
The green economy and labour: Will “green jobs” protect workers' health and safety?

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 160 million people suffer from work-related diseases, 270 million are involved in work-related accidents annually, and two million workers die from work-related diseases and accidents every year. ILO Director-General Juan Somavia has stated that the “green economy” – promoted by the UN itself and the central theme of the Rio+20 conference next month – should work towards greater protection of the health and safety of workers across the world. But will the activities that will be promoted as part of the so-called green economy actually contribute to achieving this goal?

The “green economy” of monoculture tree plantations

Among the companies that could benefit a great deal from the “greening” of the economy are those that promote monoculture tree plantations, which are considered to be “forests” by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO). FAO predicts a massive increase in these monoculture plantations, between 40 and 90 million hectares of “planted forests” by the year 2030, not including oil palm plantations. In the context of the green economy, many of these so-called forests will be monoculture plantations of trees that can serve as “green” energy sources, such as:

- (1) Plantations that not only supply trees for pulp and paper production, but can also be used to produce cellulose-based agrofuels in an industrial facility known as a biorefinery. One of these facilities is already under construction in Finland.
- (2) Plantations of fast-growing trees for biomass, for example, to produce charcoal as a source of energy for iron and steel foundries or wood pellets for electric power generation in Europe. There are numerous wood-fired power plants under construction in Europe, primarily in the United Kingdom.
- (3) Plantations of oil palm, mainly in Indonesia, to produce oil that will be refined to obtain biodiesel, which can be burned to generate electricity or used as fuel for motor vehicles and airplanes, primarily in Europe.

There are also plans to establish millions of more hectares of plantations in order to “sell” carbon, for example, in Indonesia and India, where these plantations will “supply” industries in the North with “carbon credits” based on the false supposition that these “credits” can offset their greenhouse gas emissions.

“Green jobs”

In this scenario, the countries of the South will supposedly benefit from the creation of “green jobs”. FAO itself, back in 2009, stated that “sustainable forest management” could create 10 million new jobs. Since the sustainable forest management practiced for centuries by forest peoples is under ever greater threat, and considering the enormous lobbying power that the monoculture tree plantation industry wields over FAO, we can only reach one conclusion: that according to FAO, green jobs are

created through the establishment of industrial tree plantations, which continue to expand ever further.

Throughout the years, WRM has reported extensively on the conditions faced by workers, both men and women, on large-scale industrial plantations of eucalyptus, pine, oil palm and rubber trees. These workers tend to be people from local communities, who carry out particularly hazardous tasks, such as spraying toxic chemical pesticides and fertilizers and operating chainsaws. In the last 20 years we have seen working conditions become increasingly precarious, through outsourcing and even “outsourcing of outsourcing”, payment on a piece-work basis, pay cuts, total disregard for workers' rights, and the obstruction of trade union organizing. How can safe and healthy jobs be created in these conditions?

These are the workers who were severely hit by the economic-financial crisis that erupted in 2008, when the global demand for industrial goods declined. Many were laid off, forced to face the despair of unemployment and to pay the price for a crisis they did not cause, to save the profit margins of the company owners. These workers may eventually be rehired, but they have no guarantee of employment in the medium and long term. What the companies want is flexibility.

The trend of companies undertaking ever larger industrial projects has tended to further aggravate the situation. In Brazil, the conditions faced by workers on the construction site of what will be the world's largest pulp mill, owned by Eldorado Brasil – as described in this edition of the WRM bulletin – leaves no room for doubt: these projects generate insecurity and even desperation in the lives of the workers, most of them brought in from outside the region, as well as for the local population.

How can safe and healthy jobs be created?

Quite often, the temporary workers hired by the companies connected to monoculture plantations were formerly peasant farmers. When they had their own land, they had labour security and could live in peace, in an intact environment that offered them such riches as pure water, food, natural remedies, etc. This is the story of the communities in Indonesia who saw their environment destroyed by oil palm companies who promised that the plantations would improve their lives. Disillusioned, they have decided to fight back to reclaim their lands. The story of one of these communities is also presented in this edition.

To pursue the goal of truly safe and healthy work, a number of urgent measures are required, among them:

- Public policies to control and monitor companies to ensure that they respect the rights of workers, and strict penalties for companies that violate them.
- Public policies that guarantee the land rights of communities and provide support for their production of food and other crops, so that they have the security to continue working their land and, at the same time, to preserve the natural environment on which they depend.
- Policies to halt the ongoing process of privatization and concentration of land ownership in the name of investments in the green economy, for example, for the establishment of monoculture tree plantations for biomass and agrofuel production.

These measures could genuinely contribute to the creation of decent work, ensuring and promoting safer and more ecologically sound workplaces, with the native vegetation preserved intact, so that

people can work and live happily.