Brazil: Voices of local communities in Acre denounce violations in Community-based Sustainable Forest Management

In the business world, “sustainability” promises, among other things, that economic activity does not violate the rights of the communities affected, and that future generations will be able to continue to benefit from the natural setting where the activity is practiced. NGOs, companies and governments who promote “sustainable forest management” (SFM) claim that this is possible to achieve in tropical forests, using certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as a guarantee.

The state of Acre in the Amazon region of Brazil is considered an international pioneer and model for SFM, including “Community-based Sustainable Forest Management”. In this case, logging is carried out within the territories of rubber-tapping communities, to whom SFM was promoted with a great many promises – above all, the possibility of significantly increasing their income, while preserving the forest for future generations at the same time.

During a field visit to Acre, we listened to the stories of rubber tappers who have participated in Community-based SFM initiatives through their associations, including some in areas that have been certified by the FSC. The people we spoke to live in the Porto Dias and Chico Mendes Agro-Extractivist Settlements (PAEs). The first Community-based SFM experience took place in the Porto Dias PAE.

For this article, we decided not to reveal the identity of the majority of the people we spoke with, in order to prevent them from suffering any repercussions as a result of what they denounced: that SFM, even when it is labelled “community-based”, does not fulfil its promises, and threatens the rights of rubber tappers to maintain their ways of life and their control of the forest that they depend on for their survival.

Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) in Acre

In Acre, the coalition of political parties that has governed the state since 1999 has subscribed to the SFM concept since its inception. The current governor of the state, Tião Viana, stated in 2012 that “the forests of Acre are areas of production and wealth, with extractive characteristics, protected by the introduction of science and technology.” This could serve as the basis for creating “a dynamic and sustainable economy for current and future generations” and for “global, intelligent and humane insertion in the world.” (1)

During the Second International Expert Meeting on Sustainable Forest Management held in Acre in 2011, which also marked the 25th anniversary of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), Eduardo Mansur, a representative of the organization, declared that “Acre has succeeded in establishing a sustainable development model that is an example for all, because it followed sensible models of respect for the forest, and for traditional populations.” (2)

Impacts of community-based SFM on local communities

- A top-down proposal

FSC Brazil claims that the search for “alternative models of sustainable development” in Acre “is rooted in the ideals of the defence of the forest and sustainable development initiated and promoted by Chico Mendes,” the world-renowned leader of the organized struggle of rubber tappers in Acre and Brazil. The name and figure of Chico Mendes are constantly used in the discourse of those who control and benefit from SFM in Acre today.

But those who fought alongside Chico Mendes in this struggle stress that his goal was the creation of territories, known as Extractivist Reserves (RESEX), where rubber tappers could carry out their activities with full autonomy and control over the territory and the forest within the reserves.

Community-based SFM emerged in Acre in the mid-1990s with the support of technicians from an NGO called the Amazon Workers’ Centre (CTA), according to a long-time rubber tapper we spoke with, who also explained that this was a top-down proposal which presented the tappers with two options: “We could go along with the legal management, or our forest would go up in smoke,” a reference to the clearing of forests due to the expansion of cattle ranching and illegal logging. To persuade the community, the technicians from the CTA promised that SFM would generate a good income, and that selective, “low-impact” logging would conserve the forest.

The state government also played a fundamental role, subsidizing Community-based SFM and FSC certification, and even using international funding to do so. In 2002, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) provided the state government of Acre with 65 million US dollars in financing for the promotion of “sustainable development”, with forest management and infrastructure identified as key “instruments” for this purpose. (4)

The main FSC-accredited certification agency in Acre, Imaflora, also made concerted efforts to convince communities to become involved in community-based SFM: “Making certification and its benefits accessible to communities and small producers, attracting them towards a model of sustainable use of the forest, is a task undertaken as a priority by Imaflora since its beginnings.” (5)

- The “engineers” and companies occupy the “colocaçãos” [rubber tappers’ family landholdings]

As one rubber tapper told us, those who come to the communities to talk about sustainable management and FSC certification “are not forest people.” They are engineers from the firms that conduct forest inventories or head up the certification process, and “when the engineers are talking, everyone stays quiet,” he added. They have brought with them to the territories of the rubber tappers, in the words of the governor of Acre, “science and technology”.

This is essentially a violation of the community’s territorial rights, because the rubber tappers are no longer able to freely use their territories. So-called Community-based SFM, and particularly when it is certified, further strengthens the voice of the engineers who say what will be done in the SFM area, without listening to the rubber tappers.

