

Mexico, the Leader in Community Forest Management

By Emilio Godoy

MEXICO CITY, Jan 5, 2011 (IPS) - Thanks to its experience with community forestry projects, Mexico can provide tips on how to manage forests while fomenting the development of local economies in 2011, the International Year of Forests.

Every year, some 13 million hectares of forests are lost worldwide, and deforestation is responsible for 20 percent of total emissions of carbon dioxide, one of the main greenhouse gases responsible for global warming, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).



Wood worker in the southern state of Chiapas.

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"The priority is to avoid losing forests, and this year gives us the opportunity to focus on the issue," Iván Zúñiga, spokesman for the non-governmental Mexican Council for Sustainable Forestry (CCMSS), told IPS.

"The forest is an entire ecosystem, in which people are inserted," he said. "But human beings don't only degrade forests; they can improve them as well. The biological wealth of a well-managed forest can improve."

Mexico leads the world in the sustainable management of forests, with more than 800,000 hectares of community forests, according to the World Bank.

Of the 2,300 local communities in Mexico that produce timber under forest management plans, 600 have their own saw mills or furniture-making companies, the CCMSS reported.

"The system that can work is to foment small enterprises," Francisco Chapela, regional manager of the Rainforest Alliance's TREES programme, told IPS. "If families depend on the forest, they will have an incentive to keep them alive. That can curb deforestation and lead to the expansion of forest cover."

About 65 million hectares in Mexico are covered by forest, and the ministry of the environment has granted management permits to 6.5 million hectares.

The authorities say the country loses some 150,000 hectares of forest annually, but Greenpeace and other environmental organisations put that figure above 500,000 hectares a year.

The Rainforest Alliance, which was founded in 1986, launched the world's first sustainable forestry certification programme in 1989 and is now the foremost Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Forest Management certifier.

To date, 43 Mexican businesses have received Rainforest Alliance certification.

In 2006, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2011 the International Year of Forests. (FAO had declared 1985 International Year of the Forest.) This year's slogan is "Forests For People".

Forests are home to 80 percent of the world's biodiversity and 300 million people. Furthermore, they provide a livelihood for 1.6 billion people, nearly a quarter of the world's population, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"People need a form of development based on resources that are not destroyed when they are used," Victoria Santos, technical director for the grassroots Organisation of Forest Producing Ejidos of the Mayan Zone (OEPFZM), told IPS.

In the municipality of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, in the southeastern Mexican state of Quintana Roo, Santos has personally witnessed the impact of hurricanes and storms.

Because of the effects of Hurricane Dean in August 2007, 10 local "ejidos" or communities were forced to abandon their forestry activities, and only three have managed to start up again.

The OEPFZM, founded in 1986, is currently made up of 3,000 families who manage 287,000 hectares of tropical forest.

At the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP16), held in Cancún, Mexico in late 2010, the international community reached an initial agreement on a new financing mechanism, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation.

But the Cancún Agreement, signed by more than 190 nations, failed to define technical criteria or sources of financing for what is known as REDD+ because it is an extension of the original programme implemented since 2008 by FAO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Environment Programme (UNEP).

REDD, which is currently applied in Bolivia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, the Philippines, Tanzania, Vietnam and Zambia, is aimed at fighting deforestation, cutting carbon dioxide emissions, and boosting access to technical and financial support by participating countries.

At COP16, the Mexican government gave an idea of the vision on which the national REDD strategy will be based, when it begins to function in 2012. However, today there is little assessment of the degradation of the soil in this Latin American country.

This strategy "should not replace the reduction of emissions from other sources," Zúñiga said. "It is a risk if it is poorly implemented, but it is also an opportunity to curtail deforestation and the loss of forests, and to provide funds to enable communities to sustainably manage their forests."

But programmes like REDD have to overcome serious problems relating to land ownership, the land rights of indigenous communities, and the expansion of monoculture forestry plantations.

"Communities have not been taken into account; they must be informed about what it means to take part in these programmes," Santos said.

"A strategy based on police controls won't work, people will see it as something that is being imposed on them," Chapela said. "Incentives have to be created, and there should be a mixture of

exploitation of the forests, conservation of the forests, and payments for environmental services."
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