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OUR VIEWPOINT

- [Aridity and death vs diversity and fertility: a women's view of plantations](#)

COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS

- [Amazonia: The right of indigenous peoples to live in voluntary isolation](#)
- [Colombia: Constitutional decision over Forestry Law awards victory to social organizations](#)
- [Congo, D.R: The oil palm invasion has started](#)
- [Mexico: The ongoing fight of indigenous communities against illegal logging](#)

COMMUNITIES AND TREE MONOCULTURES

- [Increased poverty, land conflicts and deforestation: The Asian Development Bank's plantations record](#)
- [Indonesia: Call for Action against certification of Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper's timber plantations](#)
- [Indonesia: New report on the human rights impacts of oil palm plantation expansion](#)
- [Spain: The NORFOR/ENCE certification, yet another FSC fraud](#)
- [Thailand: Rubber plantations against forests, people and health](#)
- [Uganda: Why Is FSC Certifying Land Disputes and Human Rights Abuses at Mount Elgon?](#)

GE TREES

- [Belgium: Field trials planned of GM poplar trees for ethanol](#)
- [Growing networking against GE trees](#)

OUR VIEWPOINT

- Aridity and death vs diversity and fertility: a women's view of plantations

International Women's day is around the corner and we would like to pay homage to the countless women struggling for their rights by sharing parts of a recent research (1) carried out by two women in Brazil which, on the one hand, provides a broad account of women's struggles against plantations in that country and on the other hand provides testimonies from local women on how those plantations have impacted on their lives and livelihoods.

The authors' opening paragraph explains that "On 8 March 2006, International Women's Day, before the break of dawn, 2,000 women from Via Campesina occupied the Aracruz Celulose corporation's tree nursery in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Their faces hidden by purple scarves, the women waged a lightning attack, destroying thousands of eucalyptus seedlings. Their goal was to draw the Brazilian public's attention to the impacts of

monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantations on local populations and ecosystems ... In their statements, the rural women protestors equated the green deserts of eucalyptus plantations with aridity and death, and highlighted the relationship between diversity and fertility, factors that make life possible, and monocultures and desertification, which represent death."

The research contains numerous testimonies about how Aracruz Celulose's eucalyptus plantations and pulp mill affected local communities in general and women in particular. For instance Maridéia, an indigenous Tupinikim woman remembers the days before the arrival of Aracruz: "It was so wonderful to have the river open to us. We washed clothes, we collected water for drinking, for cooking... You could catch fish, you could scoop them up with a sieve. All those women... there would be so many there together! It was the place to wash clothes. You would finish washing clothes, then take a swim and leave, you know?"

Those were the good old days. Then Aracruz arrived and "destroyed everything we had, it destroyed our forest, it destroyed our river, the fish, the hunting" (ROSA, Tupinikim village of Pau-Brasil).

Based on the testimonies of women, the report concludes that "In this new context, some of the impacts experienced by men and women are similar, but others are gender-specific. With the loss of territory, women have lost their farms, places to plant their gardens, to raise small animals and to grow medicinal plants.

The replacement of the forests by eucalyptus plantations led to the loss of food formerly supplied through gathering, hunting and fishing. The destruction of the tropical rainforest also led to the disappearance of rivers and streams, which were once the meeting places for women and a privileged space for sharing female knowledge. Indigenous and quilombola women have been forced to live with the pollution of their surroundings by the agrochemicals used in monoculture industries. The disappearance of the forest has also meant the loss of the raw materials used in the production of utensils and crafts, an activity that was primarily the domain of women in indigenous communities.

The loss of biodiversity has also signified the loss of a large number of natural medicines derived from the plants, roots and animals of the forest. It has deprived Guarani indigenous women, who formerly used plants to stimulate and reduce fertility, of the right to family planning, leaving them hostage to contraceptive pills and tubal ligation. In addition, indigenous and quilombola women can no longer find the vines, trees and animal fats they once used for medicinal purposes.

Some indigenous women, bearers of a wealth of knowledge about native flora and fauna, have become domestic workers, day labourers, babysitters and cooks for Aracruz Celulose officials. The obligation to take on these new tasks has impacted on their role as mothers, forcing them to give up breastfeeding their children at a very young age or to leave them with others while they are still infants, in order to look after the children of urban women.

Faced with these drastic transformations, these populations have built alliances with social movements and NGOs that support their struggle. Today they are joined together through a network aimed at further strengthening their capacity to resist. Women, who also play a leading role in these battles, have also embarked on a process of organising in specific spaces to discuss the impacts of eucalyptus monoculture on their lives and ways to contribute to resurrecting the way of life of their peoples."

"Indigenous and quilombola women, who for so many decades have shared the impacts of eucalyptus monocultures, are now seeking to share their organisational experience, discovering the paths to freedom together. These women are increasingly joining together, giving each other strength in their shared struggle against the oppression of agribusiness and the patriarchy."

Although the above illustrates a specific situation in a certain region of Brazil, we know that countless women living near plantation areas in a wide range of countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia will see their problems reflected in

this research. On this new International Women's Day we hope that this documented evidence will serve their struggles to stop this tree plantation model which symbolises "aridity and death" and to move towards a type of development that represents "diversity and fertility, factors that make life possible."

(1) Barcellos, Gilsa Helena and Ferreira, Simone Batista (2008).- Women and Eucalyptus: Stories of Life and Resistance. Impacts of Monocultures on Indigenous and Quilombola Women in the State of Espírito Santo. WRM, January. http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/Book_Women.html

[index](#)

COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS

- Amazonia: The right of indigenous peoples to live in voluntary isolation

In her article "Peoples hidden in the forest: the right to live in their own Amazon? (*), the Argentine writer, Elina Malamud explores with great sensitivity the conditions that have led numerous forest peoples to voluntarily choose isolation. The author quotes the words of Sydney Possuelo, a Brazilian champion of the struggle in defence of the rights of indigenous groups to continue living their way of life: "If we were more decent, there would be no peoples in isolation, but our behaviour has led them to seek protection from us. Their isolation is not voluntary, it is forced by us."

