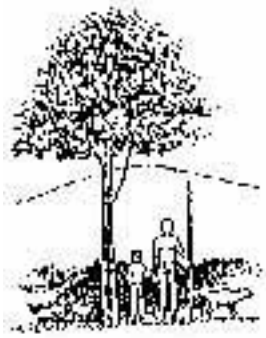
wrm briefings

Working conditions and health impacts of industrial tree monocultures

world rainforest movement

WORKING CONDITIONS AND HEALTH IMPACTS OF INDUSTRIAL TREE MONOCULTURES



World Rainforest Movement

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An Overview

The environmental impacts of industrial tree monocultures have been widely documented, as have the effects of this industry on local communities in the countries of the South. However, relatively little is known about the working conditions of those who are employed on these plantations and the effects of this work on their health.

The purpose of this publication is to share the information we have gathered on these issues, and to promote further study of working conditions and health impacts in the many countries where large-scale industrial plantations of eucalyptus, pine, acacia, oil palm, rubber and other tree species have been established.

With regard to working conditions, it is striking to note that despite the diversity across countries and regardless of the type of plantation in question, there are common elements that emerge in country after country.

The first and perhaps most important common factor is the outsourcing or subcontracting of work. In other words, those who work on the plantations are not directly hired and employed by the companies that own the plantations. Instead, workers are employed through subcontracting firms, while the permanent staff of the companies themselves is limited almost exclusively to high and mid-level management.

This system gives rise to a series of problems for workers, who are left exposed to exploitative working conditions, often at the hands of insolvent employers. Moreover, the system itself encourages subcontracting firms to exploit workers, since they must compete with each other (in terms of price and quality) for access to the contracts offered by the companies that own the plantations.

One of the few costs that subcontractors can lower in order to be more competitive is the cost of labour. They generally achieve this by providing workers with substandard housing and food, paying low salaries, providing insufficient safety equipment or none at all, and failing to comply with labour and social security laws.

Another way of bringing down the cost of labour is by increasing the workers' productivity, and this is usually done by means of piece work. In other words, workers are paid a set amount of money for each seedling planted, each tree pruned, each cubic metre of wood cut, each kilo of oil palm fruit picked, each section of rubber tree plantation harvested, etc. Workers must achieve an extremely high level of output in order to earn at least a minimum wage-level salary by the end of the month, something that only the youngest and strongest workers are generally able to do.

Exposure to dangerous chemicals and work accidents are also everyday occurrences on industrial tree plantations. The use of agrotoxic substances that have been banned because of the dangers they pose is all too common, and these are frequently applied by workers who have not been trained in their proper use and without the necessary protective equipment. The case of work accidents is largely similar: workers are often not properly trained for the dangerous work they carry out, nor are they provided with the equipment needed to protect them. As a result, accidents are frequent, and very often serious or even fatal.

The system itself makes it very difficult for workers to defend their rights. They are often scattered and isolated from one another both geographically and because they work on different crews employed by a variety of different subcontractors. One of the most common features of this sector is limited or non-existent labour organisation, particularly due to the fear of being "blacklisted" by employers for joining a union or promoting unionisation.

Overall, the working conditions that predominate across vast areas of plantations established in Africa, Asia and Latin America violate the most basic rights of workers.

This is why we call on governments and the pertinent national authorities, national and international trade union movements, specialised United Nations agencies (particularly the ILO and WHO) and civil society organisations to protect the rights of these workers, who have been largely ignored by the rest of society until now.

Here we present a collection of materials that address this issue distributed by the WRM over the course of 2007, which can help to provide more information on the seriousness of this problem.

- Working conditions on tree plantations: A health issue
- Chile: What is not said about work in tree plantations
- Uruguay: The sad situation of tree plantation workers
- Uruguay: Labour conditions in two FSC certified tree nurseries
- South Africa: Working conditions and the contract labour system in timber plantations
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- Working conditions on tree plantations: A health issue

Very few studies have been undertaken on the health and safety of tree plantation workers around the world. In addition, this sector generally tends to be addressed as part of the larger sector of the forestry industry, which also encompasses logging and wood harvesting activities in natural forests.

Nevertheless, a chapter on the forestry industry in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety includes some noteworthy data that it is well worth presenting here, focussing on information related to the sector we are particularly concerned with.

The ILO recognizes that forestry work, including work on industrial tree plantations, is strenuous and dangerous. Because they work outdoors, workers are exposed to extreme weather conditions: cold, heat, snow, rain and ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Work often continues even in bad weather, and night-time work is becoming increasingly frequent in mechanized operations. Worksites are usually remote and have poor communications, which makes the rescue and evacuation of workers difficult in emergency situations. In many countries it is still common for workers to live for long periods in camps, isolated from their families and friends.

The difficulties are aggravated by the nature of the work, which involves the use of dangerous tools and heavy physical effort. Bad weather, noise and vibration are common physical risk factors in forestry work in general. Exposure to physical risks largely varies in accordance with the type of work and the equipment used. Other factors like work organization, employment patterns and training also play an important role in increasing or decreasing the hazards involved in forestry work.

Manual forestry work typically implies a heavy physical workload, which in turn leads to a high energy expenditure, depending on the specific task done and the pace at which it is carried out. Forestry workers need to consume a much greater quantity of food than “ordinary” office workers in order to cope with the demands of their jobs.

Different studies have revealed that forestry workers are exposed to high rates of illness in addition to injuries and accidents.

Although few in number and conducted with small numbers of workers, studies of physiological indicators of physical strain (heart rate, haematological parameters, elevated blood enzyme activity) have all concluded that tree planting is an extremely strenuous occupation in terms of both cardiovascular and musculoskeletal strain.

Musculoskeletal and physiological load

Although there is no epidemiological literature that specifically links tree plantation work with musculoskeletal problems, the forceful movements involved in carrying loads, in addition to the range of postures and muscular work involved in the planting cycle, undoubtedly constitute risk factors that are heightened by the repetitive nature of the work.

Repetitive strain injuries continue to be a significant problem. Studies have shown that between 50% and 80% of machine operators suffer from neck or shoulder problems.

Comparisons of figures tend to be difficult because injuries develop gradually over long periods of time.

Tree planters also face numerous biomechanical hazards to the upper limbs, including extreme flexing and bending of the wrists – such as when grabbing seedlings from trays – and the sudden impact on hands and arms when the planting tool hits a hidden rock.

Meanwhile, the manual piling of logs involves the repeated lifting of heavy weights. If the proper working technique is not used and the pace is too fast, there is a very high risk of suffering musculoskeletal injuries. Carrying heavy loads over long periods of time, as when harvesting and transporting wood for pulp production, has similar effects. The total weight carried, the frequency of lifting and the physical and repetitive nature of the work are factors that contribute to the muscular strain exerted on the upper limbs.

On the other hand, working with portable machines such as chainsaws may require an even greater energy expenditure than manual work, due to their considerable weight. In fact, the chainsaws used tend to be too large for the task being carried out. Highly specialized motor-manual tasks entail a very high risk of musculoskeletal injuries because the work cycles are short and the specific movements are repeated many times over.

