Women Stand Up to Fight the Suzano Paper Mill in Maranhão, Brazil

The construction of the Suzano Pulp and Paper mill—along with nearby highways, the constant transport of wood, and the massive influx of workers—has brought a lot of devastation to communities. This is the testimony of an activist who is fighting for her territory and the life of her community.

The Suzano Pulp and Paper mill in Imperatriz, Maranhão state, Brazil, has caused a lot of devastation for communities in the area. This mill was inaugurated in 2014 and has an annual production capacity of **1.65 million tons of pulp and 60 thousand tons of toilet paper.**

WRM interviewed Rosa (Rosalva Gomes), who is from a babassu coconut breaker family. Breakers are women who live among, and depend on collecting babassu palm coconuts for their livelihood. Rosa is a leader and an advisor to the *Movimento Interestadual das Quebradeiras de Coco Babaçu,* MIQCB (the *Interstate Movement of Babassu breakers*) in the region of Imperatriz, Maranhão state.

Created by women in 1991, the MIQCB arose from the need for women to have a space where they could act and discuss their demands. The social spaces at that time were the Rural Workers' Unions, where women did not even have the right to vote in union assemblies or discuss demands specific to women; they were not seen as an important part of the organization or the struggle for land.

It all started with discussion circles. They established contact with other women in Maranhão, as well as in the neighboring states of Pará, Tocantins and Piauí. Women began meeting in larger circles, talking about the realities in their regions, and in 1991 they founded their own movement **to organize women coconut breakers from these four states and together demand their rights—mainly the right to access the coconut palms.**

Today, the main rallying cries for the struggle continue to be: the organization and empowerment of women breakers; access to coconut palm; defense of babassu forests; organization and marketing of babassu production; access to institutional policies; and the unwavering fight for regularization of traditional territories. The struggle also aims to strengthen the communities and territories with a focus on agroecology and "living well."

This is Rosa's testimony.

1. What was the process like when the Suzano mill was installed in Imperatriz? What discourse did the company and government use to try to gain the acceptance of communities?

Back in the 1990s, the company (then called Celmar) tried to establish the pulp production center here, but it did not succeed. This was partly due to social movements' resistance to the mill at that time. Later, and with the name Suzano, the mill was implemented. This was possible through the **use of a discourse about jobs, growth of the city and benefits for traditional communities—mainly**

communities near the place where the mill was to be built.

With a view to “growth” in the region, state and municipal governments facilitated all processes for the production center to be implemented—including public consultations, which were not done in a consistent fashion. The consultations that took place were not well advertised, and they always painted the company in a rosy light. **The company heavily used, and still uses the local press to create a good image of themselves, and the few movements which were not co-opted are considered to be “anti-development.”** This is the case of MIQCB, which was one of the few movements that did not accept alliances with the company, sell out or allow itself to be co-opted. It has always maintained its position against that “development” model.

The company corrupted virtually the entire platform of social organizations in the region. Suzano also corrupted officials from federal environmental protection agencies. One example is the regional managers of the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio, by its Portuguese acronym).

In the 1990s, women coconut breakers and the MIQCB fought to create the Ciriaco reserve, which is one of the largest babassu reserves in the country. The management that protects the declared reserve area in Ciriaco (municipality of Cidelândia, Maranhão) participates in “social” actions with the company, serving as a bridge for the company to have more access to grassroots communities. There are reports of violations in the protected area, such as ranching and the felling of palm trees within the reserve. The management knows this and is complicit. In 2012, MIQCB conducted a survey in the region about the impacts that the company causes, and those it would cause upon implementation of the mill in Imperatriz. The researchers at that time needed to speak with management at the center, but were not admitted; we were not even authorized to enter the reserve. The Institute is playing a completely different role than the one entrusted to it. This is appalling, too, because the ICMBio came from, and even bears the name of Chico Mendes—who fought so hard for the life and diversity of the forests. He fought so much, and they took his life because of his struggle. Now, the policy adopted by the Institute and the management at the production centers are killing Chico Mendes again. That’s how I see it.

Historical organizations in the region, such as the Rural Worker’s Union of Imperatriz (STTR, by its Portuguese acronym), only keep with an opposition nowadays through its Secretariat of Women’s Policies, a union department chaired by Maria Querobina da Silva Neta. However, the union leadership itself is doing a job of containing the communities that are in dispute with the company over lands. Leaders of grassroots organizations—**activists who previously worked with communities—have also been co-opted. And because they were politically formed within the territories, they were hired by the company to work in social sectors and serve as bridges to ensure space for the company in these localities.**

There was an organized backlash to the company’s first attempt to implement the production center in 1990. The second time, the company worked in such a way that the reaction was not strong or sufficient, because it had made sure to corrupt various sectors, managers of institutions such as ICMBio and the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA, by its Portuguese acronym), directors of grassroots organizations and community associations, the local CARITAS (organization tied to the Catholic Church, which was created to support rural communities in the face of conflicts and threats), union leaders in the region, and so on. This was a large group of representatives who could—via their organizations or institutions—stir up big problems for the company. So that’s where they began. **That was the first major impact: a de-structuring of the social forces of the region**, which were already in a process of weakening.

2. The mill is a major infrastructure project that required a large number of workers to build it. How did this affect the population of Imperatriz, especially women?

The mill is one of the major pulp production centers in the country and it **affects us in every way**. While the mill was being built, many men and women were hired, who—deceived by the discourse of "development"—left behind their identity as rural workers. This affected their rural retirement, because they had their work permit signed (as non-rural workers) for a few months.