The Amazon – coveted since the Spanish conquest for gold, then rubber, oil, precious woods – was greedily appropriated by adventurers and merchants who left among the inhabitants a trail of disease, death and disintegration. Today, major works linked to development projects (such as the trans-Amazon highway and hydroelectric dams) together with agro-industrial expansion, continue to have the same devastating effects on the physical and cultural integrity of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon.

Possuelo, who is a first hand witness of how "integration" operates, tells us "Contact brings with it group de-structuring, artificial needs – if you give them clothes, then you must give them soap to wash with" – personal lack of control, drunkenness, prostitution, destruction, because the worst of all were the epidemics that we cure every day with a pill, but for the Indians from the heart of the forest lacking any immunological defence they mean death without any remedy, alone, abandoned in the forest by their brothers." "Since 1987, I changed from contact to protection, that is to say, to no contact, to the right to isolation as the best way to preserve them."

These indigenous groups, because of their lifestyle are self-sufficient in their own environment and – insofar as this is not altered – live in the abundance of what the forest gives them: "hunting, fishing, fruit and timber combined with slash and burn farming, resources from the flora and fauna that their cultural practices and low demography allow to be renewable."

The groups that have chosen isolation have the right to do so, recognized by the United Nations. And the author argues that, in addition to this, they "have the right to political and legal recognition by the National States, to the collective ownership of their lands, their resources, their genes, their cultural knowledge."

We all have the responsibility of recognizing and defending their rights and of preventing the continuation of stories of genocide and death of the peoples and the forests.

(*) Only available in Spanish: "Pueblos ocultos en la selva ¿Derecho a vivir la propia Amazonía?", Elina Malamud, 5 February 2008. <http://www.ecoport.net/content/view/full/75895>

[index](#)

- Colombia: Constitutional decision over Forestry Law awards victory to social organizations

On 28 March 2006, in the midst of strong pressure from the Government and the timber industry, Law 1021 was adopted in Colombia, better known as the "Forestry Law" (see WRM Bulletin No. 105), enabling major timber investors to have easy and privileged access to the country's forests, thus compromising the future of these forests, both public and those belonging to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

In 2007, the "Public Interest Rights Group of the University of the Andes," with support from a wide range of social sectors in Colombia and internationally, filed a lawsuit against the Forestry Law as being unconstitutional.

On 23 January of the present year, the Constitutional Tribunal declared the Forestry Law to be null and void, thus giving reason to the Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities which had repeatedly denounced the unconstitutional nature of this law as it did not comply with the requirement of consulting them and allowing them to participate in the process of formulation and adoption of the law.

In a communiqué to public opinion signed by numerous Colombian social organizations (1) it is pointed out that: "This sentence again sets up a basic safeguard for the integrity of ethnic minorities, contesting and curbing the Government's attempts at foregoing prior consultation and the concept that attempts to convince us that the liquidation of collective rights and of the cultural, social and economic integrity of ethnic peoples and communities is irreversible."

According to the Colombian group "Semillas": "This decision of the Constitutional Tribunal has awarded victory to all us Colombians who believe that a more just and sustainable world is possible. This triumph opens a window of hope and recharges the forces of society's resistance processes and struggles in general in order to face this model of privatization of all public assets and ransacking of collective territories." (2).

This is a victory of the struggle of numerous Colombian social organizations, that have succeeded in obtaining this decision from the Constitutional Tribunal, which sets down jurisprudence. It is time for celebration.

Article based on: (1) "Comunicado a la Opinión Pública. La liberación del derecho a la consulta previa. La Corte Constitucional, declara inexecutable la Ley General Forestal, enero 23 de 2008", (Comunicado to Public Opinion. Liberation of the right to prior consultation. The Constitutional Tribunal declares the General Forestry Law to be unconstitutional, 23 January 2008, sent by Diego Alejandro Cardona, Censat Agua Viva, e-mail: selvas@censat.org, y (2) "La Corte Constitucional declara inexecutable la Ley Forestal"(The Constitutional Tribunal declares the Forestry Law to be unconstitutional), Grupo Semillas, <http://www.semillas.org.co/sitio.shtml?apc=l1----&x=20155467>

[index](#)

- Congo, D.R: The oil palm invasion has started

Born to independence in 1960, the Democratic Republic of Congo has lived since then amid fighting. Its former colonial ruler Belgium, as well as the US, the EU and international financial institutions such as the World Bank have been key hidden actors and interested parties in a scenario where ethnic rivalry has caught the world attention, while hiding economic struggles over the riches of a country which was the world's largest cobalt exporter, the fourth biggest diamond exporter and ranked among the top ten world producers of uranium, copper, manganese and tin.

The civil war that ravaged the country from 1998 to 2002 and was followed until now by renewed fighting was to a large extent aimed at securing the interests on diamonds, gold, coltan, cobalt, ivory and timber. Not only nine of Congo's neighbouring states were involved in the war but also a number of western countries, either supporting the rebels or the government.

A complex web of western companies with direct and indirect vested interests in the region have tried to hold control of the country's natural resources: Anglo American, American Mineral Fields, Barclays Bank and De Beers from Britain; Texaf, George Forrest International, Petrofina and Union Minière from Belgium; Tenke Mining Company from Canada; Bayer A.G. from Germany; America Mineral Fields, Cabot Corporation and Brown & Root (a branch of Halliburton) from the US, to name just a few.

The war, waged and armed by foreign commercial interests, was at the cost of the local impoverished population. It left the country with a death toll of up to 3.8 million.

Forest peoples such as the Mbuti, Sua, Aka, Efe, Ituri, Batwa, Luba, Mongo, Azande, Bangi, Ngale, Rundi, Teke, Boa, Chokwe, Lugbara, and Banda have lived in those lands from ancient times. They were not consulted when the colonial powers grabbed their territories or during neocolonialism, when similar actors kept on holding power. Industrial logging, agroindustry, and conservation projects have not only rendered no benefit for them but also implied the eviction of forest and forest dependent people. It is estimated that 6 million people have already been displaced in the country, where about 40 million people in a population of 62.6 million depend on the forest to survive. Millions have kept dying, mostly through starvation and disease. Living amid the most commercially valued goods on the world, they have become mere victims and subjects of humanitarian aid.