Working in awkward positions can result in problems such as lower back pain. One example of this is the use of an axe to delimb trees that are lying on the ground, which involves working bent over for long periods of time, leading to great strain on the lower back area and static work for the back muscles.

Another potential risk for those who work planting trees is posed by the unloading of trays of seedlings from delivery trucks, since these can weigh between 3 and 4.1 kg each when full. Carrying loads with harnesses can also lead to back pain, especially if the weight is not well distributed on the shoulders and around the waist.

It is also important to point out the muscular load on the lower limbs: walking several kilometres a day carrying loads over irregular terrain, sometimes uphill, can rapidly become exhausting work. In addition, this task implies frequent flexions of the knees and the constant use of the feet. Most tree planters use their feet to clear away detritus with a lateral movement before making a hole, and also to apply weight on the tool’s footrest to plunge it into the soil and to compact the soil around the seedling once it has been inserted.

In the case of motor-manual forestry work, workers are also subjected to specific risks due to the machinery they use. Noise represents a problem when working with chainsaws or similar equipment. The noise level of the majority of chainsaws used in normal forestry work is over 100 decibels. Operators are exposed to this noise level for two to five hours a day, which can result in hearing loss.

Continuous work in the outdoors, exposed to the rigours of climate, often without proper protection against the sun (sunglasses, hats and sunblock) and against insects, can result in dehydration, sunburn and heat stroke. Working in a hot climate puts pressure on forest workers who carry out heavy work. Among other effects, the heart rate increases to keep body temperature down. Sweating leads to the loss of body fluids, and heavy work in high temperatures means workers may need to drink a litre of water an hour to maintain the balance of these fluids.

In cold climates, the muscles do not function well, and this increases the risk of suffering musculoskeletal injuries and accidents. Furthermore, energy expenditure increases considerably, since it takes a great deal of energy simply to stay warm.

One of the illnesses specific to this sector is “tree-planter burnout”, a disorder provoked by haematological deficiency and characterized by lethargy, weakness and dizziness, similar to the “sport anaemia” developed by athletes in training.

There is a high incidence of premature loss of working capacity and consequently of early retirement among forestry workers. Chainsaw operators and workers who manually load logs are prone to hearing loss and back injuries. A disorder that traditionally affects chainsaw operators is so-called “white finger” disease, a painful condition provoked by the vibration of the saw which can leave them unable to work: the fingers turn white and become numb, making it impossible to carry out more delicate tasks. The disorder can also cause tingling and pain in both arms, especially at night.

On the other hand, the long work days, commuting and strict quality control to which tree planters are subjected, together with the demands posed by piece work (a widespread practice among tree plantation subcontractors) can affect the worker’s physiological and psychological equilibrium and result in chronic fatigue and stress.

Accidents and injuries

The setting in which tree plantation work is done makes workers particularly prone to trips and falls. Forestry work can result in injuries to almost every part of the body, but injuries tend to be concentrated in the legs, feet, back and hands, roughly in that order. Cuts and open wounds are the most common type of injury among chainsaw operators, while bruises tend to predominate in other work areas, although there is also the risk of fractures and dislocations as well as injuries associated with forceful movements or caused by cutting scraps or debris.

Ranking of the most frequent tree-planting accidents grouped by body parts affected (percentages based on 122 reports by 48 subjects in Québec, Canada)

Rank	Body part	% total	Related causes
1	Knees	14	Falls, contact with tool, soil compaction
2	Skin	12	Equipment contact, biting and stinging insects, sunburn, chappi
3	Eyes	11	Insects, insect repellent, twigs
4	Back	10	Frequent bending, load carrying
4	Feet	10	Soil compaction, blisters
5	Hands	8	Chapping, scratches from contact with soil
6	Legs	7	Falls, contact with tool
7	Wrists	6	Hidden rocks
8	Ankles	4	Trips and falls, hidden obstacles, contact with tool
9	Other	18	

Another study on occupational safety on tree plantations in Nigeria revealed that on average, workers suffered two accidents a year, while in a given year, between one in four and one in ten workers suffered a serious accident.

Two situations which further heighten the already high risk of serious accidents during the harvesting stage on tree plantations are “hung-up” trees and wind-blown timber. Wind-blow

tends to produce timber under tension, which requires specially adapted cutting techniques. Hung-up trees are those that have been severed at the stump but do not fall to the ground because their crowns have become entangled with other trees. Hung-up trees are so dangerous that in some countries they are referred to as “widow-makers” due to the large number of deaths they cause. Bringing these trees safely down to the ground requires the use of tools like winches and turning hooks. However, a highly dangerous practice known as “driving” is used in some countries, through which other trees are felled so as to fall onto the hung-up tree and thereby bring it down.

In many countries, manual workers work together with or close to chainsaw or machine operators. Machine operators are seated in cabins or use hearing protection and good protective equipment, but in most cases, manual workers wear no protective gear whatsoever. They also do not maintain a safe distance from the machines, which results in an extremely high risk of accidents and hearing loss for unprotected workers.

The other side of the coin with regard to mechanization is the emerging problem of neck and shoulder strain injuries among machine operators, which can be as incapacitating as serious accidents.

The risk of an accident varies not only in accordance with the technology used and the degree of exposure involved in the job, but with other factors as well. In almost all cases for which data are available, there is a very significant difference between segments of the workforce. Full-time, professional forestry workers directly employed by a forest enterprise are far less affected than those who are self-employed or employed by contractors.

Transportation on highways also accounts for a large number of serious accidents, especially in tropical countries.

Chemical hazards

The trend towards mechanization of forestry work is increasing. During maintenance and repair operations, the hands of machine operators are exposed to lubricants, hydraulic oils and fuel oils, which can cause irritant dermatitis.

The portable machines used in the forestry industry are powered by two-stroke engines, in which lubricating oil is mixed with gasoline. Generally, around 30% of the gasoline consumed by a chainsaw engine is emitted unburned. The main components of exhaust emissions are hydrocarbons, which are typical components of gasoline, as well as additives like organic lead compounds, alcohols and ethers. Some of the exhaust gases are formed during combustion, and the main toxic product among them is carbon monoxide. Fuels also represent a fire hazard.

Forestry workers are also exposed to chemical products like pesticides, insecticides and herbicides. On tree plantations, pesticides are used to control fungi, insects and rodents. Products used include phenoxy herbicides, glyphosate or triazines, as well as insecticides such as organophosphorus compounds, organochlorine compounds or synthetic pyredroids. In nurseries, dithiocarbamates are used regularly to protect softwood seedlings against pine fungus.

The methods used to apply pesticides include aerial spraying, application from tractor-driven equipment, knapsack spraying, ultra low volume (ULV) spraying and the use of sprayers connected to brush saws. The risk of exposure is similar to that in other pesticide applications.

The symptoms caused by excessive exposure to pesticides vary greatly depending on the compound applied, but occupational exposure to pesticides most often causes skin disorders. Personal protection equipment tends to be very hot and to cause excessive sweating.

