
Brazil: Industrial eucalyptus plantations in southwest Bahia – conflicts and confrontations

The Brazilian countryside, since the time of colonization, has always been the target of capitalist appropriation, driven by the logic of the accumulation of wealth and profits, with the Brazilian state mediating the maintenance of the capitalist world order. This logic, supported by technical assistance and bank credit agencies or by the active participation of multinational corporations, is manifested in the appropriation of nature and its transformation into merchandise, leading to growing concentration of control over rural areas, above all.

More recently, in the state of Bahia, with the creation of Odebrecht Perfurações Ltda. in 1979 and the Camaçari Petrochemical Complex, massive investments were made in the production of pulp and paper in coastal areas of northern Bahia. In this domestic industrial market, the Brazilian state established the foundations for the expansion of eucalyptus plantations, extending this production towards the south and extreme south of Bahia. This was the framework for the construction of the BR 101 highway linking two major cities, Vitória in the state of Espírito Santo and Salvador in the state of Bahia, to enable and facilitate the occupation and exploitation of the region by industrial eucalyptus plantations. This expansion strategy turned the region of southwest Bahia into the “hotspot” of the moment.

The interest of the tree plantation sector in the region of southwest Bahia dates back to the times of the coffee plantation crisis, which began in the late 1980s and grew more acute in the 1990s due to drop in world coffee prices and the decrease in the area planted in the Planalto da Conquista region. It is important to note that this was also the period of the largest number of land occupations, with more than 20 between the years 1986 and 2000. The first of these was on an estate of the former Brazilian Institute of Coffee (IBC), which is now the União Settlement.

Thus the cattle-farming and coffee-growing eras were followed by a new stage of agribusiness capital investment in southwest Bahia, that of eucalyptus plantations. It is important to stress that, unlike the south and extreme south of Bahia, the eucalyptus grown in the Planalto da Conquista region is primarily used to supply charcoal for the iron and steel industry in northern Minas Gerais, as well as providing firewood for ceramic production and treated wood for various agricultural, industrial and civil construction activities.

In this context, rural producers and forestry sector companies, supported by public education, research and extension institutions such as EMBRAPA Florestas and the State University of Bahia (UESB), set their sights on tree plantation agribusiness for investment opportunities aimed at quick profits. It is important to stress the fundamental role played in this period by the UESB through its reinforcement of the concept of “forestry agribusiness”, which served to promote the establishment of industrial eucalyptus plantations. Following two symposiums held in 1992 and 2005, these discussions spread to numerous municipal governments and producers in the region.

In the meantime, social movements, non-governmental organizations, environmentalists and other sectors of civil society began to mobilize under a collective banner of opposition to the expansion of large-scale industrial eucalyptus plantations, protection of the environment, and the search for sustainable alternatives.

This mobilization led to the emergence of the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), the Mixed Agricultural Cooperative of Small Farmers of Southwest Bahia (COOPASUB), the Centre for Coexistence and Agroecological Development of Southwest Bahia (CEDASB), the Mata de Cipó (“Vine Forest”) Institute, and more recently, the Forum of Social Entities and Movements of Southwest Bahia. All of them share in the search for socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives for the region, and for many of them, this translates into explicit struggle against tree plantation agribusiness.

As a consequence, rising up against the deafening rumble of the tractors knocking down what is left of the region’s vine forests is the cry of “We can’t eat paper or charcoal!” It is both a warning cry and a battle cry, which resulted in the union, symbolic and real, of the banners of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), the Unemployed Workers Movement (MTD), the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), the Centre for Social Studies and Action (CEAS), and the other movements and organizations mentioned previously, at the First Regional Seminar Against Industrial Eucalyptus Plantations in 2001.

At the seminar, a strategy was outlined to stay a step ahead of the “forestry agribusiness” sector, through the occupation of rural estates that could be used to establish new eucalyptus plantations. Local seminars were also organized to discuss, with the affected communities, the issue of eucalyptus plantations and their impacts on health and the environment. Another important event was an exchange held in the traditional rural “geraisera” community of Rio Pardo de Minas, in northern Minas Gerais, in 2002, when the community was waging a hard-fought battle against the company Minas Floresta for the recovery and demarcation of its ancestral territories. In 2004, another exchange with the Centre for Alternative Agriculture of Northern Minas Gerais (CAA) and with the Peoples of the Cerrado contributed to forging closer links between the peoples of northern Minas Gerais and southwest Bahia in the fight against eucalyptus plantations and the search for socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable alternatives.

