
Brazil: Agribusiness, deforestation and climate change

The present development model has been strengthened on the basis of large-scale models – production, marketing, consumption – and the activities sustaining it are also on a large scale and basically involve intensive land use. They are the causes of the greatest problem presently hanging over an unconcerned humanity: the stepping up of greenhouse effect gas concentrations in the atmosphere, responsible for climate change.

One of these industrial economic activities is deforestation – generally to obtain timber and/or gain land for industrial cattle ranching or industrial monocrops (food, fuel or trees).

Every time vegetation is burnt or decomposes, it causes the emission of carbon contained in leaves and stalks, released as carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse effect gases. When this is a natural process, re-growth balances the net carbon emissions but when a forest is cut down and land use change takes place, the atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide increase enormously. Deforestation implies the total elimination of the ground biomass, including tree trunks, stumps and roots. Giving over forest lands to industrial agriculture makes them one of the least efficient ways of absorbing carbon from the air.

Presently, most of the net emissions from deforestation take place in tropical regions and the expansion of large-scale mechanized agriculture is one of the most important factors involved in forest loss. According to data from a PNAS report (1) in the nine States of the Brazilian Amazon, industrial agriculture increased by 36,000 km² and deforestation totalized 93,700km² between 2001 and 2004. The report reveals that the strengthening of industrial agriculture for the production of commercial crops in high demand – such as soybean – has been done at the expense of Amazon deforestation, presently the greatest source of CO₂ emissions in Brazil.

Furthermore, deforestation is generally the direct or indirect result of government policies. This appears – although not at a first glance – in the information given in Brazil on the stepping up of deforestation in the Amazon during the month of August: 75,600 hectares against 32,300 in July. The Ministry of the Environment submitted a list of the “100 greatest deforesters” between 2005 and 2008. The first six places are taken by the settlements of the National Institute for Settlement and Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonización y Reforma Agraria - INCRA) – which met with a broad and sly smile from agribusiness.

The Brazilian professor, Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, from the University of Sao Paulo, makes a very revealing exposé of the reasons concealed behind these figures and affirms that the guilty party is the official agrarian policy itself.

“The government” points out de Oliveira “in its political decision not to confront agribusinesses that are part of its parliamentary support, did not implement the agrarian reform in areas where the encampments [of people demanding land] are located and preferred to concentrate it in the Amazon. A total of 307,000 families were settled in the Legal Amazon between 2003 and 2007. This is the

primary reason for separating the defence of agrarian reform from the defence of the policy implemented by INCRA. The agrarian reform will continue being supported because it is the way to achieve food sovereignty. However, INCRA's policy is not the way. It must be severely criticised for the mistake it contains: that of not assuming the need for agrarian reform throughout the country.

INCRA's agrarian reform policy is marked by two principles: not to implement it in areas under the direct domination of agribusiness and to implement it in areas where it can "help" the expansion of agribusiness. That is to say, the agrarian reform policy of the present government is definitely linked to the expansion of agribusiness in the country. This is the second reason to separate the defence of agrarian reform from the policy adopted by INCRA.

The settlements in six municipalities in the State of Mato Grosso, the absolute champion in Amazon deforestation, are located exactly on one of the fronts of the territorial expansion of cattle-raising. Therefore INCRA is responsible because it does not have any policy to follow up on these settlements. It is a common practice for the settlers to sell their plots illegally to agribusiness which, in order to "buy" them, requires them to be totally cleared. They do this so that the responsibility for felling is placed on the settler and on INCRA. Another trick is to hand over cattle to be raised jointly by the settlers. In both cases, the forest is cleared to give place to pasture-land for cattle-raising.

The same processes take place in the settlements implemented in the locality of Cotriguaçu covering a total area of 141,000 hectares. According to the Ministry of the Environment, over 46,000 hectares of forest were felled to give way to grazing and to cattle-raising. In the Bordolândia settlement, the picture is identical.

In the locality of Querência, the settlements cover an area of 101,000 hectares and in Nova Ubiratã they cover 48,000 hectares. These two localities are at the forefront of the territorial expansion of cattle-raising and soybean plantations. There the clearing of over 30,000 hectares of forest took place because of the pressure of the cattle and soybean agribusiness in regions where clearcutting is practically total. It is obvious that the process could not have taken place without the participation or omission of INCRA.

The way in which the Ministry of the Environment made public the information should also be criticised as on the list, next to individual owners, are entire settlements giving the impression that the responsibility is that of the agrarian reform, which is not true. When the total area deforested is divided by the number of families settled, it may be seen that on average it is less than 70 hectares. Therefore, those mainly responsible for felling the Legal Amazon continue to be the big cattle ranchers and soybean growers who take over the land, either illegally or not." (2)

(1) "Cropland expansion changes deforestation dynamics in the southern Brazilian Amazon", <http://www.pnas.org/content/103/39/14637.full.pdf+html?sid=ca32002c-b059-479b-9729-688006d4ffd1>

(2) [Text extracted and adapted from: "A Amazônia e a reforma agrária de novo no banco dos réus", Adital, <http://www.adital.com.br/site/noticia.asp?lang=PT&cod=35400>]