Biological hazards

People who work outdoors, as in the case of tree plantation workers, are exposed to health hazards from animals, plants, bacteria, viruses, etc. to a greater degree than the rest of the population. Allergic reactions to plants and wood products, especially pollen, are very common. There is also the possibility of injuries during processing operations (for example, from thorns, spines, bark) and from secondary infections, which cannot always be avoided and can cause additional complications.

Another potential hazard is being bitten by poisonous snakes, as well as the possibility of a life-threatening allergic reaction to the antidote used in such cases.

Social and psychological factors

The health and safety situation in tree plantation work depends on a range of factors such as stand and terrain conditions, infrastructure, climate, technology, work methods, work organization, economic situation, contracting arrangements, worker accommodation, and education and training. But social and psychological factors also have an impact. In the context of forestry work, these factors include job satisfaction and security, the mental workload, susceptibility and response to stress, the capacity to cope with perceived risks, work pressure, overtime and fatigue, the need to endure adverse environmental conditions, social isolation in work camps with separation from families, work organization, and teamwork.

Traditionally, forestry workers have come from rural areas and have felt a sense of identification with the independent, outdoors nature of the work. However, modern forestry operations no longer fit such expectations. Those who are unable to adapt to mechanization, subcontracting and the rapid technological and structural changes in forestry work since the early 1980s are often marginalized. Many new entrants still come ill-prepared to the job.

Social and psychological factors are likely to play a major role in determining the impact of risk and stress. A German study revealed that around 11% of forestry industry accidents were attributed to stress, and another third to fatigue, routine, risk taking and lack of experience.

Forestry workers generally consider risk-taking to be part of their job. Where this tendency is pronounced, risk compensation can undermine efforts to improve work safety. In these situations, workers adjust their behaviour and return to what they perceive as an acceptable level of risk. For example, this may be part of the explanation for the limited effectiveness of personal protective equipment (PPE). Knowing that they are protected by cut-proof trousers and boots, workers go faster, work with the machine closer to their body and take short cuts, thereby violating safety regulations because they “take too long to follow”. Normally, risk compensation seems to be partial. There are probably differences among individuals and groups of workers, and reward factors are probably important to trigger risk compensation. Such rewards could include reduced discomfort (such as when not wearing warm protective clothing in a hot climate) or financial benefits (such as in piece-rate systems), but social recognition in a “macho” culture is also a conceivable motive.

Among the most common stress factors in the forestry industry are high work speed, repetitive and boring work, heat, an overload or underload of work in unbalanced work crews, young or old workers trying to achieve sufficient earnings on low piece-work rates, isolation from workmates, family and friends, and a lack of privacy in camps.

The transformation of forestry work that has drastically increased productivity has also increased stress levels and reduced overall welfare in the sector.

Two types of workers are especially prone to stress: harvester operators and contractors. Operators of sophisticated harvesters are in a multiple-stress situation, due to the short work cycles, the quantity of information they need to absorb and the large number of quick decisions they need to make. Harvesters are significantly more demanding than more traditional machines like skidders, loaders and forwarders. In addition to machine handling, the operator is usually also responsible for machine maintenance, planning and skid track design as well as bucking, scaling and other quality aspects that are closely monitored by the company and that have a direct impact on pay.

Quite commonly, the operators of these machines are also their owners and work as small contractors, which can lead to added strain. This is particularly due to the financial risk entailed, which can involve loans of up to USD 1 million in a highly volatile and competitive market. Among this group, working weeks often exceed 60 hours.

There are significant differences between the various segments of the forestry workforce in terms of the form of employment, which have a direct impact on workers' exposure to safety and health hazards. The share of forestry workers directly employed by forestry companies has been declining. More and more work is done through contractors (that is, relatively small, geographically mobile service firms employed for a particular job), which may be owner-operators (either single-person firms or family businesses) or may have a number of employees. Both the contractors and their employees often have very unstable employment. Because contractors are under pressure to cut costs in a very competitive market, they sometimes resort to illegal practices such as moonlighting and hiring undocumented immigrants. Accidents and health complaints tend to be more frequent among workers employed by contractors.

Contract labour has also contributed to increasing the high rate of turnover in the forestry workforce, further exacerbating the lack of qualified workers. The lack of structured training and short periods of experience due to high turnover or seasonal work are decisive factors in the significant health and safety problems facing the forestry sector.

The dominant wage system in forestry continues to be piece-rates (in other words, payment based exclusively on output). This payment system tends to lead to a faster pace of work, which is believed to contribute to increasing the number of accidents. An undeniable side effect is that earnings decrease once workers reach a certain age, because their physical abilities decline.

Wages in the forestry sector are usually much lower than the industrial average in the same country. Employees, the self-employed and contractors often try to compensate for this fact by working 50 or even 60 hours a week, which increases strain on the body and the risk of accidents because of fatigue. Organized labour and trade unions are rather rare in this sector. The traditional problems of organizing geographically dispersed, mobile, sometimes seasonal workers have been compounded by the fragmentation of the workforce into small contractor firms.

Labour inspections are rarely carried out in most countries. In the absence of institutions to protect workers' rights, forestry workers typically have little knowledge of their rights, including those stipulated in existing health and safety regulations, and therefore face great difficulties in exercising them.

The information presented in this article was extracted from the ILO Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety, Fourth Edition, Volume III, Part X, Industries Based On Biological Resources, Forestry.
http://www.ilo.org/encyclopaedia/?d&nd=857200345&prevDoc=857000002
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 122, September 2007.

- Chile: What is not said about work in tree plantations

Forestry development in Chile –meaning monoculture tree plantations- is marked by a great imbalance in the distribution of the monetary wealth generated by this industry. The huge profits obtained -subsidized by the Chilean people- enable the economic groups that own these companies to generate enormous wealth, while the population does not receive in exchange any real benefits from this activity.

The economic damages produced by environmental disasters are suffered by the affected people (in Río Mataquito, Río Cruces in Valdivia, due to loss of water in planted areas, etc.). For their part, the State and the companies turn a deaf ear on the damage caused by their pine and eucalyptus plantations to the neighbouring and mainly Mapuche communities.

The conditions of forestry labour and forestry workers are hidden from public opinion and invisible to the community. These workers are unable to access the mass media that could reflect the many difficulties they face, both regarding labour and their physical and psychological health. The difference with workers from other sectors such as mining and transport is that these have the capacity to expose their problems because they generally live in urban or populated areas and the mass media disseminates their views more often as they are closer to the news. However, forestry work generally takes place in distant areas that are hard to access and usually restricted as they are private forestry property. To this is added the workers scant organizational capacity as they usually work for small contracting or sub-contracting companies.

The loss of access to natural resources affected by tree plantations, such as water - which is becoming increasingly scarce around the plantations- is causing the migration of peasants and poor Mapuche people to the cities. The new arrivals normally end up in urban poverty belts and require assistance form the different social welfare services.

