

Focali Brief: 2012:04

# Conflict and Rhetoric in Bolivian Forest Protection

Since the election of President Evo Morales in 2005, Bolivia has positioned itself as a leftist, anti-capitalistic defender of indigenous rights and environmental protection. While several groundbreaking steps were taken in this direction, practice has fallen short of rhetorical promise when it comes to forest protection.

**THE PARTICIPATION** of indigenous peoples has been put forward by many as an important feature of any REDD+ (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) scheme discussed under the UN framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC). As a country with a high forest cover and high deforestation (see box 1), Bolivia is highly interesting from a REDD+ perspective. In addition, the country is trying to position itself as a progressive promoter of indigenous rights.

## Constituting a plurinational state

In a way unprecedented in Bolivian history the current administration has put focus on the rights of indigenous peoples. In February 2009, through a process marked by political conflict, a new political constitution was adopted, which defined Bolivia as a “plurinational” state based on political, economic, juridical, cultural and linguistic plurality (Bolivia, 2009). The constitution aims at the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples on their own terms, not in a liberal Western sense (Lupien, 2011). It recognises the indigenous communities’ rights to autonomy, self-government, recognition of their institutions and consolidation of their territories, within the framework of the State and the constitution (Bolivia, 2009, Article 2). Indigenous communities situated in forest lands are granted exclusive rights to the use and management of forest resources (ibid, Article 388). The right to community and collective property is recognised and protected. The



Box 1: Bolivia in numbers. Sources: (FAO, 2010; INE, 2012). Photo: Lisa Westholm

constitution establishes strong state control over natural resources. However, indigenous peoples are guaranteed the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) with respect to extraction of non-renewable resources in their territories (ibid, Article 30). Nonetheless, despite the rhetoric of the constitution, consultations have not been integrated in legislation or developed as a normative instrument (Ribera, 2011). Rather, critique has been voiced that subsequent legislation concerning indigenous communities works against the intentions of the constitution (Cameron, 2012).

## Protecting Mother Earth

In the international arena the Morales administration has also maintained a high profile on issues related to environmental protection. Bolivia was the only country to oppose the adoption of the Cancun Agreement at the UNFCCC COP 16 in 2010, because it did not contain any binding targets for emissions reductions and because it opened the door to carbon markets (Solon,

2010). Following the UNFCCC meetings in Durban Bolivia has proposed the development of a “Climate Justice Entity”, and a “Joint Mitigation and Adaptation Mechanism for the Integral and Sustainable Management of Forests” (Bolivia, 2012a). The proposals outline a number of tools for the payment of developed countries’ “climate debt” (p. 2). Emphasis is on non-market based approaches, respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, national sovereignty and the obligation of developed countries to financially and technically support emission reductions in developing countries.

The Bolivian position is motivated in terms of ethics, rights and justice, but also in spiritual terms, referring to “the sacred Mother Earth” (Bolivia, 2012b:2) being a central part of the Andean indigenous peoples’ worldview. In 2010, a law establishing the Rights of Mother Earth was adopted (Bolivia, 2010). The law defines Mother Earth from an indigenous cosmivision, as the inseparable integrated system of all living beings and their surroundings.

### About this brief

Focali provides knowledge to Swedish ministries, government agencies and other relevant actors for effective forest management to achieve climate-poverty targets.

It also establishes an office for the protection of these rights. Indigenous and environmental organisations however criticise the government for ignoring the law in practice (Ribera, 2011).

## Forest sector

Bolivian forest policy has gone through several paradigm shifts. When the first forest law was issued in the 1970s, the focus was on economic growth (Pacheco et al., 2010). The forest administration was characterised by corruption and inefficiency. In the 1990s, this was followed by a period of focus on reduced impact logging and forestry certification. This development was supported on the policy side by the introduction of long-term forest concessions and allocation of forest ownership to private actors as well as indigenous groups.

When Evo Morales came to office in 2006 policies shifted, once again emphasising the role of the state (Pacheco et al., 2010). As he came into office great hopes were invested in his ability to industrialise the country and to use the ensuing profits to finance extensive poverty reduction measures. A revision of the agrarian reform aimed at speeding up and making the land titling process more transparent. The reform includes titling of indigenous lands and clarifying the rules for expropriation and redistribution of lands to smallholders and indigenous communities (Redo et al., 2011). The National Development Plan (Bolivia, 2006) proposed a number of policies, including productive transformation of the forest sector, industrialisation and expansion of sustainable forest exploitation; state control over forest resources; sustain-

able use and conservation of biodiversity; and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration. Nonetheless, an analysis conducted in 2009 described the Bolivian forest sector as suffering from considerable legal uncertainty and a lack of institutional capacity which has paved the way for illegal activities and deforestation (Castro Delgadillo, 2010).

