the Caribbean.

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Abstract

The logic of the dominant economic model is the consideration of nature as a *resource*. In this article, we question this economic vision towards the ecosystems and biodiversity, considered as commodities that can be bought or sold. Through an alternative vision we point out different views of the world from the indigenous people of our lands, for whom the forests, the sun, wind and water are not *resources* but essential elements of nature and common goods that give life to the complex net we belong to. This is why we emphasize the need to reinvent our words, in order to deconstruct the dominant discourse by remodeling our relationships towards the world surrounding us.

Multidimensional crises and the safer proposal of *Green Economy*

The role that natural wealth plays in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean is strategic due to the geographic characteristics, being a region with high productive and economic potential. These resources are attractive to big corporations and foreign interventions in a permanent competition to obtain control in the zone. This reality causes complex situations that involve the State, several transnational companies and the population, as well as the use of legal and economic instruments that cause the territory inequity and conflicts. Due to this appropriation of natural wealth, naturally rich countries possess populations high on poverty and marginalization.

One of the more common forms of control in the region has been the establishment of bi- or multilateral agreements for the entrance to a market controlled by exterior entities and with particular interest, usually in the form of free trade agreements or association agreements. These mutual understandings made in a context of inequity and based on dehumanized macroeconomic concepts impact on the different needs of the population, for example:

- Increase of unemployment and sub-employment rates. According to Red Latindadd, on the inform called *¿Markets or nations? Impacts from DR-CAFTA in the region from 5 years of validity (2011)*, unemployment rate varies between 5 and 12%, El Salvador and Costa Rica being the most affected countries in the last decade. Free trade agreements have made the work exploitation rates more profound, causing labor flexibility, especially among employed women.
- Through a new model of appropriation of the territory, more privatizations and demands on public ownership are being made, followed by the sell or rent of the land, which is usually used for agriculture business purposes (African palm tree, soy and sugarcane), instead of the production of food. This green hoarding stresses the socioenvironmental conflicts the region faces today. For example, in March 2011, in

the Valley of Polochic, Guatemala, 800 families were violently evacuated from the lands they harvested and lived on. To the present day, the 14 affected communities still do not have the necessary lands to develop their livelihoods.

- The privatization of goods and services provided by the state is being focused on natural strategic goods: oxygen (environmental services), genes (biodiversity) and water. Since the nineties, Mesoamerica has obtained loans and legal modifications to allow private dealerships, to establish the culture and infrastructure for the payment of water, and to obtain credits that increase the debts of public institutions that are responsible of the water supply service.

The increase of the countries' external debt is another point to consider, because even if the nations of the region are classified as medium rent countries, they assign, contradictorily, more than 40% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to the payment of their external debts. The debt is mainly transferred to the population, which contributes to accentuate the poverty and exclusion conditions, processes closely joint to the structural violence circle that affects the region.

This external debt represents a heavy weight for the countries, obstructing the region's development and the plain exercise of human rights. Also, the conditions established for the access to the external credits and inversions have caused the weakening of the power of the State.

- As it is said above, the widening of inequity continues to grow, not only among sectors, but among actors. It is necessary to emphasize that the impacts are differentiated among men and woman, according to the logic of the patriarchal system.

The model of development of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean continues with the same logic of accumulation and unfair distribution. Even if new purposes to the global crisis make this model up with green and sustainable labels, exterior politics' implementation implies the control of the economic, social, politic and environment scenarios of our countries.

For all the said above, it is important to emphasize the latest trend to promote military intervention as the optimal way to guarantee public safety, rose up as an effect of the dismantling of the state. This militarization entails the loss of freedom for the population and the criminalization of the exercise of citizenship in defense of territories and of human rights .

This situation causes multiple socioenvironmental conflicts in the region, in which political and economical pressure from national and international extractive sectors are provoking situations in which a lack of respect and even the violation of the local populations' human rights are becoming a common practice.

- **Mining**

Extractive industries, mining especially, have in the region turned out to be activities aiming for the countries economic growth. Paradoxically, instead of overcoming the vulnerability conditions, mining becomes another instrument to deprive communities, to perpetuate evacuations, pollution, assassinations, and to dismantle the local economic systems, and therefore, to aggravate inequality.

In this context, Honduras counts with 36.9% of total mining authorizations in Central America, having a 31% of its territory with grants to mining companies for metal exploitation. Guatemala, according to anti-mining movements, has authorized mining activities in 32,667 km², and El Salvador, the country with the least number of authorizations for mining, has 29 permissions and 2.35% of the mining territory in Central America.