Furthermore, the millions of dollars of damages to highways and bridges caused by the heavy traffic of trucks loaded with timber, fall directly on small farmers, as they are prevented by these circumstances from taking their products to consumer centres, very often loosing them. The costs involved are thus not taken on by the companies but by the Chilean population which provides the money to pay for the repairs on the damaged highways.

The salaries of forestry workers are based on production or yield, measured in cubic metres. Sometimes the figures are altered, making out smaller figures. This is a mechanism used by some Forestry Service Companies to manipulate the information given by the workers regarding salaries to be paid.

No complete information is available about the total number of work-related accidents because minor accidents (falls, sprains, injuries that do not require major care) are frequent and treated outside the official system, generally at private clinics or with private doctors and are not reported. In this way they avoid increasing the rate of work-related accidents and the cost of insurance.

The labour regime keeps family heads away from their homes for 12 days, and are then given 3 days rest. This does not facilitate a healthy family life and alters the maintenance of well constituted homes.

Contact with plantations recently sprayed with pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, among others, and the companies' scant concern over regular health checks does not enable the workers to receive due information on the risks they are exposed to.

The clearest proof of the repercussions of this development model is to be found in the high poverty rates and low human development in regions mainly dedicated to forestry activities, such as the eighth region and the province of Malleco in the ninth region of Chile.

Of course the forestry model produces wealth, in abundance, but the question is what type of wealth and how much of it goes to benefit those involved in its generation (forestry workers such as chainsaw operators, strippers, loaders, foremen, operators, drivers, mechanics, etc.) and how much only goes to fatten the coffers of unscrupulous economic groups that benefit from us Chileans bearing the load of the negative costs of this industry.

There is no doubt that forestry work generates more poor people than those who come out of poverty thanks to this activity. The excuse most frequently-used by the government and the companies to promote the forestry model in the poorest regions of Chile, is that it creates jobs and therefore absorbs labour. However the facts show the contrary as, due to the forestry industry, there has been a loss of well paid, independent jobs, with workers putting in hard work, but obtaining sufficient reward, being free and not causing major impacts on the environment, such as the jobs generated by artisan fishing, tourism and farming. In exchange, poorly paid, slave-like and risky jobs have been created, while at the same time generating considerable impacts on the environment.

What type of jobs do we want? What type of employment do our leaders want? It would seem that this is of no concern to them, as long as they can keep their own jobs.

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- Uruguay: The sad situation of tree plantation workers

In Uruguay we have entered the 21st century as witnesses to the transformation of the landscape throughout the length and breadth of the country. Plantations of eucalyptus and

pine trees seem to have invaded every type of terrain. This geographical transformation has also had a direct social impact, affecting numerous aspects of life.

The influx of capital invested in forestry operations (primarily foreign-owned) and the immediate establishment of monoculture tree plantations marked the inception of a new pyramid of social and work categories: contractors, sub-contractors and a wide base of plantation workers, who have participated in these enterprises from the first stages of ant eradication and nursery building through to the harvesting of the wood lured by dreams of a better future.

Vacant fields and abandoned farm buildings, storage sheds and vehicles were rapidly transformed into makeshift “rooming houses”. And in areas where there was simply no infrastructure at all, flimsy tents or shelters built from branches and plastic sheeting, easily confused with livestock pens, become the living quarters of the work crews.

For many workers, employment on tree plantations has meant overcrowding, promiscuity and dismal working conditions, the most outstanding and widespread characteristic of an industry that was hailed as promising economic well-being and prosperity for large sectors of the population. At the same time, a series of other factors emerged that have combined to create labour conditions that are far from encouraging: the occurrence of serious work-related accidents, the appearance of diseases associated with poor nutrition and lack of hygiene, low salaries or unpaid wages, and cattle rustling and bitter mate tea as the only means of survival.

The Uruguayan government has failed to implement any plans for monitoring and controlling working conditions in this sector through the pertinent state agency. The justification used for this is that there have been no complaints received from the workers. Nevertheless, the general tone of the policy followed is essentially to intervene as little as possible; this is made clear by the official statistics themselves. Aside from this basic lack of oversight policies, the most obvious obstacle is the complete lack of four-wheel drive vehicles that would make it possible for inspectors to reach the different worksites, a situation that has remained unchanged for several years. The decrease in the number of labour inspections carried out on tree plantations is inversely related to the continuous increase in the area of land planted and the volume of wood harvested.

The subjection to the worst imaginable labour conditions suffered by part of the workforce in the sector has not led to an increase in complaints to the competent authorities. The number of complaints registered has been slight. There are a number of reasons for this. One is the lack of awareness of the labour rights that protect workers as the weakest party in labour relations. Another reason, and perhaps the most important, is the fact that workers are afraid of being identified as the person responsible for lodging a complaint and consequently losing any possibility of finding employment in the future.

Thousands of workers are transported daily from cities and towns like Rivera and Tranqueras to different worksites. Other workers migrate to towns and villages like Perseverano, Castillos, Greco, Punta del Chileno, Aguas Blancas, Villa del Carmen, Piedra Colorada, and many others, in search of employment opportunities regardless of the working conditions entailed. Many of them spend days or even weeks sleeping outdoors or in makeshift shelters hoping that they will be able to work and make enough money to return home.

Paso de La Cruz is a town that abandoned its traditional activities of cattle and citrus fruit farming to devote itself entirely to the tree plantation industry. It is located in the department (province) of Río Negro, a few kilometres from National Highway No. 25.

Rows of houses that stretch along a gravel road are home to a permanent population of approximately 400 residents. The town has several stores, a multi-purpose community hall, a police detachment and a doctor who visits the area on a fairly regular basis. Communication by mobile phone is largely a matter of luck. As you walk down the main street, the chainsaws, hard hats and other equipment you see in almost every front yard very clearly reflect the main activity of the townspeople. During the day, dozens of logging trucks pass through loaded down with timber, while heavy machinery owned by the local government struggles to maintain the only route in and out of town in usable condition.

The forestry companies operating here prohibit work crews from spending the night on their lands. As a result, during the harvesting season, more than 200 workers commute many kilometres to set up their camps in town. Some manage to rent abandoned houses, but the majority are forced to bunk down in open fields, vacant lots or along the roadside. During the night, the fires that workers build to sit around and share mate tea are the only form of street lighting.

While some of the local residents interviewed highlighted the positive aspect of the fact that there is no unemployment in the town, they did not hide their discomfort and concern over such problems as alcoholism, prostitution, cattle rustling, broken promises with regard to salaries, and the payment of wages with vouchers that can only be redeemed in certain stores. The local police detachment is overwhelmed by the high demand for police intervention and the complexity of the social problems that have developed. Troubled by the situation that is emerging in the town, a complaint has been lodged with the departmental government.

There is a great deal that still needs to be done with regard to the social situation. As has been stressed by the International Labour Organization (ILO), it is not enough to create new employment opportunities; what is really needed is the creation of decent jobs.

By the Association of Labour Inspectors of Uruguay (AITU), “For work with rights”. E-mail: inspectoresdetrabajo@adinet.com.uy, http://www.aitu.org/ ;

Source: WRM Bulletin nº 122, September 2007.

