



Covid-19: An Alibi for more Oppression, Corporate Control and Destruction of Forests



Ph: GIGA

Solidarity in Action..... 2

Our Viewpoint: Exploiting the Pandemic: Corporate and Elite Profiteering.....2

Indigenous peoples in **Brazil** fight against government policies... and the pandemic.....6

Communities in **West and Central Africa** Resist Industrial Oil Palm Plantations, Even in Times of Covid-19..... 11

Indonesia: How the Pandemic Strengthens Immunity for Mining Corporate-Oligarchy and Paves the Way to a New Dictatorship..... 17

Agro-imperialism in the time of Covid-19..... 23

Brazil: Against Covid-19, Feminist Economics in the Countryside and the City.....26

The Pandemic in Forests in **India:** Escalated Attacks on Communities.....29

Reflections amid the Covid-19 Pandemic from WRM’s Advisory Committee.....33

RECOMMENDED

Papua: Violence against Indigenous Peoples and Forest Defenders.....46

India: The impact of Covid-19 and lockdowns on *Adivasi* (Indigenous) and Forest Communities..... 46

“Overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic: Lessons from the *dulet*”.....46

This Bulletin articles are written by the following organizations and individuals: CIMI - Western Amazon, Brazil; activists of the Informal Alliance Against the Expansion of Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa; the Indonesia Mining Advocacy Network (Jaringan Advokasi Tambang - JATAM); GRAIN; Siempreviva Feminist Organization (SOF), Brazil; All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM); members of WRM’s Advisory Committee; and members of the WRM international secretariat.

Solidarity in Action

This special bulletin wants to pay tribute to the forest communities and peasant families around the world who despite all odds and difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic -including the movement restrictions imposed by governments and the corporate and elite profit-seeking abuses -, have still managed to practice solidarity: From organizing alternative protection systems against the spread of the virus, collective kitchens, food crops distribution for those in need, and markets that while respecting social distancing provide healthy food for a fair price; to welcoming those affected by dispossession and displacement; to supporting women and girls facing violence; to continuing the resistance against destruction of their territories... And there are countless other examples. We stand in solidarity with you.



COVID-19: An Alibi for more Oppression, Corporate Control and Destruction of Forests

Our Viewpoint

Exploiting the Pandemic: Corporate and Elite Profiteering



Ph: nacionwampis.com

Over the past several months, governments around the world have implemented measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, such as issuing stay-at-home orders, shut-downs, curfews and/or "social distancing" and quarantine guidelines. Often combined with declarations of states of emergency, such measures have severe negative impacts on the global South, where the majority of people are heavily dependent on the informal economy and live day to

day. Government support has been erratic at best for many and it is impossible for this majority to stay safe and isolated. The lack of proper, adequate and context-specific information on how to prevent the spread of the virus, along with the lack of adequately equipped healthcare facilities, has left forest and peasant communities in particular more exposed than ever.

Another side of the pandemic has become increasingly evident: corporations and elites active in the global South, and especially in forested countries, have used the health crisis to enrich themselves even more and expand their territorial control.

Peasant and forest communities in the global South have a long history of confronting the disaster of the investments imposed by profit-seeking corporations and elites: land grabbing, soil erosion and water pollution, the destruction of livelihoods, large-scale deforestation, annihilation of life spaces, cultures and histories, forced displacement, violence, marginalization, criminalization, among countless others. The “emergency” was a reality for those communities well before the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, government measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus are merely intensifying impacts and injustices of a long-established and destructive economic system. Such measures have deepened extreme inequalities between rich and poor, between the North and the South, women and men, and between white communities and communities of colour. In a nutshell, the impacts of these measures are worse for those who already face the violence of racism, classism, patriarchy and oppression. And these same vulnerable communities have been most affected by the devastating Covid-19 disease.

Amidst countless human tragedies, corporations and political elites are abusing the situation to advance land grabs, roll back legislation protecting territories and people, and increase their profits.

In Cambodia, for example, Vietnamese rubber giant Hoang Anh Gia Lai (HAGL) razed the forests of the indigenous Kreung and Kachok communities during the national lockdown, affecting two sacred ‘spirit mountains’, along with wetlands, old-growth forest, traditional hunting areas and burial grounds. (1) In Indonesia, two farmers were killed in March in clashes over a long-standing land dispute with a palm oil firm in South Sumatra province. (2) In Panama, indigenous Guna leader Rengifo Navas condemned the increase in land invasions and mining exploitation, as well as illegal logging and hunting in many *comarcas* (indigenous territories) during the lockdown. (3) The Indigenous Wampí People in Peru filed a lawsuit against representatives of the GeoPark oil company, arguing that it threatened the health and well-being of the Wampí by allowing unauthorized oil workers to enter their Autonomous Territory. (4) In Uganda, agro-industrial companies backed by police and military forces have forcefully dispossessed more than two dozen small-scale farmers despite a government order to stop land evictions during the Covid-19 lockdown. (5) Meanwhile, a joint venture owned by mining giants Alcoa and Rio Tinto in Guinea backed by the World Bank, relocated more than a hundred families in order to expand a bauxite mine during the government-imposed lockdown. Villagers were moved to a previously-mined hilltop location that lacked adequate housing, water and sanitation, and where arable land was insufficient and livelihood opportunities largely absent. (6) And the list goes on and on.

To make matters worse, the threats, violence, criminalization, persecution and harassment that peasant and forest communities resisting destructive operations in their territories faced before the pandemic, have continued apace during the lockdowns. In fact, confinement is a real risk for community activists given that remaining in one place makes them easily identifiable and vulnerable to potential aggressors. In many countries, an already insufficient level of state protection of activists has diminished significantly, greatly increasing their vulnerability. Colombia alone witnessed a 53% rise in assassinations of social leaders between January and April 2020. (7)

On top of this, national governments put the well-being of corporations before that of their citizens, ever obedient as they are to corporate lobbyists, who have been particularly active during this period.

The oil and gas sector is among those most aggressively demanding (lobbying for) both financial support and deregulation, according to InfluenceMap, which tracks and measures corporate influence over climate change policy. (8)

Governments in several countries have excluded so-called “essential services” from lockdown restrictions. These included mining, fossil fuel, palm oil and timber plantation companies. From Bolivia to South Africa to Malaysia, workers have been forced to risk their health and the well-being of their families and communities living in close proximity to the corporate operations. These “exceptions” have nothing to do with providing “essential services” to society during a lockdown. They are designed to sustain corporate profits.

Despite this trend of prioritizing corporations and foreign investments, governments could well soon be facing a flood of lawsuits from corporations demanding compensation for measures taken during the pandemic. From private water companies to highway toll firms or utility businesses, the trade deals and agreements for international investments expose governments to litigation even during a global pandemic, simply because corporate profits are placed at risk. (9)

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also take advantage of the pandemic to advance their agendas

Despite the damage that the World Bank and the IMF have caused, particularly across the global South, by imposing neoliberal policies, structural adjustment plans and loan conditionalities, they are now portraying themselves as “experts”, standing ready to guide the world through the Covid-19 crisis. (10)

These multilateral organizations seek to play a major role in the national governments’ decision-making processes with respect to the economic direction that countries will take. Yet, both have always played a key role in facilitating privatization, the far-reaching and destructive activities of corporations, the financialization of nature, and the debilitation of national welfare safety nets - including the now so evidently dysfunctional public health systems, among many others. They are, in other words, key allies in the corporate quest for ever-increasing profits.

The IMF has responded to requests for emergency aid from over 80 countries. However, the few loans that have been granted are tied to controversial conditionalities (that is, domestic

reforms that must be introduced before funding is released). These reforms include further weakening of labour protections and promoting privatizations. (11) For its part, the World Bank is "assisting" 100 countries in their fight against Covid-19. However, much of this support has gone to the Bank's private-sector clients, and no provisions have been made to ensure that healthcare financing will not support privatization of such provision, which has been a notorious policy of the World Bank in the past. (12)

But extraordinary things happen

Clearly, most of the pandemic responses provided by national governments and financial institutions are not about taking care of people or workers, but about helping companies and shoring up neoliberal economies. It is also clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is not an isolated event: the capitalist-patriarchal, classist and racist system that dominates our respective societies is as much part of the current emergency situation as is the novel coronavirus itself.

And it is largely the same people who have felt the most terrible and damaging impacts of this profit-seeking system, who are now ensuring that no-one is left behind. Extraordinary things are happening among neighbourhoods and communities. From peasant movements distributing free-food to those in need to community-based initiatives designed to halt the spread of the virus, to communal meals prepared and distributed on the streets and self-organized community markets that while allowing for social distancing provide healthy food and basic needs.

If we want this crisis to be a turning point towards socially and ecologically just societies, along with collective responses to restart economies that place the well-being of ordinary people before that of corporate profits, the pandemic has to be understood as a symptom of an emergency that the majority of the world's population has been experiencing for way too long.

In the months leading up to the Covid-19 outbreak, millions of people throughout Chile rose up to protest the harsh and brutal impacts of neoliberal policy on that particular society. A graffiti message painted on a city wall during that time certainly holds true today: *"We can't return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem."*

(1) EcoBusiness, Vietnamese rubber giant razes indigenous lands as Cambodian government grapples with legacy land issues, June 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y99facoh>

(2) Farmlandgrab, Land conflicts flare across South-East Asia during coronavirus lockdowns, May 2020, <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/29643>

(3) Servindi, Indígenas de Mesoamérica: "Vivimos una nueva ola de colonialismo", June 2020, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad-noticias/19/06/2020/edicion>

(4) Servindi, Gobierno Wampis denuncia penalmente a funcionarios de GeoPark, June 2020, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad-noticias/01/06/2020/gtanw-denuncia-penalmente-funcionarios-de-geopark>

(5) Witness Radio, Multinationals use COVID-19 crisis to violently grab land of poor communities with impunity, April 2020, <https://witnessradio.org/multinationals-use-covid-19-crisis-to-violently-grab-land-of-poor-communities-with-impunity/>

(6) IDI, World Bank-Backed Rio Tinto-Alcoa Joint Venture Relocates Guinean Village During Covid-19 Lockdown, June 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y75ot2fe>

(7) International Land Coalition, Land Defenders can't Catch a Break from Violence during Covid-19, <https://lac.landcoalition.org/en/noticias/covid-19-no-da-tregua-defensores-tierra/>; and El País, El asesinato de líderes sociales en Colombia crece un 53% en el primer cuatrimestre, May 2020, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-05-25/la-pandemia-no-frena-el-asesinato-de-lideres-sociales-en-colombia.html>

(8) Desmog, Under Cover of Pandemic, Fossil Fuel Interests Unleash Lobbying Frenzy, April 2020, <https://www.desmogblog.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-fossil-fuel-lobbying-trump-influencemap>; and InfluenceMap,

The COVID-19 Crisis and Climate Lobbying, <https://influencemap.org/report/The-Coronavirus-Crisis-and-Climate-Lobbying-23249d39450ff19b441090a6a50174eb>

(9) Corporate Europe Observatory, Cashing in on the pandemic: how lawyers are preparing to sue states over COVID-19 response measures, May 2020, <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2020/05/cashing-pandemic-how-lawyers-are-preparing-sue-states-over-covid-19-response-measures>

(10) Reuters, IMF chief economist says 100 countries seek pandemic aid; more resources may be needed, April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-imf-world-bank-imf-resources/imf-chief-economist-says-100-countries-see-pandemic-aid-more-resources-may-be-needed-idUSKCN21W2UQ>

(11) Research Gate, Softening the blow of the pandemic: will the International Monetary Fund and World Bank make things worse?, April 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340569889_Softening_the_blow_of_the_pandemic_will_the_International_Monetary_Fund_and_World_Bank_make_things_worse

(12) CEPR, We Can't Trust the IMF and World Bank to Lead the COVID-19 Recovery, May 2020, <https://cepr.net/we-cant-trust-the-imf-and-world-bank-to-lead-the-covid-19-recovery/>

Indigenous peoples in Brazil fight against government policies... and the pandemic



Ph: Chico Bata/Todos os Olhos na Amazônia

*"Without effective actions to contain the pandemic among the (indigenous) peoples, this government will also be labeled as genocidal."
CIMI, June 2020*

At a cabinet meeting held in April 2020 in Brasilia, Environment Minister Ricardo Salles was caught on video stating that the focus of the public and the media on the Covid-19 pandemic, which has to date officially killed more than 65,000 people in the country, offers a distraction during which the government can “run the cattle herd” through the Amazon “by changing all the rules and simplifying standards.” (1) The video was made public in May 2020.

The reality is that the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro is trying to dismantle, and as quickly as possible, the rules that protect the forests and the constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples and *quilombolas* (communities formed by people subjected to slavery who managed to escape captivity), as well as the country’s system of environmental protections. This will have grave consequences throughout the country, especially in the Amazon, which is the region with the greatest forest coverage and presence of Indigenous Peoples. It should not be forgotten that the Bolsonaro government has acted in this way since its first day in power. (2) The current pandemic serves as a cover to further intensify

these brutal attacks on the forests, along with the peoples and communities that depend on it.

In Brazil, official figures of those infected with Covid-19 among the indigenous population certainly do not reflect the true extent of the pandemic. According to the Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB in its Portuguese acronym), up to June 2020, more than 420 indigenous people had died of Covid-19 and over 11,300 were infected in more than 120 communities. (3)

This is an unmitigated disaster for Indigenous Peoples, given that each group has its own culture and histories, and many of their leaders, especially the elders, who are the keepers of memory and knowledge of these peoples, are disappearing because of the pandemic. However, the way in which the authorities have dealt with this crisis clearly shows how the Bolsonaro government has in fact become a deadly enemy for these peoples and their life territories.

The Munduruku alone, who are one of the 305 peoples that inhabit Brazil, have lost ten of their *sabios* or wise ones. “We always say they are living libraries”, said Alessandra Korab Munduruku, a tribal leader, “It has been very painful.” (4) In June 2020, Chief Raoni of the Kayapó people accused President Jair Bolsonaro of taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to “eradicate his people”. Likewise, chief Ninawa of the Huni Kui people, who had also been infected with Covid-19, fears that the disease will spread among his people. (5)

Along with the increase in the number of Indigenous Peoples infected and killed by Covid-19, is the rise in the assassinations of indigenous leaders, as well as invasions of their territories by loggers, miners, evangelical missionaries and land grabbers. And certainly the risks for Indigenous Peoples are greater today due to the current context and the likelihood that such invaders could infect members of the communities. Given the characteristics of their collective coexistence, as shared among most of these peoples, such an epidemic could well lead to genocide, reminding us of events that took place in the not-so-distant past during the continent's colonial period.