Though fighting has continued in certain parts of the country Congo has now an elected President --Joseph Kabila-- confirmed by a general election held in 2006. According to a recent report by BBC News "Mr Kabila has enjoyed the clear support of western governments such as the US and France, regional allies such as South Africa and Angola and businessmen and mining magnates who have signed multi-million dollar deals under his rule."

The recent emergence of China as a serious rival in the contest to reap the rewards of high commodity prices has radically changed the picture. According to a report by John Farmer and Ann Talbot, "China has established itself in Congo by providing US\$8 billion for infrastructure projects and mining operations. This deal will give Chinese companies control of several important copper and cobalt mines. Since the Chinese investment was announced, President Kabila has been courted by every government that fears its interests in the Congo may suffer."

The table is served. There are still millions of hectares of valuable tropical forests --ironically spared from devastation by years of war-- ready to be plundered. Linked to industrial logging, forest areas are also planned to be used for the plantation of oil palm monocultures to feed the booming agrofuel market for European and US cars, as well as for China's insatiable demand of palm oil.

Despite the countless testimonies that can be found in Colombia, Cameroon, Indonesia, Ecuador and many other countries about the impacts of large scale monoculture oil palm plantations and on how they deprive communities of their livelihoods, the mainstream rhetoric keeps on advising that it is good to plant such monocultures. For instance, UN Economist Dr Schmidhuber has said that DR Congo could devote millions of acres for agrofuel feedstock including oil palm. Keeping a blind eye on how the process works everywhere else, he also says that environmental concerns would be less of an issue in DRC, since large areas of arable land lie outside rainforest zones. Not only does such argument ignore the presence of people living in or depending on those areas, but it also proves consistently to be wrong. The reason is simple: what makes oil palm plantations really profitable is to gain access to forest areas, log the forest, sell the timber, and then plant the oil palm with the resulting revenues.

The destructive process has already begun. In October 2007, a Chinese company signed a billion-dollar contract to establish more than 3 million hectares of oil palm plantations in the country. The oil palm invasion has started and the forests --spared from destruction by war-- will now be destroyed in peace.

Article based on information from: "Further war threatens in Congo as rivalry for resources intensifies", John Farmer

and Ann Talbot, 22 January 2008, (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/jan2008/cong-j22.shtml>); "DR Congo has great potential for biofuels says U.N. official," mongabay.com, January 9, 2008, <http://news.mongabay.com/2008/0109-congo.html>; "Country profile: Democratic Republic of Congo", BBC, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1076399.stm); The World Guide, New Internationalist/Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2001/2002, pp.179-181.

[index](#)

- Mexico: The ongoing fight of indigenous communities against illegal logging

The struggle for environmental defenders in Mexico continues. Activists who seek to protect their local ecosystems continue to be under threat from illegal loggers and the inaction of local government authorities.

As part of this struggle comes the case of environmentalist Ildelfonso Zamora, his family and his community of San Juan Atzingo, Ocuilán municipality in the State of Mexico. Since 1998, Ildelfonso Zamora has worked to bring public attention to the problem of illegal logging in his community, which borders the Zempoala Lagoons National Park, a zone identified as one of the 15 "critical regions" affected by illegal logging in the country. The park is located within what Greenpeace calls 'the great water forest' which houses two percent of the world's biodiversity and supplies three quarters of the water consumed in Mexico City, besides helping to mitigate climate change and its impacts in the region.

For the last number of years, Ildelfonso, his family members and fellow commissioners of their indigenous communal landholding have been subject to a series of threats by illegal loggers. Various incidents have included gunshots outside family residences, death threats, confrontations in vehicles on the highway and even threats directed at the local mayor.

The most shocking incident against these defenders of the forest was the murder of Ildelfonso's 21-year-old son Aldo in a highway shooting at the hands of a group of illegal loggers in May 2007. The arrest of two men involved in the murder was delayed by a staggering 79 days after the shooting. At 9 months since the death of Aldo, two of the four murderers still remain at large, despite being clearly identified and having outstanding arrest warrants. Mexican President Felipe Calderón made public statements in July 2007 that he would commit to carrying out justice in the case, yet such an outcome has yet to be delivered.

These incidents occur within an environment of harassment and systematic discrediting of defenders of environmental rights in Mexico. The murder of Aldo Zamora can be placed among the similar cases of Rodolfo Montiel, Teodoro Cabrera, Felipe Arreaga and Albertano Peñaloza in the mountains of the state of Guerrero and the cases of the indigenous Tarahumaras environmentalists Isidro Baldenegro and Hermenegildo Rivas in the state of Chihuahua.

The Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center in Mexico City (Center Prodh) has been working with Ildelfonso and the community of San Juan Atzingo with legal defence, awareness raising and educational workshops. In June of 2007 Center Prodh and Greenpeace Mexico made a joint request to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights for precautionary measures which would protect the life and physical integrity of victims that are under threat within the community. In January 2008 Center Prodh also highlighted the plight of the community of San Juan Atzingo in a report to the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on Human Rights Defenders.

That campaigning for environmental protection in Mexico should mean putting one's life in danger illustrates the need for stronger accountability of local authorities and their involvement in these violations. Ildelfonso Zamora and his community continue to live in mourning for the death of Aldo Zamora and are still waiting for justice and personal safety.

For more details of the case and addresses of authorities to whom letters can be directed, visit: <http://centroprodh.org.mx/english/> and also at Greenpeace Mexico's website: <http://www.greenpeace.org/mexico/press/releases/caso-aldo-zamora-seis-meses-d> or email internacional3@centroprodh.org.mx.

[index](#)

COMMUNITIES AND TREE MONOCULTURES

- Increased poverty, land conflicts and deforestation: The Asian Development Bank's plantations record

The ADB has handed out more than US\$1 billion for forestry projects since its first forestry project in 1977. Most of the Bank's recent forestry projects were rated "partially successful or unsuccessful". The Bank acknowledges "problems with project design and implementation" and that "its [forestry] sector investments have had a minimal positive impact on forest loss and degradation". Even this "minimal positive impact" is a result of defining a plantation as a forest. According to the Bank, clearing villagers' forests and farmlands and replacing them with monoculture tree plantations is "positive".