- Broken promises of income

The people and institutions who convinced the communities to become involved in industrial logging activities promised them significant income in return. However, a married couple from the Chico Mendes PAE who spoke with us expressed their frustration over the small amount of money they have earned. For the extraction of timber from around 10 hectares of land, they will obtain 3,000 Brazilian reais – but they will have to wait until the end of the year to collect it, they complained, and furthermore, a percentage of the money will go to Cooperfloresta (see the box below). They emphasized that they could have earned more money from the land by gathering Brazil nuts, for example. Moreover, they told us that they have decided to pull out of the Community-based SFM initiative, but it is not that simple: they must continue for a certain amount of time in order to repay the costs of the technical work – for instance, the inventory conducted by third parties before the project began. This is part of the contract that they signed, which means that they are responsible for this debt, they say. However, there is one not-so-minor detail: they do not have a copy of the contract signed with Cooperfloresta.

Cooperfloresta

Cooperfloresta (the Community Forest Producers Cooperative) is a cooperative founded in 2005 and made up by “extractivist” families (whose traditional livelihoods depend on the extraction of non-timber forest products, such as rubber tapping and harvesting nuts and seeds), grouped into six associations, of which four have areas certified by the FSC. Cooperfloresta is responsible for selling the timber harvested by its members, seeking the best price. The cooperative has been subsidized by the government of Acre and the federal government through the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES). (6)

According to one of the inhabitants of the Porto Dias PAE, Cooperfloresta was created in the course of a month, with little discussion, and is “more of a company than a cooperative.”

Although it is called “community-based”, Community-based SFM is an activity with industrial purposes and is increasingly carried out by companies more than by community members. While a rubber tapper receives, based on various testimonies, no more than 100 reais (roughly 42 US dollars) for a cubic metre of wood per family, a logging company in Xapuri reported that the sale of sawn timber in the port of Santos, one of Brazil’s main ports, can yield up to 2,500 US dollars per cubic metre.

A community member from the Porto Dias settlement agrees with the “engineers” that when timber is certified by the FSC it gains extra, additional value: around 240 reais (roughly 100 dollars) per cubic metre of wood, as compared to 120 reais (just over 50 dollars) per cubic metre of timber harvested from a non-certified management area. At the same time, however, he stressed that certification increases the cost of production due to the additional expenditures on consulting and auditing firms. Thus the additional income is reduced due to the additional expenses, which are charged to the families participating in SFM.

The difficulties faced, even with all of the subsidies provided by the government, have reinforced the trend of an increasing proportion of logging being carried out by companies. And another growing trend is the sale of “standing timber”. Although the earnings per hectare are lower, in this case the rubber tappers do not need to do anything more – they simply receive the amount of money per hectare agreed upon with the logging company.

The current way of life and the future of the forest and the rubber tappers under threat

A family from the Chico Mendes PAE decided to withdraw from the Community-based SFM initiative. One of the main reasons for this decision was the devastation of the forest within their colocação – the landholding assigned to each family within a PAE – which they traditionally used to harvest non-timber forest products. During our visit they showed us a large clearing in the middle of the forest, inside their colocação. A number of new roads had been opened in the forest so that the skidder, a heavy vehicle used in a logging operation for pulling cut trees out of a forest, could reach this clearing where the logs were gathered in order to be transported on trucks to the sawmill. The family noted that all of these new roads contributed to blocking the rubber trails they use for their traditional livelihood of rubber tapping.

An inhabitant of the Porto Dias PAE told us that he had left the Community-based SFM programme three years ago after he “woke up” and realized that logging work was destroying the traditional way of life of the rubber tappers: “They extract rubber and know how to sell it, they gather Brazil nuts and know how to sell them. Timber is not something for rubber tappers, it is for engineers.”

With regard to Community-based SFM, Dercy Teles recounts:

> “They presented the management plan didactically, meticulously, in full detail, claiming that this (logging) activity is not threatening because where there are three trees of the same species – the parent, child and grandchild – the parent is cut down first, then the child, and then the grandchild, and during this cycle, other trees are growing. This claim is not justified, as anyone who really knows the forest could tell you.”

An inhabitant of the Porto Dias settlement pointed to the risk of a larger amount of timber being extracted, thus further increasing the impact on the forest, but noted that some are willing to take this risk because “everyone knows that timber brings in money.” The trend towards selling “standing” timber could also generate more destruction. And there is the additional risk of even more destruction resulting from a lack of adequate care taken during the cutting and transporting of the timber by outsourced workers, who are sometimes poorly trained and often employed under precarious working conditions. This has been confirmed by various FSC audit reports in the state of Acre. Meanwhile, the presence of companies and workers from outside the region has other impacts on the communities.

