



Chico Mendes, the Forest Peoples Alliance and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD)

On December 22, 1988, Chico Mendes – rubber tapper, union leader and environmentalist – was murdered in his home in Xapuri, Acre state in the western Brazilian Amazon. News of Chico’s killing, unlike the more than 1,500 other murders for hire of rural community and union leaders in the interior of Brazil in previous decades, spread across the world almost instantly, and was on the front page of the New York Times two days later.

For a decade Chico had led communities in the depths of the Amazon in demonstrations against ranchers’ deforestation to protect the forest where they lived, in the struggle that ended up costing his life. But Chico had the vision to see that his struggle went far beyond Acre, and ultimately the Amazon. He saw that the poor and isolated rubber tappers, Brazil nut gathers and other traditional communities of the Amazon needed an alternative to the government’s inequitable, destructive development model. In this context, he helped to conceive the concept of “Extractive Reserve” – protected forests, sustainably managed by local communities in exchange for secure land tenure and social services. He founded the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS), to defend traditional communities’ interests and make the Extractive Reserves a reality. He also made common cause with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, overcoming decades of strife between rubber tappers and Indians because he saw the need for forest peoples to unite to save the basis of their livelihoods, bringing rubber tappers and Indians together in the Brazilian Amazon Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest. Before Chico Mendes, environmentalists thought that the forest people were the problem. Chico showed them that forest peoples were the solution: “We were environmentalists before we ever heard the word,” he famously said.

Chico Mendes took his vision across the world to explain to policy makers and the media the global importance of his peoples’ local struggle. That is why Chico’s death did not go unnoticed. He insisted always that the preservation of the forest was inseparable from its economic viability for the forest peoples. It was in this sense that the Brazilian Amazon Forest Peoples’ Alliance first called for including deforestation in the Kyoto Protocol, and in this sense that our organizations have participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change forums. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), currently under discussion in the UNFCCC, in our understanding, was born in Chico Mendes’ dreams. REDD must make those dreams real: recognize the global value of the forest and the global good assured through forest peoples’ struggles; stop deforestation; respect and honor forest peoples’ rights, including their land rights; create the basis for durable prosperity for forest communities; ensure social equity and ecological integrity for the forest peoples and their ecosystems.