In Mexico, according to information from the General Direction of Mining Promotion and from the Economy Ministry, to the first semester of 2013, there are 263 mining companies with foreign capital operating, managing a total of 677 projects.

From all of these companies, 198 (75%) are from Canada, 39 from the United States (15%), 7 from the United Kingdom (3%), 5 from Australia (2%), 3 from Japan, China and Corea (1%), and the rest from Switzerland, Luxemburgo, Chile, India, Italy, the Netherlands and Peru.

Water and Energy

The south of Mexico and countries that constitute Central America and the Caribbean are rich in fresh water, but very vulnerable to changes that, in middle or long term, may reduce its availability. Waste, pollution and lack of governance enhance water risk.

In Mexico the mismanagement of water is evidenced in the inequitable distribution among types of water uses, rural and urban areas, and even among cities. Mexican law does not contemplate these matters, nor do Guatemala and El Salvador have legal regulations on the use of water.

Water situation in the region is serious: we face an important decrease in underground aquifers. In Central America, water supplies per habitant decreased more than 60% since 1950, and the prognosis is that in the next years it will decrease to up to 80%. El Salvador is the only country in Central America that does not have enough water, as it is shown in the study by the Global Water Partnership (GWP) made in 2011: "With 1700 m³ per person and per year, El Salvador is almost reaching the hydrological security threshold, established in 1500 m³ per habitant."

On the other hand, great projects for renewable energies are currently searching to be placed in the new market that emerged with the climate change phenomenon. A clear example is the international economic agreement called Plan Puebla-Panamá or Middle America Project, an industrial development that promotes the installation of factories, assembly plants, mineral extraction, wind energy projects and highways building in the pursuit of free trade. This projects has caused deprivations in local communities with legitimate concerns for the environment.

Transnational companies and governments from the region perpetuate the extractive model by promoting the exploitation of clean energies coming from the sun, movements of the sea, and geothermia. These initiatives do not constitute a real alternative from this perspective, since they are based in the same capitalist model of accumulation.

Regarding hydroelectric plants and renewable energies, according to the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Economy, in 2012 there were 85 companies with foreign capital operating in Mexico: 50 from Spain, 20 from the United States, 10 from Canada, and 3 from China, United Kingdom and Japan.

An example of affectations and human rights violations by energy projects is the case of the wind energy corridors in Istmo de Tehuantepec, México, where forced expropriations are taking place in indigenous territories justified by the development of huge wind mills.

In the case of Mexico, more than 185,000 people have been moved as a result of the construction of big hydroelectric dams promoted by the federal government. These types of projects affect mainly indigenous and rural populations.

Biodiversity and ecosystems

Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean are some of the richest regions in the world in terms of genetic, species' and ecosystem biodiversity. Mexico is the world's second in reptiles' biodiversity, third in birds' biodiversity and fifth in amphibians and vascular plants.

Furthermore, the region is considered the origin center of one of the products that currently provides nourishment for a large part of the population: corn (*Zea mays*). This reality should emphasize the commitment to the protection of this species and its varieties, due to the great adaptability and specialization that indigenous people and peasants reached in the great environmental diversity that compose this region.

In Latin America, around 220 types of corn have been described and 64 of them (29%) have been identified in Mexico. In this sense, it is necessary to mention that the importance of corn does not only rely on its genetic diversity and food supply potential, but also in the role that it plays in the beliefs, cosmogony and spiritual practices of the traditional cultures that inhabit our territory.

Despite all the mentioned above, the willingness to conserve the corn's high diversity has been ignored by the region's governments, and nowadays a great menace threatens the region: the introduction of transgenic crop varieties. This homogenization of corn crops implies a reduction in natural varieties, adapted to specific microregions in Mexico and Central America, provoking the increase of economic dependence of peasants towards new agriculture supplies and especially towards seeds, which had been a common good since ancient times.

In 2003, an study showed that the native corn crop fields belonging to peasants and indigenous people in Mexico were polluted with transgenic varieties, recognizing the presence of the BtCry9c protein (an indicator of Starlink corn, nowadays prohibited for human consumption in the United States), as well as *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) - used for

transgenic corn by Monsanto and Syngenta companies, and CP4-EPSPS protein from Monsanto, an indicator of transgenic corn with resistance to herbicides (ETC Group, 2003).

Today, six multinational companies dedicated to research and genetic innovation have control of the current priorities and the future direction of agriculture in the world. Syngenta, BASF, Dow, Monsanto and DuPont control 59.8% of the commercial seeds and 71.1% of agrochemicals. The same six companies develop at least 76% of research in both sectors (ETC Group, 2012).