In April, the Bolsonaro government issued Legal Instruction 9 (*Instrução Normativa Nº 9*), which basically legalized the crime of land-grabbing of indigenous territories. This was an unconstitutional and criminal act that further aggravates violence against Indigenous Peoples and fosters even more environmental crimes. (6)

Between March and April 2020, in the Javari Valley of the Amazonas state, foreign evangelical missionaries organized helicopter flights with the aim of ‘reaching out’ to uncontacted indigenous tribes. All taking place in the midst of a global pandemic, and when the same foreign organizations had just gained a powerful ally in the Brazilian government. In February, and prior to any form of social distancing, the Bolsonaro government appointed evangelical missionary Ricardo Lopes Dias, a former member of the New Tribes Mission of Brazil, to head the department responsible for uncontacted indigenous tribes of FUNAI (the Brazilian government’s National Indian Foundation). The appointment was heavily criticized by indigenous organizations and members of civil society, and even attracted the attention of the Federal Public Defenders Office. (7)

Deforestation + pandemic + fire + militarization

According to a study carried out by researchers from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE in its Portuguese acronym) and the National Center for Monitoring and Early Warning of Natural Disasters (CEMADEN in its Portuguese acronym), the deforestation rate between August 2019 and May 2020 already represented 89% of the land deforested the previous year, and that was even before the start of the driest season with the highest rate of forest fires. As the climate becomes ever drier, the burning of already deforested areas may well cause uncontrollable fires to break out. The same study also reveals that from August 2019 to May 2020, 78,443 fire outbreaks were detected in the Amazon region, representing an increase compared to the same period between 2018 and 2019. The study concludes that with ever more fires and the consequent increase of patients with respiratory ailments, added to the large number of patients with Covid-19, there will be a higher demand placed on healthcare services, which could lead to their collapse in the states of the Amazon region. And these same services are already operating at full capacity due to the pandemic. (8)

Another concern is the increasing militarization of the Amazon. This is due to the large number of armed forces personnel who occupy leading positions in environmental agencies and other government bodies dealing with indigenous issues. Not forgetting that it is the country's military who have been tasked with coordinating the Bolsonaro government's supposed policy to fight deforestation.

In a country where the Indigenous Peoples, in addition to facing the on-going health emergency, also have to cope with structural racism, WRM spoke with the representatives of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI in its Portuguese acronym), of the regional unit of the Western Amazon. Since its foundation in 1972, CIMI has played a major role in facilitating coordination between the villages and the Indigenous Peoples, which resulted in the promotion of large indigenous assemblies, even during the country's last military dictatorship (1964-1985). Hundreds of indigenous organizations emerged from this process, which also strengthened the fight to guarantee their rights and the process to set boundaries to the country's indigenous territories.

WRM: What is the general situation in the Brazilian Amazon regarding Covid-19 and Indigenous Peoples? How are the peoples and their organizations dealing with the pandemic?

CIMI: The lack of assistance from the government is striking, along with insufficient preparation by the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Healthcare, SESAI. This lack of support becomes even more relevant because the distances in the Amazon are so huge. This means that countless communities and villages are not receiving any support whatsoever. Indigenous Peoples and their organizations have done everything possible to cope with the pandemic. They're working mainly on the dissemination of preventive measures and in advising people how to take the necessary personal precautions. In the case of indigenous populations, preventive measures need to be more specific, given that each group has its own customs and they even have different community traditions and rituals.

WRM: It's clear that from the first day he took office, President Bolsonaro has been attacking the Indigenous Peoples head on. From your perspective, what is the objective of the actions and measures adopted by this government?

CIMI: The Bolsonaro government has three main lines of attack in terms of the rights of Indigenous Peoples: 1) it acts against the constitution, or rather, modifying constitutional provisions and completely ignoring articles 231 and 232 of the Brazilian Constitution; 2) it acts against the issue of territories, that is to say, not to demarcate the territories that are being processed, questioning those already demarcated and opening up these same territories to the land market; 3) finally, it acts to "integrate" the (indigenous) peoples, falling back on the military's old policy of national integration. Based on these three lines of intervention, the President intends to simply annihilate the Indigenous Peoples and open up their territories to the land market and mining exploitation.

WRM: There is an increase in the invasions of indigenous territories and in the threats and violence against these peoples and their defenders, including CIMI. What's happening in terms of the pandemic? Are the invaders the same or are there others?

CIMI: They are the same and others are joining them. To get a clearer idea of what's happening, out of the total properties registered in the Environmental Registry of Rural Properties (CAR, in its Portuguese acronym), a countrywide public electronic registry, which is mandatory for all rural properties, almost ten thousand properties have been overlapped onto indigenous lands in different stages of regularization or on areas of restricted use. This has been indicated in the survey released by the Chamber of Indigenous Populations and Traditional Communities of the Federal Public Ministry (6CCR / MPF). In the State of Acre alone, 132 private property records were identified in the CAR, and all of them were in indigenous areas. The physical invasions themselves take place in three stages as follows: during the first year, the invaders organize a kind of expedition into the area to be invaded and assess its possible uses, according to their intentions and interests (timber, grasslands, sugarcane, minerals, soy, etc.); the following year they deforest the land and only in the third year do they start burning. In this way, the invasions detected today may have begun in 2018. This strategy aims to make any accusations more difficult, given that the directors of government inspection bodies are frequently being reassigned, which causes a constant restart of the processes and the annulment of previous actions. This lack of control is then blamed on the former directors. At the other extreme, the government has created mechanisms so that the legalization of these invaded areas becomes effective.

WRM: How is the government and its allies taking advantage of the pandemic to advance their historical agendas, seeking to pass measures or laws that directly violate the rights of Indigenous Peoples over their territories and cultures?

CIMI: The government has taken advantage of this time of pandemic in which such peoples do not have the chance to organize themselves and carry out protests, as they must remain on their lands and in their communities. This makes it really difficult to follow up on the measures adopted in Brasilia (the seat of the federal government). Furthermore, the debating sessions or votes on legislation in the Congress are virtual, making any oversight by the Indigenous Peoples and their allies even more difficult. The strategy is the one stated by the Ministry of Environment: to take advantage of the crisis so as to "sweep away" regulations and simplify the laws.

WRM: How can people and organizations inside and outside of Brazil support the struggle of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon in these difficult times?

CIMI: The best way to show solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples in these difficult times is to inform the international community of these violations of their rights. Whenever we have had the opportunity to meet with Indigenous Peoples during this period, we have coordinated the dissemination of documents and videos to the emails of deputies, senators and ministers. We are witnessing a true act of genocide and ethnocide against the Indigenous Peoples and this situation must be brought to the attention of the international mechanisms that defend human rights.

(1) Mongabay, Brazil minister advises using Covid-19 to distract from Amazon deregulation, May 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/brazil-minister-advises-using-Covid-19-to-distract-from-amazon-deregulation/>

(2) WRM Bulletin, "The National Interest": Neofascism in the Amazon Rainforest, January 2020, <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/the-national-interest-neofascism-in-the-amazon-rainforest/>

(3) Platform to monitor the indigenous situation in the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Brazil, <https://covid19.socioambiental.org>

(4) The Guardian, 'We are facing extermination': Brazil losing a generation of indigenous leaders to Covid-19, June 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/21/brazil-losing-generation-indigenous-leaders-Covid-19?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

(5) AFP Spain, Brazilian Chiefs concerned about indigenous health and Bolsonaro's policies, June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7cMjwvM2WY>

(6) Emergência Indígena. Plano de Enfrentamento da Covid-19 no Brasil, <http://emergenciaindigena.apib.info/>

(7) Repórter Brasil, Organizações religiosas dos EUA mapeiam indígenas no Brasil e não interrompem ações com isolados mesmo durante a pandemia, June 2020, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2020/06/organizacoes-religiosas-dos-eua-mapeiam-indigenas-no-brasil-e-nao-interrompem-acoes-com-isolados-mesmo-durante-a-pandemia/>

(8) INPE, CEMADEN, Nota Técnica. O desafio do Brasil para conter o desmatamento e as queimadas na Amazônia durante a pandemia por Covid-19 em 2020: Implicações ambientais, sociais e sua governança, May 2020.

(9) Amazônia notícia e informação, Combate ao desmatamento passa a ser coordenado pelo exército, May 2020, <https://amazonia.org.br/2020/05/combate-ao-desmatamento-passa-a-ser-coordenado-pelo-exercito/>

Communities in West and Central Africa Resist Industrial Oil Palm Plantations, Even in Times of Covid-19



Villagers from Ijaw-Gbene in Okomu Kingdom, Nigeria, who had their homes burnt down on May 2020 by agents of Okomu Oil Palm Company. Ph: Farmlandgrab

In the middle of a health crisis, palm oil companies are presenting themselves as benevolent donors, with marketing campaigns directed at the national and international media. This is the case in West and Central African countries where these companies operate. This propaganda hides the fact that companies are gearing up to profit or otherwise take advantage of the pandemic: from undermining workers' rights, to demanding economic bailouts and special treatment as “essential businesses.”

Since 2013, the oil palm industry has targeted West and Central Africa for a new wave of expansion of its industrial plantations. At that time, estimates amounted to around 4 million hectares of land locked up in large-scale concessions to oil palm companies, particularly in Cameroon, the DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. (1)

Meanwhile, grassroots organizations, community groups and activists from the region have been coming together since 2013—in Cameroon, Gabon, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast—to share experiences of the devastating impacts that these monoculture plantations have on communities' livelihoods and wellbeing. They began to discuss how they could better organize and resist this invasion. This culminated in the creation of the Informal Alliance Against the Expansion of Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa.

The Alliance seeks to strengthen communities' resistance to industrial plantations, and to defend their territories against plantation expansion. Integral components of this resistance include the Alliance's support of communities reclaiming their lands; the commitment to ensure safe spaces for women to discuss the specific impacts that industrial oil palm plantations have on their lives; and women's involvement in these struggles and in the Alliance. The Alliance defends the traditional use of oil palm and the importance of forests and savannahs for communities' wellbeing.

In their years working together, members of the Alliance have shared and learned from each other about the many tactics that oil palm companies use to commit illegal and oppressive acts to impose and expand their business. (2) Women in the Alliance in particular have raised

awareness, and shared stories about, the increase in sexual violence, rape and abuse that women and girls face. This devastating aspect of industrial oil palm plantations is usually kept hidden. (3) Today, the land in concession to industrial oil palm companies has been reduced to almost 2,5 million hectares. Strong community resistance is a key factor in companies' failed attempts to occupy more of the land that governments had promised to set aside for industrial oil palm plantations.

In this context, the WRM asked organisations and activists engaged in the Informal Alliance about how the situation in and around industrial oil palm plantations has evolved since the Covid-19 pandemic started; and with governments across the region implementing so-called emergency measures to confront it. This article highlights their experiences. Testimonies are kept anonymous for security reasons.

In **Ivory Coast**, oil palm plantations owned by the company **PalmCi**—a subsidiary of the **SIFCA group**—are located in the department of Aboisso. The company fired several community residents without prior notification, citing lockdown measures as the reason. The workers who still have jobs are not given protective gear to reduce the risk of spreading or contracting the coronavirus. One woman from the region said: *“Locals are left to defend for themselves, because the company does not provide them with protective gear. The situation is difficult for communities living around and within the industrial plantations.”*

Another woman talked about the worrisome situation regarding access to water: “Obtaining drinking water in Yapokro is absolutely impossible. The situation we are living in has been going on for decades, and nobody does anything—despite the presence of the company, PalmCi. Now with Covid-19, I can say that the situation is even more disturbing, given that we drink the same water as the animals that roam everywhere looking for food. The worst part of all of this is the water that PalmCi provides us with once or twice a week, because it divides the village in order to distribute it. The water arrives in very dirty tanker trucks and is not suitable, as it makes our whole body itch after we bathe. That same tanker truck supplies water to the plantations. I can say then that the people of Yapokro were not safe before, and we are not safe now with Covid-19. It is discouraging to see women and children fetch water morning and afternoon. The attempts to get PalmCi to bring us water were unsuccessful; the village chief told me so. He made several complaints, but they were not successful, or sometimes led to promises that were never fulfilled. I always get the same answer: that it is the regional council that should take care of this and not PalmCi, which is just a company. When it rains, the whole village rejoices because the women go to collect rainwater that for domestic tasks and other uses. Daily life for villagers in Yapokro is alarming; they are simply looking for a solution by launching a call for help through my voice.”

Women involved in the Alliance have been focusing on the matter of abuse that women suffer, due to the existence of the plantations. In particular, they have focused on the violence faced by women who produce traditional palm oil and who are regularly harassed and intimidated by company guards.

Two women were recently arrested in Ivory Coast, allegedly for stealing palm fruits. They worked for the company, and were fired due to the Covid-19 situation. A few days after their dismissal, they were arrested. According to one of the women, a security agent from the company saw them, and “he grabbed me by the ponytail and dragged me a long way, mistreating me, and then cut a branch to hit me with.” She continued: “The strange thing is

that this security agent knows our husbands; he went to the houses to apologize to each of them for his behaviour, and apparently he wants this case not to come to light, he wants it to stay between them. I asked what he apologized for.” They were released, but as mothers of six and four children, respectively, they are now in a desperate situation. “This pandemic hurts us a lot. PalmCi is insensitive and does nothing at all, except for firing people unfairly. Covid-19 and PalmCi are a cancer to communities in the region.”

In another instance, two PalmCi agents recently attacked a woman collecting materials to make brooms inside another PalmCi plantation. Company agents take the view that the plantation is company property and that for any material taken from the plantations, people have to pay a fee at the checkpoint set up at the entrance of the plantations – or leave their material behind. Unsurprisingly, conflicts around these demands for payment at the checkpoints regularly occur.

In **Gabon**, a public-private partnership between agribusiness multinational, **Olam**, and the Gabonese government began setting up industrial plantations in 2012, on land received for free from the government. Of the plantations established so far, six blocks are oil palm plantations and one is a rubber plantation. With Olam’s occupation of community lands and forests, the conflict between people and animals has aggravated. Because forests and savannahs have been converted to industrial plantations, elephants now invade people’s farms.