More than 80 per cent of the Bank's loans for forestry projects went on establishing plantations. ADB-funded plantations have repeatedly failed due to poor selection of species, fire, disease or because the land on which they are planted was already in use by local people. Many of the Bank's plantation projects were poorly designed and weakly monitored.

The ADB's own documents reveal the problems clearly, as the following extracts illustrate. A project in Western Samoa was delayed "due to prolonged, and sometimes breakdown in the negotiation to secure lease of land owned collectively". In the Philippines, an ADB plantation project "suffered from deficiencies in Project design and implementation." The plantations established were poorly maintained and "were characterized by highly uneven and low tree growth rate." An ADB-funded project established 20,000 hectares of plantations in Bangladesh, but villagers who took part in the project "received only minimal benefits". The result was "impatience and a feeling of resignation among participants" and "a potentially hostile social environment." At a project site in Nepal, only about one-third of the Bank's target area of 5,000 hectares could be planted, "primarily because of encroachment by squatters".

A Timber Plantation Project in Indonesia aimed to plant on 51,000 hectares of "unproductive shrubs and grasslands". At project completion, just over half the target area had been planted. The ADB's Project Completion Report describes the damage to the plantations by fires and failing species as "staggering". The tree species selected for the project "were not based on proven field trials, and were not sufficiently reassessed during site planning and preparation of plantation site designs."

One of the companies carrying out the planting, Inhutani III, clashed with Indigenous People in West Kalimantan. An Indonesian NGO, the Institute of Dayakology Research and Development, accused Inhutani III of using force in taking over lands from indigenous communities. The Bank hired a consultant for a few weeks and rejected the allegations, although the project area was reduced to exclude "areas where potential land tenure claims could rise".

Under the Bank's Industrial Tree Plantations Project in Laos, loans were given to farmers to plant eucalyptus trees. Many of the trees failed to grow, leaving farmers with no means of repaying the debt. "Thousands of inexperienced farmers and individuals were misled by prospects of unattainable gains, leaving the majority of farmers with onerous debts, with no prospect of repaying their loans, and with failing plantations," notes a report by the Bank's Operations Evaluation Department.

The project also supported commercial tree plantations. One of the companies involved, BGA Lao Plantation Forestry

(now taken over by Japan's Oji Paper) used ADB funding to bulldoze commons, forest and villager's farmlands to make way for its monoculture eucalyptus plantations.

Monitoring by ADB staff of plantation projects is weak. In Laos, Bank missions included few trips outside Vientiane. Between 1996 and 2003 there was no forestry specialist on any of the Bank's project review missions to Laos. Between July 2000 and February 2002 there were no ADB review missions to the country at all.

In an earlier project in the Philippines, only one socio-economic survey was carried out and only one Bank mission included a visit by a forestry specialist to the project sites. The Project Performance Audit Report notes that "There was little or no assessment of plantation growth performance, review of the appropriateness of Project design, and determination of the adequacy of Project staffing input and technical competency. No technical advice on forestry establishment or assistance in the Project performance management system was provided."

Since 2000, the ADB has been carrying out a review of its Forest Policy. An open discussion on the problems created by the Bank's lending to the forestry sector (as well as the impact on people and forests of the Bank's lending to roads, dams and mining) is long overdue. But the most recent publicly available draft of the proposed policy is dated June 2003. Since then, ADB staff have promised on several occasions that a new draft would be made available to the public. In January 2008, the ADB's Senior Public Information and Disclosure Coordination Assistant, Robert Paul S. Mamonong, promised that a "draft synthesis report is being revised and is expected to be ready by April 2008."

A few years ago, Javed H. Mir, the ADB's forestry specialist, gave a presentation about a "Regional Study on Forest Policy and Institutional Reforms" carried out by the Bank. He answered his own question, "What not to do?" with "Not to repeat mistakes". Following his advice would mark a dramatic break with history for the ADB. Repeating mistakes seems to be precisely what the Bank is determined to do. The Bank's June 2003 draft forest policy, for example, aims to "increase the extent and productivity of plantations".

Instead of continuing to promote problems, the Bank should stop financing industrial tree plantations.

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>

[index](#)

- Indonesia: Call for Action against certification of Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper's timber plantations

The giant pulp company PT. Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (PT. RAPP), operating in Riau Province, is applying for a Plantation Forest Management Certificate from the Indonesia Ecolabeling Institute (LEI) Certification System.

Riau-based NGOs and several regional and national NGOs are strongly challenging the application on several grounds including:

* Based on Landsat images, "there occurred land conversion long before the definitive permit was issued on 1 October 2004." According to Civil Society's "Critical Response" (1) long before the Minister of Forestry endorsed 75,640 hectare to the company, PT. RAPP had logged the natural forest where its Pelalawan Sector lies.

* 46.43% of the entire PT. RAPP'S industrial timber plantation in the Pelalawan sector lie inside the Protected Forest designated under the 1994 Riau Province's Spatial Plan in direct violation of several government criteria and standards that allow industrial timber plantations only in what is classified as "Production Forests" (for timber extraction).

* The entire PT RAPP's HTI – Pelalawan Sector, before it was exploited by the company, had been a pristine natural

forest, as is shown in an image captured by Landsat in 1996.

In their Call for Campaign Action (2) launched in January 2008, several NGOs:

1. "appeal to LEI to cancel the application, which is currently under assessment by certifier *Mutu Agung Lestari* (MAL).
2. appeal to buyers and consumers not to purchase pulp and paper produced by the company as they are produced at the cost of forest destruction and in direct violation of the Indonesia's existing laws.
3. support the government of Indonesia (i.e. the law enforcers) to continue the legal proceedings against PT RAPP's violation of the permit."

