
The Farce of “Smart Forestry”. The Cases of Green Resources in Mozambique and Suzano in Brazil

"Nobody eats eucalyptus." With this statement farmers expressed their outrage when the company Aracruz Celulose expanded its monoculture eucalyptus plantations several years ago on arable land in Espírito Santo, Brazil. While the objective was to produce and export more pulp, Aracruz and other companies publicly promote their practices as "smart." They claimed they only plant trees on "degraded" or "abandoned" land, for example. And now with the climate crisis, the FAO suggests adopting "climate-smart forestry" practices. The question that arises: Can we really consider current company practices to be "smart forestry"?

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is the UN entity responsible for promoting agriculture and food, but it is also in charge of forests and tree plantations—the latter being wrongly defined as "planted forests." In its "Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) Sourcebook", the FAO addresses the role of forests and trees, saying that "efforts to make a transition to climate-smart forestry will need to be taken at all levels ... and in all timeframes." (1)

But can we really consider today's forestry practices to be smart? Is it smart practice that a few companies are occupying millions of hectares for monoculture production of eucalyptus, pine, acacia, palm and other species, and causing negative impacts; all in the name of achieving greater productivity?

While the FAO's goal is ostensibly to bolster food production, and while companies claim they are restoring 'degraded' land, in practice these monoculture tree plantations always compete for land suitable for agriculture. The reason is obvious: if companies didn't grow trees on fertile lands, their plantations would not achieve the desired productivity. And so, wherever these plantations expand—usually in large areas of thousands of hectares—food production tends to decrease. This is a disaster for peasant communities, profoundly impacting on their food sovereignty and on that of the local population in general. That's why this is not a smart practice at all. And it's why the business logic that aims to maximize production and profit has been a main target of a criticism, which is summed up in the phrase “We can't eat eucalyptus.”

In response to such criticism, many companies have developed pilot projects that aim to combine monoculture tree plantations with food production. One of the most widely implemented programs is called “*fomento floresta*” in Portuguese (promoting forestry). In this program, farmers plant eucalyptus trees on their own land. They usually sign a contract with the company, wherein they agree to tend the trees and later sell them to the company, all the while assuming the risks in the event the plantations don't prosper. Companies present this as a “social program” and a way to “help” farmers, suggesting that through “*fomento floresta*” it is possible to harmoniously integrate eucalyptus tree plantations and food production.

The company “Green Resources” in Mozambique

In Mozambique, the African country with the largest expanse of tree plantations for wood, the

Norwegian company Green Resources (GR) promotes eucalyptus monoculture in Nampula province. There, it operates under the name Lúrio GR. In a recent field visit to the district of Mecubiri, we heard from villagers of a community directly affected by the company's eucalyptus plantations.

On their webpage, Green Resources claims they only plant eucalyptus on “low-value grassland or degraded forestland.” Yet directly affected villagers unanimously affirm that the company is growing on arable land. It's land that families were using or planning to use in the future as food-growing areas, which they call “machamba.” People say that in recent years, coinciding with the arrival of eucalyptus plantations in their community, local food production has decreased.

Villagers also say that some eucalyptus trees have been planted on their lands as part of a “*fomento florestal*” program that is also supported by the European Union.



A group of participants in this program told us they joined because of the promises the company made to them: that they would become rich, that they could continue to grow food in between eucalyptus trees, that if 80% of the eucalyptus seedlings would survive, they would receive a solar panel to have access to electricity. Today, however, these people are frustrated. While most of the eucalyptus trees did grow, and many people did receive a solar panel, several panels are no longer working. As for the promise of being able to grow food in between eucalyptus trees, one villager reported that she tried to plant cassava, but it didn't develop well, whereas the eucalyptus kept growing. She observed that the eucalyptus caused the soil to dry out, compromising the growth of the cassava. She wonders how she will be able to grow enough food for her children.

Another villager told us he participated in a program promoting soybean production. In this program, Lúrio GR distributed seeds, only to later charge an additional 20%. The villager who planted soybeans explained that no one in the community eats soy, as it's not part of their traditional diet.

Instead, the soy they produce is sold to the poultry industry. However, like the villagers who planted eucalyptus, this farmer is discouraged. He said his income has decreased because the price of soy has dropped significantly in the past three years. Meanwhile, GR is not providing him with support to market his products (2).

The company “Suzano” in Brazil

Another company promoting so-called “*fomento florestal*” is Suzano Papel e Celulose. The company claims to work with 1,000 rural farmers, of whom 80% are small land-holders practicing “*fomento florestal*.” Suzano is one of the largest companies in Brazil, expanding rapidly and promoting monoculture eucalyptus plantations for pulp and paper. In the future, it plans to export “wood pellets” for generation of power and electricity in Europe. In 2015, it became the first company in Brazil and Latin America to obtain approval to commercially plant transgenic eucalyptus, which is supposedly 20% more productive than “conventional” eucalyptus (see article from WRM's April 2015 Bulletin).

Suzano's expansion in recent years has led to conflicts with traditional communities in the Baixo Parnaíba region, who have organized to defend their territory, where they extract bacuri and other products (3). Nevertheless, Suzano claims that “the majority of land on which plantations are established is degraded agricultural land.” Regarding the introduction of transgenic trees, they assert that farmers who practice “*fomento florestal*” would stand to benefit most from this new technology. The company argues that the gains in production would enable small-scale farmers to produce the same amount of wood on less land. According to Suzano, this would free up more land for food production and forest conservation (4).

Yet decades of “success” —the steady increase in eucalyptus productivity in Brazil, thanks to “conventional” methods to improve production—have led to millions *more* hectares of plantations, not fewer. With this expansion, Suzano and other companies have caused much conflict and displaced local communities from their lands, as well as reduced areas available for food production. According to Brazilian lawyer André Dallagno, of the NGO Terra de Direitos (Land of Rights): “Eucalyptus is an exotic species in Brazil, and has proven to be the enemy of peasant farmers, villages and traditional communities. This is due to the species' consumption of and impact on water resources, which is significant in its non-GM variety and even more severe in its transgenic form. There are cases of entire communities surrounded by intensive eucalyptus monoculture that are now considered to be “green deserts,” with their water resources depleted. Furthermore, eucalyptus production requires the intensive use of aerial pesticide spraying over long distances, which also impacts nearby communities.” (5)

Conclusion

These two cases of companies, both of them FSC-certified, support what WRM has been arguing for years: it is not smart to tirelessly promote a forestry model or form of agriculture based on large-scale monocultures. This model of production also has severe impacts on the climate. Considering that this model of production used by forestry companies requires mechanization, the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides, the transportation of products over long distances, etc., we are talking about a heavily oil and natural gas-dependent activity. To continue following this model will only worsen the climate crisis. The truly smart option, therefore, would be to stop. Until then, it is essential to support and strengthen communities in their struggles against large-scale tree plantations.

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1. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3325e.pdf>
2. WRM Field visit with Justicia Ambiental (Environmental Justice), September 15-23, 2015.
3. <http://wrn.org.uy/pt/livros-e-relatorios/plantacoes-de-eucalipto-para-energia-o-caso-da-suzano-no-baixo-parnaiba-maranhao-brasil/>
4. <http://theforestdialogue.org/publication/company-responses-questionnaire-development-genetically-modified-trees>
5. <http://wrn.org.uy/es/articulos-del-boletin-wrm/seccion1/los-transgenicos-no-son-bienvenidos-entrevista-con-andre-hl-dallagnol-de-la-organizacion-brasilera-tierra-de-derechos/>