In regards to how workers have been affected by Covid-19 measures the government has put in place, one Gabonese activist said, “There are employees who sometimes couldn’t go to work, as the number of people authorized to get on the vehicle was very limited. Therefore, those who were not able to get on the vehicle got lower wages. And now, the latest news from the provincial labor directorate is that around 1,000 employees—mainly agricultural workers—are going to lose their jobs. In other words, Olam is taking advantage of this crisis to get rid of those employees and hand them off to subcontractors. And unfortunately, the subcontractors treat them even worse. With Olam, the treatment already was not what it should be [...], and with the subcontractors it is even worse! It is really worrisome. Now, we know that because of the pandemic, the State made some decisions and took some measures to support companies that will have problems. But Olam is going beyond all of that. And as a result, jobs will be lost in order to benefit subcontractors, who do not treat the workers better.”

Before the pandemic, communities living around Olam’s oil palm plantations were already denouncing the company’s lack of respect for the promises and agreements it made to the communities, in terms of social projects. The Gabonese activist continued: “Unfortunately, there are communities that lack water. There are communities where Olam had built water wells. But unfortunately those wells do not work anymore, the pumps do not work. Some worked for a month or two, and then stopped. And people suffer from a lack of water, which is crucial—since we know that washing your hands with clean water is, of course, one of the measures to prevent Covid-19. As for the clinics, they were built without medications being available; therefore we have no medications. This means that if there is a positive case or someone gets sick, people will only have traditional treatments. And speaking of traditional treatments, since many communities lost their forested areas, they no longer have access to the forest. Well, things will be difficult. With no healthcare and no forests, how will they be treated? It will be very difficult for them.”

Two major corporate players operate in **Nigeria**, where communities are being evicted, harassed and arrested. Their rights are being severely undermined by the conversion of farmland and forests to oil palm plantations. **Wilmar**, one of the biggest plantation companies in the world, has more than 100,000 hectares of land in Cross River State; meanwhile **Socfin** operates in Edo State.

Socfin is a Luxembourg-based holding company owned by two rich European families: Hubert Fabri (Belgium) and Vincent Bolloré (France). Socfin controls a total of 400,000 hectares of land in 10 African countries. In Nigeria, the Socfin group owns **the Okomu Oil Palm Company (OOPC)**, controlling 33,000 hectares of land. (4)

On 20 May 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, Okumu Oil Palm Company agents burnt down villagers' homes in Okumu Kingdom. This is the fourth time that a village has been burnt down in connection with the company's expansion of plantations. This time, over 80 people ended up homeless and were forced to seek shelter in nearby communities and churches. This, in turn, exposed them to even greater health risks during a global pandemic. A villager said "Many times the company security would come and harass us and accuse us of stealing the company's palm fruits; other times Asemota, the Head Security Contractor, would come to the village to threaten us that he would deal with us before this came into a manifestation." A 16-year old villager said: "I just woke up this morning, then I went to the river to check my fishing hook. Before I knew what was happening, OOPC security and soldiers were coming. As they were coming, they were shooting so I ran into the bush. Then they burned down our houses all my school books, school uniform and other properties were burnt down. This is the only piece of clothing left on my body. So let people come and help us." Villagers cannot even go to the city to file complaints, due to the restrictions on movements as a result of the government's pandemic emergency measures. (5)

In **Ghana**, industrial oil palm plantations owned by **Socnaf** (another **Socfin**-owned company) affect nine communities. The company says it has acquired concession rights to 17,000 hectares, but communities argue that more land has been taken from them. One Ghanaian activist declared that "Over the past six years, Socfin has been employing many community members as casual workers. It made a system, where it hires them as casual workers for three months, then renews them for three more months, and then three more months; it has been like this for the past six years. In Ghana, if a company hires someone for more than three months, that person becomes a worker and is no longer a casual worker. And now, Covid-19 comes up. Because it has to follow social distancing, Socfin has actually released, if not sacked, all those casual workers without any prior notice, without any payments. I have witnessed this personally. I was there." At the same time, the same activist condemns the use of violence and intimidation tactics used by the company's security guards. He said, "one young man from Adanse community, one of the most affected communities due to the plantations, went fishing beyond the company concession. He saw his motorbike seized and broken by security guards. The issue is at the local court at the moment."

In **Cameroon**, **Socapalm** (another **Socfin**-owned company) is one of the main oil palm plantation companies in the country. The company's concessions occupy a total of 50,000 hectares. Villages are completely surrounded by Socapalm plantations, and villagers have no access to land to cultivate food. The company's plantations even invade cemeteries. Because of the size of the trenches that the company dug around its plantations, many

villagers have to walk more than seven kilometres to get to a field where they can cultivate food. If anyone picks up a palm fruit fallen from the Socapalm truck, they risk being arrested.

Denouncing the violence against women who live around Socapalm's plantations has been an important issue for the women involved in the Informal Alliance in Cameroon. They have documented several cases, and called on Socfin's offices in Cameroon and Switzerland to act and ensure that women are no longer exposed to sexual violence in or around the company's plantations.

In this period of Covid-19, many workers have been sent home on unpaid leave without compensation, especially those who are temporarily employed. Those who haven't been let go by the company are transported in packed personnel transport vehicles, without any personal protection. In some countries, workers commute every day between big cities, like Douala in Cameroon, and the plantations. This poses risks for workers, their families and also the villagers. (6)

Workers and communities affected by Socfin plantations in Nigeria, Cameroon and Ghana struggle to survive even under 'normal' conditions. They witness the company violating their rights and denying their access to land that they depend on for their livelihood. Under conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has become outright unbearable for many. Meanwhile, in 2019 alone, Socfin's major shareholders and directors helped themselves to 30 million euros in dividends out of a net profit of 47 million euros. (7)

In the **DR of Congo**, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, disputed concession rights to more than 100,000 hectares of land held by the Congolese company, **Plantations et Huileries du Congo (PHC)**, are being handed over to an opaque company registered in the tax haven of Mauritius. Communities in the DR Congo insist that the current owner of PHC—Canadian company **Feronia Inc**—and its colonial-era predecessors, Unilever and Levers Brothers, acquired the concession rights illegally. They say the communities never consented to the theft of their palm groves by industrial oil palm plantation companies. On top of this, workers at the company's plantations have toiled under atrocious conditions and for wages below the minimum wage. Just a few months ago, several of the houses that the company provides to workers collapsed at one of the three plantation sites, in Boteka. Conflicts have been numerous and deadly; the latest victim was a community activist killed by a company security guard in 2019.

One activist from DR Congo said that the company is cashing in on the Covid-19 pandemic by “retiring many plantation workers, without giving them a final settlement.” While the company has been paying out millions in salaries to its Europe- and Kinshasa-based management teams, it claims it is unable to make these final salary payments to retiring workers, because no funds were set aside.

Communities in the Basoko area at the Lokutu plantation site made an important step in recovering their ancestral land in early 2020, when they successfully started to take back control over parts of their territory. When, under the guise of Covid-19 pandemic measures, the company started again delaying payments of wages and restricting availability of palm oil for villages surrounded by the plantations, communities started to take palm oil production into their own hands. They introduced traditional and artisanal palm oil harvesting and production systems. Working conditions are now much better in these areas than when they

were managed by Feronia. Moreover, since the company's costly offices in Kinshasa and London are not involved, all the value created by this work stays in the communities. A community manager of the operation stated: "With access to these lands, we are able to resume our palm oil production, which was violently interrupted by colonisation. Since the beginning of the week, I alone have sold 15 drums of oil, which gives me 300 thousand Congolese Francs (US\$150) in profit. That's seven times what you could earn working extremely hard for the company for a whole month." (8)

- (1) GRAIN, Communities in Africa fight back against the land grab for palm oil, 2019, <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6324-communities-in-africa-fight-back-against-the-land-grab-for-palm-oil>
- (2) The Alliance, WRM and GRAIN, Promise, Divide, Intimidate and Coerce: 12 Tactics Palm Oil companies Use to Grab Community Land, 2019, <https://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/booklet-12-tactics-palm-oil-companies-use-to-grab-community-land/>
- (3) The Alliance, Breaking the Silence: Harassment, sexual violence and abuse against women in and around oil palm and rubber plantations, 2019, <https://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/breaking-the-silence-harassment-sexual-violence-and-abuse-against-women-in-and-around-industrial-oil-palm-and-rubber-plantations/>
- (4) GRAIN, Unravelling the Socfin/Bolloré plantations, thanks to Profundo, April 2020, <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6443-unravelling-the-socfin-bollore-plantations-thanks-to-profundo>
- (5) Farmlandgrab, Another terror attack on local communities by Okomu Oil Palm Plantation Plc, June 2020, <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/29694-another-terror-attack-on-local-communities-by-okomu-oil-palm-plantation-plc>
- (6) Farmlandgrab, We demand justice and safety for workers on Socfin's rubber/oil palm plantations during the Covid-19 pandemic, April 2020, <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/29602>
- (7) GRAIN, "Business as usual" at Socfin and Bolloré..., May 2020, <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6468-business-as-usual-at-socfin-and-bollore>
- (8) WRM, DR Congo: Communities take back control over land stolen from them and urge the oil palm company Feronia to confirm their announcement to "abandon" the land, June 2020, <https://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/dr-congo-communities-take-back-control-over-land-stolen-from-them-and-urge-the-oil-palm-company-feronia-to-confirm-their-announcement-to-abandon-the-land/>

Indonesia: How the Pandemic Strengthens Immunity for Mining Corporate-Oligarchy and Paves the Way to a New Dictatorship



Women and student protest against nickel mining company PT Gema Kreasi Perdana, Harita Group. Ph: JATAM

As each person struggles to take care of his or her own health, many businesses are taking advantage of the government's measures taken supposedly to confront the Covid-19 outbreak, in particular, mining companies.

In Indonesia, as of 2018, there are 8.588 mining permits. The six biggest provinces for these mining activities are South and East Kalimantan and South Sumatera -dominated by coalmine permits-, and South and Central Sulawesi and Bangka Belitung -dominated by other minerals extraction such as tin, cobalt and nickel-. Mining has become one of the main causes of deforestation in the country, and it is entering into more and more territories, including so-called Protected Areas. Mining expansion is also related to the increasing demands worldwide for a transition to a "clean" and "green" economy, including industrial zones for battery production and other related technology. Mining is also a source of constant and often violent social conflicts and devastation.

For mining tycoons in Indonesia, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided ample opportunity to make profits and to push for destructive regulation for their own benefit. These represent bigger risks for the defenders of the Earth—who were already constantly dealing with threats —, through more forceful tactics that escape the (public) eyes.

First, mining companies expose workers and communities deliberately to the dangers of the pandemic by continuing business operations under the label of "essential business".

The communities who live around and/or near the mines are restless. PT. Dairi Prima Mineral (PT. DPM) in Dairi, North Sumatra, continues to work, bringing workers from outside the

region, provoking anxiety in communities living nearby. Likewise, in Banyuwangi, East Java, despite persistent protests from communities, the gold mining operation of PT. Bumi Suksesindo (PT. BSI) is still active. As a matter of fact, after having mined and destroyed Mount Tumpang Pitu, PT. BSI is now targeting the (still) preserved Mount Salakan.

Similarly, the operations of the industrial zone for battery production in Morowali, Central Sulawesi, and the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) and Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP) in Halmahera, North Maluku, continues despite controversies. The Coordinating Minister for Maritime and Investment, Luhut Binsar Panjaitan, keeps facilitating the entry of workers from China to enter and work in Indonesia.

But not only nearby residents and communities are affected, the working class as a whole has also become a victim of this policy. Infected workers have been found in, for example, the Bangka ships of PT Timah's tin extraction activities in Bangka Belitung Province; the mining complex of giant coal company Kaltim Prima Coal (PT. KPC); the Indo Muro Kencana large-scale gold mining operation in East Kutai, Central Kalimantan; and in the "mining province" of North Maluku, one of the centres of nickel mining and where one of the main industrial complexes of electric vehicles' batteries in Indonesia is located. (1)

In Mimika, Papua, the situation of the PT Freeport Indonesia (FI)'s gold and copper mining workers is even more worrisome. On record, as much as 150 positive cases of Covid-19 (2) have been identified, including workers' families. (3)

The regional government through the Mimika Regent, the Chemical and Energy Mining Workers Union (SP-KEP) and the All Indonesia Workers Union (SPSI), demanded from the beginning of the outbreak that mining operations must be suspended. They argue that forcing workers to stay in the mining area under unhealthy working conditions is a type of slavery and an act of blatant indifference towards workers' life and safety.

In 2018, PT FI recorded US\$ 1.28 billion (Rp 18 trillion) in profits alone. Thirteen PT FI's commissioners and directors have total salaries of US\$ 4.9 million (Rp 70 billion). Meanwhile, the total budget of the Tangerang Regency government in Java for handling the Covid-19 pandemic is the same amount: US\$ 4.9 million (Rp 70 billion).

The clause 113 of the Coal Mining and Mineral Law (Minerba Law), which regulates the possibility of temporarily stopping operations due to emergencies, including epidemic emergencies, has until now not been applied to protect communities and mining workers.

Land, Water, Air, Forests and Health are essential. Mining is not.

Second, mining companies continue to inflict organized violence upon communities and defenders of the Earth, who are at the front of the resistance despite the pandemic.

Every year, the curve of violence against communities and Earth defenders in Indonesia continues to increase. According to data recorded by the Indonesian Mining Advocacy Network (JATAM), there were 71 mining conflicts from 2014 to 2019, and 40 cases of criminalization of citizens and environmental defenders, which included 210 people being criminalized. (4)

Death, assault, criminalization, intimidation and terror are part of the organized violence that occurs in the mining sector and are carried out by a variety of players, including official security forces, company officials or corporate paid actors, such as thugs.

This violence continues during the lockdown in Indonesia, with a number of recorded incidents. In Banyuwangi, East Java, community protesters against PT BSI, from Mount Tumpang Pitu to Mount Salakan, set up protest tents since the end of 2019 until the Covid-19 pandemic took place. They suffered two consecutive physical attacks to disperse their tents by corporate mercenaries, police, and the Indonesian National Army, using the pandemic emergency measures as an excuse. This happened while mining operations were still taking place without any complication.

In Kendeng's karst mountains, in Pati and Rembang Regencies, Central Java, Kendeng women organizing peaceful protests against eleven illegal limestone mining operations were intimidated by men who work for the mine. It is known that the operations of these mines are connected to the controversial cement supply chain, namely PT Semen Indonesia (PT SI). PT SI's operations are located in the groundwater basin and karst ecosystems, threatening agricultural water and food for local residents.