Article based on the following documents:

(1) [http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Indonesia/Civil_Society_Critical_Response.pdf]

(2) [http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Indonesia/Campaign_Action.html]

Produced by several NGOs and sent by Rivani Noor, CAPP, e-mail: rivani@cappa.or.id, www.cappa.or.id

[index](#)

- Indonesia: New report on the human rights impacts of oil palm plantation expansion

The major issue of land tenure underlies the problem of oil palm schemes in Indonesia and elsewhere. Occupying large tracts of community land where food and cash crops used to be grown and medicines and building materials were harvested, monoculture oil palm plantations erode the rights and livelihoods of local communities.

Through promises, bribes, and cheating combined with the unawareness of local communities of their rights, companies move in leading to the large-scale privatisation of land and natural resources.

Palm oil, a vegetable oil already used extensively for food production, cosmetics and animal feed, is increasingly in demand as an agrofuel. In response to this growing market, large-scale oil palm plantations are being developed in Latin America, West Africa and South East Asia. Indonesia, the world's largest producer of crude palm oil, has already increased its palm estates to 7.3 million hectares, and is planning to expand the area under plantation by a further 20 million hectares – an area the size of England, the Netherlands and Switzerland combined.

The recent report "Losing Ground. The human rights impacts of oil palm plantation expansion in Indonesia" [<http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Indonesia/losingground.pdf>] by Friends of the Earth, LifeMosaic and Sawit Watch, reveals how Indonesian government policies and palm oil industry practices are harming the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples and argues that in the face of such evidence targets to increase agrofuel use in the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union are misguided, risking environmental damage and human rights abuses on an even bigger scale.

[index](#)

- Spain: The NORFOR/ENCE certification, yet another FSC fraud

The pulp and paper company ENCE owns monoculture eucalyptus plantations in Spain and Uruguay, certified by FSC. Part of these plantations, some 12,000 hectares spread out among over 200 plots, are located in the Northeast of Spain (Galicia, Asturias and Cantabria) and are managed by one of its forestry subsidiary companies, NORFOR.

Eucalyptus cultivation has been practiced in Galicia on a large scale from the fifties onwards and has increased since ENCE started producing pulp exclusively from eucalyptus wood. Today, the destructive potential associated with this crop can be noted, having been one of the main agents in the proliferation of forest fires, erosion and soil degradation, impoverishment of rural communities, low wages in forestry, loss of diversity and in wide areas the virtual disappearance of the ecological and cultural landscape. The state of degradation reached in the plantations is leading the administrations to design policies aimed at controlling this species and substituting it with other more profitable and better adapted trees.

NORFOR's forestry activities have been characterized by the use of very intensive and aggressive plantation practices as regards to their consequences on biological systems supporting production. Additionally, in the economic context, the company's activities have had negative consequences as it is the main buyer of eucalyptus timber in Galicia, thus acting as a monopoly and causing prices to collapse. Socially the company's activities have also had negative impacts, such as the impossibility of obtaining other forest produce due to the aggressive cultivation techniques which imply uncontrolled use of agrochemicals such as weed-killers, fungicides and insecticides, that lead to the elimination of a large number of organisms that would make bee-keeping, hunting, mushroom gathering or cattle-raising possible.

In September 2004, following an audit carried out by SGS -which was documented in an amazing public summary- NORFOR was granted FSC certification. This certification was questioned by Greenpeace, WWF and the Pontevedran Pola Defensa da Ría Association, supported by the ecological movement as a whole. This questioning highlights, with evidence, the company's lack of compliance with the majority of FSC's principles and criteria. However, the lack of sensitivity on the part of SGS, NORFOR and FSC itself was total and in spite of the fact that SGS had no option but to admit to the content of some of the complaints, the certificate was upheld.

Finally, after three years of complaints, FSC's Accreditation Services International (ASI) decided to carry out a follow-up audit on SGS, the company having granted certification. In principle the auditing had been programmed to study the controversial aspects of certification and thus respond to the complaints that had been submitted and maintained. The field audit took place at the end of May 2007 and included a brief meeting with the ecologist groups at the beginning of June. During this meeting, the ASI members declared that they had prepared and carried out the field audit without having read the contents of the complaints sent by APDR (Asociación pola defensa da Ría). Thus it became clear that the auditors were unaware of the facts and evidence contained in the complaints and that there had been no intention of finding out if these were true regarding NORFOR's forestry management.

As expected, the auditors' report was of very poor quality and doubtful honesty and only included a few of the cases of lack of compliance with standards, that had been highlighted in the claims against this certification. The report does not analyse indicators regarding compliance with Spanish standards, resolves Major Non-compliance with Principles with Requests for Minor Corrective Action, minimizes the effects of NORFOR's poor practices and indicates that SGS has carried out a "professional" auditing process. Even so, ASI decided to maintain recognition of SGS as a certifying body and to uphold the company's certification.

The conclusion to be reached is that FSC, having had the opportunity to check the negative aspects of NORFOR's forestry management, has decided -by maintaining its certification- to take a further step along the road to fraud. FSC's ASI has not been willing to analyse the points contained in the complaints in order to avoid having to cancel the certification of this company and to withdraw its recognition of SGS as a certifying body.

This lack of interest shown by FSC in checking compliance with its own standards, as well as the large number of certified companies denounced by ecologist and human rights movements all over the world, is indicative that those presently responsible for FSC have taken up the position of emptying certification of content and certifying without considering compliance with standards. The company does not even show any interest in improving its management system. Presently NORFOR's plots show the same signs of degradation, they occupy protected ecosystems to plant

eucalyptus monocultures, make massive use of agrochemicals, conceal the situation of certified plots and do not comply with most of the certification standards.

In view of this situation it is necessary to bring to the attention of citizens and administrations the fraud concealed behind many of FSC's products, warning that behind the seal there may be poor forestry management, much more likely if the timber comes from monoculture plantations and that it is possible that the "green seal" conceals an activity that is seriously damaging at the environmental, economic and social levels, as is the case with products made from NORFOR's eucalyptus timber. Consumers must know that FSC certification is being granted without this implying the promotion of environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable forest management.

