Brazil: The cerrado and the city of Três Lagoas under the control of the paper industry

On how pulp and paper companies are expanding in these territories while neutralizing community resistance in a process in which the population ends up economically and symbolically dependent on the companies.

When we visited Três Lagoas in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil, the presence of pulp and paper companies in every corner of the city was highly noticeable. Over the last few years, the Brazilian region has witnessed a huge expansion of monocultures of eucalyptus trees (1). They have taken over areas once occupied by other rural activities as well as the culture and image of the city, politics and social programs.

In this region, two companies have over 500 thousand hectares planted with eucalyptus and are representative of the economic dominance of this sector. Fibria, recently purchased by Suzano, has a total production capacity of 3.25 million tons of pulp per year just in the production plants of Três Lagoas. Eldorado, which was bought out in 2017 by Paper Excellence, produces around 1.7 million tons of pulp per year in the same city. Regardless of whether it's a transnational or domestically owned company, **this issue is about the expansion of a large-scale production model that only brings benefits to big companies and harms rural communities**.

Pulp companies moved into this region because they had identified advantageous and favorable conditions: the low cost of land, a lot of available land owned by just a few, tax incentives, flexible legislation, and the absence of well-coordinated and organized social movements. Above all, they identified the complicity of governments that, as part of a 'development' model, prioritize 'big investments' to the detriment of the inhabitants of agrarian reform settlements, peasants, indigenous peoples and other local communities.

WRM and representatives of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (**UFMS**) visited Três Lagoas and its region towards the end of 2017. We also went to see several settlements and rural communities, where we witnessed that companies enjoyed all the necessary conditions to successfully set up operations. As one local inhabitant stated: "If the land is profitable for the big ones, why are they going to use it for the little ones? If they could, they would hook us all up and throw us out of here."

In this article we will show how the notion of the public ends up being confused with that of the private, in a process that leads the local population to economically and symbolically depend on companies, creating the perspective that change is impossible in the present context.

Settlements: omission and dependence

In the region of Três Lagoas, eucalyptus monocultures have expanded on the old pastures of farms leased to pulp companies. These are settlements that had been part of the agrarian reform, and which with their plantations and livestock farms broke the monotony of a landscape full of tree

plantations. For their part, **companies have expanded throughout these territories with 'development plans' that consist of social projects that have made inroads, given the absence of the State** in terms of the implementation of public policies that benefit the population.

Consequently families end up 'dependent' on the companies, either because they take part in social projects, ranging from teacher training to courses in agro-ecology and the distribution of seeds and farm supplies; or due to the fact that many local people end up working in the tree plantations to supplement their income.

"If someone says they live off the land it's just not true. The Incra (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform) really didn't give us a thing; then the companies arrived and from then on they didn't help us anymore. We were here before the eucalyptus, and not in settlements but camping out. The struggle isn't going to fall back," one inhabitant told us.

The UFMS group calls this the process of **"privatization of agrarian reform"**, as companies implement projects that stand-in for 'public policies.' Thus the companies take control over such projects and consequently exert a form of control with respect to the inhabitants.

Social projects are one of the main tools of companies to meet two objectives: **neutralize the resistance of communities, and obtain forest certification that makes them appear to be committed to green and socially responsible initiatives.**

The silence about the impacts of the plantations is due to the fact that if the families living in the settlements or the local indigenous people make any complaints, they would lose access to social benefits and projects, which themselves should be rights guaranteed by the State.

Surrounded by eucalyptus plantations, local people also suffer from the use of agro-chemicals and animals attacking their crops, such as wild boar, tapir, macaws and toucans. In the communities visited, we were told stories that such animals attack their crops because they've lost their natural environment.

As one local inhabitant told us: **"The social function of the settlement has turned into feeding the wild animals."**

"We have a lot of problems to plant because of the beasts. After we plant corn the birds attack. And I saw a toucan eating the green squash. There's no more wild fruit. According to the companies, the banks of the streams have been preserved, but that's not true, there's nothing left for the beasties."

Another observation of the communities regarded the impact on waterways. After the arrival of extensive eucalyptus plantations, communities claim that water became scarce. "Before there was always water, but not anymore. The rivers and streams have dried up. My husband used to go fishing in lakes that no longer exist." The biome in the region is the cerrado, which we call the 'water tank' or 'upside down forest.' The deep roots of the trees interact with the water table, but with plantations this doesn't happen, rather the opposite: these trees consume huge quantities of water.

Expulsion from the countryside

Changes in land use due to eucalyptus plantations have caused many impacts: on people, the flora and fauna, the soil and water. Before the arrival of the pulp industry, the region was mostly occupied

by livestock. However, and although such an agricultural system is also harmful, negative changes in social relations have now been observed in rural areas. According to testimonies, many families that lived on the old farmsteads were always able to plant their own crops and raise animals for meat and milk, whether one member had a working wage or not. But when they leased their farmsteads, families were forced to move to the city of Três Lagoas, where they need a wage to live and have to buy all their food.

“In the city we even need to buy the green papayas.”

"There was more employment than there is now with the eucalyptus plantations. On the leased farmsteads they’ve even destroyed the houses. People were forced to migrate to look for work in other regions."

Consequently, the social fabric has been damaged. The people who left for the city almost never see their children due to their long working days and the distances they must travel each day from where they live to where they work: "We can’t teach our children or watch them grow up; it just creates more poverty as people crowd into the outer sectors of the city."

This also has an impact on rural schools. There is a very large turnover in schools (in the district school of Arapua, there is a turnover of around 50 students per month), while many were closed due to the falling number of students. This was down to the mobility of workers and their families; for example, in the district of Garcias where a railway station already existed.

The student turnover makes the daily life of the teachers difficult and impacts teaching quality. "It’s so sad to see our reality. Our school used to have a 100 percent pass rate to State universities; but just last year only two of our students went on to study in private programs," a teacher from Arapua told us.

Is it possible to resist?

The presence of the companies can be seen everywhere: in schools, in the media, in public activities. With its symbols and propaganda, a kind of 'eucalyptus culture' has been created. Popularly known as the "City of Waters," Três Lagoas has 'won' the title of "Pulp Capital of the World" due to the sector’s growth, the transformation of the agricultural sector, industrialization and plantations of eucalyptus monocultures. (2)

If the arrival of the companies has 'driven' the economy, there are other negative impacts that are frequently not associated with their presence. These include the sexual exploitation of women and girls, along with numerous labor and infrastructure problems in the city and the countryside, which have been caught unprepared to receive the large number of people attracted by the promises of employment made by the industries.

At first glance, it would appear that 'everything is lost,' that the companies have taken total control of the countryside and the city. However, after talking with the farming communities, we felt that families are aware of this circumstance, but still try to take advantage of social projects in order to gain independence.

Despite the limited resources that some families receive from the companies (insignificant amounts that should in any case have been distributed by the government), they were able to produce food not only as a source of income, but also as an affirmation of their dignity. We view this as a form of

resistance, albeit a silent one.

For its part, within the UFMS research is being undertaken that highlights criticisms of the model of large-scale tree monocultures, and which attempts to promote a discussion of this issue within the government and the population of the city regarding the impacts, including the promotion of debates and field visits. Moreover, UFMS has been promoting projects that support and encourage production by local people, such as the fairs held on the university campus and selling bags filled with food. What is at stake are two different projects regarding the present and the future for the city of Três Lagoas and the surrounding rural area.

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(1) See “Mato Grosso do Sul – a nova fronteira do eucalipto” (Mato Grosso do Sul - the new eucalyptus frontier).
(2) http://www.treslagoas.ms.gov.br/a-cidade/