The same thing happened in Samboja, Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan. Angry residents burnt coal-mining excavators to stop operations. (5) This was done because the machines reached the edge of the Samboja Reservoir, which is the main source of agricultural irrigation for the residents of Kutai Kartanegara. Residents were intimidated by thugs who were suspected of being backed and protected by police.

Ironically, these things happened exactly when president Jokowi made an appeal to the mass media requesting that people ensure their respective food security in various regions, in order to anticipate food deficits due to weather changes and the pandemic. What a pseudo and contradictory appeal.

This organized violence also affects the working class. A number of workers who protested against the IWIP industrial complex in Halmahera, during the International Workers' Day celebration (May 1, 2020) were arrested. Those arrests ignited a wave of solidarity around the country until today. (6)

A series of harmful and threatening tactics have emerged in the context of this "civil emergency" around the Covid-19 pandemic. Kapolri (head of national police chiefs) issued a Telegram Letter enforcing cyber and physical security, including the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of police and army personnel for the "new-normal." This represents enormous threats to freedom, civil democracy and even environmental struggles.

The perpetuation of an emergency can pave the way to a dictatorship that will expand organized violence against society.

Third, mining companies shamelessly frame themselves as heroes during the pandemic. Donations, medical logistics and medical devices attempt to cover up their dirty mining practices.

At the end of March 2020, the Indonesian Coal Mining Association (APBI) donated Rp 540 billion (over US\$38 million) - which they collected from coal mining companies within the APBI, such as Adaro and corporate conglomerate Bakrie Group (PT Kaltim Prima Coal & PT Arutmin Indonesia). At the same time however, these same coal companies have a record of abandoning the most poisonous mining pits, appearing as epicentres of conflicts with nearby residents and indigenous peoples, and even having various money and tax flow scandals.

Almost all well-known mining companies run corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and have given assistance and money to help residents during the pandemic, including personal protective equipment, basic food, hand washing installations, swab test kits, among others. (7)

Yet, some of these same mining and electric batteries companies, namely PT Huayue Cobalt Co. Ltd, PT HPAL, PT Tsing Shan and Brunp Recycling Technology, are since before the pandemic, submitting a permit process for the disposal of tailings or mining waste into deep sea waters. These companies plan to dispose their mining waste in Obi Island waters, North Maluku Province, and Morowali waters, Central Sulawesi Province. (8) This will sacrifice the livelihoods of coastal residents, fishermen and indigenous peoples on small islands, as well as the diverse coral triangle area.

The Maritime Coordinating Ministry, which supervises the planning of this activity, presented these mining industries as heroes that stood up to help Indonesia in this difficult time of the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to promote the mining industry.

These are political marketing strategies.

Fourth, during the pandemic, mining companies have received benefits that ensure their safety and comfort, remove public control and facilitate mining investment licensing.

Saving the mining companies began with extending incentives through the Minister of Finance Regulation (PMK) No. 23/2020 Tax Incentive for Tax Payers Affected By Coronavirus Outbreak, in March 2020, which includes the various commodities along the mining production chain. The regulation was then expanded from eleven sectors to nineteen sectors through PMK No. 44/2020, in April 2020.

The expansion of incentives provided by Sri Mulyani, the Minister of Finance, included benefits regarding export and import taxes, facilities for import-export destinations (KITE) to incentives for corporate tax instalments. Through these incentives, as much as Rp 35 trillion (near US\$2.5 billion) (9) of public money is being channelled to mining companies.

Using the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse, from February to March 2020, several institutions, such as the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KADIN), Coal Mining Associations as ICMA and APBI as well as the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM), attempted to revoke the obligation to use national vessels for coal exports in order to encourage exports. Even though the obligation is regulated by the Ministry of Trade (Permendag) No. 82/2017, it is in effect since May 1, 2020. (10)

Then, from March to April 2020, the Indonesian Nickel Mining Association (APNI) also urged the government to facilitate low-grade nickel exports, even though it had been banned since January 2020 because nickel exports were obliged to follow the downstream mining industry regulation by processing the mineral domestically. (11)

By the end of May 2020, the Indonesian Coal Mining Association (APBI)'s Executive Director, Hendra Sinadia, even dared to submit a request for relaxing coal royalty payments to the government, on the grounds that the pandemic had made commodity prices depressed due to market oversupply. APBI asked the government to change its regulations for the safety of coal entrepreneurs. (12)

On top of this, this de-regulation for the mining and coal industry, re-packaged with the name of the Draft Employment Bill (Ciptaker Bill) and the Revision of the Mineral and Coal Mining Act (Minerba Law), is the most deranged opportunism. Both benefit the mining and lethal coal energy industries with several incentives. The discussion has sparked protests, which despite the pandemic, continue.

The revised Minerba Law also abolishes article 165 regarding criminal acts and corruption sanctions of officials. They propose a definition of a legal mining territory that allows the size of the mining area to be unlimited, with automatic extension - without any auction or possibility to reduce the area of a giant coal company. The automatic extension refers to several coal companies whose permits will expire soon, such as PT Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC), Arutmin, Adaro, Kideco Jaya Agung, Berau Coal and Multi Harapan Utama (MHU). The de-regulation of the mining industry is being discussed as policies that ensure the safety and comfort of the industry, without any consideration for the safety and rights of people and/or nature.

These four trends and patterns show how the mining industry continues to benefit from the pandemic while destroying ecological social immunity throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

Oligarchy Immunity and New Dictatorship

Behind this mining business is the control and accumulation of profits that will concentrate more wealth and power for the mining oligarchs. It is their immunity that is increasingly thickened.

Behind a row of coal mining giant companies that benefited from the Mineral and Coal Act (Minerba Law), such as PT Adaro Indonesia, are the names of the Thohir, Garibaldi or Boy Thohir families, which control the companies. Meanwhile, Erick Thohir became Minister of State-owned Enterprises. The silence of Minister Erick Thohir regarding the automatic extension of companies' concessions, which is connected to his family's business, has left an alleged conflict of interest that involve the last election rounds in the country. Likewise, PT Arutmin and PT Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC) got new fresh blood and immunity through the revised Minerba Law. And like this, the list of revolved doors and corruption goes on.

Public money is not been used to strengthen ecological and social immunity at various mining sites, but on the contrary, to strengthen corporate-oligarchy's immunity by giving subsidies, incentives and bailouts to mining companies. In the end, it is the social and

ecological immunity that will decline very much, and conversely, the immunity of corporate oligarchies that will increase rapidly. **This immunity includes mobilizing organized violence in the name of combating the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the “new normal” discourse.**

If the situation gets to that point, we should all be wary of the corporate-oligarchs hijacking democracy by perpetuating emergencies. Such a situation will provide a way for a new dictatorship to install itself— **a dictatorship under the flag of mining capitalism.**

*Merah Johansyah Ismail,
Coordinator of the Indonesia Mining Advocacy Network (Jaringan Advokasi Tambang - JATAM)*

This article was written in commemoration to the Anti-Mining Day (Hari Anti-Tambang) May 29, 2020, and the Environmental Day, June 5, 2020.

- (1) Babelpos, Satu Warga Desa Payung Positif Covid-19, Klaster Kapal Keruk PT Timah, Juni 2020, <https://babelpos.co/2020/06/02/2136/> ; Akurasi, Duduk Perkara Karyawan KPC Positif Corona Sepulang dari India, Keluarga Masuk Pemantauan, April 2020, <https://www.akurasi.id/duduk-perkara-karyawan-kpc-positif-corona-sepulang-dari-india-keluarga-masuk-pemantauan/> ; Kalimantan, 7 Pekerja Tambang di Kalimantan Timur positif Covid-19, Juni, 2020, <https://kalimantan.bisnis.com/read/20200609/407/1250032/7-pekerja-tambang-di-kalimantan-timur-positif-covid-19> ; ProSampit, Empat Karyawan PT IMK Positif Covid-19, Mei 2020, <https://sampit.prokal.co/read/news/28319-empat-karyawan-pt-imk-positif-covid-19.html> ; MalutPost, 23 Karyawan Tambang di Malut Positif Corona, June 2020, <https://malutpost.id/read/23-karyawan-tambang-di-malut-positif-corona>
- (2) The Jakarta Post, Freeport cuts workforce at Grasberg mine as coronavirus cases in area rise, May 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/05/18/freeport-cuts-workforce-at-grasberg-mine-as-coronavirus-cases-in-area-rise.html>
- (3) Detik News, 124 Pekerja Freeport di Papua Positif Corona, 2 Orang Meninggal, Mei 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5031640/124-pekerja-freeport-di-papua-positif-corona-2-orang-meninggal>
- (4) Tirto, Selama Periode Awal Jokowi Ada 71 Konflik Tambang, kata Jatam, Januari 2020, <https://tirto.id/selama-periode-awal-jokowi-ada-71-konflik-tambang-kata-jatam-eqW9>
- (5) Kaltimkece, Gali Perkara di Tengah Corona, Warga Bakar Alat Berat, Penambang Balik Mengancam, April 2020, <https://kaltimkece.id/warta/lingkungan/gali-perkara-di-tengah-corona-warga-bakar-alat-berat-penambang-balik-mengancam>
- (6) SPNews, Buruh Kritis Terhadap Perusahaan Tambang Ditangkap Polisi, Mei 2020, <https://spn.or.id/buruh-kritis-terhadap-perusahaan-tambang-ditangkap-polisi/>
- (7) TribunKaltim, Indo Tambangraya Megah dan Semua Anak Usaha Spontan Meringankan Beban Masyarakat Akibat Covid-19, Mei 2020, <https://kaltim.tribunnews.com/2020/05/09/indo-tambangraya-megah-dan-semua-anak-usaha-spontan-meringankan-beban-masyarakat-akibat-covid-19> ; Republika Pengusaha China Sumbang Indonesia Alkes Tangani Covid-19, Mar 2020, <https://republika.co.id/berita/q7t6wq320/pengusaha-china-sumbang-indonesia-alkes-tangani-covid19>
- (8) Mongabay, Jatam dan Kiara: Pemerintah, Jangan Izinkan Perusahaan Buang Tailing ke Laut, Mar 2020, <https://www.mongabay.co.id/2020/03/12/jatam-dan-kiara-pemerintah-jangan-izinkan-perusahaan-buang-tailing-ke-laut/>
- (9) OkeFinance, Revisi PMK Nomor 23, Sri Mulyani Beri Insentif Rp35 Triliun untuk 18 sektor Industri, April 2020, <https://economy.okezone.com/read/2020/04/22/20/2203116/revisi-pmk-nomor-23-sri-mulyani-beri-insentif-rp35-triliun-untuk-18-sektor-industri>
- (10) Investor Daly, APBI Minta Pemerintah Evaluasi Kebijakan Kapal Nasional, Mei 2020, <https://investor.id/business/apbi-minta-pemerintah-evaluasi-kebijakan-kapal-nasional>
- (11) AP3I, Ada Corona, Penambang Nikel Minta Keran Ekspor Kembali Dibuka, April 2020, <https://www.ap3i.or.id/News/News-Update/Ada-Corona-Penambang-Nikel-Minta-Keran-Ekspor-Kembali-Dibuka.html>
- (12) Ekonomi, Pengusaha Batu Bara Minta Relaksasi Pembayaran Royalti, Mei 2020, <https://ekonomi.bisnis.com/read/20200528/44/1246004/pengusaha-batu-bara-minta-relaksasi-pembayaran-royalti>

Agro-imperialism in the time of Covid-19



Ph: Grain

Nestlé, the world's largest food company, is known for scandal. It [earned the nickname "babykiller"](#) in the 1970s for causing infant illness and death in low-income communities by promoting bottle feeding of its infant formula and discouraging breast feeding. In recent years, [similar charges](#) have been made against the company for contributing to soaring rates of obesity and diabetes in poor communities by targeting them for sales of ultra-processed junk foods. But there's another scandal of equally grim proportions that is contained within the company's accounting sheets.

On April 23, 2020, with the world in the grips of the Covid-19 pandemic and the FAO warning of a looming global food crisis, Nestlé's shareholders and executives [awarded themselves](#) a record dividend payout of US\$8 billion. In a time of a global health and food crisis, this handout is worth more than the entire [annual budget](#) for the UN's World Food Programme and would be enough to cover the average annual expenditures on health care for more than 100 million people in Africa.

Nestlé's massive 2020 dividend payment was, in fact, just a fraction higher than the previous year's. Such large payouts for shareholders and executives is standard practice for the company-- as it is for all the big transnational food and agribusiness companies, even at times of global health catastrophes. Other notable shareholder dividends, announced in April this year, include a US\$2.8 billion payout by the world's largest seed and agrochemical company Bayer AG, a US\$600 million payout by the world's largest poultry producer Tyson and a US\$500 million payout by the world's largest pork company, the WH Group. Cargill, the world's largest agribusiness company, is on track to top last year's record payout of US\$640 million, which it makes to just a small number of Cargill family members. Increased e-commerce, particularly of food items, during the Covid-19 crisis increased the net worth of Jeff Bezos, the founder of e-commerce giant Amazon, by a shocking [US\\$24 billion](#). It is even a rich time for the shareholders of smaller players in the industry, like the oil palm and rubber plantation company SOCFIN. The two French and Belgian families that essentially own the company, [received EUR20 million](#) (around US\$22.5 million) in dividends and remunerations from SOCFIN's group operations while communities where it operates in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon cannot access clean or safe water.

All this greed at the top leaves devastation and little to trickle down to the bottom, where its

consequences are deadly.

A powerful industry in the midst of a “perfect storm”

The labourers in the corporate food system, those who are quite literally dying on the frontlines to sustain the lifestyles of shareholders and executives, are not faring well. The supply chains of the big food companies, which have always been dangerous places for workers, have now become hotspots for Covid-19 infections and transmission. Across the world, there have been deadly outbreaks in meat plants, port facilities, [warehouses](#), [fish canneries](#), [oil palm plantations](#), fruit farms, [supermarkets](#) and all other points along the chains that these companies command-- with the exception of their office towers, of course.