According to Dercy Teles:

> “We know that the logging is carried out by companies contracted for this purpose. The rubber tappers are merely guides. The inventory of the area is carried out by people from the outside. In addition to the damage that they cause, they also alter family relations, because they often become involved with women from the region who then leave their husbands. There are also cases of prostitution. In the community of Simintuba, the company that went to conduct the inventory disrupted the life of the community. There was an increase in prostitution – adolescent girls began to prostitute themselves when the company arrived – and

marriages were broken up."

Another Porto Dias resident said that it would be better "to leave behind the forest, the logging thing," but complained that the government provides little incentive for this and, in general, little support for the proposals of the communities. Dercy Teles reports: "With the cattle ranchers advancing on the reserve, community members end up giving in to cattle farming, because it is the only thing that provides them with a quick income." (7) But she added: "I am not obliged to knock down the forest in my colocação to raise cattle. I can combine it with another activity. And that is what I do. I raise cattle. I am not a cattle rancher." Numerous community members agreed that the meagre income provided by the sale of timber is leading to an expansion of cattle farming – an activity that logging is supposedly aimed at curbing.

Final considerations

In Acre, in 2010, more than 960,000 hectares of land were under sustainable management plans negotiated with the Environment Institute of Acre (IMAC) in public, private and community areas. Of this total area, 30,300 hectares were exploited that year, resulting in the extraction of 756,000 cubic metres of timber in the form of roundwood, primarily by companies and large landholders. This represented an increase of 79% over the previous year and a 150% increase in the volume of roundwood extracted annually compared to the previous decade, which demonstrates that logging in Acre is in full expansion.

Thus we can see that instead of the needed reduction in the consumption of tropical timber – one of the main direct causes of deforestation – a new market for "sustainable" timber has been created. Paradoxically, there is a shortage of timber in Acre.

Clearly, the extraction of "sustainable" and "certified" tropical timber is being carried out today so that a small few in the urban centres of Brazil and other countries, primarily the most industrialized countries of the global North, can have access to luxury products made from precious wood, at the expense of the vast majority of the people in the areas where the timber is extracted and their surroundings.

We conclude by reaffirming the need to respect, value and provide incentives for the way of life of rubber tapper communities. They have vast experience in their traditional livelihood practices, which do not destroy the forest and require very little expenditure, such as the extraction and gathering of latex, Brazil nuts and açaí. In the words of Dercy Teles: "Above all, we believe that in order to guarantee the preservation of nature, there is a need to value the products that have proven to be sustainable for centuries, as in the case of extractivism. Rubber tappers are extractors, they extract latex. For us, this means well-being, because one can live an extremely tranquil life in harmony with nature. It is very good to live in the forest." And in the words of Chico Mendes: "We learned from the indigenous people and from the forest a way to raise our children. We satisfy all of our basic needs and we have created our own culture, one that brings us much closer to the indigenous tradition than to the tradition of the 'civilized' people. (…) Together (indigenous peoples, rubber tappers, riverine communities, etc.) we can protect nature." (8)

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(1) Acre+20 – Uma Terra de Sonhos, um Mundo de Oportunidades, 2012.
(2) Paula, Elder Andrade de (2012), "A dupla face da destruição das florestas tropicais" (http://www.

wrm.org.uy/oldsite/paises/Brasil/A_dupla_face_da_destruicao_das_florestas_tropicais.pdf).
(3) http://br.fsc.org/newsroom.261.4.htm
(4) Carvalho, Ricardo da Silveira: “Desenvolvimento, sustentabilidade e manejo madeireiro em comunidades no sudoeste da Amazônia: um olhar para além da engenharia florestal”. Master’s thesis, Universidad de Lavras, 2009.
(5) http://intranet.gvces.com.br/cms/arquivos/caminhos_para_a_mudanca.pdf
(6) http://cooperfloresta.com/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=57
(7) http://www.wrm.org.uy/oldsite/boletim/172/opiniao.html#7%20e
(8) Revista Contracorrente, interview with Dercy Teles Cunha Carvalho, vice-president of the Rural Workers Union of Xapuri, Acre, “O extrativismo morreu”, 2013 (http://issuu.com/guilhermeresende/docs/contracorrente5).