By Benito Andrade, Asociación Pola Defensa Da Ría (APDR), e-mail: apdr@apdr.info, www.apdr.info

[index](#)

- Thailand: Rubber plantations against forests, people and health

The recent study "Rights of rubber farmers in Thailand under free trade", by Ms Sayamol Kaiyoorawong and Ms Bandita Yangdee, [http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Thailand/Rights_of_rubber_farmers_in_Thailand.pdf], makes a thorough review of the whole rubber business and its actors in that country.

The report highlights that the first rubber trees brought from Malaya and planted in Thailand in 1899 developed into a national scheme of integrated plantation, where rubber trees were grown in combination with indigenous plants and other fruit trees, food plants and other species. Such pattern allowed farmers not only to harvest the rubber but also to collect vegetables, wild animals, herbs, fuel wood and wood for construction.

A promotion policy which started in 1911 and was further strengthened in 1978 made rubber plantations spread in the southern, eastern and northeastern regions of the country, totaling some 2 million hectares according to 2003 data. And the trend has been to keep on spreading. Expectations to increase rubber production by 250,000 tons per year in Thailand aim at meeting the increasing global demand of rubber to feed –among other- the automobile industry.

This upsurge has led to a change in the production pattern of rubber, giving rise to large scale monoculture plantations which have played havoc in the environment and on people.

Rubber plantations have changed the landscape. Quoting the report, they "can be seen all over the south of Thailand, from the highland areas down to the low lying plains and since the latest government promotion project in 2004-2006 cloned seedlings have begun sprouting in almost every province of the country, replacing short-term cash crops."

They have also eroded the ecosystems, including forests: "Being monoculture plantation, the use of chemical pesticides and the lack of other plants destroyed the bio-diversity of the eco-systems and coexistence of flora and fauna." "With decreasing trees covering the soil, the evaporation of water was affected" and even the level of the underground water was reduced." Moreover, some rubber plantations in the South were located on 40-60 degree slopes, which resulted in soil erosion.

Some of the social impacts of monoculture rubber tree plantations relate to the consumer culture that the production for sale of rubber has brought about. Rubber farmers now have to pay cash to get the things that they could previously harvest in the integrated system. Now it is money which plays an active role in dominating the community's way of life, separating them from nature as well as from the community way of living and working. Now "each household will concentrate on tapping their rubber to get as much money as they can. As each plantation is located far from each other, their cooperation is, in effect, on the decrease."

The authors explain the consequences that such change had on the life of the communities: "By collecting natural produce along with the products gained from partially transforming nature into rubber forest, the communities could live happily. In the past, any decision-making was made by community members. But when the rubber plantation system was introduced, the plantation owners would be led and forced to strictly comply with the requirements of the ORRIF [government office]. Under the monoculture plantation approach, the rubber farmers must obey and follow the instructions given to them. They have no control over the production system, development of rubber varieties, rubber pricing and its selling. The monoculture of rubber is therefore destroying the local wisdom of developing rubber varieties and the farmers' agricultural methods."

Regarding the work at the plantations, a study cited in the report found that "these rubber farmers did not rest adequately. Thus, they were physically weak and had aches and pains because of the movements they had to make according to the different levels of the rubber tree they had to tap and the overload of latex buckets they had to carry. Eating irregularly brought on peptic ulcer disease." Another study "found that the rubber farmers' toes and nails were ruined and their eyes infected because of the use of chemical sprays without proper protection."

The large scale rubber plantations have been a cause of uncontrollable disease outbreaks, soil degradation and topsoil erosion on the slopes. Also rubber prices are beyond the farmers' control and vulnerable to being lowered. For local communities what may be in store is the potential collapse of the eco-systems as well as their lives.

Article based on "Rights of rubber farmers in Thailand under free trade", by Ms Sayamol Kaiyoorawong and Ms Bandita Yangdee, Project for Ecological Awareness Building, sent by Sayamol Kaiyoorawong, e-mail: noksayamol@yahoo.com

[index](#)

- Uganda: Why Is FSC Certifying Land Disputes and Human Rights Abuses at Mount Elgon?

Mount Elgon has seen major land disputes since it was declared a National Park in 1993. Villagers were evicted from the park in 1993 and again in 2002. The area surrounding the park has a high population density and farmers have little choice other than to keep going back into to the park to plant their crops. Violence has flared between the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA), the agency responsible for managing the park, and villagers trying to make a living. Villagers say that UWA officials have threatened them, shot at them and sexually abused them. Several people have been killed.

The situation is further complicated by a carbon offset tree planting scheme run by the Dutch FACE Foundation together with UWA. The FACE Foundation has been planting trees around the boundary of Mount Elgon since 1994. The trees are supposed to store carbon and the Carbon Neutral Company has been selling carbon credits from Mount Elgon since 2002 (the FACE Foundation and the Carbon Neutral Company share the same director, Denis Sliker). Currently the Carbon Neutral Company is not selling credits from Mount Elgon and UWA-FACE is not increasing the area of trees planted (currently around 8,000 hectares) because of the disputes.

The 25,000 hectare UWA-FACE project area has been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council since 2002. In April 2007, SGS Qualifor, the FSC certifying body, visited Mount Elgon to carry out a reassessment of the tree planting project. After SGS's assessors had arrived in Uganda, UWA requested SGS to certify the entire Mount Elgon national park. At a stroke, the area to be assessed increased from 25,000 hectares to 112,100 hectares. Undaunted, SGS's team of four people assessed the entire National Park in three days.

SGS raised three major corrective action requests during their April 2007 reassessment. To comply with FSC rules, the certificate could only be issued once these corrective action requests had been met. SGS, however, issued a six month extension of the certificate. After a "close-out visit" by one SGS auditor in August 2007, SGS issued the

certificate. This "close-out visit" did not involve visiting the area certified, or talking to any villagers.

Accreditation Services International (ASI), a subsidiary of FSC, is responsible for checking that certifying bodies comply with FSC's rules. ASI was also in Uganda in April 2007, carrying out an annual audit of SGS. ASI reported that SGS's certification of Mount Elgon was based on hoped for future improvements, rather than what was actually happening in the National Park. ASI comments that "Major CARs [corrective action requests] have been closed based on documents and procedures to be implemented rather than field performance," and adds "Compliance with FSC certification requirements is not clear."

