Forest carbon project in Paraná, Brazil: Reduction of deforestation and persecution of local communities

In 1999, a number of years before the emergence of REDD, one of the world's first forest carbon projects was launched. A joint initiative of Brazilian NGO *Sociedade de Pesquisa em Vida Selvagem e Educação Ambiental* (Society for Wildlife Research and Environmental Education, SPVS) and U.S.-based NGO The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the project is located on the coast of the southern Brazilian state of Paraná, more specifically, in the municipalities of Antonina and Guaraqueçaba.

With funding from three U.S. corporations – General Motors, American Electric Power and Chevron – SPVS acquired a total of 18,600 hectares of land. The organization claims that through its conservation efforts and activities to restore degraded areas, 860,000 tons of carbon have already been removed from the atmosphere (1). Under the logic of REDD projects, the carbon credits generated would be used by the U.S. corporations that provided the financing to "offset" or compensate for part of their contaminating emissions. However, there is little information available on either the SPVS website or the sites of the corporations involved regarding the actual amounts transferred to the NGO by these corporations. The local communities we visited also had no knowledge of this, which demonstrates a lack of information and transparency.

The SPVS website (2) reports that, according to the Brazilian Forestry Service, the project falls under the category of "REDD actions that have generated good results." However, the project has caused devastating impacts on the local communities who live around the SPVS forest reserves.

Brief historical background

Since the colonization of the region by the Portuguese, the Paraná coastal area has been inhabited by so-called *caiçara* (3) communities, indigenous communities and quilombola communities (made up by escaped African slaves and their descendants). These different communities practice agricultural and extractive activities. They live in harmony with the forest, where they grow subsistence crops, mainly cassava, through the traditional farming system of shifting cultivation. From the Mata Atlântica or Atlantic Forest they gather palm hearts for food, vines for craft making, and wood for building houses, fences and fishing canoes. They hunt and fish to feed their families.

Obviously, these communities depend a great deal on the forest for their survival, and they have developed a relationship of harmonious coexistence with it. Proof of this is the fact that this region is one of the most well-preserved areas of the Atlantic Forest biome, which has suffered a higher degree of destruction than any other biome in Brazil.

These communities had never bothered to register or fence the lands where they live, since they considered this territory to be an area of shared use, belonging to everyone. Most of the lands were legally classified as *devolutas*, or publicly owned, on which the families lived with their belongings that were passed down from generation to generation. They worked the land, sometimes individually as a family unit, or sometimes collectively, practicizing itinerant agriculture.

The arrival of the ranchers

One of the first major changes in the region began in the 1960s with the arrival of loggers and, especially, ranchers. These ranchers began to register and take over control of the land, in many cases through *grilagem* (illegal registration and appropriation of land), a common practice in rural areas of Brazil. As a consequence, the local communities were threatened and many families were forced off of their lands. The ranchers used *jagunços* (hired killers) and even water buffaloes to invade and take over the properties of small farmers. Ranchers in this region opted to raise water buffalo instead of cattle, because they are heartier and more resilient animals and thus better suited to the local conditions in the deforested areas, which are prone to flooding, making access and locomotion difficult.

The arrival of SPVS – and its promises

In the late 1990s, the SPVS arrived in the region and began to buy up large areas of land from the ranchers. It also managed to buy up a certain amount of land from*posseiros* (farmers without official land ownership documents), mainly from those who felt pressured by the NGO. According to local inhabitants, at the beginning, the SPVS provided jobs for 47 people from the community, paying them slightly more than the minimum wage. Three of the employees were women, who were paid even lower salaries than the men. The SPVS promised that these jobs would last for 40 years, the planned lifetime of the project. Most of the local community members hired were employed as forest rangers. In addition to providing employment, the SPVS promised it would improve the incomes and lives of local families.

The project's impacts on the community

In reality, however, the arrival of the SPVS dealt a heavy blow to local communities. As the NGO began to buy up land in the area, the communities living nearby gradually lost access to the abundant forest and the rivers; in other words, they began to lose their freedom, their autonomy, their right to freely move about and their right to their own way of life. They even lost the right to cut down native trees on their own properties, as in the case of a local inhabitant who had planted a grove of juçara palm, a native tree used for harvesting palm hearts, for self-sustenance. Today, he is prohibited from cutting down these trees, even though they are located on his own land.

To intimidate the local communities into submission, the SPVS brought in the environmental police of the state of Paraná, known as the "Força Verde" or "Green Force". Their persecution of the communities continues until today, with Força Verde officers going so far as to forcibly enter and search private homes without due authorization.

A local community member reports:

> *They wanted us to collaborate with them, and we agreed to collaborate (…) but then they started sending the guards in. Around three days went by and they started to send the guards to my house. They came in saying that I had hidden things there, it was completely wrong, if the door was closed they would come in anyway. They would bang on the door and say they had a court order, they didn't care about anything, they would just come right in. (...) The Força Verde came into our house numerous times, not once or twice, many times. (…) If there was any kind of weapon in the house, they would grab it and take it with them. (…) You couldn't even have a knife, they would take it away, they wanted everything. (…) They never showed us anything, they just turned up and came right into the house. Once when I wasn't*

> *home they came in holding a gun. My brother-in-law was in bed, the door was ajar like that, my father was there outside. They came along, pushed the door, banged on it until the latch came open. My brother-in-law was sick, with the flu and a headache. They showed him a gun and he said, "What's going on, I'm sick and you break in like this." (…) And they showed up at my house like that numerous times. Collaboration? That kind of collaboration isn't good for anything, it's just harassment. It would be better to end it. And they tried to fool a lot of people that way.*

Another community member told us that her husband was handcuffed in their home by the Força Verde, who claimed that they were just doing their job. Another time, when he cut down a tree to build a canoe, he was imprisoned for 11 days, and had to pay bail in order to be released. Their lives today are filled with hardships and fear: if they stay at home, they have no means of survival, but if her husband goes out to look for work elsewhere, she and her children will be left alone, frightened and unsafe. This also underscores how the impacts of the SPVS project and the persecution accompanying it affect women and families as a whole.