In both the city and the region, there was **a lot of movement of men coming from other places, and many women suffered sexual abuse**. Many women who went to work at the eucalyptus seedling production sites are suffering from **health problems,** including cancer. Many women were seduced in the general services spaces and on the construction sites. There were several accidents during construction, **including the deaths of workers, which was covered by the local press.** The families were given little or nothing of what they were due by law. Vehicle transit increased on the Rice Route (Padre Josimo Tavares MA 386 highway), which meant more disturbances in communities bordering the road, more risks for people—mainly children—and the harassment of adolescents from the communities. Many young people from the communities went to Imperatriz in search of much-dreamed employment at Suzano; this interfered with the communities' continuity and also caused overcrowding in the municipality, which was not prepared to receive this influx.

3. Today, almost five years after the mill was installed, what could you say this project brought, in terms of "local development"?

Nothing good.

The jobs that are currently available are for manual labor on the outskirts of the city and the state. The municipal government collects millions in taxes from the company annually, but it does not invest in anything in the region. The city is ruined. Recently, we had to fight hard to get approval from a Parliamentary Investigation Commission on health (CPI, by its Portuguese acronym) at City Council to investigate significant misuse of funds. There is a dangerous transfer of responsibilities from the municipality to the company, via the famous social responsibility projects and activities. **Communication spaces in the region have been appropriated for the benefit of the company. The company has intervened in spaces created by social movements—**such as the CFRs (Rural Family Houses), which were conceived of based on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the alternation as a model of contextualized education. There is now a very strong socio-political division in babassu coconut breaker communities; whereas before, the movement benefited from the strength of their autonomy.

Fish in the Tocantins River are dying, because water used at the mill is being returned to it. According to the company, this water goes through a treatment center. However, the chemical agents are not fully removed, and this can end up disrupting even the reproduction of native species of the river. **The way the city is presented to the world has been distorted. The roots of Imperatriz are the Tocantins River, artisanal fishing, and the collection and use of resources.** This symbolic city, on the border between the *Cerrado* (savannah) and Amazonian biomes, is called the Gateway of the Amazon. It has now been decorated with eucalyptus trunks and eucalyptus trees, and the company's logo is on sports uniforms and festive clothing in the city; people are being induced to forget their ancestry. On some days the city stinks. The wind brings a bad odor from the mill, which is pervasive in the neighborhoods closest to the production center. **Drought in the streams and creeks** is occurring more intensely every year, due to the water consumption of the eucalyptus trees. **The soil, air and water are poisoned**, and several people have **health problems** that were not

common in the communities before—such as itching of the body and blindness. **Serious and fatal accidents** occur, mainly due to the triple trailer trucks that transport logs. There are fires on the plantations during the summer which are not reported, nor are the affected people indemnified. Most of the triple trailer trucks are 30 meters long and transport wood from the plantations to the mill. They are very heavy trucks that carry hundreds of logs, which—due to movement on the roads and high speeds—end up falling off and causing accidents and deaths. The risks are greater on the roads of Maranhão, as they are more narrow and do not have rest areas. The trucks damage the roads because of their weight, and the constant vibration of the earth causes the walls of houses to break.

The Interstate Movement of Babassu breakers (MIQCB) filed a complaint with the Federal Prosecutor's Office (MPF, by its Portuguese acronym) about the death of at least eight people in 2015—including three women who were burned to death on plantations. However, the MPF replied that it was impossible to move forward with the process, citing insufficient information about the victims and their families. They said something to the effect of needing the victims' full name, father's name, mother's name...it was totally absurd. There was even a horrifying news report on Mirante TV, a local station, with the son of a victim who died from a trunk that fell off a truck that was transporting wood to the mill. It showed how company representatives had not visited the family, and there was no indemnification. (The family lives in the municipality of Vila Nova dos Martírios, a city near Imperatriz, which also suffers from impacts caused by the company.)

There are communities in conflict with each other, divided into their own territories. There are social organizations without autonomy. In short, **the good it is bringing is only for a small minority of businessmen and politicians who are pocketing millions, to the detriment of many harmed people.**

4. Are there other infrastructure projects in the region related to the Suzano company?

Part of the MA 386 Rodovia Padre Josimo highway is a stretch of ten kilometers that connects Imperatriz to the company's mill. The road was originally built **for the transport of wood. This stretch of the road is in terrible condition and is extremely dangerous.** It is very narrow, and in some places has no asphalt, which breaks under the weight of the trucks. Many communities bordering this stretch of the highway suffer due to the dust and the **risk of accidents; and in the case traditional communities, their harmony is disrupted.** Trucks also drive in urban areas, causing accidents. One recent accident caused the instant death of a couple at the intersection of JK avenue and the BR 010 highway.

5. Is there anything else you would like to share?

There is no oversight of Suzano's activity in the region. The company is not held responsible in any way for the physical, cultural, environmental and social damage it causes in communities. **The transfer of responsibility from public authorities to the company is dangerous** and threatens the sovereignty of the municipality and of the people.

It can take many years for organizations that work with communities to reverse the social fragmentation that the mill caused in the region, particularly in the communities. It is a typical venture that uses people in order to appear to be a company acting in good faith. All the while, Suzano is one of the multinational companies that is most promoting human rights violations in Brazil.

As for the movement...As a black woman and activist in a women's movement, I often feel threatened by the company. We are followed around the communities; we are watched while we

meet in the communities. We are easily identified by the work we do, and we are determined not to stop working, even in the face of these risks.