Venezuela: the struggle against Smurfit's plantations

Smurfit Carton of Venezuela, a subsidiary of the Dublin-based transnational Jefferson Smurfit, which recently merged with Stone Container, thereby becoming the world's largest producer of paper and paperboard, is both creating and facing big problems in Venezuela.

A previous merger with the US-based Container Corporation in 1986, led Jefferson Smurfit to becoming the major shareholder of Carton de Venezuela, changing its name to the current Smurfit Carton de Venezuela. Until then, the company's mill had produced pulp from sugarcane bagasse (a by-product in sugar production). In 1994 it switched its pulp production to wood, to be supplied from plantations and primarily from tropical forest.

The company's operations in Portuguesa state have resulted in overt or hidden confrontation with local communities, whose lives and livelihoods have suffered -and are still suffering- from its activities. At the base of all this lies the issue of the concentration of land and power in the hands of a transnational, against a background of lack of land by poor peasants.

The company began buying lands back in 1986 and currently holds 15 properties involving some 27,000 hectares in the state of Portuguesa and 7,000 additional hectares in the states of Lara and Cojedes. At least half of those lands are classified as agricultural. According to Venezuelan law, those lands could have not been planted with trees. But they have and much of them is now covered with eucalyptus, pines and gmelinas.

In 1997, the relationship between Smurfit and local peasant communities was already at a critical level, as a result of aerial spraying of herbicides, which had destroyed 190 hectares of peasant's crops and even intoxicated school children in the village of Tierra Buena, when the situation erupted dramatically. That year, Smurfit purchased a large estate (La Productora, with 2,700 hectares), which had until then been dedicated to commercial agriculture and cattle raising. Peasants from two adjacent communities (Morador and Tierra Buena), had expected to receive this estate as part of the government's agrarian reform programme. Smurfit changed the whole situation, not only by planting trees in land that peasants needed to grow crops, but also by changing the relationship which peasants had had with the previous owner, which allowed them free access to his property, including fishing and hunting. Within this context, Smurfit fenced the whole estate with barbed wire and brought in guards to keep people out.

On July 14th 1997, local peasants occupied La Productora, demanding the government to asign part of those lands to them. The answer was to bring in the National Guard. The repression was ruthless, and hundreds of men, women and children were brutally beaten, shot at and imprisoned. Many of them still suffer from the injuries received and those considered to have led the occupation are still lacking freedom of movement and must report regularly to the authorities. Although there is ample evidence of the torture inflicted on people (including photographs and written testimonies), those responsible have not been sentenced in court and remain unpunished. On the contrary, repression is still rampant in the area and terror is the basic tool used to try to keep people out of the company's properties. Especially trained dogs (complete with trainers) have been brought in from Colombia;

machine-guns are fired during the night; squads of masked “vigilantes” on horseback patrol the area; houses are searched without warrant; people are shot at in front of their homes; they are detained on the road and beaten if they are found with matches in their pocket (which is considered near-arson by the company).

To make matters worse, plantations are not only occupying the land peasants desperaterly need, but are also impacting on other resources they depend on, such as water and wildlife. The company has been as ruthless with the environment as it has been with local people. Impacts on forests and water are a direct consequence of its activities, while impacts on biodiversity are a by-product of the industrial plantation model.

Deforestation is part of the company’s policy. In spite of having extensive plantations, it’s pulp mill has until now been mostly fed with tropical wood, extracted both from its own properties and from other forests in the region. Although such activity is illegal, the company manages to “legalize” it with the assistance of some government officials. There is ample proof that the company has deforested many of its land holdings. In the case of its estate La Productora, it obtained a permit from the government to deforest 600 hectares of highly diverse tropical forest. In other of its properties, logging has been carried out illegally. Additionally, anyone can observe trucks loaded with “firewood” (a denomination to avoid control of protected tree species) moving along highways all night in the direction of the of the company's Mocartel pulp mill in the state of Yaracuy.

Impacts on water are not only the result -as happens elsewhere in the world- of high intake of water by fast-growing trees. They are also the result of the destruction of water courses with bulldozers, which flatten the terrain to give way to more trees (particularly Gmelina arborea). Every inch of the land must be planted. Impacts on water are also the result of the destruction of riparian forests that protect water courses.

Local animals, fish and plants, which provided to many of the local peoples’ food needs are disappearing at an increasing rate, as their natural habitats are substituted by green deserts of trees and more forests are cleared to feed the pulp mill.

In spite of all the problems it is causing, the company does not seem to be succeeding in breaking people’s will to oppose its operations and there is a question mark as to for how long its plantations will be able to survive -even protected by barbed wire, dogs and armed men- while at the same time being surrounded by hundreds of people who hate those trees and the company they represent. If plantation forestry is unsustainable in general, in this case it seems to be more unsustainable than ever.