

# **TRIPARTITE ALLIANCES: LESSONS FOR CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT\***

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## **LAS LECCIONES DE AVANZAS TRIPARTITAS PARA LA CONSERVACION Y EL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE**

### **SUMMARY**

This paper presents an overview of the pressing problems which presently affect rural tropical areas in Latin America and proposes some potential solutions to the critical ecological and social problems in these areas. In particular, the objectives, structure, and activities of the Tropical Forest Action Program (PROAFT) for Mexico are discussed within the context of the international Tropical Forest Action Plan (TFAP) and the socio-cultural priorities of rural tropical communities. One of the initiatives of PROAFT called tripartite alliances is described with respect to its potential for local participation in tropical bioconservation and the role of conservation and research programs in rural communities.

### **RESUMEN**

Se analiza el panorama preocupante actual de las áreas rurales tropicales en Latinoamérica y se proponen algunas soluciones a los problemas ecológicos y sociales más importantes. Se discute la importancia del establecimiento de alianzas tripartitas establecidas entre comunidades campesinas, la Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos (SARH) y centros de investigación, educación, conservación o extensión. También se analizan las bases del programa de Acción Tropical (PROAFT), el cual será presentado a la comunidad internacional bajo la coordinación de FAO en 1993.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The present situation in Latin America's rural areas, which contain some of the world's most important tropical forests, is disturbing. Large sectors of the human population in these countries are being pushed into absolute or marginal poverty due to the high concentration of wealth in small sectors of the population. In addition, the process of economic accessibility occurring in the majority of Latin American countries places their economies at the mercy of the international market. As a result, the governmental roles within these international forces and in the context of each country's human, natural, and economic resources present a difficult challenge to overcome.

Latin America contains 68 million of the poorest people in the world, and 80% of this poor population live in areas where their life quality is threatened by ecological destruction and environmental hazards. It is increasingly evident that many of these marginal groups- in particular those ethnic groups with traditional roots - sincerely desire to conserve their natural resources. Yet, poverty forces them to use survival strategies which contribute to the deterioration of the environment. During the last ten years, tropical deforestation has increased from 11 to 17 million hectares per year. In Mexico alone,

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deforestation has increased from 2.7 to 7.4 million hectares per year, and erosion represents a problem for 42% of the country (Tudela, 1992).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL DEGRADATION**

The causes for rural poverty and environmental degradation in Latin America can be placed in three main categories:

- 1) soil erosion due to poor farming practices which undermine soil fertility as part of various survival strategies for survival;
- 2) cultural erosion which results in the abandonment of traditional conservation practices. In part, this situation is due to the increasing dependence of rural communities on wider labor and commodity markets and, at the same time, the lack of opportunities for wage labor and the collapse of local official institutions which promote collective labor organization; and
- 3) deforestation as a consequence of migration and colonization in tropical areas by groups from areas where production alternatives have failed.

In Mexico, these factors reflect a process of globalization in the tropics which places at risk the cultural values of the country's vast ethnic mosaic, particularly with respect to the management and conservation of natural resources.

Mexico cannot be blind to the fact that an alarming number of its citizens live in marginal conditions in the rural areas of the tropics. In 1980, approximately 24 million Mexicans (26% of the nation's population) were living in poverty, and in addition, 173 million Mexicans (20% of the population) were living in extreme poverty, in that they were unable to satisfy 60% of their basic needs. Conditions of poverty are particularly prevalent in the tropical regions of Mexico. Among the poorest states are Oaxaca and Chiapas which in 1980 had per capita GNP figures of 5 and 11 thousand pesos, respectively. As a point of reference, the national average at the time was 11.6 thousand pesos and the highest per capita GNP was 31.5 thousand pesos in the state of Tabasco (due to petroleum interests and an oil boom in the 1970s) (PRONASOL, 1990).

Clearly a combined conservation and development process is necessary to incorporate the tropical Mexican states with the remainder of the country by first offering a self-sufficient production system and subsequently a commercial production system. It is important to note that development is not only a matter of land productivity; socio-economic, cultural, and education aspects need to be taken into account as well in order to break the self-perpetuating link between poverty and environmental degradation.

