The contradictions behind the “Zero Deforestation” pledge

The UN climate negotiations in Paris will again put a lot of emphasis on forests, which are seen as mere carbon stores. One of the most recent approaches promising to leave the remaining forest “carbon stores” intact is called “zero deforestation”. Several big industrial plantation companies support the idea and it sounds beautiful: no more deforestation so no more forest carbon emissions are going to be released into the air. But how can businesses that are based on the expansion of industrial plantations and that are most active in tropical forest areas commit to no more deforestation? A look at what is happening in countries like Liberia and Indonesia, where big players from the plantation sector committed to ´zero deforestation´, shows why such commitments are full of contradictions and serve mainly the purpose of allowing corporations to carry on their activities.

The case of the Golden Veroleum company in Liberia

In July 2015, officials from the Forestry Department in Liberia presented a draft “Manual for Harvesting Trees in Agriculture Plantation Extension and Mining Contract Areas” for review. The manual would facilitate timber extraction from within "agricultural" concession areas, legalizing so-called “conversion timber”. These concessions, for example in the northwest and southeast of the country, are still covered with vast forest areas. Until now, conversion of such areas was not possible, as the current legal framework excludes logging in existing agriculture concessions for export. However, with the proposed “Manual”, possibilities for much more forest destruction would be opened. (1)

One of the biggest “agricultural” concession holders in Liberia is the palm oil company Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL), with a concession area of about 220,000 hectares. GVL is owned by the agribusiness company Golden Agri Resources (GAR), which announced in 2014 a “zero deforestation” commitment that extends to all its palm oil operations, including those of its subsidiaries. Why would the proposal for a review of the manual for extraction of timber from agricultural and mining concessions in Liberia, if adopted, cause deforestation? And how does it highlight the contradictions behind the "zero deforestation" commitment of companies such as GAR?

The proposal would allow a company like GAR to claim internationally that the company – in this particular case their subsidiary GVL - is not expanding into forested areas, while in practice, it is doing exactly that. Under the proposed changes, GVL could claim that another company took out the timber from their concession first, so the area is not forested anymore. Whereas, without the changes, only GVL as the concession holder is allowed to take out timber. Thus, if GVL expanded into the forested area, there would be no-one else but GVL to blame for expansion into the forest – something the company pledged at international level it would no longer do.

While GAR promotes its “forest conservation” policy internationally, what the proposed changes in the manual for timber extraction from agricultural concessions implies is the opening of “agricultural” concession areas to industrial logging and thus more deforestation. This is not a new practice:

according to the think thank Chatham House, half of the tropical timber being sold nowadays is conversion timber. (2)

The cases of Wilmar and APP companies in Indonesia

For the last few months, Indonesia was once again heavily affected by massive forest fires, a huge problem to which we dedicate an article in this bulletin. Most of the plantation companies that adhered to a “zero deforestation” commitment are active in Indonesia. They include Wilmar, active in promoting oil palm plantations, and APP promoting timber plantations for pulp production.

According to the Indonesian NGO WALHI, recent forest fires are roaring also in the concessions linked to Wilmar and APP. One main cause for the fires is the burning of forests and (peat-)lands for plantation expansion, carried out by companies, including subsidiaries of Wilmar and APP. In Central Kalimantan, for example, forest fires were detected in the plantation areas of 14 Wilmar subsidiaries, while in Riau, fires were detected in the areas of 6 APP subsidiaries. (3) The impact of forest fires on people, territories and the climate are especially severe with an exceptionally long dry period affecting Indonesia.

Zero deforestation can only happen if companies stop promoting large-scale plantations

It is known that industrial agriculture including oil palm and timber plantations represent the most important direct cause of deforestation globally. What is striking, then, is that plantation corporations that adhere to a “zero deforestation” pledge do not spend a word in their pledges on what will be done to actually stop further plantation expansion.

If “zero deforestation” is to be taken seriously, it would mean that in Liberia, for example, with the trend of much more permissive rules for logging in agricultural concession areas, companies like GVL would need to reject such trends and not permit any industrial logging in its concession areas, as it would lead to massive deforestation. Likewise, Wilmar and APP announcing to stop plantation expansion in their existing concessions would be a necessary step to reduce forest fires and thus deforestation and its tremendous impacts in the region.

At the same time, a huge challenge that remains for local communities is how to deal with the millions of hectares of plantations that already exist. It is important to support communities’ efforts to organize and their struggles to take control of those lands, transforming the territories occupied by industrial plantations into other uses that allow communities and future generations to coexist and benefit from the territories.

About this bulletin

Faced again with two weeks of corporate-controlled UN negotiations in France around climate and forests, our response is to expose once again the false solutions that come out of this process and the hardship they provoke on the ground, but also how communities resist these false solutions.

Like “zero deforestation” commitments, there are many other tactics that corporations are using to evade responsibility for the social and environmental destruction they cause. An article on “biodiversity offsets” in Malaysia shows how the mechanism is created to “compensate” for biodiversity destruction, and in practice strengthens the interests of the palm oil and timber industry in the country. Another article reflects on the decision of forest-dependent communities in a forest conservation area in the Brazilian Amazon to reject an NGO proposal for a REDD project in their

territory. Another article reports on the very interesting struggle and organization of ex-timber plantation workers in South Africa, dismissed in the process of mechanization and privatization of a decades-old plantation business in South Africa, and now struggling for dignity. Their aim is to convert timber plantations that surround their villages into areas where they can produce crops and start to restore the land as part of their aim towards food sovereignty.

Another persistent claim in greenwashing destruction is that large hydro dams are “green” and produce “sustainable” energy. An article reporting about the recent World Indigenous Summit on Environment and Rivers, which took place in Sarawak, Malaysia, exposes a completely different picture of large hydro dams. The meeting facilitated an exchange of experiences and strengthening of the resistance among communities fighting mega-dams.

1. http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/forests-under-siege-liberia-may-intensify-forest-destruction/
2. Ibid
3. http://www.tuk.or.id/2015/10/open-letter-grave-concerns-with-financing-of-companies-link-to-forest-peat-and-land-fires-in-indonesia/?lang=en
4.