- Uruguay: Labour conditions in two FSC certified tree nurseries

For years now WRM has been documenting the social and environmental impacts of monoculture tree plantations. However, so far we had no information on the starting point in this chain: the nurseries where millions of plants intended for plantation are produced. Recently research has just been concluded on the labour conditions and use of agrochemicals in the nurseries of the two main forestry companies in Uruguay certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC): Eufores (Ence-Spain) and FOSA (Metsa Botnia-Finland). (1)

Both companies’ nurseries use the most advanced technology in this area and basically produce eucalyptus clones. Cloning is done from branches of the so-called “mother-plants” using them to produce cuttings, small stalks with a pair of leaves. This production is carried out using specialized equipment and once the saplings are produced they remain in the nursery until they are well rooted, subsequently to be moved outdoors for weathering for the plantations.

Although the technology for plant production is “advanced” (including modern irrigation installations, greenhouses and a broad agrochemical package), it is not quite so “advanced” regarding labour conditions.

The first thing to draw attention is outsourcing. Approximately 80 percent of both companies' workforce, occupying 50-70 people (Eufores) and 130 people (FOSA), work under this system. Outsourcing is an externalization of labour that implies breaking the direct labour relationship with the company that takes on production. In this "triangular labour relationship" people are hired by a company (contracting company) but in fact work for another company, on their premises, under their direction and discipline, thus diluting the figure of the real employer.

According to the workers, "outsourcing is a way of avoiding possible problems with the union and with the workers in general" as it divides them, both regarding benefits and labour projection, thus conspiring against the possibility of worker organization. Insofar as outsourcing condemns those hired to seasonal work, labour insecurity and functional tenure – they will always be "unskilled workers" and paid as such although they may be carrying out specialized tasks such as cloning eucalyptus – among the workers the illusion persists that they will become direct employees. On occasions this leads to their withdrawal from trade union activities for fear of being "pinpointed."

Union organization has been difficult in both companies. At Eufores, the union was only established four years ago, in spite of company opposition. However, once established, Eufores unleashed its persecution against the trade union leader, who reported that he felt "personally victimized." Even so, Eufores was certified. It has only been during the past year that the company seems to have accepted the fact and the leader reinstated to his normal workstation.

In FOSA the creation of the trade union is very recent (August 2006), but its members are almost all workers from the contractor company. However pressure is felt and some do not join for fear of being considered as "trouble-makers" by the company and that this might eventually prevent them from becoming direct FOSA employees. In spite of this situation, this company was also certified.

Another aspect showing the companies' lack of social responsibility is that, as a principle, the health of the eucalyptus plants comes before people's health. In order to avoid the saplings from becoming infected by pests and diseases, a very high amount of agrochemicals is applied. In Eufores, two products banned by FSC are applied: Fundazol (Benomil, an endocrine disruptor, producing genetic mutations, which is probably carcinogenic for humans) and Flonex (Mancozeb, banned because it is carcinogenic). Both nurseries use Captan, a fungicide banned in Finland in August 2001 because it is extremely toxic: it is considered to be carcinogenic, produces contamination of soil and groundwater table, and is very toxic to fish, also affecting frogs, birds and water fowl.

The workers are continually exposed to agrochemicals in a closed environment impregnated with such products. Furthermore, the water from washing out the backpacks or other implements used for spraying agrochemicals is spilled out in the same place. Because they are unable to take a shower before going home as the restrooms have no showers, the workers spread contamination to their family insofar as they go home with the same clothes they worked in. In this regard, workers reported that over 90 percent of the children of women working in the nursery suffer from allergies, spasms and asthma.

As for medical checkups, these are nonexistent in FOSA. Eufores does do some, but the workers do not trust the results and are trying to get monitoring done by an organization that is independent from the company, such as the Ministry of Public Health.

Some noteworthy labour conditions in the Eufores and FOSA nurseries are: the isolation of the location –preventing displacement during the lunch break that, in the case of FOSA is not paid– the difficult access to the restrooms –they are distant from the workplace– and their capacity is totally inadequate in addition to the above mentioned lack of showers; the absence of extractors in enclosed places –only the plants have air-conditioning– and the high temperatures there, in addition to the omission –on the part of FOSA– of providing articles necessary for the job, such as latex gloves –the company only provides rubber gloves as they are cheaper, but this hinders manipulation.

Cases of skin, eye, hand and neck allergies and allergies in other parts of the body, with rashes, itching and swelling, are frequent in workers exposed to toxic products such as fungicides, insecticides, hormones and chlorine.

The issue of female labour warrants special mention. The forestry companies emphasize the generation of jobs for women, but the jobs they offer are mostly for unskilled labourers which, as we have seen, are outsourced with no prospects for betterment. There are some administrative posts, but few women hold managerial positions –they are generally clerks.

Maternity is hard to sustain under the nurseries' labour regime. There are no day-care centres and the distance and lack of transport lead to very long working hours away from the children. During pregnancy these harsh working conditions prevent workers from reaching the authorized term for leave –7 and a half months pregnancy– even though they prefer to work as long as possible because prenatal leave implies much lower income. However, the prevailing conditions –temperatures that can rise above 40ºC and long working hours either sitting or standing– oblige them to take prenatal leave at between months 4 and 6 of their pregnancy.

It is interesting to note that the certification of these two companies had already been questioned in an investigation carried out by WRM (2). Now this investigation on these companies' nurseries is added to such questioning. In fact, in her summary on the issue, the researcher concludes that "these two certified companies in no way show themselves to be 'environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable' (as defined in the FSC mandate). On the contrary, they enjoy this seal at the cost of the work and health of their workers and of the environment of all Uruguayans.

(1)"Labour conditions and use of agrochemicals in two tree nurseries", August 2007, RAPAL-Uruguay (only in Spanish) http://www.guayubira.org.uy/trabajo/viveros.pdf
(2)"Greenwash. Critical analysis of FSC certification of industrial tree monocultures in Uruguay", April 2006, World Rainforest Movement, http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Uruguay/book.html
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 123, October 2007.

- South Africa: Working conditions and the contract labour system in timber plantations

Since the mid 1980's there has been a global trend towards the outsourcing of labour-intensive aspects of the plantation timber production model. In South Africa, the timber industry has openly admitted that its main motive for replacing permanent employment of workers with contract outsourcing was to cut costs. This has resulted in a number of negative consequences for plantation workers and their families: loss of job security, together with all the normal benefits of direct permanent employment –medical assistance schemes, insurance, pensions,

housing, education bursaries, and opportunities for in-house training and career development. This has led to considerable disadvantages and economic losses to worker communities, while timber companies have benefited exponentially.

Another reason for the move to contract employment / labour outsourcing was clearly the desire on the timber industry's part to avoid having to deal with any worker union action that could threaten productivity and therefore profitability. Outsourcing jobs under the contract labour system effectively passes responsibility for worker health and safety down to often poorly resourced sub-contractors that cannot afford to provide even basic protective clothing like gloves and face-masks to their workers. The sub-contracting system is usually very poorly monitored by the timber companies, and because main contractors often sub-contract the work to other contractors at a profit, without actually having to get involved in the actual work, it becomes even more difficult to keep track of whether the conditions of contract in terms of things like training, minimum wages and protective clothing are adhered to.

