
The new trend of biomass plantations in Brazil: tree monocultures

A new expansion cycle: carbon and biomass plantations

Within the context of Brazil's efforts to be a global economic power, a report was brought out by the Secretary of Strategic Affairs of the new government, under president Dilma Rousseff, which the Brazilian media got access in March this year. It announced that the new governmental policy is to more than double the tree plantation area in Brazil to 15 million hectares, increasing Brazil's market share from US\$ 7 billion to US\$ 25 billion. While the first expansion cycle aimed especially at pulp and paper production, this time the government aims to expand plantations for different purposes. The pressing issue is that billions of subsidies are needed to achieve this aim, more than the government itself is willing to contribute.

In this sense, the international focus on the climate crisis came as a very welcome alternative angle for the corporative sector and the government to use to open the door to new subsidies, especially for 'renewable' carbon plantations, with doubtful climate benefits. For example, the Plantar company in the state of Minas Gerais has been a pioneer in offering carbon credits through a CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) project based on renewable eucalyptus tree plantations, ironically destined to be burnt again, emitting back into the atmosphere all the CO₂ that was stored. The resulting charcoal is the energy source for Plantar's pig iron industry.

Another example is the efforts of companies like Fibria and Suzano Papel e Celulose to sell carbon credits from the carbon stored in its plantations on the voluntary carbon market through the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX), a stock exchange to commercialise carbon credits, founded in 2003. Once again, this mechanism is about a temporary carbon storage, not a permanent one, which is what is needed to combat the climate crisis. Another way that the Brazilian government has attempted to get subsidies is to get a new instrument improved at UNFCCC level called 'forests in exhaustion'. This instrument would guarantee that the older tree plantations receive money from the carbon market to guarantee the replanting of these plantations.

One of the latest developments is the plan to implement large-scale eucalyptus tree monoculture plantations for biomass wood production in the Northeast of Brazil by the company Suzano Papel e Celulose. Suzano is a private company that has been operating for 85 years. It is the second largest eucalyptus wood pulp producer in the world, with five pulp mills in Brazil, located in the states of São Paulo and Bahia, which produced 2.7 million tons of pulp and paper in 2008. Nowadays it controls 722 thousand hectares of land with 324 thousand hectares of eucalyptus plantations, in the states of Bahia, São Paulo, Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, Tocantins and Maranhão. Suzano has ambitious plans to increase its pulp and paper production to 7.2 million tons with three new industrial complexes: one in each of the Northeastern states of Maranhão and Piauí, and a third one that still has not been decided on.

Suzano's biomass plantations

Suzano also has even more ambitious plans: to invest in a new type of plantation - biomass

plantations. In order to achieve this plan, in mid-2010 the Suzano Group created a new company called Suzano Energia Renovável (Suzano Renewable Energy). The proposed investment amounts to US\$ 1.3 billion, and includes five wood pallet production units, with a total production capacity of 5 million tons of biomass fuel. The first phase includes land acquisitions and the construction of three wood pallet production units, producing 1 million tons each, which would start operating in 2013. Suzano expects a liquid income of US\$ 500 million in 2014, and already has guaranteed sales contracts for 2.7 million tons. A non-binding 'memory of understanding' was signed between Suzano and the UK company MGT Power Ltd. in August 2010.

No public information is available about where exactly the biomass plantations will be located in the Northeast of Brazil and how many hectares will be necessary, however, field trials with eucalyptus and acacia were carried out in Piauí and Maranhão in 2009. The company's director, André Dorf, declared in 2010: "the lands have already been prospected and the acquisition process must take place still this year", stressing also that the Northeast "(...) has our preference because of the proximity of important ports which facilitates the flow of the production, once our aim is supplying the European continent".

Biomass plantations are very different from wood pulp plantations. The rotation cycle is two to three years instead of the seven years that is normally used, and the trees will be planted more densely. Different from wood pulp and paper production, which aims for a maximum of cellulose (to be transformed into pulp) and a minimum of lignin (the 'glue' of the tree), the plantations for 'energetic' purposes aim for a maximum of lignin. According to the director André Dorf, around 30 thousand hectares are necessary for producing 1 million tons of wood pellets. Considering the aim of Suzano to produce 5 million tons of wood pellets, a total of 150 thousand hectares of land is therefore needed.

Problems are already happening in the Northeast of Brazil with Suzano's land acquisitions for eucalyptus plantations for pulp production. This is a region where, for example, traditional quilombola communities still struggle to get the rights over their traditional territories recognised. Inaldo Serejo, coordinator from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in Maranhão, affirms in an interview that "there is an expansion going on in Maranhão, for example, of companies like Suzano Papel e Celulose that has been buying immense land areas, occupied by traditional communities, to plant eucalyptus". Therefore, an increase in problems can be expected with the further expansion of new biomass plantations.

Resistance to biomass monoculture in Brazil

The Movement of Small Peasants (MPA), one of the major rural peasants' movements in the Northeast of Brazil, and members of Via Campesina Brazil have been struggling for years against tree monoculture expansion in Brazil, through demonstrations and other protest actions. Raul Krauser from the national coordination of the MPA explains the reasons of their resistance struggle: "We already have bitterly accumulated a list of impacts on the lives of peasants from eucalyptus monoculture expansion: acquisition of big unproductive farms that should be destined to agrarian land reform; rise in land prices in the whole region; the companies are fencing [in] the peasant communities and put pressure on them to sell their lands; families get scared of staying isolated in a plantation area and because of the persecution of the companies, together with local elites, they sell their lands; local economies go worse, increase in hunger, violence and social degradation; organisations that oppose to this expansion are criminalised by the companies and by the 'Brazilian state' that gives subsidies, fiscal incentives, economical, military, juridical and also moral support, creating an image that who is against these mega-projects is against development. Considering the

fragility of the caatinga biome, the previews of climate change in the region, (..), the impacts in the Northeast will be undoubtedly much worse and the proportions of the disaster much bigger than we have seen in other regions of the country. There is a tendency that peasant communities will be destroyed, what will immediately mean a decrease in food production, threatening the local food supply, therefore the society as a whole will be affected.”

Krauser continues affirming that: “We are strongly against this expansion, once if the burning of wood is considered less polluting, the production of the wood is highly dangerous and bad for the life of peasants and other communities, bad for the development of the country. We have enough cases that prove sufficiently that where tree monocultures enter, also hunger, misery, social inequalities increase. So-called sustainable development does not go together with tree monocultures in tropical countries. What the companies tell is not more than an illusion.”

According to the latest information from the Suzano website, it is stated in the report of the first trimester of 2011 that “The company is evaluating alternatives for structuring of capital for Suzano Energia Renovável”, a sign that the company has still not found enough financial support to fully implement the project.

Final remarks on the implications of biomass monoculture

As the Brazilian experience with industrial tree monocultures shows, there is a huge potential for conflicts wherever this model is expanded. In the case of the Northeast, major concerns are the direct and indirect expelling of local peasant populations by up to 150 thousand hectares of plantations and, besides, the loss of water resources through the fast-growing plantations. As a matter of fact, these would probably be the first commercial plantations with such a short rotation cycle in Brazil and worldwide. And all this in a region, the Northeast of Brazil, traditionally affected by heavy drought periods.

This example shows, once again, that the only way to start solving the global climate crisis is by drastically cutting carbon emissions in the North. Implementing large-scale monoculture tree plantations within a conventional agricultural model, and transporting wood pallets over the ocean for power stations in the UK, is just another false solution, whilst simultaneously creating new problems for local communities in the Northeast of Brazil.

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