The big meat companies have perhaps been the worst offenders. With the Covid-19 pandemic in full bloom, they [aggressively sped up](#) their assembly lines to ramp up exports to China, where meat prices are unusually high. This decision was taken in full knowledge that these increases in processing made social distancing impossible and put their workers and the surrounding communities at risk of mass virus outbreaks. By the end of May, the results in the biggest meat exporting nations were horrific: hundreds of migrant meat plant workers sick with Covid-19 in [Germany](#) and [Spain](#), thousands of cases of workers ill with Covid-19 in Brazil's meat packing industry, and over [20,000 workers infected](#) with Covid-19 in US meat packing plants, with at least 70 deaths. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of animals are being culled, under [atrocious conditions](#) because these massive plants have had to shut production down, and the small abattoirs that could have taken in the livestock, have long since been forced out of business.

The carnage in Latin America, the new epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic, has been particularly severe. With the global economy at a near standstill, agribusiness in the region has continued functioning with total impunity, deepening its impact and harm on communities and ecosystems. In almost all the countries in the region, agro-industrial activities have been [exempted from quarantine](#), as they are considered “essential”, even though their focus is on exports, not on providing food to local people.

For example, Ecuador's government [issued a state of emergency decree](#) paralysing the country, but ensuring that “all export chains, agricultural industry, livestock [industry] ... will continue to function.” As a result, workers in the banana and palm plantations, seafood factories, flower farms, and many more, were forced to continue working as if the country was not under a health emergency, thereby exposing themselves to the risk of contracting Covid-19.

Similarly, the Bolsonaro government in Brazil [declared](#) that the production, transport and general logistics of export food chains were essential activities that must continue functioning without restrictions. In this context, exports of meat, soybeans and other commodities are surging - as are the numbers of people exposed to Covid-19 along the export chains. In the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, a meat export hub, [more than a quarter of the confirmed novel coronavirus cases](#) in May were among meat plant workers. Labour prosecutors are now fighting to [close infested plants](#) and force companies to implement even basic measures to [protect and care](#) for their workers during the pandemic.

Brazil's soybean exports, [which are up 38 percent](#) from last year, are another potential

hotspot for Covid-19, especially at the ports where trucks and workers are constantly circulating. When the local government of the port town of Canarana in Mato Grosso tried to take action by [issuing a decree](#) to pause the export of soybeans and other grains in the absence of proper health and safety conditions, the agribusiness giants Louis Dreyfus and Cargill intervened and were able to reverse the decree within a few days. Canarana is now, in early June, [seeing a surge](#) in Covid-19 infections.

All this export frenzy has a tremendous impact on the ground. According to *Deter*, the real-time detection system of the Brazilian national space research institute, deforestation of the Amazon in Brazil has increased by more than 50 percent in these first three months of 2020 – at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, in comparison to the previous year's first quarter. Taking advantage of the pandemic smoke screen, with fewer inspection agents able to carry out inspection, [agribusiness and mining operations are advancing on protected areas and indigenous territories](#), increasing the contagion of Covid-19 in indigenous populations. Many observers fear a genocide as a result of these reckless advances of agribusiness and mining operations during the pandemic.

Amidst the national quarantine in Argentina, soybean exports and forest clearings have not ceased either. In one of the most preserved forests in the entire *Gran Chaco* ecosystem, [an area of 8,000 hectares is being prospected for clearing](#). Furthermore, based on monitoring with satellite imagery, Greenpeace denounced that almost [10,000 hectares were cleared in the North of the country](#) since the lockdown began.

Such brazen corporate profiteering is creating a legitimacy crisis for the corporate food system. Although the lockdowns make it difficult to measure, the [ground appears to be shifting](#): we see workers in the food industry speaking out, organising and getting more support and solidarity from others; we see increasing interest among consumers in healthy, local foods and the well-being of food producers and farmers; and there's been an undeniable boom in community-oriented efforts to get food to where it's needed through solidarity, mutual aid, volunteer work and cooperatives. There's even been some victories at the policy level, such as the German government's [recent decision](#) to ban sub-contracted labour in meat plants and another to prevent companies taking public aid from [paying out dividends](#).

But this is a powerful industry, with ample amounts of cash and political connections at its disposal, and there is no doubt that it will do everything it can to use this moment of confusion and lockdowns to advance its interests. We have already seen this with the executive order that US President Trump issued at the behest of JBS, Tyson, Cargill and other meat corporations to keep their Covid-infested plants running. We have also seen it in Brazil where the Bolsonaro government [approved a record 96 new pesticides](#) in the first months of 2020, more than all the approvals for 2019. The same government deliberately used the cover of the pandemic to try and [pass a law](#) that would legalise land grabs and deforestation covering 80 million hectares in the Amazon and Cerrado regions. The pandemic has also been used as an opportunity to [rapidly expand e-commerce in food retail](#) and push ahead with Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in [Ethiopia](#) and in [Bolivia](#), where the de-facto government claimed that the Covid-19 health emergency made GM seeds a necessity for the country.

Agribusiness as big winner from new wave of structural adjustment

Worse is yet to come. Many governments are employing global consulting firms, like [McKinsey](#), to shape their plans to open their economies back up. These secretive firms which are deeply connected to the [world's largest corporations](#), including those from the food and agribusiness sector, will no doubt influence who emerges as winners and losers from the pandemic responses-- workers or bosses, farmers' markets or [e-commerce giants](#), fisherfolk or the trawling industry.

We are also seeing the IMF and World Bank use their Covid-19 emergency funds to push countries into implementing agribusiness-friendly reforms. In the [Ukraine](#), for example, a law privatising farmland was implemented despite the opposition of a majority of Ukrainians. In the coming months, such pressures will escalate. [Dozens of countries](#) are heading for defaults, and those debts will have to be negotiated not only with the IMF and bilateral lenders, but also with private creditors who have [already indicated](#) that they are not interested in even delaying debt and interest payments during this health crisis. A new wave of structural adjustment is on the way that will focus heavily on increasing foreign agribusiness investment and exports of agricultural commodities to pay off the vultures.

This time, however, governments are going to find it incredibly difficult to impose a new round of agro-imperialism on populations that have already had more than enough of it, and that are increasingly hungering for the alternatives that social movements have been advancing for decades.

GRAIN, www.grain.org

Brazil: Against Covid-19, Feminist Economics in the Countryside and the City



Ph: SOF

The Covid-19 crisis is 'the straw that broke the camel's back' for the gears of capital, which were already turning with great difficulty. What is essentially a health crisis has become a generalized crisis in Brazil. This is not surprising; we would not expect anything else from a society based on an economy that is constantly at war with life.

The neoliberal system seems to be incapable of handling the crisis, but it is trying to stay afloat through false solutions. These solutions are based on the expansion of the frontiers of exploitation, the precariousness of people's work, and the exploitation and monetization of nature. By contrast, the initiatives of movements and collectives based on feminist economics have gained strength.

Feminist economics offers a critical analysis of the current ways in which the economy is organized—mainly in capitalist, patriarchal and colonialist terms—as well as the theories that support the policies to implement it. On the other hand, it highlights the body as territory, where nature and culture converge. The body resists time as defined by the market. It is necessary to recover the memory that marks bodies, individually and collectively, and to listen to their stories. It is necessary to learn to listen to the body again. Recovering the rhythms of life has to do with reconnecting with the processes of our body, without intervention from the capitalist market. Feminist economics leads us to reflect on updating control mechanisms, while continuing to affirm the capacity for resistance and reconstruction of bodies in movement.

The experience of the Barro do Turvo Women Farmers Agroecological Network (Rede Agroecológica de Mulheres Agricultoras da Barra do Turvo – RAMA), from Vale do Ribeira, São Paulo, Brazil, shows how organization based on principles of solidarity and respect for community logic is quite capable of dealing with this crisis. The women in this network are broadening access to healthy food, ensuring the maintenance of diverse ecosystems, and strengthened by these, they renegotiate the domestic division of labor and fight against gender violence.

Many women in RAMA come from territories where conservation units have been assigned over their communities, whether they be *quilombolas* or family farming communities (1). They have preserved biodiversity and guaranteed food sovereignty in their communities, based on their ways of life. This has come at the cost of great struggle, and despite constant threats they receive from government agencies—which are trying to install a policy of conservation without people. The *Conexão Mata Atlântica* project (Atlantic Forest Connection) is an example of this kind of policy. It started in 2019, and seeks to increase carbon stocks in communities and extend conservation units—in other words, to expand control and invasion onto community territories, and intensify processes of monetization of nature.

In the video, "[The Feminist Economy: Learning with Women Farmers](#)" (available in four languages), we interviewed Nilce de Pontes, farmer and leader of the National Joint Committee of Quilombola Rural Black Communities (*Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas*, CONAQ) (2). She correlates traditional ways of life with food sovereignty, a key pillar in an economy organized to support life. "As a *quilombola* person, I believe that food security and food sovereignty largely come from our way of life, from how we relate to the earth—and from how we envision territorial security and food health as the same project. For us—as *quilombola* women and as black women—this is a complex relationship. It is based on our experience, on how we interact, and on how we produce healthy and sufficient food that ensures food sovereignty."

Valuing subsistence agriculture—performed by women in agroecological gardens that value diversity—is more important than ever. As the price of natural foods on the market increases, these women continue to guarantee sustenance for their families and communities through

healthy foods; and they do so autonomously (3). In addition to guaranteeing food for their communities, the women's work also supplies food for multiple families in the metropolitan area of São Paulo, via groups that promote responsible consumption.

This rural-urban alliance allows people in cities to deal with the pandemic in a different way. Consumers in the groups have access to a wide variety of agroecological foods for the same price that they paid before the health crisis. The collective commitment to maintaining a fair price enables workers to take care of their health and immune systems, through consumption of more natural agroecological foods. The movements and collectives have also acquired agroecological products from the women to donate to the people who are currently most vulnerable. These solidarity-based initiatives are especially important, as they deliver quality food to those who never would be able to access them on the capitalist market. Today, most people in cities use the little money they have to buy basic food basket products, which do not include natural foods, and are made up of nutritionally poor, industrial agricultural products. The increase in food prices in Brazil means that many families are not even able to buy conventionally-produced natural products, which contain pesticides.

For some time now, these initiatives have been bearing fruit in terms of greater autonomy and well-being. The Covid-19 pandemic was like a test for the women to prove their strength and ability to withstand such a deep crisis. It is no coincidence that this period—in which the capitalist economy is going through a major crisis—is turning out to be a time of consolidation and even expansion of the economy oriented toward sustainability of human life (4).

In her article, “Life in war: Coronavirus and the ecological and social crisis,” (5) feminist Yayo Herrero points to the need to see this crisis as an opportunity to imagine the future: “We need to build horizons of desire that are coherent with the material conditions that enable them. If we do not do it well, firmly planted in equality and rights, others will do it—riding on the horse of exploitation, inequality, racism and the misogynist retreat.”

Avoiding the pitfalls of the market and false solutions, these women are showing us a possible horizon—in terms of the organization of collective life. It is possible, as it truly seems capable of facing the greatest challenges that lie ahead: overcoming inequality, oppression and the ecological crisis.

Siempreviva Feminist Organization (Sempreviva Organização Feminista - SOF), Brazil,
<https://www.sof.org.br/>

(1) *Quilombola* communities are those made up of descendants of enslaved black peoples who, during the process of resistance against slavery in Brazil, occupied communal territories known today as *quilombos*.

(2) Link to the video in Spanish: https://youtu.be/z_d6l59y_DM. More information here: <https://www.sof.org.br/sof-lanca-novo-video-economia-feminista-aprendendo-com-as-agricultoras/>, or translated to English here: https://peoples-sovereignty-lab.org/en/common_library/i68/p1/Econom%C3%ADa-feminista:-aprendiendo-con-las-agricultoras.html

(3) See the article “Alimentación en tiempos de coronavirus,” by Glaucia Marques, in the column *Sempreviva de Brasil de Fato*: <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/05/19/alimentacao-em-tempos-de-coronavirus>.

(4) According to feminist economist, Cristina Carrasco, sustainability of life is “A concept that allows us to account for the deep relationship between the economic and the social; it sees the economy from a different perspective, considering the close interrelations among various dimensions of dependency,

and ultimately, makes the living conditions of people—women and men—a priority.” Article available at: <http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/dam/jcr:7c25f802-781e-4810-9b52-b63f2601fb28/re200908-pdf.pdf>

(5) This text was originally published with the title “En guerra con la vida,” for the magazine, *Contexto y Acción*, and was recently translated into Portuguese for the SOF publication, “Economia feminista e ecológica: resistências e retomadas de corpos e territórios,” available online at the following link: <https://www.sof.org.br/economia-feminista-e-ecologica-resistencias-e-retomadas-de-corpos-e-territorios/>.

Original article in Spanish available at: <https://ctxt.es/es/20200302/Politica/31220/coronavirus-decrecimiento-crisis-ecologica-agroecologia-yayo-herrero.htm>.

The Pandemic in Forests in India: Escalated Attacks on Communities



EN: Bewar cultivator. Ph: Ossi Kakko

Around mid-May 2020, the Finance Minister of India announced that Rs. 6000 crores (around US1 billion dollars) would be allotted under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF), better-known as [CAMPA \(Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority\)](#), as part of the government’s much-awaited Covid-19 relief package. It is important to point out that since 2014, when it came to power, this government has made the overwhelming majority of India’s citizens, particularly the *adivasis* (indigenous peoples), *dalits* (caste-oppressed), religious minorities, peasants, workers and the urban poor, only more vulnerable and insecure. Insane economic policies such as the 2016 demonetization (the government suddenly decided to withdraw currencies of certain denominations from the market, plunging the people into untold distress) and shameless pampering of certain corporate interests have already brought the economy to a halt. People in India, are being hounded and harassed routinely in the name of development, national security and religion. The poor and the working people of the country are literally under siege when the Prime Minister declared Covid-19 as a ‘national disaster’ in late March and put the country under a stringent and abrupt lockdown.

Let’s look at forests and forest communities. Ignoring all objections and protests from social movements and rights activists, the Indian government went ahead with its agenda of commoditising India’s forests: in 2014 the Draft National REDD Plus Policy (it has since then

been finalized) was announced, followed by the 2015 Guidelines for handing over 'degraded' forests to private players mainly for raising plantations (1), Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act of 2016 (or CAMPA), Draft National Forest Policy in 2018 (2) and finally, the [Draft Amendments to Indian Forest Act of 2019](#), which haven't been withdrawn yet. Together, these constitute the policy architecture for enclosing, monetising and selling the still vast forest commons in India. The Covid-19 pandemic and the related measures taken by the government are yet another threat, the latest addition to a generally grim scenario. Unfortunately, this new threat appeared at a time when the all-pervasive deprivation persisting in tribal areas has not been addressed: a crippling lack of public healthcare that severely limits the capacities to curb the spread of the virus, tens of thousands of migrant workers stranded in cities, lack of institutional mechanisms and access for procurement and distribution of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) (3), rampant deforestation in the name of forest land diversion without the consent of the communities, violations and non-implementation of progressive legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA).