Education

Education is one of the basic elements for the transformation of a society, but paradoxically, in the last decades, it has been set aside in the designation of the Nations' budget all around the region: in 2008 Mexico invested only 4.9 of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the education sector, Costa Rica invested 5%; El Salvador 3.7% and Panama 3.8% (UNESCO, 2008).

Concurrently, educative systems in the region, characterized by a low integration of elements that contribute to the development of critical postures to social inequity and class oppression, has contributed to the configuration of the region as provider of cheap manual labour to transnational corporations. This reality justifies the fact that *maquilas* are one of the strongest and more dynamic industries in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean (Katz, 2000). It is assumed then that governments should model an educative system capable to address some important challenges such as inequity and poverty in a region conformed by some of the poorest countries in Latin America: Honduras maintains 67% of its population in poverty, Nicaragua around 58.2%, Guatemala around 54.8%, El Salvador 46.6% and Mexico 36.3% (CEPAL, 2012).

Besides, this new educational model should address not only the deep socioeconomic problems, but it should also consider the exacerbated ecological crisis that affects the region, where natural resources extraction continues: high pollution levels and constant invasion of ecosystems for the development of productive activities with high social and environmental impact.

As a conclusion, a proper education for the region should be one that best faces the complex socioenvironmental reality, and that is reoriented towards the development of the knowledge capable of confronting global problems, and fundamentally where it is possible to subscribe the local knowledge of the region's populations (Morin, 1999).

Proposals from the perspective of Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean youth

In the construction phase, participants of the Future workshop generated viable, realistic and innovative proposals aimed at solving the problems and realities addressed in relation to the regional context. Proposals to build a new reality were grounded in an orientation to local initiatives as a starting point for social transformation. In the field of education, the general idea was to support local systems adapted to local contexts, in lieu of systems that had been homogenized and standardized at the country level, so that these local learning systems could discover collectively how to respond to the problems of each place.

As a controversial point, the group questioned the vertical system of traditional teaching

and learning, in which students accept the teacher's knowledge without question, as opposed to educational alternatives that would nurture students' critical consciousness, constructing knowledge horizontally and collectively.

The strength of education in the region lies in an institutional school system, because it will not be able to provide fully localized responses to the needs of human communities and to consider learning as a standalone exercise for reflection and timely action. It is therefore recommended to rescue traditional knowledge and teaching and community horizontally, depending on an active approach to regional issues.

Because of this, the workshop transcended the narrow limits imposed by the specialization of knowledge and created an interdisciplinary and holistic problem-solving space in which all aspects of science and technology could contribute to the search for the collective good.

On the topic of energy, there was recognition of the need to limit the current use of fossil fuels, which has been characterized by patterns of waste and inefficiency. Proposals included encouraging social initiatives for diversification in energy use, as well as intervention in the design and formulation of public policies and legislation related to the energy sector.

We highlight the importance of implementing education programs for the proper use of energy and for supporting a critical consciousness in individuals towards appropriate consumption patterns and the questioning of behaviors based on high levels of energy dependence that societies currently perceives as "normal".

The proposals led to a diagnosis aimed at identifying and classifying limited portions of lands based on their potential for producing different kinds of alternative energy, taking into account political, cultural, economic and socio-environmental factors. The project will build on this diagnosis with the creation of financial plans for the implementation of alternative energies.

Regarding food and nourishment systems, participants mentioned that territories should have strategies to protect biodiversity from the risks that new biotechnologies represent. The implementation of food and agricultural policies should be guided by the precautionary principle, the respect to ancestral farming practices, pursuing the food sovereignty of the area, meaning the right of each nation to define their own agricultural policies and food in accordance with sustainable development goals and food security.

Regarding climate change vulnerability, proposals include the creation of local and autonomous management groups throughout the territories of our regions, which would be tasked with presenting a detailed plan of adaptation through participatory consultations with stakeholders, supported by linkages with decision makers, international cooperations, governments and private initiatives.

In brief, it is intended that pilot models throughout the world should be underpinned by an integral and autonomous land management, taking sustainability, living well (Buen Vivir), respect for human rights and equal relations with nature into account. From this, we propose the replication of experiences in other territories, not by way of homogenization, but as a result of exchange in a context of plurality and autonomy.

As a result, the proposals are aimed at strengthening social movements and autonomous experiences in integral territorial management, opening channels for advocacy. The

process is also expected to change the negative environmental impacts and inequality in the distribution of common goods, as well as to promote experience exchanges among the various people that make up our world.

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