
Chikweti plantations in Mozambique: Will the FSC continue certifying the uncertifiable?

The FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) website has announced that the company Chikweti Forests of Niassa, which operates in the province of Niassa in northern Mozambique, is seeking the FSC “green label” for a 33,916-hectare monoculture tree plantation. According to the website, the pre-evaluation was carried out in November 2010, and the main evaluation is anticipated for February/March 2011. The FSC certification body in this case is Soil Association Woodmark, based in the United Kingdom.

Companies that promote large-scale monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations began establishing operations in Niassa in 2005, and Chikweti is one of the most prominent among them. The companies have been drawn to Niassa because it is the largest province in Mozambique, it offers a flat terrain and fertile soil, and it has a relatively small population of one million people.

But although the population of Niassa is relatively small, no fewer than 70% to 80% of its inhabitants live in rural areas. Since 2007, when the companies began planting trees, the main peasant organization in Mozambique, the National Union of Small Farmers (UNAC), has denounced the fact that the companies are planting eucalyptus trees on land that belongs to peasant communities, thus reducing peasant families’ access to land for growing crops. According to UNAC, this threatens the food security and sovereignty of local families and the region as a whole.

It should be noted that the Mozambique Land Law of 1997 guarantees peasant families access to their lands. When a company wants to use land that belongs to a community, even if it has a concession from the national government, it must carry out a consultation process with the community. However, a 2008 report conducted for the Embassy of Sweden revealed that this process was not effectively carried out, and the communities’ views were not heard. The communities have also complained about the poor working conditions offered by the pine and eucalyptus plantation companies.

In November 2009, two activists from the Brazil-based Alert Against the Green Desert Network travelled to communities in Niassa to hear from community leaders – known as *régulos* – about their experiences with pine and eucalyptus plantations in the region. At the same time, they shared their own experiences with communities in Brazil that have suffered the impacts of monoculture tree plantations for over 40 years. The Brazilian activists were able to confirm the denunciations made by UNAC, which were gathered in a report published by WRM: “[The Expansion of Tree Monocultures in Mozambique: Impacts on local peasant communities in the province of Niassa, a field report](#)”. The report noted that the companies whose plantations were causing problems for local communities were seeking FSC certification.

Perhaps this is why Chikweti Forests of Niassa called on a group of its technicians to respond to and challenge the WRM publication (see http://wrm.org.uy/countries/Mozambique/carta_Chikweti.pdf), particularly with regard to the complaints of local community members who reported that they had been fired by the company, that they had no right to transportation, that there was differentiated

treatment of “white” and “black” workers, and that the monoculture tree plantations were taking over lands used by peasant families, among other complaints. The company addressed these issues in its letter, although here we will only highlight its claim that it uses “abandoned” fields for planting trees.

WRM, in turn, responded to the letter from Chikweti

(see http://wrm.org.uy/countries/Mozambique/Resposta_WRM_para_Chikweti.pdf), stressing that “our publication is the result of real and frank conversations with peasant men and women, who expressed their complaints and concerns,” and that “the seriousness of these complaints and concerns led WRM (...) to publish them.” With regard to the issue of land use, WRM stressed that according to the peasant farmers interviewed, the fields that the company was using for monoculture tree plantations were not in fact “abandoned” but had merely been left fallow to allow the soil to rest before replanting.

In October 2010, two peasant farmers representing UNAC visited Brazil to continue the exchange begun by the Brazilian activists. There they were able to see with their own eyes the disastrous impacts of monocultures and eucalyptus trees on peasant communities in the states of Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais. They witnessed first-hand how water sources had dried up, how peasant families were gradually forced off their lands, and how the lack of access to land for those who remained affected their food security and sovereignty, especially for women. As in Mozambique, the companies in Brazil had also promised to create many new jobs, but once the plantations were established, very few workers in the communities were able to obtain employment, and the conditions were extremely poor. On the other hand, the peasant agriculture initiatives that they visited demonstrated how this way of working with the land generates a great deal more employment and income, preserves the environment, and allows families to continue living in the countryside.

It appears that the companies operating in Niassa are following in the footsteps of those responsible for what has happened in Brazil, particularly in terms of the situation of local peasant families. What’s more, they want to legitimize their activities with the FSC green label, as in the case of Chikweti Forests of Niassa.

In this regard, we will quote once again from WRM’s response to Chikweti: “We would like to point out as well that we have observed, on an international level, that the process of certification under the principles and criteria of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) has ceased to consult with and listen to the communities impacted by tree monocultures, which has benefited the eucalyptus and pine plantation companies. It is precisely these companies that hire consulting firms to carry out certification. In our opinion, for this and other reasons, the FSC has irresponsibly permitted the certification of hundreds of millions of hectares of eucalyptus and pine monoculture plantations operated by companies around the world, erroneously declaring that these plantations are ‘socially beneficial, environmentally appropriate and economically viable.’”

Finally, we have a message for the Mozambican authorities, the FSC and above all the European investors in the monoculture tree plantations in Niassa (1): a monoculture tree plantation, whether of eucalyptus, pine or any other tree species, does not bring benefits to local communities; on the contrary, it causes negative impacts like those taking place in Niassa. The FSC cannot be allowed to once again certify the uncertifiable.

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(1) The government of Sweden, the Norwegian company Green Resources and the Global Solidarity Forest Fund, supported by churches in Sweden and Norway and the Dutch pension fund ABP.

