Kenya: Pollution and deforestation caused by Pan African Paper Mills

The large-scale monoculture pulpwood plantation model being implemented in the South not only results in negative social and environmental impacts in the forest areas, but has also additional impacts from pollution resulting from the industrial process for the production of pulp as well as deforestation linked to logging for supplying the pulp mill with raw material.

Such is also the case of Pan African Paper Mills (Panpaper), based in Webuye town, in the Western Province, with a population of some 60,000 people. The mill is situated in an environmentally sensitive area on the bank of River Nzoia, which flows into Lake Victoria. It has been denounced that the factory belches out smoke and sludge, polluting air, water, and nearby rivers. So strong has been the impact provoked by this plant, that the iron sheets within Webuye town are rusted, and people passing through the town, on the Nairobi-Kampala Road, have to lock the windows of their vehicles and close their noses until they are well passed the town.

Problems caused by Panpaper in the region are not new. According to a survey performed in 1994, pollution provoked by this mill is believed to be responsible for a number of health problems: more than 60% of the children born after 1974 --when the plant began to operate-- have had breathing problems from the age of one to five years. Other health problems verified in Webuye are chronic coughing, flu, nervous disorders, diarrhoea, typhoid and migraine, which health officials attribute largely to the air and water pollution produced by the mill.

At the same time, the mill's wood supply needs constitute a powerful incentive to deforest the remaining forests in the region --Kakamega and Mt. Kenya forests in particular-- which are being plundered at alarming rates. Pan African Paper Mills is one of the main buyers of the wood extracted from them. At the same time, the company is one of the three firms that have been exempted from the partial logging ban in force in the country. To the official viewpoint, this step was taken because "the government has shares in it and is important to the economy". The record of Panpaper regarding forest conservation is terrible. From 1972 --when the mill was built-- to the present day, the whole forest cover of the area --as well as that of Turbo and Mosorit, located 200 km far away-- has disappeared.

The argument that this is the price to be paid to achieve “development” is no more acceptable nor accepted. As a result, local dwellers and activists have organized themselves in the Panpaper Anti-Pollution Lobby Group, and have organized a protest to stop such abuses. Those interested in expressing their support to this initiative can send e-mails to the company (accounts@panpaperkenya.com or nmohalta@panpaper.ke.com) expressing their concern for the present state of things and their support to the defence of local people's environmental rights.

Article based on information from: Eusebius Mukhwana, 27/3/2001, e-mail: sacred@africaonline.co.ke ; “Death mill”. A case study of Pan African paper Mills (EA) Limited, Webuye, Kenya by Oduor Ong’wen, May 1994.