Economic Development, Environmental Conflicts and Citizen Participation in Latin America

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Abstract—Environmental conflicts produced by economic development and natural resources exploitation, are discussed. Main causes of conflicts in developing countries were shown to arise from geographically external investments, inefficiency of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and the lack of communication between government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). Citizen participation can only intervene during late stages of the EIA, which is considered as one of the main shortcomings in satisfying demands of local people.

Keywords—Economic Development, Environmental Conflicts, Citizen Participation, NGOs.

I. INTRODUCTION

HUMAN societies have opposed to external intervention of forests, fields, fishing places, water resources through history, because they are of first importance for their traditions and welfare. Such resistance conducted to sabotage of machinery and infrastructure of companies and institutions. The demands of such societies are neither centered in the refinement of market mechanisms, nor in the incorporation of the ecological theory into economics [1], but in finding fare solutions to all counterparts. Environmental conflicts are not constrained to a region, town or country. In contrast, they are a global problem of first importance when governments remain apathetic to meet people demands [4]. Examples exist in the entire world. In Sarawak, the Dayak were denied the legal means to defend their lands, and so they lifted barricades on the roads where the wood was transported to protect the natural forests. Another well known case of resistance to the destruction of the native forest is the Chimanes in Bolivia.The Tropical International Timber Organisation overexploited these ecosystems without taking into account the participation of local people. In Philippines, the Bagobo tribe resisted

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government plans to construct a geothermal plant on Apo mountain, a holly place of god Sandawa [1]. In addition, similar demonstrations were also observed in developed countries such as the United States, Austria or Canada.

The objective of the present work is to analyse environmental conflicts, as well as the role of the State, NGOs and EIA as an alternative tool for improving citizen participation.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

In the case of Latin America, the diversification of the exports has conducted to increase considerably the pressure on natural resources; therefore many environmental and social conflicts have been caused in the last years [5]. In this regard, the state seems to pay little attention to formulate suitable environmental policies [10].

The administration capacity, mediation and negotiation, are key factors to sort out such social conflicts. In contrast, the mediation of environmental conflicts that intend to find alternative agreements is a practice that is being used progressively with more frequency.

Studies on environmental conflicts must take into account three main factors:

1. Companies that use environmental resources cause environmental impacts.
2. Community organizes against such companies.
3. Public institutions are the community-company mediators.

In addition, the lack of information and inappropriate mediation of interests of communities and companies, generate problems and public images that are difficult to handle. Many environmental conflicts can be solved by means of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) [6]. However, this is a tool which still has to prove efficiency in the frame of public participation, as it does not take into account the absence of environmental conflicts when a development project is executed [10].

Environmental problems originate because of the unsustainable exploitation of natural, cultural, legal and social resources of a community [3]. Most conflicts in Latin America are generated by human activities that change dramatically lifestyle of a population. In this context, the environmental conflicts usually comprise the following steps:

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- A certain environmental impact on productive activities, is translated to an environmental problem if there is conscience that supports a public discussion.
- The environmental problem can be transformed in an environmental conflict when the community is organised to debate it (at local, regional and national levels).
- There would be negotiation only if it there is certain balance of opponent forces among all parts involved within the conflict.
- When opponent forces come to the conviction that all counterparts will benefit, then negotiation becomes formal (in this stage it can be accurately defined what the conflict is, and the positioning of the parts).

However, there are some factors that can modify significantly the relationship between forces among the counterparts: the legal litigation, the political, economic, cultural and legal contexts in which conflict take place and the access to legal resources [8]. Once the conflicts have been identified, there are three resolution types:

1. The legal exit.
2. Fundamentalist exit: this can be either ecological or economic. The first refers to the pure environmental preservation without considering the economic development, and the second to the economic growth without taking into account the environmental cost.
3. Solution for bribe, which is the process of obstructing the force of the competitor part by reducing their independence. The latter can be expressed in the offer of economic goods to the community, or the most common, to political leaders of the community.

From the environmental and socio-economic point of view, the problem is that compensations, or bribes, are offered before the establishment of a company or industry. The latter can avoid environmental conflicts, although total absence of conflicts cannot be guaranteed, and therefore, it is just a preventive tool [2]. Such resolutions of environmental conflicts may be an option for Latin America, but it necessary that the State must commit to this effort. The role of the State should be compulsory and necessary, because there are no sufficient strong actors in the social structure. Consequently, the political prevalence represents a key-factor for the State, which proposals and organization of forces help the decentralization and the environmental administration [10].