Even before this transition took place, considerable effort had already been made by the larger timber companies to eliminate or reduce the use of labour in the field through the use of expensive mechanical technology that could replace hundreds of workers with single machines. Using toxic herbicides to control alien plants and weeds in plantation areas was also a cost-effective alternative to manual weeding methods that had previously provided work for many people. In spite of this the plantation industry has stuck to its dubious claims that timber plantations create new employment and uplift rural communities, although this is clearly far from the truth. It is well known that other agricultural activities, even sugarcane growing, provide employment for many more people than timber plantations do. Most job-losses have been experienced when individually owned and managed mixed farming enterprises are replaced with timber plantations, and this loss of jobs is compounded by the reduction in worker wages and benefits that inevitably results.

The prevailing timber plantation model used in South Africa and in many other lesser-developed countries is responsible for a wide range of negative impacts that can contribute to workplace injuries and poor worker health. Harmful impacts often extend beyond the workplace into the homes and communities of workers through linkages that evolved as a part of colonial governance and as an effect of the prevailing corporate 'profit at any price' mentality, where many of the direct costs associated with timber production in plantations are avoided and transferred to worker communities and the environment. The United Nations International Labour Organisation (ILO) has rated forest and timber plantation work as being one of the most dangerous, but in combination with the effects of the poor social conditions caused by the contract labour system used in the timber industry, it becomes even more harmful. Without going into great detail, it can be seen that many damaging effects on ecosystems and people are largely hidden from or ignored by society, with government also seemingly unwilling to remove its blinkers.

The disruption of community life caused by plantations both through displacement and evictions, and particularly worker migration driven by the contract labour system, is responsible for family breakdown; increased alcoholism, drug use and crime. The proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV AIDS, can be linked directly to the demands placed on workers, especially truck drivers, who must of necessity be away from their homes to find work. Overall, timber plantations perpetuate a cycle of poverty that entrenches poor nutrition, inadequate education, and poor health. Displaced families often end up living in slum shack settlements where they become exposed to disease, crime and the constant threat of losing all their possessions to the fires that frequently raze their insubstantial homes.

Women make up a large part of the workforce employed in timber plantations, but their involvement is usually confined to menial physical tasks like weeding, pesticide application, or bark stripping. At the same time these women have to take responsibility for home management, child rearing, and numerous related tasks. In the case of out-grower schemes, especially when the male household head is absent, women must bear the additional burden of responsibility for protecting and managing the woodlot. They often receive little reward as the money from the sale of the wood often goes directly to the man, especially when he is the legal beneficiary of the out-grower agreement with the timber company.

The South African timber industry boasts that its (more than 80%) certification by FSC is proof that these industrial timber plantations are responsibly managed in accordance with the FSC principles, criteria and standards for forest management. Why then is there so little tangible evidence to support these claims? Why too are so many of the problems experienced in South Africa also found in other developing countries where large-scale monoculture timber plantations have been established? Brasil, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay, Swaziland, Uganda, India, Indonesia, and Thailand are examples.

The answer to these questions should be plain to see, but unfortunately those who control the propaganda machine of the global pulp and paper industry prefer to keep themselves deluded and in denial. It has been said that if a lie is repeated often enough it will eventually be accepted as the truth and even the liar will start to believe it to be true, unless it is persistently challenged by the truth. In this case the plantation certification lie is being challenged by more people across the globe every day.

Article based on part of the recent report written for GFC on Agrofuels and certification titled "The Social Impacts of Certified Timber Plantations in South Africa and the Implications Thereof for Agrofuel Crops".
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 122, September 2007.

- Malaysia: "Cheap" Paraquat at the expense of the workers' health

An article from Jennifer Mourin, deputy executive director of Pesticide Action Network's regional office for Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP), referred to a situation which is hardly unique in the Malaysian oil palm sector: "Rajam worked as a pesticide sprayer on an estate earning a daily wage of RM18. The main pesticide she sprayed was paraquat [herbicide]. She was not provided any protective clothing such as boots, masks, gloves, goggles or apron.

On 1 April 1998, Rajam was spraying Gramoxone (paraquat) when she slipped and fell. Due to rain the previous night, the ground was wet and slippery. The impact of the fall caused the nozzle of the pump to spray the pesticide directly into her eyes. She immediately felt an intense burning sensation on her face, lips and eyes. Unfortunately, there was no water supply for her to wash her face. She then started to walk back from her work area to the estate clinic, where she arrived more than two hours later. By the time she reached the clinic, her eyes had reddened and swelled drastically. The hospital attendant washed her eyes and asked her to go to the government hospital. They admitted her in the hospital for one week. One year after the incident, she is blind in her left eye. As for the other eye, she stills feels pain and a burning sensation and experiences excessive tearing all the time."

In August 27, 2002, a ban on paraquat use was put into effect and the Pesticides Board had held firm to the decision despite strong pressure from the industry, including Syngenta, the world's largest producer of paraquat. According to PAN AP, "Soon after the decision was

made public, Syngenta Malaysia Ltd. representatives had made visits to government officials about the ban. Articles then appeared in major papers supporting paraquat as 'Safe to Use in Agriculture' and calling for a lifting of the ban and phaseout."

The Malaysian government decided to temporarily lift the ban on the dangerous paraquat herbicide from 1 Nov 2006 to allow "a comprehensive study on its many uses". That's bad news, especially for oil palm plantation workers. As noted by PAN AP, "Paraquat is a 'mainstay' within the plantation sector, especially in palm oil production. It is considered by many in the palm oil sector as the 'cheapest' form of control for weeds."

It may be "cheap" for the industry because it is the workers who pay the costs. PAN AP explains that "In Malaysia, paraquat has been a major cause of concern due to continued poisonings suffered by plantation workers –especially pesticides sprayers who are mostly women. Workers on estates are frequently employed as sprayers for six days a week, ten months a year or more, and therefore have a high degree of exposure to the chemical. The greatest risks to workers of fatal and serious incidents are during mixing and loading of spray equipment, where contact with the chemical concentrate occurs. Fatal accidents have also been described due to prolonged contact with the diluted paraquat spray during application."

The joint report by Berne Declaration, Pesticide Action Network (PAN UK) and PAN AP, "Paraquat - Unacceptable Health Risks for Users", reveals that "Paraquat is applied before sowing or planting the crop, in pre-emergence application (following planting) and as a defoliant before harvest. On plantations, workers are given virtually no choice about whether or not to use toxic pesticides."

"Paraquat, together with organophosphates and endosulfan, has accounted for numerous cases of acute poisoning and a number of occupational deaths."