Instead of respecting the autonomy and dignity of India's tribal and other forest communities, the Covid-19-relief funds have been approved under the old Compensatory Afforestation scheme (4). This scheme has been contested by forest rights campaigners and tribal organisations in India [and internationally](#) ever since the controversial Compensatory Fund Act was first mulled back in 2015. It has been pointed out that Compensatory Afforestation is largely a scam and at best an attempt to greenwash the trail of organised and licensed deforestation in India. Also, channelling unlimited money to the colonial forestry bureaucracy has the [potential](#) to destroy the livelihoods of millions of forest dwellers, causing great ecological damage and aggravating further displacement and exploitation of forest communities.

The Fund has also been questioned by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs of the Indian Government. In a letter to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) written in March 2018, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) had [argued that](#) the draft CAF rules dilute the provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The announcement of releasing Compensatory Afforestation funds to the states for 'employment generation' ignores the concerns raised by movements and activist groups about the ongoing violations of forest rights by CAMPA plantations on the one hand and by large-scale denudation of forests on the other. The movements/groups who oppose the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act and rules, oppose the present move too. Compensatory Afforestation allows organised deforestation through diverting forested land for non-forest purposes without community consent. Such consent is supposed to be legally mandatory under FRA. This results in a general loss of access to the forest Commons traditionally used and conserved by communities, whose lives depend on physical and cultural sustenance provided by forests. Moreover, Compensatory Afforestation activities, which were originally intended to be on lands not registered as forests, routinely emerge on forest Commons, village pastures and common land. The later include lands of various tenure categories such as village forests and village commons (both widely known as *nistar*), old *zamindari* forests (forests owned by landlords during the colonial era) and government lands, all of which support a wide range of rights to access and use, recorded or unrecorded, legal or customary, for collecting fuel wood, grazing animals and so on. Under the FRA, such rights were supposed to be duly recorded, and entitlements given to forest dwelling people.

Raising Compensatory Afforestation plantations on forest Commons and common lands only undermines the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and ultimately help perpetuate the historical injustice that the FRA promises to redress.

Since the CAF bill was tabled in 2015, social movements and rights activists have consistently [demanded](#) the transferring of Compensatory Afforestation funds to the *Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies) and ensuring that activities are taken up only with free and prior consent of the *Gram Sabhas*, as mandated by the FRA and the PESA legislation. This demand has been [raised](#) again in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, so that the *Gram Sabhas* can utilise the funds which currently stand at a huge 55,000 crore (around 7.3 billion US dollars) (5). This would ensure the funds respond to the diverse geographic and community-specific needs of forest communities in India.

Nonetheless, going by past experiences, the forest officialdom has kept on using Compensatory Afforestation funds to raise plantations (mostly of monoculture and commercial species) on lands cultivated by forest communities and also inside community forests, leading to transgressions on autonomy and rights. Monocultures have also destroyed biodiversity, Non-timber forest produce (NTFPs) and forest foods used by communities. Compensatory Afforestation Funds are also being [used to illegally evict tribals and other forest communities](#) from the Protected Areas such as the Tiger Reserves, National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries.

Knowing well that the Compensatory Afforestation funds in the hands of forest officials can only exacerbate the distress situation that forest communities are mired in, the Indian government is now advertising Compensatory Afforestation money as a “tribal-friendly” and distress-relief measure. This is not only ironic, but also smacks of the present government’s total disregard of realities and common human decency. Besides, the use of Compensatory Afforestation funds is legally mandatory, and allotment of money from that fund cannot be treated under any circumstances as part of an economic package meant explicitly for Covid-19 pandemic relief.

On top of all of this, it has been reported that the forest department is carrying out plantation activities during the lockdown period as well as evictions of communities. To date, these include: forest officers cutting down forests in Odisha allegedly to raise plantations (6), eviction notices were served on forest dwellers in Sikkim (7). In Madhya Pradesh (8), Gujrat (9), Manipur (10) and Odisha (11), communities were forcibly evicted, their houses burnt and demolished during the lockdown. With this fresh liberation of funds, such attacks on people are set to escalate.

Soumitra Ghosh

All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM)

(This article is largely based on a Press Release issued jointly by Indian social movements and activists on 17 May and a Press Release by All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) on 25 March 2020)

(1) *Our Forests are not for Sale! Stop Privatizing India’s Forests!*, A Press Release by All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM), 21 September 2015, <https://redd-monitor.org/2015/09/24/india-plans-to-hand-over-degraded-forests-to-plantation-companies/>

- (2) Ghosh. S., Attack on India's Forests and Forest Communities: Draft National Forest Policy 2018, Ground Xero, April 2018, <https://www.groundxero.in/2018/04/13/attack-on-indias-forests-and-forest-communities-draft-national-forest-policy-2018/>
- (3) Down to Earth, Silence grips forest, May 2020, <https://www.magzter.com/article/Science/Down-To-Earth/Silence-grips-forest>
- (4) Press Information Bureau India, May 14, 2020, Rs6000 crore employment push using CAMPA funds, https://twitter.com/PIB_India/status/1260896812639981569?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet
- (5) Business Standard, A Rs 56,000-cr afforestation fund threatens India's indigenous communities, June 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/a-rs-56-000-cr-afforestation-fund-threatens-india-s-indigenous-communities-119062500104_1.html
- (6) Sabrang, Odisha Forest Department cuts down traditional trees, destroys livelihoods of forest workers, May 2020, <https://sabrangindia.in/article/odisha-forest-department-cuts-down-traditional-trees-destroys-livelihood-forest-workers>
- (7) United News of India, Dzuluk forest dwellers served with eviction notice amid lockdown, seek justice from government, April 2020 <http://www.uniindia.com/sikkim-dzuluk-forest-dwellers-served-with-eviction-notice-amid-lockdown-seek-justice-from-govt/east/news/1962757.html>
- (8) The Hindu, Tribals in M.P.'s Burhanpur say foresters burnt hut, June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tribals-in-mps-burhanpur-say-foresters-burnt-hut/article31734977.ece>
- (9) Down to Earth, Covid-19: Gujarat forest department officials allegedly torched huts, fields, April 2020, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/covid-19-gujarat-forest-dept-officials-allegedly-torched-huts-fields-70426>
- (10) The People's Chronicle, Eviction drive turns ugly as cops and locals clash, April 2020, <http://www.thepeopleschronicle.in/daily/english/7344>
- (11) GroundXero, Odisha government's relentless persecution of Adivasis continues even during the Lockdown, April 2020, <https://www.groundxero.in/2020/04/25/odisha-governments-relentless-persecution-of-adviasis-continue-even-during-the-lockdown/>

Reflections amid the Covid-19 Pandemic from WRM's Advisory Committee

Forest communities and peasant families around the world are facing devastating situations due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the government measures taken, in particular restrictions on movement. In addition, government responses to the pandemic have been deepening the inequalities, injustices and destruction that have been going hand-in-hand with capitalism.

We invited members of the WRM's Advisory Committee to share short reflections on this extraordinary situation. We thank them for their contributions.

How do you see the impacts of authoritarian regimes unfolding due to the measures implemented around the world in front of Covid-19?

Shalmali Guttal, Focus on the Global South

Impacts

Impacts are complex and evident at several levels. In my view, understanding the links between political, economic and social aspects of these emergency measures are especially important in this period. Covid-19 has provided political leaders in many countries a very good “cover” to enact policies that favour their interests, under the pretext of responding to the pandemic. These policies can become institutionalized - emergency measures that are supposed to protect people during exceptional circumstances can easily become a fixture of our lives even after the exceptional circumstances have passed or are under control. Covid-19 is an almost tailor made opportunity for fascist regimes to consolidate their power.



Protests against anti-terror law in Philippines. Ph: Focus on the Global South

Complete and strictly enforced lockdowns in Asian countries – e.g. India, Philippines, Indonesia—have resulted in severe negative impacts on the livelihoods of forest peoples and forest based communities, who depend on forest eco-systems for their food, medicinal plants, fuel, fiber, and materials for housing and daily use. Although their isolated locations provide them with some protection against the virus, gathering and selling “Minor Forest Produce” (MFP) or Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) are crucial (often the sole) sources of income for them. The closures of local markets and restrictions on movement have led to increased cash poverty.

Forest areas have long been sites of conflicts over land and nature's wealth between communities/populations living in and around these areas on the one hand, and government, military, police and other security forces, and businesses from outside on the other hand. Land-forest grabbing, the logging and extractive industries, poaching and land/territorial

conversions for infrastructure projects have not stopped because of COVID-19. Instead, permissions, planning and operations for dams, mining, railways and highways are continuing during this time in Laos, Philippines and India.

The government of Laos, for example, announced yet another dam in the pipeline, even as thousands of families devastated by the collapse of the Xepian Xenamnoi dam in 2018 have still not received any reparations or support for rehabilitation. In the Philippines, conflicts between communities and the OceanaGold Philippines gold and copper mine came to a head in early April, when the central government used the “enhanced community quarantine” (lockdown) as a cover to send police to disband the “peoples’ barricades” that prevented the company from carrying out its operations.

In India, the government has given virtual clearance (because of COVID-19) for national highways and railways to be constructed through national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, even as forest communities are denied their legal tenurial rights in forests. Because of lockdown mobility restrictions, no impact assessments and consultations with people living in and around these areas were conducted. The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) is using the COVID-19 period to open up forests for mining despite growing evidence across the world that shows the increased risks of deforestation to the spread of new pathogens, infections and epidemics. The government is also pushing a new notification for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), which will relax environmental regulations, make it easier for businesses to operate in forest areas, and reduce the opportunities for participation by forest dwelling communities in public hearings on projects that deeply affect their lives and rights.

Many governments in the Asia region are justifying these actions under the pretext of stimulating and restarting economies badly damaged because of the pandemic. Because of the legal restrictions imposed on mobility and public gatherings, and a general suspension of civil liberties and freedoms, people can neither go out to gather information and evidence, nor protest and build resistance to these moves. At the same time, very few governments have increased financing for public health, social protection and security, food programmes and livelihood support. Evictions of local populations, environmental destruction, fragmentation of biodiverse territories and destruction of eco-systems crucial for local food and health, and arrests and incarceration of those who resist, continue unabated despite the pandemic. Forest dwellers and forest dependent communities are particularly disadvantaged and have practically no access to healthcare and adequate support in the face of health and environmental crises.

Strategies for Resistance

We have to keep organising: gather evidence and testimonies from local populations and amplify their voices to the rest of society and the world; and intensify popular education about the links between authoritarian regimes, corporate power and deepening capitalist exploitation of nature and people.

We need to greatly expand and strengthen solidarity based on justice and rights protections: raise resources for legal and material support for all those who stand up in resistance. We are in a struggle against fascism (extreme, right-wing, ultra-nationalist dictatorial powers which violently suppress opposition), statism (when the state has substantial, centralized

control over social and economic affairs) and corporatism (significant control over society, economy and politics by corporations), and these are not battles that can be waged effectively without resources and if we are fragmented. Governments and capital see advantages in actively fragmenting nature as well as societies: this makes it easier for them to control, extract value and ‘re-purpose’ nature and people as is convenient for capital—small national parks, smart cities, precarious producers and workers, insecure consumers, etc.

Equally important: we must join hands with progressive communities to build harmonious, democratic, equal, diverse and respectful societies and economies from the ground up. By their very existence and vitality, such societies and economies will challenge exploitative, violent and extractive regimes and systems, and give us hope and strength to continue building resistance.

What do growing numbers of pandemics (human and nonhuman) mean for capital in a longer historical perspective?

Larry Lohmann, The Corner House, UK

Covid-19 and the end of the modern working body

In recent years, ecofeminist movements in Latin America have been exploring in depth the idea of cuerpo-territorio (body-territory).

They have reflected on how mining companies “masculinize” the territories to which they lay waste, devaluing the multiple ways ecological relationships are sustained. They have exposed the historical links between the colonization of lands and the colonization of female bodies. Not least, they have insisted that struggles to defend territory must go hand in hand with struggles to recover the body –



New workers bodies

not only the bodies of women, but the bodies of Indigenous people, black people and peasants as well as the bodies of non-humans, including stones and spirits.

Now, as the Covid-19 crisis expands across the world, it may be time to apply this idea more widely.

In a recent book, (1) James C. Scott, the great anarchist scholar, contributes some useful background from an unexpected direction.

Examining the rise of the earliest states of the Middle East between 8,500 and 3,600 years ago, Scott notes that supporting political hierarchies of soldiers, aristocrats, priests, artisans and clerks required the production of surpluses of millets and cereals.

How else to get these surpluses except by concentrating “as much arable land and as many people to work it as possible within the smallest radius” (2) within state boundaries?

That encouraged the growth of territories where a whole range of living things were pulled together and “domesticated,” including food plants, livestock, fodder species and nomadic humans. Attracted to the biological feast that such permanent concentrations supplied were gate-crashers like oats (an agricultural weed that later became a crop) and animal hangers-on like rats, sparrows, dogs and pigs, trailed in turn by an army of parasites including fleas, mosquitoes, lice, weevils and viruses.

It was all about territory. To oversimplify a bit, on one side were state-builders’ semi-enclosed territories of relatively unfree labour and tilled soil. On the other were the borderless territories of “barbarians” who tended to prefer an independent, mobile life more closely keyed to the rhythms of migratory animals and ripening wild plants.

But it was also all about the human body. As Scott writes, “women in grain villages had characteristic bent-under toes and deformed knees that came from long hours kneeling and rocking back and forth grinding grain.” (3)

Living in one of the new agrarian states, Scott concludes, “involved a lot more drudgery than hunting and gathering and was not at all good for your health.” (4) Grain crops didn’t provide the same nutrients as wild plants. People got shorter. Even their animals were sicker and smaller.

Worst of all, microbes got fabulous opportunities to jump and multiply among the different species crowded together under the rule of the new states. Humans, animals and crops could all be devastated by unprecedented epidemics.

Scott’s research helps remind us that today’s vast new “territory” of multinational capitalism, too, is partly constituted by particular kinds of human bodies.

