Swaziland: The impact of 50 years of industrial forestry

Looking at the statistics for Swaziland is a depressing experience. Unemployment stands at 40 per cent. More than two-thirds of the people in Swaziland live on an income of less than US$1 a day. About one third of the people in Swaziland rely on food aid to survive. Nearly 40 per cent of the population is infected with HIV - one of the highest rates in the world. Life expectancy has fallen to 33 years for men and 35 for women.

The country is one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies. Political parties are illegal. The king, Mswati III, has a luxurious lifestyle which is in stark contrast to that of most people in Swaziland. Last year, the king's 36th birthday party celebrations cost US$600,000 and in December Mswati spent US$500,000 on a sports car.

Swaziland's main industries are sugar and forestry. Both require large areas of land. "They are a disaster for a country like Swaziland, where there are still feudal social relations," said Nhlanhla Msweli of the Swaziland Campaign Against Poverty and Economic Inequality (SCAPEI) at a meeting in South Africa in 2003. In a country where the majority of people are landless, industrial tree plantations cover almost 10 per cent of the land.

The Swaziland Solidarity Network (SSN) is a group campaigning for democratic change in Swaziland. In 2002, Bongani Masuku, SSN's secretary, said, "Unless land is a central component of any liberation, that liberation is not worth the noble name of freedom, but a mere fantasy for a few and continuation of suffering for the poor majority."

A new report written by Wally Menne of the TimberWatch Coalition, "Timber Plantations in Swaziland" describes the impact that industrial tree plantations have had on the people and the environment in Swaziland. Although many of the plantations were established more than 50 years ago, the impacts of industrial tree plantations "still have a profound effect on society and the environment and will continue to do so as long as the plantations remain," writes Menne.

Menne's research, based on interviews with community members, environmentalists as well as government and industry representatives, explains how industrial tree plantations have damaged ecosystems and caused loss of biodiversity. Plantations have been planted on the land with the most productive potential, at the expense of other agricultural land uses, states Menne.

Today, two South African pulp and paper companies control most of the 120,000 hectares of industrial tree plantations in Swaziland. Mondi owns 30,000 hectares of eucalyptus and pine trees around Pigg's Peak in the north of the country. The eucalyptus is exported to Mondi's pulp mill at Richards Bay, 400 kilometres away in South Africa. The pine goes to local sawmills.

Another South African pulp and paper giant, Sappi, leases 70,000 hectares of plantation land in the highveld region in western Swaziland. Planting started in 1950, with funding from the UK's Colonial Development Corporation (CDC - now called CDC Capital for Development). CDC and UK company Courtaulds built the Usutu pulp mill in 1962. Today the mill produces 220,000 tons of pulp each year,

most of which is exported to Southeast Asia.

Although the forestry sector accounts for as much as nine per cent of Swaziland's GDP, it employs only 8,000 people directly. SCAPEI's Nhlanhla Msweli told Menne "The timber industry has not contributed meaningfully to the economic upliftment of their workers." In recent years, much of the work has been outsourced to contractors, many of whom were ex-employees.

Even the remaining jobs are not safe. Mandla Dlamini, Public Affairs Manager at Sappi's Usutu pulp mill, told Menne that Sappi had considered closing its mill, because of "economic uncertainty" caused by the exchange rate and "other economic factors", which affected company profitability.

Menne reports that Sappi's Usutu pulp mill is "notorious for regular releases of effluent into the nearby Lusutfu River". He adds that "Additional pollution comes from the industrial waste dump that is situated in the worker village."

The government describes the poor rainfall in recent years as a "serious drought, which seems to be the worst in recorded history". But Menne's research suggests that the water scarcity is at least in part a human-made problem. Rex Brown of Environmental Consultancy Services, a Swaziland consulting firm which works for the government and private companies, considers plantations to be one of the causes of water shortages in the country. He told Menne that "The plantations occur in important upland catchments - essential areas for the provision of water for equally important irrigation activities in the Swaziland Lowveld."

I visited Swaziland with Wally Menne in October 2004. At the border, we saw new Volvo and Mercedes trucks loaded with eucalyptus trees waiting to leave the country. We drove through seemingly endless monoculture plantations and past huge clearcut moonscapes. We saw farmers' dry fields and we saw villagers lining up for maize donated by the World Food Programme. We saw, and smelled, Sappi's Usutu pulp mill. We saw the smoke from the mill drifting over the workers' village immediately next to the mill.

Clearly not all of Swaziland's woes can be blamed on industrial tree plantations. But more than fifty years of development by the pulp and paper industry has failed to bring benefits to the majority of Swaziland's population. Instead it has made matters worse.

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