"Hot and humid weather, low income, lack of knowledge and control over the workplace, put a large proportion of farmers and workers at risk. Even when protective clothing is worn, there may still be unacceptable risk to workers' health from paraquat. Inadequate working conditions –including insufficient protection of workers– occur on a large scale in many countries, both developing and developed. For most workers it is not possible to use sufficient personal protective equipment –this is not available, too expensive or uncomfortable in hot and humid climates. Even when used it does not always provide sufficient protection. The burden of responsibility cannot therefore be placed on workers, as there is compelling evidence of the high risks to workers' health from paraquat exposures during everyday use. Workers' exposure to pesticides is greater where no water is available for washing skin that has been contaminated with pesticides."

Quoting PAN AP we agree with its view that: "The recent reconsideration of the ban on one of the most dangerous poisons in the world has serious implications on the protection of workers' and farmers' health and their right to a safe working environment. The ban, which should have taken effect in July 2005, would have been an exemplary act of caring leadership on the part of the Malaysian government that would have placed the health and well being of thousands of agricultural workers (mostly women) and farmers above other considerations. The government's current action, however, would seem to imply that in Malaysia the industries' profits override the health considerations of the people."

Article based on information from: "Lifting the paraquat ban - in whose interest?", February 2007, Jennifer Mourin, Pesticide Action Network's regional office for Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP), Aliran, http://www.aliran.com/content/view/197/10/; "Paraquat – Unacceptable

Health Risks for Users", September 2006, Berne Declaration, Pesticide Action Network (PAN UK) and PAN Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP),
http://www.evb.ch/cm_data/Paraquat_Report_final_rev2.pdf
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 122, September 2007.

- Indonesia: The impacts of oil palm plantations on women

Twenty-two women from provinces throughout Kalimantan and Sumatra gathered in Bogor from 22nd to 24th May to discuss the effects that oil palm plantations have had on their lives.

Women and development

Why women? It is obvious that Indonesian women are stakeholders who have been marginalised by the development process, including the establishment of large-scale oil palm plantations.

Women are rarely decision-makers in developments initiated by the government and companies. They are usually only seen as the 'hands' rather than the 'brains': as the means of implementing measures once decisions have been taken, rather than being actively involved in the planning, control, supervision and evaluation stages. However, women tend to see themselves as survivors and are often a tower of strength when communities oppose plans that threaten their way of life.

The creation and expansion of oil palm plantations have had a number of different impacts on women, both direct and indirect. For example, in traditional societies, women have important roles in managing natural resources and maintaining sustainable livelihoods which support their families. These are lost once plantations replace the forests and agricultural land (see *DTE* 63: 1, http://dte.gn.apc.org/63WOM.htm).

Companies are still gaining access to communities' land by just taking it and paying thugs to intimidate people. Those who resist, including women, are forced to flee their homes because they are accused of damaging company property. The police threaten them with arrest should they return to their villages. People are frequently detained by the police without any proper authorisation. Also, witnesses too often become suspects. For these reasons, most villagers are afraid to take any action against companies that violate their rights.

Women's voices

This is what happened to Yana, one of the participants from South Sumatra who has not been able to go back to her home for fear of detention by the authorities. Another participant, from Indragiri Hulu district in Riau, told how a woman in her village had died from shock after her husband was detained by the police for alleged criminal damage of plantation company property. When women from the village of Hajak Dusun Sikui in Central Kalimantan tried to reclaim their agroforestry plots, the company accused them of illegally occupying the land; the case is currently being processed by the police.

Environmental pollution and health issues are also serious areas of concern for women living in and around plantations. In the village of Keladi, in the Ketapang district of West Kalimantan, people are beginning to experience a shortage of clean drinking water because the river they use for their supplies is downstream of a large oil palm plantation. Children have developed rashes after bathing in the river. A woman from Long Ikis in Pasir, East

Kalimantan described how the River Soi has turned black and is no longer suitable for collecting drinking water. It is impossible to find fish in the river even one kilometre from the plantation. Apparently the problem is due to the company disposing of waste from its palm oil processing plant directly into the river when the waste tanks are full.

Several participants related how they were provided with agrochemicals by companies who did not provide adequate safety instruction or equipment. Women often had no idea about the possible effects of the pesticides they used, especially during the early stages of pregnancy. Women who were weeding were sometimes accidentally contaminated with sprays used by other workers nearby. Pesticides and fertilisers stored in people's homes presented hazards, particularly to women and children who could not read or understand the labels. Empty pesticide containers were occasionally used for domestic purposes and pesticides stored in containers such as old water bottles.

Other problems for women associated with oil palm plantations are those of poverty and debt. Many companies pay women lower wages than men on the grounds that they get easier work. A woman from the village of Wirano in Southeast Sulawesi complained that no processing plant had been built six years after the plantation was established, so villagers just have to throw away ripe palm fruits. Meanwhile, the plantation company is still demanding repayment of loans it provided for their co-operative.

Many young women from West Kalimantan decide to go to neighbouring Malaysia to look for work. Their main reason is that they no longer have any land to farm or rubber plantations to tap since the whole area where they lived has become oil palm plantations. Often they return to their village as unmarried mothers. It is common for such women to open a café with rooms at the back, which are used for prostitution. The presence of such cafes, which exist in most plantation villages, further increases the numbers of children born out of wedlock. They also cause problems for married women in the community: customary fines for infidelity are said to be rising.

Plantations have made women's lives harder in other ways too. Women have to go much further to find firewood for cooking once the forests have been cleared to make way for oil palm. There is no grazing for livestock close to the village once it is surrounded by plantations. And women have to carry clean drinking water longer distances.

Demands for action

The burden for women is likely to increase with the further expansion of large-scale oil palm plantations. So some participants from this workshop went on to meet representatives of the National Commission for Women and the national parliament in Jakarta. In their written statement, the women urged the Commission to:

- Support communities in their struggle with oil palm plantation companies;
- Push the government to resolve conflicts between communities and plantations;
- Carry out field studies to investigate the negative impacts that oil palm plantations have on women who live in and around them.

Article by Down To Earth, Newsletter No. 74, August 2007, sent by Carolyn Marr, Email: dte@gn.apc.org, http://dte.gn.apc.org
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 121, August 2007.

- Cameroon: The tough reality in oil palm plantations

Last December I was travelling with three friends (a Cameroonian and a Swiss couple) along the public route that crosses the oil palm plantations belonging to Socapalm (Société Camerounaise des Palmeraies) in the Kribi region. On reaching the control post installed by the company – that we had crossed earlier on – we were stopped by a private security guard who demanded our identity documents. On asking him why he wanted them he informed us that Socapalm "secret agents" aware of our visit had ordered him to do so. He added that he had been told to take us to the company's information office. Of course we did not hand over our documents nor did we accept to be taken to the information office because the company has no legal right to demand this. However, the story serves to illustrate the power of the company and the police-type control it exercises over the inhabitants of the area.

In spite of its name, Socapalm is not a "Cameroonian society," but belongs to the powerful French Bolloré group which also owns another large oil palm plantation in the Kribi region (the Ferme Suisse). Together these plantations cover 31,000 hectares.

In last month's bulletin we published an article on the serious social and environmental impacts of a rubber plantation in the same Kribi region (belonging to the Hevecam Company). What is interesting is that the present article is almost identical to the previous one, the only difference being the name of the companies.