Many families have been so traumatized that they have chosen to move away from the place where they have lived for generations. Families who used to grow cassava and then produce and sell cassava flour now have to buy all of the food they eat, including cassava flour. The resulting change in dietary habits is one of the causes of increased health problems, according to the local inhabitants. Some of them now suffer from high blood pressure, stress and other ailments that were previously unknown among these communities. In addition, as more and more local families move away and the communities grow smaller, middle-class families from Curitiba, the state capital, have begun to buy up land and houses where they can spend weekends and holidays.

The promises of improved living conditions and opportunities for income generation gave rise to a handful of initiatives that gradually dwindled out over the years. A women's group was organized so they could earn income through dressmaking, and while the project lasted for a short time, it has now ceased to exist, according to a number of women from the communities. The promise of employment with the SPVS was not kept, either. Former employees from the communities report that almost all of them were fired, and only seven community members still work for the NGO. The only initiative that seems to have prospered in any way is a honey production project, but it does not directly involve the most heavily affected communities.

The communities fight back

In spite of the difficulties they face, local communities have managed to resist the pressures exerted by the SPVS, which seems to be determined to drive all of them out of the area. One group of local inhabitants organized in a rather special way. Near the beginning of the last decade, a ranch owner in the municipality of Antonina wanted to sell his land to the SPVS, which would have led to the eviction of the families living there. The local communities joined together and with the support of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) they occupied the land in 2003. Today there are 20 families living in the camp established there, which is named after late environmental activist José Lutzenberger. They continue to fight for the camp to be officially designated as an agrarian reform settlement by the Brazilian government.

During the community's arduous struggle against the pressures of the ranch owner, the SPVS and environmental agencies, a series of environmental crimes committed by the ranch owner – such as the diversion of a river and the indiscriminate use of toxic agrochemicals – were reported to the

environmental authorities, but went completely ignored. Nevertheless, the camp's families have continued to develop their community. They have carried out small reforestation projects, and have decided to work collectively on the basis of an agroforestry system, combining organic farming with the cultivation of trees. Each family will also have a small individual parcel of land to meet their own basic subsistence needs.

The area occupied by the camp borders on the SPVS reserve. According to the local inhabitants, the forested areas under the control of the communities are in better condition than those controlled by the SPVS.

The future

Near one of the local communities there is a research centre, in the middle of the forest, where SPVS is carrying out studies on Atlantic Forest tree species, according to the inhabitants. This research is being financed by HSBC, a private international bank, through the HSBC Climate Partnership programme. According to the HSBC Brazil website, this is an "innovative environmental programme" aimed at "the preservation of the planet." (4)

In the meantime, the future of the local communities is seriously endangered if the SPVS model of forest preservation, which has the full support of state authorities, particularly the environmental and police agencies, continues to dominate the region. It is absolutely urgent to stop the abuse and persecution of these communities. As the testimonies of local inhabitants of the region demonstrate, they are being subjected to a host of serious violations of human rights, including social, cultural and environmental rights.

In the words of one community member:

> *Yes, we have always preserved the forest, except that sometimes we need to cut a few trees too, sometimes we need to build a house, we need wood. But it's not allowed, so things are difficult. (…) Before we would clear a few trees to plant our crops, but we can't do that anymore. When the SPVS arrived, that was the end of everything. In the place where my father lived, it's impossible to live now. Before he had his crops, he planted cassava, he planted beans, but now they can't plant anything. (…) Before he didn't have to buy beans, he didn't have to buy corn, he planted lots of vegetables, he cleared a few trees and planted, and he got most of his food from the land. And now he can't plant anything, he has to buy everything. Rice and beans and cassava, all the things he used to plant. (…) Before there were no diseases and now a lot of people are sick all the time. (…) They promised that they were going to help my father but up until now we haven't seen any help, things have just gotten worse and worse. They said they were going to help, and then the Força Verde came and wanted to take my father to prison on top of everything else. That's the help they've given us…*

To combat global warming, what is urgently needed is for the U.S. corporations involved in the SPVS project to immediately start reducing their carbon emissions, instead of compensating for those emissions by purchasing carbon credits generated in an area where the people are being punished for something worthy of respect: their forest conservation practices.

(1) http://www.revistavisaoambiental.com.br/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=643:projeto-de-carbono-colabora-com-o

-desenvolvimento-sustentavel-de-comunidades-no-parana&catid=5:noticias&Itemid=5
(2) http://www.spvs.org.br/download/boletins/bol_jan10.html :
(3) Communities that have emerged from genetic and cultural mixing among the first Portuguese settlers and Indians who lived on the coast. They live in isolation, practicing different activities for their survival. (source: http://www.ilhabela.com.br/CULTURA/index.html)
(4)http://www.hsbc.com.br/1/2/portal/pt/sobre-o-hsbc/sustentabilidade
/meio-ambiente/hsbc-climate-partnership