
Brazil: A categorical demonstration against the green desert and in favour of life

With the presence of a delegate from the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment, the third Meeting convened by the Alert Against the Green Desert Network took place in the city of Belo Horizonte on 6 and 7 May. This Network, comprising over 100 member organizations, gathered many representatives of the Landless People's Movement, peasants, indigenous peoples, Afro-Brazilian communities, small farmers and social movements from the States of Minas Gerais, Espirito Santo, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro.

The panel session at the start of the meeting comprised a national delegate from the Landless People's Movement, a delegate from the Afro-Brazilian communities, a geographer from Minas Gerais, a member of the Secretariat of the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) and a representative of the Ministry of the Environment. Except for the latter, all the other panelists expressed their solidarity with those affected by the plantations and explained the reasons for their opposition to large-scale monoculture tree plantations.

The presentation by Mr. Nelson Barbosa, representative of the Minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, gave rise to great commotion among the participants. He spoke of the need to plant trees to obtain timber, adding that statistics show that a 65-year old person has already 'consumed' 367 trees. Therefore, he affirmed that reforestation plans should be promoted, together with the creation of jobs to reach the Government's Zero Hunger goal, proposing to reach some kind of an agreement with those present at the meeting.

For over two hours, the participants made the official representative aware of his fallacious argument, showing their indignation over what they had just heard, but remaining respectful and providing forceful examples. Here below are just some of the examples of their many testimonies.

A representative of the Indigenous peoples clearly let the governmental delegate know that the people were not against the government, stating "The government is ours" and adding "we are against the expansion of these companies to the detriment of our survival."

A 20-year old woman from a community in Nova Venecia in the State of Espirito Santo noted that large-scale monoculture tree plantations are not intended to provide the communities with timber but to provide the large companies with cheap raw material for their pulp mills or charcoal for iron and steel-works. She found it ridiculous that the communities should be blamed for deforestation and ironically suggested that Mr. Barbosa should obtain an invitation from Aracruz Cellulose, one of the largest pulp producing companies in the world, in order to see for himself the impact of monoculture tree plantations on the neighbouring communities.

A representative of the Federation of Rural and Agricultural Workers of the Municipality of Macuri in the State of Bahia, underscored the fact that one could not speak about reforestation when what was really being promoted were large-scale monoculture plantations: plantations should not be confused with forests. While forests are "a gift of nature, monoculture is a crime," he emphasized.

“The word sustainability is linked to durability, and there is nothing as durable as Indigenous agriculture,” stated another participant “The Indigenous peoples have demonstrated that they are able to maintain forests because they have done so for thousands of years. The 50 years of the Green Revolution have only caused devastation,” he ended by stating.

A member of MPA (the Small Farmers Movement) affirmed that there have been many more jobs lost than generated with the plantations and the installation of pulp mills. He gave details of investments made and what they could have meant in the generation of jobs if, instead of supporting the large multinational paper corporations, they had supported small farmers. According to the figures given by the government regarding investment, each job generated in the plantation/pulp industry has implied an investment of some US\$330,000.

With sorrow and pain, a representative of the Hip-Hop movement, a young man from the “favelas” (the shantytowns of Brazil), stated that one cannot speak of “zero hunger” while promoting policies making hunger more critical.

Concisely, seriously and briefly, a member of the NGO FASE questioned Barbosa about the nature of the figures he had submitted. “If you want to talk about numbers, it would be good to know how many small farmers have lost their land, how many wells have dried up, how many rivers have been contaminated, how many people have died of hunger each year and how much money the large plantation companies installed in Brazil have made” she said.

Another participant emphasized that it is impossible to reach an agreement with the communities while the government has agreements with the companies and benefits them, while it violates the communities’ rights and does not even consider them as human beings. “We answered the call made by the President and worked hard and voluntarily in the preparation of a plan for the government to take measures favouring the communities. Where are these documents and plans? When will they start carrying them out?” asked an indignant representative of the Bahia-based organization CEPEDS.

Before leaving, the Government representative promised to bring to the Minister’s attention the serious complaints he had heard and assured the participants that he personally would always defend small farmers as for many years he himself had been a small farmer.

Following the panel session presentations, the participants split up into discussion groups and examined the negative impacts of large-scale monoculture tree plantations on the local population and on labour relations in industry. They also discussed the relationship of industrial monoculture tree plantations with land problems, biodiversity, the energy model, human rights and violence.

As a result a document was prepared and, together with a letter, was personally delivered by some 200 participants to IBAMA (the Brazilian Environmental Institute) and to the National Planning Secretariat. In a tour that lasted almost four hours along the central streets of the city of Belo Horizonte, the participants handed out hundreds of flyers bearing a clear slogan: Enough of eucalyptus! We want Agrarian Reform! If rural areas are not sown, the cities will not eat!

In the letter (the complete text can be found at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/claims.html>) addressed to the Government of the State of Minas Gerais, redress is demanded of a series of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, directly violated by large-scale industrial tree plantations, both for pulp and for iron and steel works. Furthermore, guidelines for urgent measures that must be taken are provided, such as giving back to the communities 280,000 hectares of public

lands (that were rented out to private companies), accompanied by an agroextractivist restructuring program.

In their “Statement against the green desert and in favour of life” (the complete text is available at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/manifesto.html>), the communities take a stand over the socio-environmental disaster caused over the past 35 years by monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantations to supply iron and steel works and pulp mills, damaging diverse ecosystems and populations on their territory, their biological, social and cultural diversity, causing expropriation, unemployment, migration and hunger.

For this reason, the Network reaffirmed the concept that **PLANTATIONS ARE NOT FORESTS!**

The impacted populations asked the Government to establish public policies enabling them to restore this disastrous social and environmental liability, and to take action to strengthen biological, cultural and agro-ecological diversity.

Perhaps the most important thing that happened at the Meeting and the most difficult one to transmit in this article is the strength of conviction and the joy in the expressions of all the participants. The strength of the conviction that a true social change will not be possible without the elimination of large-scale monoculture tree plantations, and the joy of knowing that communities from Brazil and from many other parts of the world are working towards this aim.