## Frozen REDD+ process

The Bolivian relationship to the REDD+ process is complex and somewhat contradictory. In 2010 the government organised a World Conference of the People on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth as a response to the failures of the UNFCCC meeting in Copenhagen in 2009. In the official statement of the conference, REDD+ was rejected because of its relation to market-based solutions and described as threatening the sovereignty of the people, their right to FPIC as well as the rights of Nature (World Conference of the People on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, 2010). The statement declared that because developed countries are the main polluters they are indebted to the rest of the world and should repay this by financing the protection of forests in developing countries. In line with this, Bolivia has proposed alternatives to REDD+ to the UNFCCC, not least the above mentioned “Joint Mitigation and Adaptation Mechanism” (Bolivia, 2012b).

Despite its critical position, Bolivia was adopted as a pilot country to the UN-REDD and the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). In March 2010, the Bolivian National Programme Document to the UN-

REDD was approved and funding totalling 4.7 million USD allocated to its implementation (UN-REDD, 2010). However, at the UN-REDD meeting in Paraguay in March 2012 the Minister of Environment requested that the funds be reallocated for the purpose of implementing the alternative mechanism proposed by Bolivia (UN-REDD, 2012). The request is being considered by the UN-REDD Policy Board which also decided to conduct a high-level mission to Bolivia in order to discuss it further.

In the meantime, implementation of Bolivia's already approved UN-REDD National Programme has been put on hold at the request of the government (Providas, 2012). Also the FCPF process has been put on hold. An initial Readiness Plan Idea Note (R-PIN) was submitted in 2008. A draft Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) was prepared but has not been submitted (Blomqvist, 2012). There are two private REDD+ initiatives; the national park Noel Kempff Mercado and the REDD Amazonia project, both initially designed to connect with the carbon market. These projects are affected by the strong political opposition against carbon markets and are playing down the role of markets in financing the activities (Benton-Connell, 2011).

## Reforming or reframing development?

Participation of indigenous peoples and protection of the forests and Mother Earth are signature policies of the Bolivian government. However, while the government continues to give these issues a high profile in the international arena, in practice it has pursued poli-



*Agriculture is an important part of Bolivian economy but also one of the main causes of deforestation. Photo: Kawsay*



cies of agricultural expansion and infrastructure development which continue to drive deforestation and override local indigenous populations. There is little evidence that the Morales administration has succeeded in steering away from the neoliberal path of previous governments (Goldstein, 2012; Gray Molina, 2010).

In February 2011, the vice minister of land announced that Bolivia could expand its agricultural frontier by 5 to 10 million hectares without putting the rights of Mother Earth at risk (ABI, 2011a). This announcement coincided with President Morales proposing that Bolivia aim at becoming self-sufficient in food and a net-exporter of food products (ABI, 2011b). Meanwhile, agricultural expansion has been identified as the main cause of deforestation in Bolivia (Sangermano et al., 2012). Projections also foresee a large increase in deforestation in regions affected by large infrastructure projects e.g. in the northern department of Pando (Sangermano et al., 2012).

## TIPNIS - a road of conflict

In August 2011, over 1500 members of the indigenous communities who own the land in the TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécuré) national park started a 500 kilometre march towards La Paz to protest against the government decision to build a highway through the area (Latinamerika.nu, 2011). The government has refused to consider proposals for alternative routes, claiming that the construction of the road is crucial to economic development and that it would not affect the national park negatively. The

indigenous communities claim that the environmental effects of the road would be devastating. They also oppose the way the decision was taken without the consultation process they were entitled to under the constitution.

The conflict led to violent clashes between police and protesters resulting in several deaths and a large number of injured. At the end of October 2011 a law was adopted declaring TIPNIS an untouchable, protected area through which no highway may pass (Bolivia, 2011). This was however not the end of the conflict. Instead the government attempted to force consultations on the construction of the road, seeking support among coca growing settler communities while the indigenous communities continue to oppose the road. Disputing claims to represent the real indigenous populations of the TIPNIS and accusations of vested interests have been part of the conflict, touching some of the core conflicts in Bolivian society relating to the role of social movements and their relation to the ruling party Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). The TIPNIS conflict seems to have increased the divide between the indigenous movements and the government claiming to represent them.

## Conclusions

Focali's interest in Bolivia sprung from the country's high ambitions for including indigenous communities in forest-related decision-making. Indigenous organisations have worked hard to safeguard indigenous participation both in the official REDD+ text and in pilot initiatives. In this sense, the Bolivian example makes for an interesting case study.

The Bolivian government claims to promote the sort of pro-poor and pro-indigenous peoples policies that are being campaigned for globally by a range of NGOs and international organizations. This provides a vivid illustration that adopting policies and legislation does not mark the end of struggles for adequate safeguards for forest dwelling communities.

Rather, living up to the high standards in political discourse has proved difficult. The government support among social and indigenous movements has declined, while remaining relatively constant only among coca growers with whom Morales maintains close ties. TIPNIS is one example of these divisions. Despite the strong anti-capitalist discourse of the government, it is seeking to implement measures that can spur conventional economic growth often at the expense of indigenous rights and the environment. The radical Bolivian rhetoric means that Bolivian actions are measured against high standards, but the change of course has yet to come. In terms of forest protection this means that the political leverage that forest dwelling communities can muster will be decisive.

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Plans to build a highway through a national park have led to conflict between the government and indigenous communities. Photo: Lisa Westholm.

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