
Colombia: The uncertifiable plantations of a member of the FSC Board of Directors

In 1998, the author Joe Broderick finished his research on the Smurfit Carton de Colombia company, publishing his book "El imperio de cartón: impacto de una multinacional papelera en Colombia" (The Cardboard empire: the impact of a multinational paper company in Colombia). In this book he provides details of the serious social and environmental impacts caused by the activities of a branch of the Irish transnational company, Jefferson Smurfit in that country.

In November this year, WRM was invited by Colombian organizations to visit the region affected by Smurfit's pine and eucalyptus plantations, to observe the problems and listen to the opinions of the local inhabitants in person. The visit not only fully confirmed the information provided by Broderick, but also showed that the company has not changed one iota of its policies regarding people and the environment and that their relationship with the local society continues to be as problematic as it was when the book was first published.

None of this should astonish us, as the impacts of a branch of the same company had been recorded by WRM in the neighbouring Venezuela, following a similar visit carried out in December 1998 to the plantations of Smurfit Carton de Venezuela Company. In an article written after this visit we concluded that "the 'development' model implemented by Smurfit in Portuguesa is unsustainable, regarding both social and environmental impacts. In spite of its policy of harassment and repression, the company does not seem to have much success in overcoming the determination of the people to oppose their activities and a major question mark appears regarding how long the plantations will be able to survive (even protected by barbed wire, dogs and armed men), being surrounded by hundreds of people who hate those trees and the company that they represent. If tree plantations are unsustainable in general, in this case they seem to be less sustainable than ever."

Something similar could be said of the impacts in Colombia, where the company has been involved in deforestation processes, where there have been severe impacts on water, fauna and flora and where it has been a key factor in the eviction of the rural population in the zones where it has established itself. All this, and much more, became evident from the interviews WRM held last month with the local population.

The local people told us that "the plantations have finished off the water," that "spraying has finished with everything there was in the soil," that "there is hardly any fauna left," that there used to be "clouds of birds" and that now "only in the summer does some bird appear, but not in winter time," and that "there are no fish left either."

Regarding employment, they reported "all the work is seasonal" (it is outsourced) and that "the contract implies working for two and earning for one." Like in the jungle, only the fittest survive: "if you don't reach production, they remove you, you can't be over 40 and we all have to be strong to reach that production." Regarding worker organization, not only is there no trade union, but "he who grumbles is out" and "here no comments are made."

With this curriculum, no one would think that the company might be interested in the subject of certification of timber produced in a socially and environmentally responsible way. Its over 60,000 hectares of monoculture tree plantations are not certified and we doubt that they ever will be. Therefore, we are amazed that Smurfit is a member of the board of directors of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), considered to be one of the most credible certification systems on an international level. The FSC web page informs us that Mr. Victor Giraldo represents the company on the FSC board of directors.

Its presence does little good to FSC and someone should start asking the relevant questions. For our part, we are at FSC's disposal to elaborate on the information we have on the company.

Article based on information from Carrere, R. "Report on a visit to regions in Colombia with Smurfit plantations, 31/10/03 - 7/11/03" (internal report), FSC web page:

<http://www.fscoax.org/html/5-1-1.html> ; Broderick, J. "El imperio de cartón: impacto de una multinacional papelera en Colombia", Bogotá, Planeta, 1998; Carrere, R. "Smurfit Cartón de Venezuela: las plantaciones de la discordia"

<http://www.revistadelsur.org.uy/revista.087-088/WRM.html>)