## **INITIAL STEPS TO HALT DEFORESTATION**

In 1985, the international Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was begun in an effort to coordinate the actions of developed countries and international development and financing agencies, with the main objective to halt the process of tropical deforestation. In this same year, the World Resources Institute (WRI) and FAO presented a plan for the conservation and sustainable development of tropical forest areas. This plan provided a conceptual basis for the international framework of the TFAP. In particular, it emphasized the importance of community involvement in the planning process and the development of mechanisms which would insure local collaboration in future long-term activities of the program. Some of the specific points recommended by WRI and FAO included:

- 1) the participation of local populations in the planning process;
- 2) the identification of local uses for forestry resources and the integration of local needs in development plans;
- 3) the encouragement and support of sustainable land-use practices and the development of incentives for local populations in order to invite their participation in the development of conservation and natural resource management systems.

In July, 1991, a group of experts met to analyze Mexico's previous participation and future role in TFAP, particularly with regard to the international consensus about effective mechanisms to prevent tropical deforestation. It was decided that a new working group would be created to evaluate what had been done up to that point and to give a new focus to Mexico's program. The proposal and results of this working group have gone beyond the original idea of a basic plan; they serve as a guide for a far reaching program for Mexico, the Program for Tropical Forest Action (Programa de Acción Forestal Tropical), in order to put an effective halt to tropical deforestation and encourage the sustainable use of natural resources in the medium- and long-term.

### **MEXICO'S PARTICIPATION IN TFAP**

The Program for Tropical Forest Action (PROAFT) differs from previous programs and plans in Mexico in that it is based on placing the future management of tropical forests in the hands of the local people. Another defining aspect of PROAFT is that it has broadened the area of forestry action to include ecological, land-use, and socio-economic aspects. Finally, PROAFF works toward making the forestry sector meet the needs of the local populations through sustainable management of natural resources.

PROAFF has begun with a preliminary two-year phase during which the main activities include:

- 1) basic studies to evaluate the causes of tropical deforestation. At the present moment, fifteen studies are being carried out to document the present condition of the Mexican tropics and the various factors that drive deforestation or encourage conservation;
- 2) the development of mechanisms called tripartite alliances which allow direct collaboration with local communities and facilitate the establishment of coalitions between these communities, conservation and research organizations, and funding agencies dedicated to supporting tropical conservation and rural development activities; and
- 3) the identification of the different groups with interests in the Mexican tropics and, subsequently, the delineation of agreements for industrial forestry development to promote a process of sustainable use of tropical forests by external commercial interests.

It is important to note that during the preliminary phase this approach is low profile and not responsive to political interests and opportunities.

Despite the obvious logic and necessity of placing the future of tropical forests in the hands of the forests' inhabitants, converting this premise into reality presents a difficult challenge. The resource richness of tropical forests invites a mixture of conflicting interests which place in direct conflict the processes of development and conservation. Groups with vested interests in tropical areas include local residents, lumber companies, landless colonists from rural and urban areas, government agencies, and conservation groups, among others. As a result, it is difficult to reach an equilibrium between the need for tropical conservation and the increasing pressure for exploitation of natural resources. In terms of the mechanisms for tropical conservation, the success of PROAFF requires the development of rural participatory methodologies for tropical communities and effective mechanisms to establish long-term collaborative programs in these communities.

The present problems in Mexican tropical areas can be placed in four main categories, in which the corresponding solutions require:

- 1) the development and conservation of sustainable management practices, such as agrosilviculture and reforestation. PROAFT's tripartite alliances and development agreements are based on principles of sustainable resource management.
- 2) the integration of community participation in extension programs and rural development. PROAFT's participatory rural appraisal workshops have this function.
- 3) the formation of a strategic plan for research and education. PROAFT's strategy consists in strengthening local universities' research programs.
- 4) the establishment of proper commercialization routes for a variety of products from tropical forests. PROAFF promotes the certification of products derived from sustainable management of natural resources, sustainable forest management in the lumber and paper industry, and ethnic authenticity of artesian goods.

In light of the urgency of conservation actions in the Mexican tropics, it is not necessary to wait for a definitive program in order to proceed. Specific actions can and have been undertaken immediately, with domestic and international sponsors, to help gather the data needed for the long-term global program. This strategy furthers the development of PROAFT, even without the assurance of its complete funding. The immediate activities create a favorable and productive climate for PROAFT's long-term funding and assist its progress toward a better-integrated program for the tropics, in Mexico or elsewhere. In other words, Mexico would like to play a new role in the international TFAP, based on a different approach to encouraging local, national, and international participation and linkages for tropical conservation.