The audit at Mount Elgon is actually the fourth time that ASI has noticed that SGS is not complying with FSC rules: "This issue is a recurring nonconformity which has already been pointed out following ASI field surveillance audits in Russia, Poland and Guyana."

SGS is responsible for a series of controversial certifications. As documented by WRM in 2006, these include Mondi in South Africa and Swaziland, Norfor in Spain (now the subject of a formal complaint by Spanish NGO Asociacion Pola Defensa da Ria), V&M Florestal in Brazil (certificate since withdrawn, after a V&M guard shot and killed a villager), Smurfit Carton in Colombia, EUFORES and COFOSA in Uruguay and another project involving the FACE Foundation, FACE PROFAFOR in Ecuador. SGS also certified Barama, the Guyanese subsidiary of Malaysian-based logging company Samling. The certificate was withdrawn when an audit by ASI in November 2006 revealed that SGS had issued the certificate without an "appropriate evaluation against FSC certification requirements".

Having discovered that one of FSC's Certifying Bodies is systematically not certifying in accordance with FSC rules, surely the only sensible course of action for ASI to take is to suspend SGS from issuing FSC certificates. Instead, ASI requested that SGS "implement appropriate measures to correct the nonconformity detected". ASI made the same request a year earlier after auditing SGS's certification of the Regional Directorate of State Forest in Bialystok in Poland. At Mount Elgon, ASI found that SGS had not taken any measures whatsoever, appropriate or otherwise.

When SGS's assessors visit villages around Mount Elgon, they do so in the company of UWA staff. Not surprisingly, SGS found that villagers were reluctant to talk about sexual abuse or human rights abuses at the hands of UWA rangers. In its public summary of the reassessment at Mount Elgon, SGS acknowledges that there are disputes over land at Mount Elgon. It also acknowledges that people have been killed. FSC criterion 2.3, which states that "Disputes of substantial magnitude involving a significant number of interests will normally disqualify an operation from being certified." How many more people must die at Mount Elgon before SGS accepts that this is a dispute of "substantial magnitude"?

In July 2007, Stephan Faris, a journalist from Fortune magazine, visited Mount Elgon. He reported serious land rights conflicts around the National Park and found that half-a-million of the FACE Foundation's trees had been cut down in 2006. Villagers planted the cleared land with maize, green beans, passion fruit, avocado and bananas.

But SGS prefers the ostrich position when it comes to news which might affect its decision to certify Mount Elgon. In September 2007, I wrote to SGS's Gerrit Marais to ask him how SGS could issue the certificate given the land disputes at Mount Elgon. I sent Marais a link to the article in Fortune magazine and asked for his comments. "I am not aware of the article in Fortune," he replied.

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>

[index](#)

- Belgium: Field trials planned of GM poplar trees for ethanol

Late last year, the Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), a life sciences research institution applied for permission to establish a field trial of genetically modified poplar trees in Belgium. The GM trees would have modified lignin content, aimed at making production of ethanol easier.

VIB was established in 1996. Funded largely by the Flemish government, it employs more than one thousand scientists. VIB aims to produce scientific discoveries with "industrial application potential", which it patents and either signs agreements with existing companies or establishes start-up companies to develop the discoveries into "market-ready products". By 2006, VIB had patents on 100 of its discoveries.

VIB has a communications team responsible for producing information targeted at educators, journalists and politicians. It sets up competitions for schools, provides teaching materials, books, presentations and exhibitions. Materials include titles like "What is bioengineering?", "The Safety of Genetically Engineered Crops", and "Xenotransplantation: the animal in the man...". In these glossy brochures VIB promotes biotechnology, plays down the risks and portrays scientists as neutral experts interested only in the good of society. Meanwhile, VIB lobbies politicians to relax regulations covering the use of human cells and GM crops.

According to the application submitted to the Belgian authorities, VIB plans to plant GM trees on a 0.24 hectare experimental plot in University of Ghent Science and Industry park in Zwijnaarde. The trees are planned to be planted in May 2008 and the experiment is to last until the end of 2014.

The genus *Populus* includes about 30 species of trees, which are native to most of the Northern Hemisphere, with common names including poplar, aspen and cottonwood. It is the scientists' favourite tree for genetic experimentation. The world's first release of genetically modified trees was a field trial of herbicide resistant GM poplars in 1988 in Belgium. Since then, well over half of the 200-plus GM tree trials worldwide involved poplar trees. In 2006, *Populus trichocarpa* became the first tree to have its full DNA code sequenced.

The only GM trees to be commercially released are poplars - GM poplars have been planted in China since 2002. No records are kept of where the trees are planted or how many have been planted. In 2004, Xue Dayuan of the Nanjing Institute of Environmental Science told the China Daily that genes from the GM poplars had already appeared in natural varieties growing nearby.

The risks of genetic contamination are huge, given the large and widespread population of wild relatives. Poplar trees can spread through suckers growing from roots. Pollen and seed are spread on the wind "possibly on rather long distance", notes VIB. However, VIB states that, "seed regeneration is not often observed as ecological conditions necessary to seed germination and plantlet development are seldom met." The words "not often" and "seldom" are hardly reassuring, given that the impact of genetic contamination in non-GM poplar trees is unknown, but potentially devastating.

Yet VIB states that "The environmental impact from the release is expected to be zero, since the GM poplars are not going to flower and any suckers from superficial roots will be destroyed." True, the trees to be planted will be female clones and will produce no pollen. It is probably also true that if the trees flower, VIB's researchers will remove the flowers. But the environmental impact of this trial will not be zero.

VIB ignores the fact that the purpose of the trial plantation is to develop GM trees to produce ethanol. To be commercially viable, plantations of GM poplars would need to cover vast areas of land. If large scale GM tree plantations were to be established, genetic contamination of natural varieties of poplars, aspen and cottonwoods would be inevitable.