The city of Vitória da Conquista, the hub of the southwest Bahia region, has been directly and indirectly affected by the expansion of pulp and paper giant Veracel. It has been heavily impacted by the expansion of eucalyptus plantations stimulated by the iron and steel industry centre in Betim, Minas Gerais, where there is a particular interest in eucalyptus wood for charcoal production. There are already nearly 35,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations in this municipality, and an estimated 15,000 hectares in Encruzilhada as well as more than 20,000 in the municipalities of Barra do Choça, Cordeiros, Piripá, Cândido Sales, Planalto and Poções, all located in the Planalto da Conquista region. It is estimated that there are some 658,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations in the state of Bahia as a whole, making it the country’s third largest producer of industrially grown eucalyptus. Of this total, an estimated 70% of the plantations are in the south or extreme south of Bahia.

The abovementioned seminars and collective trajectory of organizations and social movements dealing with this problem led to the creation in 2011 of a space for discussion and action against these industrial tree plantation projects, called the Forum of Social Organizations and Movements of Southwest Bahia.

The creation of links between the Forum of Social Organizations and Movements of Southwest Bahia and other groups with considerable experience in fighting industrial eucalyptus plantations in the south and extreme south regions of the state – such as the Socio-Environmental Forum of Extreme Southern Bahia and the Forum for Work, Land, Employment and Citizenship of Southern Bahia – began in 2011, with joint preparation and coordinated participation in the public hearings held as part of the environmental licensing process for a proposed expansion project by Veracel. The company's expansion plans include the planting of eucalyptus on 50,900 hectares of land and the acquisition of a further 101,800 hectares of land (see the table below). These coordinated actions have contributed to a joining of forces and a qualitative change in efforts to confront these types of projects in the southwest region.

MUNICIPALITY LAND AREAS INVOLVED IN VERACEL'S EXPANSION PLANS (hectares)

	FOR PLANTING	FOR ACQUISITION*
Encruzilhada	4,000	8,000
Itapetinga	10,000	20,000
Macarani	10,000	20,000
Maiquinique	4,000	8,000
Itarantim	17,900	35,800
Potiraguá	5,000	10,000
TOTAL	50,900	101,800
(*) Veracel only reports the area planned for actual planting. The area it plans to acquire is an estimate based on data from the environmental impact assessment.		

Faced with this threat, civil society mobilization is needed to impose limits on corporate activities, protect collective interests and defend the environment. For this purpose, the CEAS and CPT joined with other groups and entities in the towns of Maiquinice, Itarantim, Barra do Choça and Cordeiros to draft the Popular Initiative Laws, aimed not only at restricting the establishment of plantations of exotic trees, but also at creating municipal environmental codes to regulate all environmental activities in these towns.

In 2012 the First Regional Seminar on Eucalyptus Plantations was held in Vitória da Conquista. The presentations included accounts of the experiences of popular opposition by organizations from the south and extreme south of the state of Bahia, such as CEPEDES (the Centre for Studies and Research for Development of the Extreme South of Bahia) and organizations from northern Minas Gerais, such as MAB (the Movement of People Affected by Dams), as well as the experiences of drafting the Popular Initiative Laws in southwest Bahia. Other participants included important academic sectors such as the UFBA Geografar Project and UESB students, federal and state public prosecutors, and various social organizations from the Planalto da Conquista region. The seminar served as a forum for strengthening links and coordination among these different actors and developing a common agenda for confronting the problem.

So far, the towns of Itarantim, Maiquinique and Barra do Choça have approved the Popular Initiative Laws and are now working on the consolidation and strengthening of Environmental Defence Councils to make it possible to exercise popular control and evaluate proposals for environmental and land management.

These initiatives emerged as alternatives against the expansion of eucalyptus plantations in the region, and have also given rise to benefits such as community involvement, as well as the

strengthening and, in some cases, the creation of Environmental Defence Councils which make it possible to enforce the individual and collective rights of local populations.

These experiences in southwest Bahia have led to the cultivation of other plants in addition to eucalyptus trees, providing local groups with knowledge and an organized process of struggle, while disorganizing the agribusiness order in the region.

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