### **ONE WAY TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM**

In order to design a long-term program for Mexico which will insure the future of the country's tropical forests, the following guidelines have been established:

- 1) PROAFT must be seen as a continuing process, rather than as a set program;
- 2) PROAFT's approach to the problem of tropical deforestation in Mexico cannot be reduced to only its forestry component; it must take into account the ecological, agricultural, cattle-raising, social, and economic characteristics as well.
- 3) PROAFT must work towards placing the future of tropical forest management in the hands of the local populations;
- 4) PROAFF must insure that the forest sector also helps support the needs of the local populations, without allowing that rural development compromises the resources of future generations.

Under the international guidelines, the basic goal of PROAFT is to put an effective halt to deforestation in the Mexican tropics. The strategy of the Mexican program has been to develop a model which encourages and offers alternative forms of management to tropical forest inhabitants which will benefit them and their communities. As a result, PROAFT has concentrated on completing the following objectives:

- 1) development of actions or possible solutions based on the analyses and/or diagnostic studies of the causes and effects of tropical resource depletion and the detection of potential obstacles to these actions;
- 2) support of initiatives for sustainable rural development and conservation of natural resources;

- 3) establishment of effective systems of communication and dissemination which allow the diffusion of viable alternatives for natural resource management and facilitate the corresponding process of change within the priorities of each local community;
- 4) planning, instituting, and consolidating a participatory process for tropical forest conservation strategies and actions which will give PROAFT a role within development priorities;
- 5) definition and promotion of tropical information systems which will allow monitoring and evaluation of conservation actions in order to expedite decision-making based on current information;
- 6) delineation and establishment of research, teaching and training programs and centers which support PROAFT's objectives and goals;
- 7) development of financial strategies which allow for the sound management of natural resources.

### **TRIPARTITE ALLIANCES**

A long-term program for the conservation of the Mexican tropics requires two types of information. First, an inventory and documented analysis is needed of the development projects or programs which already have been implemented in Mexico. Based on this information, PROAFT will be able to identify the policies, incentives and subsidies which have led to deforestation, as well as the problems involved, their causes and possible solutions. This inventory and analysis form part of the initial phase of basic studies, which include an examination of successful actions as well. National and international research organizations in forestry sciences have been contacted to undertake these evaluations, along with centers for political science or economics with access to data from the multilateral banking systems, Mexican agencies and archives. Each study has been contracted for a time period of six months.

Second, the establishment of financial mechanisms is needed to insure the permanence of Mexico's forest legacy and its sustainable use. In PROAFT these mechanisms include the tripartite alliances and agreements for industrial forestry development. The tripartite alliances, in particular, function to identify members of rural tropical communities who are interested in specific forest management projects. In alliance with the Undersecretary of Forestry and Wildlife (as part of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (SARH)) and a technical advisory group (research, education, conservation, and/or extension membership), the local community groups then undertake concrete projects and begin to design long-term programs for the conservation of their tropical forest heritage in the context of the cultural beliefs and community priorities.

Within these alliances, the role of the Undersecretary of SARH is to promote and facilitate such alliances, obtain the necessary resources to improve the quality of life in such communities, and encourage the implementation of forestry projects. The role of the community group is to assume responsibility for the project it proposes and to undertake actions for the benefit of the community as a whole. The role of the technical advisory group is to support, coordinate, research, and document the projects, and report directly to the office of the Subministry. In this manner, the tripartite alliances represent a new form of cooperation which jointly benefits essential sectors of the Mexican community: organized civil society (private enterprises, farming organizations, conservation organizations, or the country's great research centers), the government, and the inhabitants of the tropical forests.

The tripartite alliances should help conserve and, wherever possible, improve the tropical forest heritage of rural communities. Integrated management is the key to achieving this goal. In other words, agricultural, ranching, and forestry systems which affect the condition of tropical forests must be improved along with other activities associated with the management of renewable natural resources. This approach is necessary in order to both conserve the few areas of tropical forest which remain and to develop alternative forms of resource management in the long-term. The basic premise for PROAFT regarding the management of units of production - whether in the short-, medium-, or long-term - is the

need for diversification of crops and harvested forest resources, regional management of natural resources, and intensification of land use.