One of those bodies is the body of the wage worker. The worker who is supposed to show up on time every day. The worker who gets only so many sick days each month. The worker who can be relied on to come in and make money for the boss, year in and year out.

Business is used to assuming that this body’s health is predictable. Just as it has taken for granted that the steady unpaid work performed by the world’s “women, colonies and nature” (5) will always be there to exploit – including even the unpaid work of the prehistoric organisms that created the world’s coal, oil and gas.

One message of the Covid-19 crisis is that this predictability may no longer be there.

All of a sudden, it turns out that the worker’s body behaves predictably only when it is embedded in a particular kind of global territory. A territory not yet devastated by agribusinesses’ monocultures and vast feedlots of factory-fed animals where pandemics emerge. A territory where many potentially dangerous viruses “stay home,” to quote a recent interview with an Indonesian woman shaman.

The problem for business is that this territory is pretty much gone. (6) Microorganisms are jumping species, leaping continents, and mutating rapidly to disrupt the lives of all sorts of fresh bodies at random. Capital's free ride on a worldwide territory where viruses "stay home" is almost over, just as the free ride it has enjoyed on the back of cheap fossil fuels is almost over. (7)

A sort of "memory" of the old territory may well have lived on inside the labourer's body for a while, as forests were levelled and monocultures expanded. But, as Covid-19 has abruptly made clear, the working body that made modern business rich has been living on borrowed time. As the pandemics keep coming, capital's calculations will be upset again and again. Labour may be becoming almost as "precarious" for capitalists as it is for workers themselves.

To what extent are capitalists gearing up for this historical challenge? To what extent are they preparing for the kind of upheaval in elite-worker relations that followed, say, the Black Death of the middle ages? To what extent are they looking around for a new, different kind of labouring body that will work for them?

The answers aren't yet clear.

Of course, the first reflex of some capitalists has been simply to deny that fundamental changes are taking place. Donald Trump advises workers to drink bleach in the hope that will be enough to get them back to work. Electric car tycoon Elon Musk demands that the state end lockdowns immediately so that labourers can clock into his factory just like in the old days. Plantation and mining companies force their 'essential workers' to stay on the job despite the health risks. Wall Street meanwhile "still sees the world through pre-pandemic-tinted lenses," (8) assuming that the US Federal Reserve Bank can resolve any future *cuerpo-territorio* crises just by printing more money to hand out to big corporations. But behind the scenes, more far-sighted capitalists are surely pondering other ways of dealing with the crisis of the modern working body.

And what about popular movements? How are they preparing themselves for the coming changes?

For networks like WRM, that may be the question of the moment. (9)

(1) James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, <https://book4you.org/book/3401043/600996>

(2) Ibid., p. 124.

(3) Ibid., p. 83.

(4) Ibid., p. 18.

(5) Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, London and New York: Zed Books 2014, <https://book4you.org/book/2711883/1c4255>

(6) John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi, "COVID-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism: Commodity Chains and Ecological-Epidemiological-Economic Crises," *Monthly Review*, 1 June 2020, <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/06/01/covid-19-and-catastrophe-capitalism/>

(7) Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, <https://book4you.org/book/3502583/b22c20>

(8) Foreign Policy, Why are stocks soaring in the middle of a pandemic?, May 2020,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/29/stock-market-rally-coronavirus-pandemic/> B 250 - AC compilation_EN.doc

(9) Thanks to Ivonne Yanez, Soumitra Ghosh, Nick Hildyard and Hendro Sangkoyo for helpful suggestions.

What are the parallels between Covid-19 and climate change?

Ivonne Yáñez, Acción Ecológica, Ecuador

Several parallels can be found between Covid-19 and climate change—from **denialism** to minimizing the **severity** of both problems. For example, both Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil claimed that the virus would diminish in the heat of spring, and that it was little more than a minor flu. **Conspiracy** theories have also been applied to both issues. Trump said that climate change was an invention of the Chinese and of communist environmentalists; and that the coronavirus was manufactured in laboratories in Wuhan. In both cases, it is easier to deny the crisis than to admit it is related to an extractivist and mega-industrial way of life.

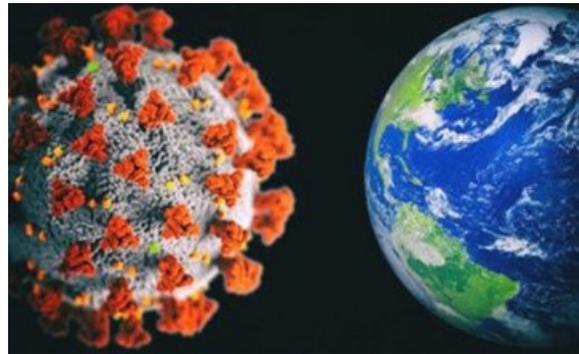


Figura 1: Ph: ICCCAD

Xenophobia and **racism** are other parallels. In regards to climate change, many blame the poor because they pollute, or indigenous peoples who deforest; or they attribute crises to a problem of overpopulation. With the coronavirus, we have been saturated with scenes of markets with seemingly poor hygiene. Trump called the new coronavirus a “Chinese virus,” distracting us from the true causes of the pandemic—such as pressure on forests and the existence of industrial mega-farms. In both cases, it is always the other, the outsider, who is responsible for all ills.

Another comparison of the two situations has to do with the management of **information and counter-information**. In both cases, there is a concerted strategy to **conceal information or to misinform**.

It was already scientifically known over 50 years ago that fossil fuels caused global warming, but this was countered with other information from the energy industry. Nothing was done despite knowing the causes. And what is worse, there was intentional movement in the opposite direction, via the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. What these mechanisms have done is worsen the situation. It has been the same with the Covid-19 pandemic. A part of the scientific community and the United States Department of Security knew that new strains of the coronavirus would arrive with brutal force. But nothing was done then either.

The responses to climate change proposed by States and the corporate and financial sectors are disconnected from reality. Drastic measures to reduce extraction and consumption of fossil fuels have been avoided. Similarly, Covid-19 has been blamed on a bat, a pangolin, or the virus itself—as if the virus itself were the problem to solve, rather than the root causes of its having turned virulent. In the case of Covid-19, disorganized and chaotic information is offered to keep investors calm and to subject people to anxiety and uncertainty. With climate change, they tell us we are all going to die tomorrow, in order to apply the “shock doctrine.”

Another similarity has to do with **differentiated impacts**. Climate change is more detrimental to populations of indigenous people, peasants, women and impoverished urban sectors. With Covid-19, the death rate among Afro-descendant, Latino or impoverished populations is

much higher than that of white or wealthy populations. The same is true of the social and economic impact: popular and working classes suffer discriminately from the health crisis and from climate change.

We can see that there will be more **drastic economic measures** after the pandemic. For example, what with the growing importance of farmland and food supplies, there will be more land grabbing and water grabbing. In macroeconomic terms, extraction will intensify even more, supposedly in order to alleviate the crisis. There will probably be increased financialization of nature.

This crisis is expected to hit capitalism hard. Financial collapse can be expected to follow on from other collapses. Until now, capitalism has been able to remain afloat, not only with the support of public money, the working class and women—and at the expense of nature—but also thanks to inventions of risky financial products, which have already led to internal crises such as the mortgage bubbles. There are also carbon credits, which are climate-based business deals. It should come as no surprise that financial products related to health and the risk of the virus spread have already been launched. The commodification and financialization of future pandemics is on the way, as has plainly already happened with climate disasters.

It would also not be surprising if international proposals in light of Covid-19 grouped together poverty “reduction” with “conservation” of forests without people and the “decarbonization” of the economy—through the market and banking, numbers and new digital technologies that will supposedly “lead” the way.

Finally, there are **command and control measures**, such as those already being used to surveil areas subject to the carbon market and ecosystem services. Now, to control Covid-19, mechanisms to control society are implemented through digital surveillance systems and draconian laws.

For governments, intellectuals or dominant currents in academia, Covid-19 is a separate crisis, and therefore must be resolved separately from the climate crisis, the crisis of falling oil prices, and other issues. That’s why their supposed solutions have always deepened the crisis, or created new ones. But organizations and peoples in movement already realize that the climate crisis and Covid-19 are part of the same historical crisis.

Today we see how the places most vulnerable to climate disasters are also attacked by Covid-19, extractive projects or the establishment of agribusiness or polluting industries. In the face of resistance, the territories are militarized and community leaders are criminalized. People are subjected to multiple exposures. There are multiple threats that impoverished and marginalized populations are exposed to. Several grassroots organizations are proposing solutions to this situation: food and energy sovereignty, working in mingas [collective/community work], solidarity, and community organization. It is about reuniting with the territories and territorializing struggles.

The peoples’ proposals are participatory and from the ground up—to defend territories against both extractivism and climate change, and to take actions of collective care in the face of the pandemic. Many initiatives are arising that are different from, and opposed to

those of centralist states. And perhaps for that reason, they are more effective than any left-wing, right-wing, progressive or neoliberal government.

Acción Ecológica Opina. ECOFASCISMO. Abril 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/AccionEcologicaEc/posts/2864906820268611>

Black people four times more likely to die from Covid-19, ONS finds. The Guardian. 07/05/2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/black-people-four-times-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-ons-finds>

CLIMATE CHANGE SERVICE. <https://climate.copernicus.eu/>

Decades of Science Denial Related to Climate Change Has Led to Denial of the Coronavirus Pandemic. INSIDE CLIMATE NEWS. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/08042020/science-denial-coronavirus-covid-climate-change>

First Person: COVID-19 is not a silver lining for the climate. UN Environment chief

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>

How the oil industry has spent billions to control the climate change conversation. The Guardian. 08/01/2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/08/oil-companies-climate-crisis-pr-spending>

La financiarización de la crisis del COVID19. Armando Negrete. ALAI. 30/04/2020

<https://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/206260>

Stockholm Environment Institute. SEI. <https://www.sei.org/events/webinar-the-geopolitics-of-covid-19-and-climate-change/>

The unholy alliance of COVID-19, nationalism, and climate change. MIT Technology Review.

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/04/10/998969/the-unholy-alliance-of-covid-19-nationalism-and-climate-change/>

How is Covid-19 strengthening the push towards a so-called "energy transition"?

Hendro Sangkoyo - School of Democratic Economics, Indonesia

Any attempt to answer this question should embark from a critical stance toward a set of assumptions about the possibility for capitalism, as the global political-economic protocol of wealth accumulation and redistribution, to come to terms with the breakdown of the biosphere, the catastrophe it helped create.

Putting aside the strengthened interconnections among peoples' resistance to life-predatory investments across the globe, the ecological breakdown – which also brings Ebola, SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV, Flu A and the progressing SARS-CoV-2, besides climate chaos – is posing an unprecedented threat to the institutions that animate the global market. The past two quarters of 2020 witnessed what the future of the global market may entail—a turbulence which has little to do with business cycles, determined by chaos.



Nickel Mining in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Ph: Shutterstock

The usual flair in “crisis management” of the global market’s value-chain infrastructure – which includes consultancy company McKinsey, top Wall Street advisors and think tanks across the spectrum of trade blocs, the BRICS and the UN-World Bank, the thousands of corporations nested under the UN-Global Compact and its country-level tentacles, the captains of industry and robber-barons in the new emerging markets – is generating the usual responses to crisis that are almost invariably failing in the attempt to handle the loss of temporal “order” that the Covid-19 set in motion. Despite the hasty mobilisation to restart

production, perhaps best exemplified by the Japanese automotive industry and Apple computer suppliers in China, which began preparing such a restart in late January, the connotations of time and space in the word *future* noticeably shrivels to an unspecified "*after the coronavirus menace is gone.*"

Amid the shaken faith in the capabilities of both market mechanisms and government, piggy-backing on the present market interruption to advertise an energy transition to a low-carbon economy sounds as bloodless as it is pathetic. Nevertheless, a transition "from fossil fuel to non-fossil fuel energy" as such is a valid proposition that deserves serious interrogation of the assumptions behind it. And most importantly, whether or not such a call would also mean a transition in the economy that it serves. Justice should apply to the ultimate social-ecological objectives as much as to the method and process of withdrawal.

Let's take a closer look at each word in the term "energy transition". As usually used, the term tends to signify nothing more than an alteration over time in the composition of the energy sources that are a key input to the usual path of economic growth. The associated misery, exploitation and predation of life associated with that growth is ignored.

This kind of "supply- side" approach has nothing to say about pandemic industrial urbanism, the real source of demand for the energy industry. Neither is there any explicit mention of the need for a fundamental transition away from extractivism as its cornerstone, nor a serious incorporation of justice in redefining how the term energy is understood.

Without exception, any technical advancement or re-configuration in energy conversion/generation – agrofuels, wind or hydro kinetics, geothermal, photovoltaic cells or batteries for electric vehicle and power storage – must admit their dependency on extractivism, which is escalating in its intensity, geographic coverage and ecotoxicology.

To cite an example, a 2011 statement from a Greenpeace energy-revolution package for Asia mentioned that "with its current need to be electrified, its geographical condition and scattered communities, Papua is the perfect model for decentralized renewable energy grids that are ready to be harnessed today in order to power the future". Relegating the particularity and values of the human condition and its lifescape to a set of proposed external technical objectives is at best problematic. In fact, for both sides of Papua Island and the countless small islands which flank it, energy as defined by its technical components of generation, transmission and distribution must first be redefined and understood as a social-ecological issue. This is even more important in the face of the energy industry's brutal hunt for raw materials in the region.

As is glaringly obvious in the cobalt barefoot mining of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the rare metal deserts of China, the Sulawesi-Mollucas-Papua nickel-cobalt corridor of Indonesia, or the lithium triangle of the *salars* of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, a low carbon economy in the making brings with it more social-ecological depredation. Under the transformed geography of commodity production, the energy industry must also maintain its reliance on fossil fuels, including coal, gas and bunker fuels, besides land and water grabbing and toxic dumping, which are all associated with its operations.

These social-ecological burdens of such a transition/revolution also sustain the demand for an extractive imperialism: Countries with large deposits of the new golds such as the battery

minerals (cobalt, lithium, nickel, graphite, and manganese) are held hostage by the requirements of the green energy technology. In reality, the labels "clean" and "dirty", or "high" and "low" carbon emission serve merely as reference to industrial or finance asset classes; in reality, they allow corporations to get away with murder.

Indonesia is an illustrative example. The country holds the world largest geothermal energy potential – *and* the largest disaster risks from volcanism, tectonic and geothermal-induced seismicity. In this context, the global finance and industrial capital behind the brewing geothermal rush work hand in glove not only with occupants of public offices, but also with coal industrial lobbies and politically influential environmentalist organisations. This cooperation involves privatising the country's legislative process and crafting various special purpose vehicles for investment.

