

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Brazil

Environmental Minister Resigns

by Juan Carlos Sanchez*

It is hard to find someone today that argues directly against a growing economy and a healthy and sound environment. International policy instruments since the Brundtland Report and Rio Declarations, such as the 2005 United Nations World Summit Outcome, have recognized that environment, society and the economy are interdependent and mutually supportive pillars of sustainable development.

The typical image of the development paradigm depicts a concentration of circles, where the confluence is, theoretically and politically, the representation of “sustainability”. Unfortunately, the reality and subsequent governance is much more complex and there are moments in every political administration where decisions must be made. Apparently, as depicted in the following paragraphs, policy makers sometimes choose between economic growth and development on one hand, or regulatory action and environmental protection on the other. However, behind the ideas of negotiation and participation, both from the sustainability paradigm, the possibility of reaching agreements between conservationists and business parties must always be taken into account.

On 13 May 2008, five days before the beginning of the 9th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biodiversity, the environmental minister of Brazil, Marina Silva, presented her letter of resignation citing a lack of political commitment on behalf of the government to protect the Amazonian Rainforest. However, given Silva’s renowned commitment towards protection of her native Amazonia, the resignation letter must be read thoroughly.

Upon her appointment in December 2002, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) indicated that “the first sign I would like to send to the world is that the Amazon will now be treated differently by my co-worker Marina Silva who will take care of environmental policy”.¹

Silva was chosen as a symbol of environmental commitment by the Brazilian Government, but after more than 5 years and many battles for the environmental cause, she officially left the Brazilian Government due to “growing resistance within the government and society to take the environmental agenda forward”.² Naturally this decision comes after a long and conflictive relationship with the central government, eroded by recent and intense clashes

between the former Environmental Minister and governmental agencies more oriented towards development, such as the Minister of Housing and Agriculture. The specific issues disputed among the offices were provided in the new framework macro-policy of the government to develop the Amazon region. Development of the rainforest is one of the most sensitive issues confronting environmental protection and economic interests; or in other words, delivering on sustainable development.

Thus, the ongoing debate has revolved around this polemical political decision. For example, Sergio Leitao of Greenpeace believes that, “Brazil loses the only voice that spoke in defence of the environment”. Contrarily, Rui Prado, Head of the Agricultural Federation of Mato Grosso, hopes that “the next Minister is not as radical as Marina. She was a great obstacle for the economic development of Brazil.”³ At the core of opposing comments is



Stilt roots of a *Rhizophora* mangrove tree captured on a small river in Salinas, Pará, Brazil

Courtesy: Wikipedia

reflected the nature of Silva’s agenda, which repeatedly opposed infrastructure projects in the Amazon, including hydroelectric power plants and new roads, as well as the construction of a nuclear power plant. The decision of the Lula government to authorise the use of genetically modified grains is another element to consider in this dispute.

Some days before the resignation, the BBC quoted Lula – within the context of the launch of a new development

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plan for the Amazon – “who takes care of the Amazon is Brazil, who decides what to do with the Amazon is Brazil”.⁴ The project intends to sustainably develop the region by adding 3,000,000 hectares of the tropical forest to the zone of official production, among other conflictive measures that might have been the deciding factors for the former Minister’s decision.

Speculation has arisen as to Lula’s position for balancing between economic growth and environmental protection; although, according to official statements, the environmental stance of the government will continue as previously determined, as decision-making is not concentrated in one person but follows guidelines from the states as well as local government.⁵

As of 14 May, ecologist Carlos Minc has been appointed as Silva’s substitute. The future of his mandate remains unclear, considering the conflicts of his environmental career and later approvals for mega-project development in Brazil.

It is hoped that the new keepers of environmental policy in Brazil remember the basic concepts of sustain-

able development. Negotiation among varying interests within the Amazon needs to take place and neither economic or conservation interests can be considered over the other. Furthermore, there is evidence⁶ that certain environmental policy designs, along with a strong and agile legal framework backed by proper institutions, may enhance economic development under a sustainable development paradigm. May the new leaders find these policy designs.

Notes

1 El Mundo. Marina Silva, la ministra de Medio Ambiente que defendió el Amazonas, deja el gobierno. Visible at <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/05/14/ciencia/1210727571.html>.

2 Idem.

3 BBC Mundo. Brasil: sale ministra de Medio Ambiente. Visible at http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7399000/7399792.stm.

4 BBC Mundo. Brasil: sale ministra de Medio Ambiente. Visible at http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/fr/-/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7399000/7391528.stm.

5 Folha Online. Lula elogia Marina e diz que política ambiental será mantida.

6 Feiock, R., Stream, C., 2001, “Economic Protection versus Economic Development: A False Trade-Off?”, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (May – Jun. 2001), pp. 331 – 321.

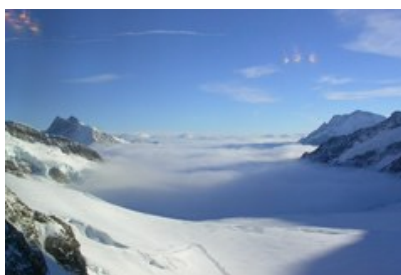


Switzerland

Ratification of the Alpine Convention

With its eight Contracting Parties, the Alpine Convention aims for the long-term conservation of the Alps while promoting sustainable development, considering the economic interests of the local population and establishing the principles for transboundary co-operation among the Alpine Countries. In the interest of achieving these goals, the Convention contains nine executing protocols¹ to guide its implementation,² as well as an additional Protocol on the Settlement of Disputes. Therefore, it is to be noted that national discourse as to the Convention’s foresight in recognising the Alps as a single space in a global context continues to be positive within Contracting Parties.

In 2003, die Ständerrat (Federal Assembly) of Switzerland decided – contrary to the motion from its Committee on Environment, Land Use Planning and Energy – to discuss the position of the government concerning ratification of the Protocols of the Alpine Convention. Later in 2004, the Bundesrat (Federal Parliament) received permission to ratify three protocols and adopted Motion 04.3260, requiring a report on the actual condition of the mountain areas within Switzerland, measured against the principles of sustainable development, the federal policy of sustainable development and the capacity of the Alpine Convention as an instrument to reach these goals.



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Courtesy: CIPRA

Upon release of the report³ in 2007, the accompanying note stated: “The Alpine Convention and especially its protocols have no negative impact on the sustainable development of mountain regions.” It went on to acknowledge that, “a comparison between the Alpine Convention and Swiss federal policy demonstrates that the minimum requirements of the protocols are already fulfilled by domestic legislation and that the protocols present no prospect of further recourse from environmental NGO’s.” Lastly, it declared, “The Alpine Convention is to be understood as a common platform for resolving regional problems. The government feels reassured in its decision that all protocols should be ratified, as they are a positive platform for co-operation between other Alpine countries and are important for resolving any border conflicts.” (WEB/ATL)

Notes

1 Summaries of the Protocols of Implementation of the Alpine Convention are online at: http://www.alpenkonvention.org/page5a_en.htm#p9.

2 Country by country figures detailing the status of ratification has been compiled and released online at: http://www.alpenkonvention.org/page3_en.htm.

3 The report: “Alpine Convention and Mountain Areas” (Bericht zur Motion der Kommission für Umwelt, Raumplanung und Energie des Ständerates vom 25. Mai 2004 Alpenkonvention und Berggebiet (04.3260)) and further information on Switzerland’s federal policy concerning the Alpine Convention is online at: <http://www.are.admin.ch/themen/raumplanung/00228/00290/index.html?lang=de>.

