
Brazil: Challenging Aracruz Celulose's power

What is happening in Espirito Santo --one of the smallest Brazilian states-- is historic. Mighty plantation and pulp company Aracruz Celulose has generated so much opposition stemming from its activities, that the state Parliament recently passed --almost unanimously-- a law banning further planting of eucalyptus until an agro-ecological mapping of the state is put in place, which will define where eucalyptus can and cannot be planted. The law was immediately vetoed --during a "solemn session"-- by the Governor and now Parliament must decide whether to lift or maintain the veto.

But the battle is not just between Parliament and Governor but between organized opposition and Aracruz itself. Opposition has greatly increased during the recent years as a result of the wide range of social and environmental impacts resulting from the company's activities, added to the fact that job opportunities provided by the company have dramatically decreased. Additionally, according to local Parliamentarian Robson Neves, the company "does not pay any tax to either the state of Espirito Santo or to local municipalities" where its plantations are located.

The opposition front, originally conformed by some few NGOs and indigenous peoples organizations has now grown to include a great number of other impacted sectors of organized society such as AfroBrazilian communities, charcoal producers, fisherfolk, landless peasants, trade unions, small farmers, as well as academics, social and environmental NGOs, politicians and other concerned citizens.

Within such context, the author of the law --Parliamentarian Nasser Youssef-- put forward the idea of organizing an international seminar on eucalyptus, open to both supporters and opposers to plantations of that species. Aracruz and its experts were to be in the panel, together with panelists bringing in experiences from both Brazil and countries such as Chile, South Africa, Thailand and other. The idea was strongly supported by the local organizations who believe in democracy, pluralism and debate. But Aracruz "declined" the invitation and convinced its experts to also "decline". It addressed a letter to Nasser Youssef, President of the Environment Committee of the State Parliament (full text in Portuguese at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/Vitoria.html>), which merits some comment.

On the one hand, the company tells Youssef --and the state Parliament-- what it should be discussing in the seminar. According to Aracruz, the 28 out of 30 parliamentarians that voted the law did not realize that the law was "unconstitutional" and the seminar should thus focus first and foremost on this issue. Secondly, the seminar should be focusing --not on the impacts of eucalyptus-- but on the issue of clear and stable rules for corporate investments from companies such as Aracruz which "dignifies the state and the country" through its production and investment. Thirdly the seminar should be discussing the "forestry vocation" of Espirito Santo but instead --according to the company-- "the seminar organizers opted for a clearly ideologic and tendentious approach".

On the other hand, in its letter, Aracruz lectures parliamentarians on the "myths and ideologies" surrounding the eucalyptus debate and proves --in less than one page-- that its plantations "conserve biodiversity", "conserve the soil", "protect hydrological resources", "generate employment and rent",

"contribute to regional development" and "generate tax incomes". The message is clear: don't waste your time discussing eucalyptus plantations because we and our experts know that they have no negative impacts and that should be sufficient for you.

Thirdly, Aracruz questions the organization of the seminar itself and the selection of international panelists who, "apart from not being known in the global fora, share the same preconceptions against forestry plantations, which in Brazil have a clear competitive advantage compared to those in the countries they represent". So not only are those people unknown, but they also have preconceptions while at the same time they try to assist their countries' plantations in competing with Brazil! Surrealist, to say the least.

Finally, in order to participate in the seminar, Aracruz "only requests that the discussion processes are democratic, open, free, within a consistent agenda, with broad participation of all interested sectors and not manipulated to justify predefined results". As those conditions were --according to the letter-- not met, the company "declined" the invitation.

In spite of Aracruz's almost insulting refusal to participate, the seminar was a huge success and met all the "criteria" raised by the company: democratic, open, free, consistent agenda, extremely broad participation --lacking only Aracruz, its experts and the Federal Ministry of Environment-- and not manipulated in any way whatsoever. And it is interesting to note that the company did not comply with any of its own criteria when organizing, immediately after the international seminar, its "own" seminar --opened by a representative of the same Federal Ministry of the Environment that declined to participate at the International Seminar-- where only the people with preconceived ideas in favour of Aracruz were invited and where the people impacted by the plantations were left outside. Corporate discourse and reality appear to be moving along parallel lines that never meet.

In sum, Aracruz's refusal to participate is an example of the arrogance of transnational corporations which believe they have the right to decide on everything and the power to do so. At the same time, it is a way of acknowledging that organized opposition in Espirito Santo is in fact challenging that power and that the company feels increasingly isolated. All good news!

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