Green Economics in Brazil: Women talk about the impact of the SPVS REDD project and a Boticário Foundation protected area

The survival of traditional groups in the coastal region of Paraná has become increasingly threatened by private initiatives to appropriate forested areas for various purposes. This article focuses particularly on two of them: One is the trading of carbon credits under the terms of the REDD program, with incentive from Brazilian NGO Sociedade de Pesquisa em Vida Selvagem e Educação Ambiental or SPVS (Environmental Education and Wildlife Research Association); the other is forest and biodiversity conservation in the Salto Morato Nature Reserve owned by the Boticário Foundation.

SPVS came to the region in the late 1990s and, in conjunction with the US-based NGO The Nature Conservancy (TNC), began buying large tracts from landowners. The area currently covers a total of 18,600 hectares in the localities of Antonina and Guaraqueçaba, and has the status of Natural Heritage Private Reserve (RPPN for its Portuguese initials). These are areas under private ownership aimed at preserving biodiversity and where hunting fishing and any other extractivist activities are prohibited.

The SPVS acquired the land through its association with TNC and with resources from US companies General Motors, American Electric Power and Chevron, whose primordial objective and particular interest is the carbon that is “stored” there. TNC purports that the investor companies “invested US$18 million between 1999 and 2001 for planting, execution and maintenance of Brazilian projects for a period of 40 years.” This means that in 1999, years before the launching of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) program, the first carbon project in the world’s forests had already begun.

The Salto Morato Nature Reserve was created by the Boticário Foundation, which belongs to the Boticário Group, a Brazilian beauty products company. The reserve has 2253 hectares and includes a 100-meter waterfall. The area was purchased in 1994 with support from TNC.

The Boticário Foundation is connected to other NGOs, such as SPVS and TNC, in the “Climate Observatory” initiative, whose introduction gives great importance to the so-called carbon market and is touted as the most robust initiative in the fight against climate change.

Persecution

The environmental police have always had a presence in the region, but according to inhabitants of communities neighboring the SPVS and Boticário areas, they never persecuted community-members in the way they have been since the arrival of these organizations.

Women are particularly affected since they are more exposed due to the domestic responsibilities that keep them at home while their husbands are usually out in search of work. There are numerous stories from women about the Fuerza Verde, or environmental police, who burst into their homes, armed and without proper judicial authorization.

One inhabitant of Antonina, next to the SPVS area, asserts “they don’t come here to conserve, they come here to bother,” and goes on to tell:

> "They came to my house, I wasn’t here, I had gone out to deliver some invitations (…) so they came up to my house, my daughter was there having breakfast. They didn’t knock, just went directly to the window. My daughter was frightened. (…) When I got back, they had gone through practically my entire vegetable garden without permission (…) I didn’t know that they had already been in the house. With those little devices [GPS], they didn’t do it to me, they did it to my daughter (…) they showed her and said: “your father has two rifles inside the house; where are they? Tell me where they are” (…) They really bothered me, they wanted to come into the house, it was outrageous really (…) And I was alone in my house. Just my kids and me, with no husband, he was out working. (…) just us and six men. And one of them said: If you don’t give it to me [the rifle], we are going to nab your husband. So I went and got it and gave it to him.”

We hear many stories from women about how their husbands had been arrested. The woman quoted above says that her husband was once handcuffed at home by the Fuerza Verde, who said they were doing their “job”. Another time he was detained for 11 days for cutting down a tree to make a canoe. He had to pay bail to get out. When their husbands are arrested, there is greater insecurity and women are more and more fearful.

Inhabitants of the Morato community next to the Boticário Foundation area assert that the police are always in their community. One of them tells how they entered her 80-yr-old grandmother’s house:

> "My grandmother has high blood pressure and was feeling bad. She got nervous. She had pork and chicken on the stove. They came in just like that without asking, without anything, just rummaging around to see what they could find. She was in the kitchen like always. They scared her. She felt really bad. But if you say anything to them, they throw you in jail!"

Safety Issues

The ban on farming, hunting, fishing and practicing traditional medicine has generated a situation in which communities can no longer consume basic, healthy, agrotoxin-free foods they used to have access to. Families must instead purchase most of their basic foods, which are often contaminated by agrotoxins. According to women in the community, these changes in their basic diet explain the surge in new health problems.

An elderly inhabitant claims “they used to live more peacefully.” The community produced its own food, whereas now families face the problem of producing their food due to the scarcity of land. She also adds that “there weren’t the illnesses there are now, they didn’t exist. The diseases were measles, whooping cough – the ones there always were – chicken pox, mumps. But diseases like diabetes, arthritis, arthrosis, thrombosis – none of that existed, nobody had any of that.”