Likewise, the subverted phrase "ecosystem restoration" largely refers to a type of corporate property or concession for agrofuel or pulp plantations. This has nothing to do with the wellbeing of the forests. In this light, "energy transition" or "revolution" in its common usage is ushering in a darker episode of colonialism: The biggest appetite for "energy transition" or "revolution" comes from the most industrialised countries, while what sustains it lies in nominally-independent countries rich in minerals and fertile lands.

"Transition" becomes a code word emptied of adequately specified criteria for social-ecological processes and outcomes. As with the medicalisation of the Covid-19 pestilence or the financialisation of climate-change mitigation, any political variant of a Green New Deal state-corporate-centred campaign is not an answer to accelerating social-ecological breakdown. As "transition" refers to a unilaterally-decided sustainability of corporate industrialism, "energy" – the other half of the buzzword – continues to obscure a peculiarly savage energetics in the service of wealth accumulation by means of ruining the lives of Earth beings. Stopping the engine remains the social-learning agenda of prime importance.

What is the role of the agro-industry, and what actors are behind this enormous chain of production?

Silvia Ribeiro, ETC Group

The industrial breeding of animals in confinement (poultry, pig, bovine) is a real factory for animal and human epidemics. On these farms, there are huge concentrations of overcrowded, genetically-uniform animals with weakened immune systems, to whom antibiotics are continuously administered. This latter point, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is the main cause of global resistance to antibiotics. It is a perfect breeding ground for more lethal mutations of viruses, and for bacteria that are multi-resistant to antibiotics—which are later distributed throughout the world following the routes of free trade.



Rob Wallace, US biologist and author of the book, *Big Farms make Big Flu*, thoroughly documented this process, analyzing outbreaks of new viruses of animal origin: avian and swine flus, Ebola, Zika, HIV and others. A large number of them originated on industrial farms, and others in wild animals, such as the Covid-19 coronavirus that came from bats. But to date, studies indicate that Covid-19 would not have reached humans, had it not been for intermediaries. The study of its genetic makeup suggested the intermediaries could have been pangolins, small mammals that live in Asia; but the same study pointed out that it could have been other animals—such as pigs. The organization, GRAIN, reported on the existence of mega-pig farms in the province of Hubei, of which Wuhan is the capital (1).

At the same time that Covid-19 was detected, China's large pig farms were devastated by another virus that affected and killed millions of pigs: African swine fever (2). Fortunately, it has not mutated (yet) into an infectious virus for humans, but it is growing throughout China and Europe.

The baneful relationship between industrial livestock and epidemics/pandemics goes beyond large farms and extends throughout the whole industrial agricultural system. Viruses originating from wild animals reach farms, or rural and urban areas, because of the destruction of biodiverse habitats—habitats that could have functioned as barriers to contain the spread of viruses from wild animal populations.

The main culprits for this destruction of ecosystems are the agribusiness food system as a whole (monocultures, farms, contamination of soils and water sources), uncontrolled urban growth, and the onslaught of megaprojects in these areas—such as mining, dams, highways and commercial corridors.

In this context, the agroindustrial food system also plays a key role in the devastation of biodiversity: the main cause of deforestation worldwide is the expansion of the industrial agricultural frontier. In Latin America, this causes 70% of deforestation on average, and in Brazil up to 80%, according to data from the FAO.

Additionally, of all the agricultural land on the planet, over 70 percent is used for the livestock industry (pasture or forage), the vast majority of which is industrial. More than 60 percent of the grain grown worldwide is to feed animals in confinement (3). What is even worse, some governments' measures to allegedly control the Covid-19 pandemic are, in fact, accelerating land-grabbing in forests. Agroindustrial multinational corporations, including giants like Bayer-Monsanto, are among the industries that have benefitted from the pandemic—reporting huge profits despite the health crisis.

Therefore, attributing the problem of the pandemic to the consumption of wild meat is absurd. In fact, it successfully diverts our attention from seeing the destructive role of the industrial agricultural-livestock food system, which is already engendering other pandemics in this very moment—since nothing has changed yet. Worse still, the meat processing industries have been hotbeds of Covid-19 infections in the United States and Europe.

By contrast: Traditional, small-scale, decentralized, peasant and pastoral farming of domestic animals—or the traditional consumption of wild meats within limits decided upon by communities—is part of indigenous and peasant communities' survival. These communities maintain and even increase diversity, and prevent pandemics. Moreover, peasant networks—

including fisherfolk, herders and urban gardeners—provide food for 70% of humanity, with less than 25 per cent of the land, water and resources (4).

(1) GRAIN, New research suggests industrial livestock, not wet markets, might be origin of Covid-19, March 2020, <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6437-new-research-suggests-industrial-livestock-not-wet-markets-might-be-origin-of-covid-19>

(2) GRAIN, African Swine Fever: Building a factory-farmed future, one pandemic at a time, March 2020, <https://grain.org/en/article/6418-building-a-factory-farmed-future-one-pandemic-at-a-time>

(3) Grupo ETC, Con el caos climático, ¿quién nos alimentará? ¿La cadena industrial de producción de alimentos o las redes campesinas?, 2014,

https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/web_quien_nos_alimentara_con_notas.pdf

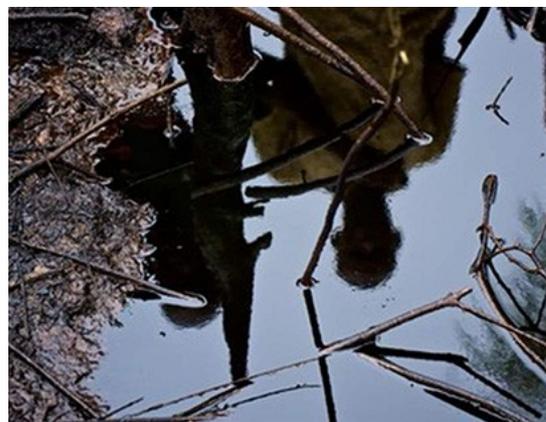
(4) Grupo ETC; ¿quién nos alimentará?, 2017, https://www.etcgroup.org/es/quien_alimentara

How Covid-19 impacted the oil spills clean-up process in Ogoni?

**Godwin Uyi Ojo, Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/
Friends of the Earth Nigeria**

While clean up and remediation of Ogoniland was put on hold due to the pandemic, drilling and exploitation of oil and gas continues without problems.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, many corporations, especially in the oil and gas sector as well as in the oil palm plantations industry, continued their operations as “essential services,” while the rest of society in Nigeria remains under lockdown. During the lockdown, the International Oil Companies (IOCs) in some instances failed to adhere to simple protocols put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19, including failure to ensure transparency in disclosing the status of their staff and ensuring social distancing, which pitched the Rivers state government against the federal government.



Ph: Amnesty International

It has been more than two decades since nine Ogoni leaders were executed for standing up against Shell's operations in their communities. While oil production has ceased, pipelines operated by Shell still crosses land and waterways in Ogoni, which means that the area is still plagued by oil spills. In 2011, a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report exposed extensive oil pollution and severe health risks in Ogoni, including polluted drinking water. The report recommended that Shell clean up every oil spill they are responsible for in the Niger Delta.

A recent field-monitoring visit conducted by ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria to the polluted sites in Ogoni in April 2020, showed that the implementation of UNEP's recommendations has been rolled back in several ways. While the Ogonis continue to suffer the impact of a wrecked environment from hydrocarbon pollution as well as the destruction of tropical and mangrove forests, the hope of clean up and remediation is pushed back using the Covid-19 pandemic as a decoy for contractors' withdrawal from site. However, while clean up was put on hold at many sites, drilling and exploitation of oil and gas continues without stopping.

The pressure on the government and oil companies to pay the committed US\$200 million annually into the Statutory Clean Up and Rehabilitation Fund has waned and suffered a major setback as funds for 2020 are yet to be released. Further, the high cost of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and the dependence on oil and gas in the event of crashing export prices has compounded the situation, leaving the government helpless. It has also eased the pressure on the Hydrocarbon Pollution and Restoration Project, the government agency responsible for the clean-up, as civil society in general were unable to conduct their face-to-face advocacy and campaigns on a regular basis. A proposed oversight visit of Nigeria's national assembly committee on Ecology and Climate Change to the pollution sites has also been postponed pending the lifting of lockdown and interstate travel restrictions. Postponement of these supervisory visits may further affect the quality of clean up.

In Ogoni, oil spills are found at depths of up to 5 meters. This has contaminated the soil and water sources, and this pollution continues in spite of the halt of oil production arising from conflicts between communities and Shell, an oil multinational that has operated for decades in the area. The rivers and streams remain polluted and not even emergency and relief measures have been adequately provided to the people. Farm yields and fish catch are depleting, leaving the communities to bear the brunt of such destruction. The cumulative environmental degradation remains unaddressed and the Ogonis remain worse off for it.

The measures in place to confront the Covid-19 pandemic have helped social movements and actors to redirect attention to the nature of development, the modes of production and consumption as well as to scrutinize the relations between the global North and the global South. They have underlined a major challenge in the crisis of over-exploitation of natural resources of the global South by the global North that is leading to environmental degradation, climate change and deforestation as well as violent conflicts at the sites of extraction and production; not forgetting the conflicts next to refineries and factories using these fossil fuels.

The world, and in particular the global North, needs to confront the unjust system in place which is based on exploitation and accumulation for the benefit of a few and which increasingly feeds overconsumption, largely in the global North, while exacerbating social disparity and inequalities.

New visions of development(s) are required for a system change that allows overproduction and overconsumption to stop while building upon transformative just transitions from fossil fuels to just renewable energy sources, a process which ERA is currently championing in Nigeria. This means the world needs to shift to an economy following the idea of "leave the oil in the soil," which would protect the environment and rural livelihoods. There is a need to halt the continued privatization of our lands, food, water and energy sources that local communities depend on.

Individuals and communities in Nigeria are already showing alternatives that ensure a just and localized access to energy sources by producing and supplying solar energy off the grid and stand-alone mini-grid systems that allow them to control their own energy sources. Through social mobilisations from the local to the global, awareness raising and consensus building, these alternative visions keep growing.

RECOMMENDED

Papua: Violence against Indigenous Peoples and Forest Defenders

The documentary “Selling out West Papua”, shown on Al Jazeera, with associated reporting by news portals Gecko and Mongabay, reveals how two Korean companies, Posco and Korindo, are engaging in corrupt deals as they buy up forests on a large scale to develop oil palm plantations in West Papua. The impacts for communities are devastating. See the video in English and with Bahasa subtitles here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBbVu1ZOpYY>) and read further here (<https://thegeckoproject.org/the-consultant-why-did-a-palm-oil-conglomerate-pay-22m-to-an-unnamed-expert-in-papua-edb486651342>).

Communities and activists may be at risk of further violence and reprisals by companies and security services. Support the letter seeking to bring national and international attention to the situation in Papua. **The letter is available for sign-on here** (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd5yRDwsisHMSMjLYiFAH4tkvoW9ZxhM8trHs_TBkY3_bvrpA/viewform)

Moreover, incidents of violence, arrests, destruction of property, internal displacement, intimidation and death threats towards Indigenous Peoples and Environmental and Human Rights Defenders have risen alarmingly between April and June 2020. Amongst those targeted are: the Moskona indigenous people in the Regency of Teluk Bintuni (April 2020), Aifat indigenous people in Maybrat Regency (April-May 2020), Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Kampung Ikana, Kais Darat, South Sorong Regency (June 2020), and in Kali Kao, Jair District, Boven Digoel Regency (June 2020), Papua Province. Some incidents involve recurring violence against Environmental Human Rights Defenders. See the Press Release from the Pusaka Bentala Rakyat Foundation here:

<https://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PR-PUSAKA-Urging-the-State-and-Corporations-to-Protect-and-Respect.pdf>

India: The impact of Covid-19 and lockdowns on *Adivasi* (Indigenous) and Forest Communities

In a series of articles, forest communities talk about the violation of their forest rights as a result of government approvals for forest destruction in connection with hydropower and coal projects that were passed or accelerated during the pandemic. During the lockdown, the Ministry of Environment and Forests approved large-scale industrial, mining, hydropower, roads and highway construction projects without the required due diligence and in disregard to environmental laws and the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Read the bulletin published by the Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy (CFR-LA) network in India in English here and Hindi here.

EN: http://www.cfsla.org.in/uploads_acrvr/QMGVJCovidAndForestRightsBulletin-June16-30.pdf

HN: http://www.cfsla.org.in/uploads_acrvr/W0515VanAdhikarAurCoVID19Bulletin-June16-30.pdf

“Overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic: Lessons from the *dulet*”

“*Dulet*”: A highly transferable disease brought by the *meginalaw* (good spirit) to discipline the wrongdoings of humanity.

Alim “Kim” Bandara, a member of the Indigenous Political Structure of the Teduray and Lambangian Indigenous Peoples in south-central Mindanao, Philippines, explains how

Covid-19 and *dulet* are similar in many aspects. In this article, Bandara explains how the Teduray and Lambangian have confronted similar situations before and what lessons these experiences hold. Read the publication in English here.

https://focusweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/08_Lessons-from-dulet-on-Covid-19-pandemic.pdf

Articles of the Bulletin can be reproduced and disseminated using the following source: **Bulletin 250 of the World Rainforest Movement (WRM): "Covid-19: An Alibi for more Oppression, Corporate Control and Destruction of Forests"** (<https://wrm.org.uy/>)

Subscribe to WRM bulletin here: <http://eepurl.com/8YPw5>

The Bulletin aims to support and contribute to the struggle of Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities over their forests and territories. Subscription is free.

Did you miss the last issue of the WRM bulletin "Protected Areas feed corporate profiting and destruction"?

[You can access all the past issues of the WRM bulletin at this link](#)

Bulletin of the World Rainforest Movement (WRM)

This Bulletin is also available in French, Spanish and Portuguese

Editor: Joanna Cabello

Editorial Assistants: Elizabeth Díaz, Lucía Guadagno, Jutta Kill, Winfridus Overbeek and Teresa Pérez

WRM International Secretariat

Avenida General María Paz 1615 office 3. CP 11400. Montevideo, Uruguay

Phone/Fax: +598 26056943

wrm@wrm.org.uy | <http://www.wrm.org.uy>