In fact, the indigenous Bagyeli ("pygmy") people who live around the palm plantations told us practically the same story as the Bagyeli affected by the rubber plantations. Socapalm evicted them from their homes, promising them modern housing. The palms were planted, grew, gave fruit, were harvested, but the company has not built a single house.

Now these Bagyeli people are surrounded by plantations and banned from entering them. If they do so, the guards who catch them chase them out with whips. They are forced to live in a flood area where mosquitoes and associated diseases are abundant.

As to their livelihood, they are hardly able to survive. The company does not employ them and if it does, it pays them a lot less than the other workers. The only animals left in the plantation for the Bagyeli to hunt are rats. Only some hunting is possible in the surroundings of the plantation and further away in the mountain area.

All this is a consequence of the destruction of the tropical forest by the company to convert it to palm plantations. Previously the Bagyeli (expert hunters and gatherers), found all they needed in the forest (meat, fruit, etc.). Now they do not even have clean water as it is polluted by chemical fertilizers and sediment from erosion. Regarding health, problems related to poor nourishment, polluted water and the unhealthy place where these people live are becoming more serious as they no longer have the plants they used for their traditional medicines. The hospital belongs to Socapalm and as they are not on the company's payrol, they have to pay if they are hospitalized.

Regarding the situation of the company workers, it is no different from that of the Havecam plantation workers. They also live in crowded housing belonging to the company, they also work for outsourced employers, they also have problems with their eyesight due to the lack of protection from the dust falling from the bunches of fruit, they also apply agrochemicals without the necessary protective clothing, they also have problems with drinking water and sanitation.

Regarding labour organization, the workers told us that there was no independent trade union and it is unlikely that one can be organized. In 1992 there was a strike in demand of better

working conditions and an increase in the "miserable salary" they earn. The result was that the strike leaders were imprisoned and made redundant.

At a time when oil palm plantations are being promoted to supply fuel to the countries of the North, the consumers in these countries should realise that in no way can this fuel be considered "green." Its true colour comes from a combination of social exploitation, violation of human rights and environmental destruction.

By Ricardo Carrere, based on information gathered during a trip to the region in December 2006 with researchers Sandra Veuthey and Julien-Francois Gerber. The author thanks the Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) for the support received that made this trip possible. *Source:* WRM Bulletin nº 116, March 2007.

- Cameroon: FAO's rubber "forests"

According to the FAO definition, rubber plantations are "forests." Recently we visited one of these "forests" in Kribi, Cameroon and talked with the workers and local population. Unlike the FAO "experts," nobody, absolutely nobody there perceives these plantations as forests.

In fact, if there is anything in the world that looks less like a forest it is precisely a rubber plantation. To the normal monotony of plantations comprised of parallel lines of thousands of identical trees – eucalyptus, pine, acacia – is added the array of small pots hanging on the tree trunks into which the latex is gathered. Along the paths there are other, larger pots where the latex is poured to take it to the processing plant. Added to this is the penetrating and disagreeable smell of rubber.

The plantations we visited belong to the Société des Hévéas du Cameroun (HEVECAM), a company set up in 1975, with plantations covering a total of 42,000 hectares in a region that was previously covered by dense tropical forests, hosting some of the most varied biodiversity in the world. Today one can still see the enormous stumps of native trees between the rubber trees and even large tree trunks rotting in the middle of the plantation. That is to say, this plantation –this "forest" according to FAO– was the direct cause of the total destruction of the forests previously growing there.

This is well-known by the Indigenous Bagyeli People ("pygmies") who have been the worst affected. The Bagyeli are nomad hunters and gatherers who used to find in their ancient forest all they needed for their welfare. According to the group of Bagyeli we interviewed, they used to live decently on their territory that covered what is now the HEVECAM plantation, in addition to other adjacent areas. The forest no longer exists and the Bagyeli are considered to be intruders on their own territory, now controlled by the company. Although they are "allowed to enter" the plantation, the same cannot be said for the children as they might "damage the rubber trees".

The possibility of obtaining food and income by hunting is very remote. To the disappearance of fauna due to the effects of the plantation is added the presence of hunters with fire-arms – usually HEVECAM workers– who advantageously compete with the traditional arms of the Bagyeli. The possibility of getting a job on the plantation is also unlikely. The company hires them sometimes for weeding, but pays them very badly. The result is that now here is a demoralized, poor, underfed, exploited and oppressed human group, cornered by the plantation and with nowhere to go.

However, the Bagyeli are not the only ones to have been adversely affected. We also interviewed the inhabitants of the village of Afan Oveng near the HEVECAM plantation, where two years ago a company truck had an accident and the contents of latex and ammonia it was transporting ended up in the river running through the village. As a result animals died, people were sick and the fish died. They sent letter after letter to the responsible authorities and to the company and so far the only "compensation" they have received have been some tankers with water, not even fit for human consumption.

However for these people the problem is not limited to an accident, but goes much further and implies that their traditional rights over the forest have never been recognized. For example, the place were the company hospital is located used to be land belonging to these people. They insist that "the forest belongs to us" and denounce that the "forest that still is left is being destroyed by HEVECAM".

In fact, the company continues its "savage" felling of the forest, apparently in connivance with the mayor of Kribi, who owns the saw-mill where the timber is processed. The local community receives no benefit, but is left with the damage implied by the disappearance of the forest and of the products obtained from it.

Company workers – brought from other regions of the country – would then seem to be the only ones to benefit from these plantations. However, this is not the case either. "HEVECAM is slavery", affirmed a person who had worked 7 years for the company. He spoke of very low wages, very hard work, respiratory diseases, blindness, tuberculosis, death, arbitrary redundancy and the impossibility of trade union organization.

We visited one of the villages built by the company and talked with various workers. There they told us that they had continuous problems with drinking water; that the latrines were overflowing, that this led to abundance of mosquitoes and subsequently to diarrhoea, cholera and malaria. They are crowded in these dwellings and it is not easy to find a two-roomed house. Consequently, most of the families must live in a single room. As the houses belong to the company, if the workers are fired, or even if they retire, they automatically find themselves homeless.

They also told us about the transportation system for the company workers, done in hired vehicles that are obliged to comply with a set timetable to cover the 40 km from the village to the plantation, resulting in frequent accidents. They told us about the application of weed-killers and fertilizers with no gloves or protective equipment. They explained that there are people who have gone blind because in that climate the eye protection equipment provided by the company cannot be used and it has done nothing to find a solution to the problem.

If the above would seem to confirm that effectively "HEVECAM is slavery", this conviction was further strengthened when the workers told us that when the company was privatized in 1996 (the International GMC Group of Singapore is the present owner), they learnt about it when different cars from those used by the previous managers appeared. "They bought us in the same way as they bought the rubber trees." Just like in times of slavery.

By Ricardo Carrere, based on information gathered during a visit carried out to the region in December 2006 with researchers Sandra Veuthey and Julien-Francois Gerber. The author thanks the Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) for its support which made this visit possible.
Source: WRM Bulletin nº 115, February 2007.