Territories and food sovereignty: Where the struggles of peasants and forest communities converge

This issue of the WRM Bulletin is co-produced with GRAIN. GRAIN works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems and against the corporate controlled industrial food system. WRM supports the struggles of forest-dependent communities in the defence of their forests and territories against industrial tree plantations, extractive industries and other threats to the life and livelihoods of such communities. While each of the two organisations have their particular history and focus, we see these struggles intimately connected and indeed we often come across each other in meetings, emails, fora and statements.

Over the past years we have gone further than that and established more active working relationships, initially mostly in Latin America but more recently in other parts of the world too. For example, we are now working together in a joint project that aims to support the struggles of local communities against large-scale industrial oil palm plantations in West- and Central Africa. So it is only logical that we ended up producing this bulletin together.

After all, many forest-dependent communities are peasants, and many peasants are forest-dependent communities; and they are all food producers. They are affected alike by the corporate agenda, be it through the expansion of eucalyptus and other monoculture tree plantations or by foreign investors that buy up land to plant crops for the international food and biofuel markets.

They are also vilified in the same way and often by the same people; for destroying the world's tropical forests with shifting cultivation practices, for causing soil erosion because of overgrazing and because of their supposed lack of capacity to produce enough food for a growing global population. They are often portrayed as backwards and standing in the way of progress. And, as we show in one of the articles in this bulletin (about REDD+ and agriculture), they are now targets for projects and programs to stop deforestation in the name of the fight against climate change.

The truth is, however, that it is not peasants and forest-dependent communities that are responsible for these problems. The real culprits are the fast expanding and corporate driven plantation economies with their polluting and water draining monocultures. They take up an increasing amount of fertile farmland and continue to massively plough under native forests and other fragile ecosystems. In the process, they produce huge amounts of greenhouse gas emissions. And – this is important to stress – they don't produce much food. They produce commodities for an ever voracious global export market to feed the paper industry, the livestock industry and more recently the agrofuel industry. Despite this, forest-dependent communities are being told to stay out of the forests and find their food and livelihoods elsewhere. Peasant communities are thrown off their land to make way for the 'more productive' plantations.

As a result, peasants and forest-dependent communities around the world are being squeezed onto less and less land. Today peasants account for over 90% of all farms but control only a quarter of the

world's farmland. Yet, they still manage to produce most of the world's food without nearly the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced by large-scale industrial farms. But if the current global wave of land grabbing and land concentration is allowed to further expand, it will be difficult for them to continue to do so. Who then will feed the world?

Food sovereignty: a common struggle

To counter the corporate driven food system and to articulate a vision that puts peasants and forest communities central in the struggle against the food, environment and climate crises, La Via Campesina – the global peasant movement - launched in the mid 1990s “food sovereignty” as the solution. During the past two decades, this has become a central axis in the struggle for a better food system of many movements and organisations. Placing food sovereignty at the centre of the agenda also means to recognize the crucial role of women in cultivating and reproducing seeds as well as providing food for their families and communities since ancestral times. While sustaining life, women also play an essential role in the front lines of struggles to defend territories and hence food sovereignty.

Among other things, this struggle includes:

- Integral agrarian reform to give land back to small farmers and local communities, and defence of territories that are so central for peasant and forest communities
- Agroecology as the natural farming method to feed the world
- Building upon indigenous knowledge and local seeds
- A frontal opposition to the industrial food system, corporate trade interests and technologies controlled by agribusiness
- A focus on local markets and short circuits under control of local communities
- An understanding that this struggle brings together the different food producers (farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists), different constituencies (food producers and consumers) in different locations (North and South).

Peasants and forest-dependent communities have the same struggle here, and a common opponent.

The climate agenda

This issue of the WRM bulletin zooms in on the struggle against the climate crisis, another agenda that peasant and forest-dependent communities have in common. They are feeling the disastrous impact of climate change in their daily lives and livelihoods, but they also realise that they hold the key to averting the climate crisis.

For over 10 years, the world’s governments at each annual climate conference have been wasting a lot of time pushing false solutions in order to avoid making any real change in the current production and consumption model. Among these false solutions are proposals to turn forests into “carbon sinks” that can compensate for emissions done elsewhere under the REDD mechanism and related initiatives such as the “landscape REDD” approach. Now climate negotiators are also debating a vague “climate smart” agriculture proposal, all with the same intention to offset greenhouse gas emissions instead of reducing them at source. Governments are moving us deeper into this crisis because they are failing to address the real causes of climate change and corporations are increasingly controlling the agenda of the conferences and technologies connected with the false solutions that are proposed and backed by the UN.

FAO’s director Graziano da Silva, in a debate about the next climate summit, recently said: “We believe that agriculture in the broad sense - including forestry, fisheries and aquaculture - can and must play a central role in addressing climate change (..)” (1) However, neither industrial tree plantation companies nor agribusiness companies can ever be part of the solution because the models they depend upon are the problem (2). It is rather peasant and forest-dependent communities that are convincingly offering and practicing food sovereignty as a solution. As GRAIN has calculated, the industrial food system is largely responsible for the climate crisis producing around half of all the global greenhouse gas emissions. While in contrast, a food system based on proper soil management, natural farming, local markets, fresh food and equitable land distribution would not only support many peasant and forest-dependent communities worldwide, it would also be able to lower emissions and put capture back carbon into the soils.

But there is a long way to go before we get there. As we show in one of the bulletin articles, the fertilizer industry is dominating the discussions and decision-making on what to do with agriculture and the world’s food system. Another article reflects on how trade deals move the world deeper into the climate crisis. REDD+ projects and carbon markets leave polluters off the hook and bar local communities from accessing forests for their livelihoods. And another article highlights how certification schemes set up to provide “green labels” to monoculture industries like timber, pulp, soy or oil palm are seeking alliances with REDD. A conversation between GRAIN and WRM on certification schemes and oil palm plantations sheds some light on what these schemes mean for local communities. And the issue of expanding eucalyptus plantations in Mozambique and Brazil, also covered in this bulletin, deserves attention: these plantations can be called “smart” from a corporate perspective, but in no way from a climate, food sovereignty and community well-being perspective.

In the lead up to the mobilisations around the next UN climate summit in Paris this December, social movements from across the world are preparing to put real solutions forward and denounce the false solutions that are now on the UN’s negotiating table. In this, it is important that the struggles and solutions of peasants and forest-dependent communities are centrally present.

GRAIN (https://www.grain.org/) and WRM (http://wrm.org.uy/)

1. http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/336488/icode/
2. See further information on how large-scale monoculture plantations are a main driver of deforestation here:
   http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/deforestation/direct-causes/large-scale-monoculture-plantations/
   And on the role of industrial agriculture as a main driver of deforestation here:
   http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/deforestation/direct-causes/industrial-agriculture-and-cattle-raising/