III. STATE VERSUS ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

By means of local democratic mechanisms, authorities strengthen themselves when being part of the conflict since they can negotiate for the general interests of the community [7]. Next, they intend some action-lines that should be internalized by the government by giving their technical support and political responsibility to the resolution of environmental disputes:

1. The adoption of measures to stimulate balance of forces among the parts in conflict. In this regard, three main factors must be considered:
- Reformations to procedures, or new legal dispositions to protect the interests of groups affected by the action of a third counterpart.
- The improvement of means of communications, to get better information quality on the impact of environmental conflicts. The legal accusation is a factor that contributes to the balance of forces.
- Creation of services of support and technical assistance for the weaker counterpart in the conflicts (these are usually the local groups of the community).
2. Measures to improve negotiation among the parties in conflict:
- The production and canalisation of information on the conflicts -from and towards- the parts, and to the public opinion in general. This information includes description of the project, actions and potential environmental impact.
- Reformations of administrative procedures (e.g. obtention of permits) and legal procedures that force the search for agreements for negotiating among the parts.
- Training courses on direct negotiation, developing seminars, creation of regular channels of information, good access to internet.
- Mechanisms to generate reliable and credible information on environmental aspects that will be assimilated for all parts, as the misinformation is usually one of the main sources of the environmental conflicts.
3. Promotion of a democratic context of citizen participation:
- Stimulation of the democratic discussion of strategies for local and regional development, and definion priorities of environmental aspects.
- Establishment of clear and expedite channels for public participation at local level. The participation of the local population contributes significantly to public environmental programs.
4. Measures for improving education of institutional, political and regional/local employees, by means of increasing the capacity of technical mediation of public agencies and the regional government. The capacity of political mediation of public agencies and the regional government, and the development of technical and political skills to predict potential environmental conflicts, must be also improved.

The above mentioned measures imply that, instead of avoiding or ignoring environmental conflicts, it is better to assume them as realities and use them to profit in terms of democratic development and environmental management. The political decentralization of local governments and their organizations are indispensable to face the environmental conflicts appropriately [11].

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IV. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as a Possible Alternative for Citizen Participation

The System of Evaluation of Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA), is not appropriate to evaluate projects impacting the environment, because environmental legislation does not contemplate community participation to evaluate developing projects.

A big shortcoming of the SEIA is the low culture of participation [12]. On the other hand, it has been questioned the stage of SEIA at which time citizen participation takes place. Usually, the law establishes that the process of civic participation begins with the EIA. However, it might be inadequate, as it is very probable that the population is already full of prejudices and rumors. If participation is allowed before EIA, then the community would able to express restlessness and incorporate them in the reference terms of EIA.

In addition to institutional and economic limitations of the Latin American citizens, there are other aspects related to culture and historical traditions. Many of them were reported by Marko Ehrlich, of the Environment Division of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB):

- Reduced experience of popular participation in the process of decision-making.
- Limited interpretation capacity and practical articulation of local governments and NGOs, with the population that is influenced by an environmental problem.
- Reduced access to information about the development activities programmed for the sector, area or affected community.
- Distrust relationships among the executors of the project, local governments and representative NGOs.
- Institutional deficiency in interpreting local necessities, dialogue capacity, negotiation and formulation of viable and effective mitigation measures.

V. NGOs Versus Environmental Conflicts

Because of EIA, new demands for the NGOs working on the environmental issues have to meet. NGOs have to make an effort to understand technical topics of environmental nature, and to assume a mediation role between the government and the citizenship. They should also play the role of translators within the complex topics of the EIA [12].

In a document presented by the IDB in 1993, Marko Ehrlich reported that NGOs should make efforts to improve the participation and mediation between the population and the government. In addition, NGOs should be an instrument for [9]:

- Developing effective communication mechanisms (meetings, surveys).
- Interpreting the local population's restlessness and the articulation of the local necessities.
- Getting the local population's trust.
- Promoting the use of procedures for popular participation by environmental consultancies.

VI. Conclusion

Environmental conflicts involve all the actors and social organizations, since they are all, directly or indirectly, related to the human impact. The latter, is caused mainly by external investors. To avoid the occurrence of conflicts, it should be considered that investment projects should have appropriate development plans in the frame of economic, legal and social development. Deficiency exists in both government and NGOs because of the lack of suitable legislation. Citizen participation should be allowed since early stages of EIA.

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