Examples of activities which can be considered for community projects in the tripartite alliances include, among others:

- reforestation;
- conservation of tropical zones, species and/or varieties;
- communal production nurseries;
- forestry-grazing systems;
- agroforestry production and management systems;
- multiple-use and diversified land-use systems;
- traditional crop production;
- traditional construction techniques and use of natural resources;
- alternatives for the optimal utilization and conservation of the environment;
- reports on the use and management of natural resources;
- sustainable forestry practices; new wood substitutes for artesian goods or construction; and
- fire-prevention practices.

A preliminary activity for the establishment and development of the tripartite alliances is the organization of a participatory rural appraisal workshop, where an exchange of knowledge and experience can take place and adjustments made for the specific project and community. At least two members of the community and one of the technical advisory group must be present in this workshop. During the workshop, the basis for a natural resource management plan is established for each community as well.

Although the tripartite alliances have been established in order to initiate various actions for the conservation, management, and sustainable use of tropical resources, the basic objective of the alliances is to design an integrated management plan for forest communities and ejidos<sup>1</sup> with the active participation of their members. This goal is accomplished through a series of land planning exercises during the various evaluation workshops for the alliances.

For example, in an ejido or community in the tropics, different types of land use can be found: field agriculture (milpas), fruit orchards, livestock raising, silviculture, raised fields, fallow plots (acahuales), and community forest reserves, among others. In order to manage the tripartite alliances, then, a map of land use in the ejido or community is needed. As a result, each community or ejido selected for the tripartite alliances receives guidance from PROAFT and from its associated technical advisory group, so that community members can acquire some experience in participatory rural evaluations. Using this technique, an evaluation of land use in the community can be completed in approximately two weeks. Such an evaluation is indispensable for designing a plan for sustainable and integrated management of ejidal, community, or private land holdings.

What PROAFT seeks in these management plans is the more efficient and rational use of the different ecological and land-use zones which correspond to each community. PROAFT also searches for and suggests alternative practices which are aimed at improving land use and thus the local populations quality of life. In this sense, diversification applies not only to crops; it implies having different production units with varied types of use and management, so as to integrate production systems and insure their viability in the short-, medium-, and long-term.

Assistance by the technical advisory group in the development of the management plans consists of a joint analysis with members of the community as to what should be planted and where, what should be conserved, and how and where this can be achieved. These decisions are based on local, regional, and national needs in the farming and forestry sectors and on the areas' local ecological characteristics. This

level of local planning needs to be complemented by some additional techniques for regional planning, so as to compile both micro and macro scales of information for each region.

Following the initial phase of PROAFT described above, it can be foreseen that several aspects of the alliances will need to be clarified and resolved for the long-term viability of the program. First, it will be necessary to clarify what are the possibilities and limits of the tripartite model for community participation and tropical conservation, including components of the corresponding resource management practices such as silviculture, sustainable agriculture and livestock-raising. Second, it needs to be decided for how many years each tripartite alliance will be supported with unrestricted funds. Third, as a result of the financing limits, PROAFT will need to develop a combination of unrestricted funds and loans which will allow and encourage participant communities to become independent of PROAFT and develop their own mechanisms for self-management of their own projects. Fourth, in the initial process to make the projects independent, PROAFT will need to insure the communities' participation and role in larger, regional projects. Through these processes, PROAFT hopes to encourage that other communities copy these self-management models without having to repeat the initial process and costs of the tripartite alliances.

Finally, a consolidation of all the various alliance projects will be necessary to establish a local tropical forest network. In turn, this process will tie together other networks which are already in existence, such as the network of forest communities and the network of producers from areas where forest conservation is an integral part of their land-use systems. These networks provide a mechanism which makes an exchange of information more feasible and strengthens the group of communities which demand change in order to conserve their forests.

## **CONCLUSION**

The fundamental purpose of the tripartite alliances is to encourage the participation of the inhabitants of Mexico's tropical forests in the protection and conservation of their tropical resources and to insure that they have a say in the decisions that affect their means of livelihood. Towards this goal, the alliances serve to establish effective communication between the various groups with experience and knowledge about resource management alternatives and to put these concepts into practice within the socio-cultural context of each locality. Part of this process is to incorporate and adjust the goals of PROAFT for tropical conservation within the development priorities of each community, so that the initiatives for conservation and development work together rather than in conflict. In addition, the tripartite alliances also serve as a base for the development of research and education programs from the local to international level, which provides a form of monitoring and self-evaluation of PROAFT's activities and allows the presentation of a studied model for potential application in other tropical areas.

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