Having enough money to be able to buy food becomes an additional pressure, whereby people have to leave their communities in search of work.

Forced to look elsewhere for work and un-kept promises

The persecution has caused a situation in which these communities feel like prisoners, as if they were cornered in their own houses, fenced in by a jungle that they can only look at but can't go into or share in its bounties. When asked if the projects conserve the rainforest, the inhabitants respond that, when they had their crops close to their homes, there was more to hunt because the animals also fed off their crops. But now they cannot plant and the animals have gone.

They do not agree at all with the idea that their traditional use of the jungle was putting its future in jeopardy. For example, in the case of one of the most common and appreciated food items, palm hearts, one inhabitant says, " Right here around my house there are lots of palms, the seeds fall to the ground; sometimes we throw them into the jungle, but then we can't harvest them, we aren't allowed to harvest them."

For this reason many inhabitants – the men, but also the women – are forced to sell their labor to the regional landowners or seek work in the smaller cities of the region or in the capital.

Ensuring a salary by working for the SPVS is also not a relevant option for these communities. When they arrived, SPVS promised jobs that would last for nearly 40 years – the same timeframe expected for the carbon project. According to inhabitants, SPVS initially employed 47 members of the community, mostly as forest rangers, but today there are few left. Former employees say that most were fired and now there are only seven employees left. Furthermore, the salaries they paid were and continue to be quite low, just a bit above minimum wage. Only three of the initial 47 employees were women, who were paid less than the men. The case of the Boticário Foundation is not very different. According to residents of the Morato community, there are only six people working.

While the middle class of Curitiba, the state capital, have bought houses in the region to spend their weekends and holidays, many local families have chosen to stop living there, which has emptied out the communities. However, there are also cases of families who have returned to their communities after finding it difficult to adapt to the city. One resident who lived for a time in the city and then returned says: "(…) I prefer this place, it's peaceful here. But (…) there's not much else we can do."

Communities resist and point to alternatives

Nevertheless, these communities continue to resist pressures from SPVS and the Boticário Foundation, whose goal appears to be to kick them out of this place. One community got organized in a unique way. At the turn of the past decade in Antonina, a landowner wanted to sell his lands to SPVS, which would have caused the expulsion of all the families who lived there. So they got organized and, with support from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), they occupied the land in 2003. There are currently 20 families there fighting for the squatter encampment located at the Rio Pequeno settlement, which carries the name of environmentalist José Lutzenberger, to be legalized as an agrarian reform settlement.

The community started small reforestation jobs and, opting in favor of agroecology, chose to work collectively with the agroforestry system to generate income for families in the future. In addition, each one of the families will have an individual plot of land for basic subsistence. One inhabitant, as she works with the agroforestry system on the recovery of one of the areas depleted by the landowner, says:

> "I have been living here for four years and I like it. (…) I work here, have some land too, and we work collectively. (…) So everyone helps , it's very good, all really nice (…) In the future, further along, there's going to be a thicket that will grow into agroforestry (…) so my

companions and I will be able to have income, I think this is for the future (…) And it's nice to come in here, see the trees, the plants. We don't work just for money, we work with life in mind as well. We work with a lot of pride, a lot of love. Because plants are a form of life just like us, they also get thirsty (…) I lived in the city (…) the city is horrible. (…) Not here, here you can leave houses open. (…) And for my kids, this place is paradise. (…) Here there's no violence at all."

The reality of Paraná also shows that communities do resist. And they offer us a series of elements for re-thinking the perverse model of development that the green economy seeks to reinforce. For example, these families are the ones who practice the recovery of nature. They show that human beings are a part of and depend on nature, and that nature is a source of riches that makes it possible for people to live well, conserving and enjoying true wealth.

Summary of the article "Economia Verde no Brasil: a privatização da Mata Atlântica: Projetos de REDD e áreas protegidas e seus impactos sobre mulheres e homens em comunidades tradicionais no litoral do Paraná", by Winfridus Overbeek, published in the magazine jointly with Amigos de la Tierra América Latina y el Caribe and with Grain/ Acción por la Biodiversidad sobre Economía Verde. To read the complete article in Portuguese, visit the Veja magazine site, and to access the complete publication in Spanish, go to:http://www.wrm.org.uy/temas/Economia_Verde/asalto_final_a_los_bienes_comunes.pdf