VIB makes no mention of the impacts that industrial tree plantations have on local communities and their environments. Nor does VIB consider the fact that growing trees (or any other type of agrofuel crop) to produce ethanol on an industrial scale will increase conflicts over land. If forests and grasslands are not to be destroyed (which would release huge amounts of carbon) the tree plantations will have to be planted on agricultural land. This will increase the price of food encouraging corporations and farmers to clear land elsewhere (including forests and grasslands). Two recent papers in Science magazine demonstrate that all the major agrofuels cause more greenhouse gas emissions than conventional fuels, once the emissions caused by land clearance and producing the fuels are taken into account.

The people promoting agrofuels and GM trees as a solution to climate change tend to be scientists whose research benefits from promoting agrofuels or GM trees. "Biomass represents an abundant carbon-neutral renewable resource for the production of bioenergy and biomaterials, and its enhanced use would address several societal needs," claims an article published in Science magazine in January 2006. What's missing from such statements is a comparison of agrofuels with, say, large scale solar and wind power combined with high voltage direct current cables and hydrogen fuel cells. These technologies can be used immediately and would massively reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Unlike GM trees.

By Chris Lang, <http://chrislang.org>

[index](#)

- Growing networking against GE trees

From the Amazon to Finland, New Zealand and Chile, from Indigenous Peoples to European NGOs, from women to youth groups, in just a week nearly 140 people got connected and became involved in the gathering of signatures for an Open Letter demanding a ban on the release of genetically engineered (GE) trees.

The letter (1), denouncing the impacts of GE trees on the environment and on people, was handed over to the 13th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) that took place in Rome, Italy. The signatures came from members of organizations from countries where research on the genetic modification of trees is being carried out: Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and US.

A web of connections quickly developed, and a simple letter evolved into a tool for action, where people got involved and in some cases were informed about something they were unaware of. Such was the case of a person from Spain who wrote: "I've just read about GE trees and feel it is a very threatening issue. I didn't know about this.

Though each and everyone of the signatories became a participant of the initiative, the prevailing feeling was that of being thankful, reflected by expressions like "I would be happy to sign", "thanks for the initiative", "keep up the great work", "keep up the struggle."

People expressed their concern as well as their sorrow. "As a member of the Secwepemc (Shuswap) nation, I am very concerned about the genetic engineering of the poplar trees since our people had a very special relationship with the tree for thousands of years. ... I am also expressing our deep concern over the long term ecological implications of genetic engineering of plants, as well as the implications of corporate control of plant life that goes along with genetic technology."

Underlying the issue is the awareness that most voices are not being heard, and that most people have never been consulted about this. A friend from Brazil put it this way: "I join the signature campaign convinced that we must protect

our native flora and we commit our efforts to make the voices of those who cannot say what they think and feel to be heard.”

Concerns were expressed about specific issues such as the potential cross-pollination of GE trees with natural trees, thus permanently damaging genetic biodiversity, as well as the potential impacts on human health, as in the following message: “GM pollen will be widely inhaled by people and this may have health effects, especially if the trees have been engineered to produce a pesticide.”

People were eager to exchange updates and news related to GE trees. From Belgium we got to know that: “it might be interesting for you to know that currently an application for a field trial with GM poplar trees is [being] considered. The minister will take the final decision on the authorisation the coming month.” A person from Canada informed that: “The Canadian Government (the Canadian Forest Service of Natural Resources Canada) is field testing GE trees in Quebec: our last information is that field tests include poplar and insect resistant spruce.” Friends from South Africa expressed that: “The industry players deny that they have any field trials, but it seems that there could be some happening even if not approved by government. We will need to investigate further to see if there is any proof.” The news from Finland was that: “unfortunately Finland in general has been among the few countries who have always voted in favour of GMOs. I think there is a strong scientific lobby on their behalf.”

As a result of the dissemination of the sign-on letter, a number of Brazilian social organizations (2) sent a letter to the Brazilian delegate at SBSTTA urging him “to advocate that CBD SBSTTA reaffirm the resolution of COP8 recommending the adoption of a precautionary approach based on the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. Furthermore, in the light of the lack and uncertainty of scientific reports related to the use of GE trees, it should be recommended not to perform field studies. ... A case-by-case evaluation would be contrary to the principles of the CBD and would respond to the corporate interests of the forestry and biotechnology industries.”

Similar action was carried out by a group of Latin American and Argentine organizations (3) who addressed an Open Letter to the Argentine Delegation at the Rome meeting, demanding that liberation of genetically manipulated trees be prohibited.

It is clear that tackling the issue of GE trees requires a strong opposition movement and in that respect we quote a Brazilian friend that warned: “This is one of the BIG issues and only being very united will we be able to force a change in course.”

He is of course right and that’s precisely why networking and campaigning at the local and global level are so necessary. We therefore invite everyone to sign on a similar letter to be sent to the upcoming CBD COP 9 (4), and – more importantly- to become involved to stop this insanity.

(1) [see letter at http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/BDC/SBSTTA13/GE_Trees_Campaign.html]

(2) (including Marcha Mundial de Mulheres (a global women’s group), Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (a small farmers’ group), Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (a landless rural workers’ group), Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (a peasant women’s group), Terra de Direitos (a human rights’ group)

(3) (Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero-Vía Campesina (Santiago del Estero Peasant Movement – Via Campesina) Centro de Políticas Públicas para el Socialismo (Centre for Public Policies for Socialism), GRAIN, Grupo de Reflexión Rural (Rural Reflection Group), Movimiento Semillero de Misiones (Misiones Seed Movement), Centro de Acción Popular Olga Márquez de Arédez (Olga Marquez de Aredez Centre for Grass-roots Action), Juventud Indígena Argentina, (Argentine Indigenous Youth Movement), El Aguamanda-Gualeguaychú, (Water Commands in Gualeguaychu), Grupo de Ecología Política, Comunidades y Derechos (Group for Ecological Policy, Communities and Rights), Red por una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos (Network for a Latin America Free from Transgenic trees).

(4) contact Ana Filippini, e-mail: anafili@wrm.org.uy

Article based on messages received from people who signed on to the letter

[index](#)

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