
?Quilombola Communities' Resistance Against Suzano Company in the Southernmost part of Bahia, Brazil

In the southernmost part of Bahia, Brazil, the advance of industrial monoculture plantations of eucalyptus has occurred in indigenous and *quilombola* lands, among others. These traditional peoples and populations have fought for decades for recognition of their lands and for the right to remain on them.

In 2019, Suzano Papel e Celulose became one of the world's largest corporations in the pulp sector through the acquisition of Fibria, itself the result of a merger between Votorantim Celulose e Papel and Aracruz Celulose, in 2009. Currently, it holds 2.1 million hectares in seven states in Brazil (Espírito Santo, Bahia, Maranhão, Ceará, Pará, Mato Grosso do Sul and São Paulo) and owns a 50% stake in Veracel Celulose in Bahia. Suzano has 1.3 million hectares of eucalyptus plantations and operates 10 pulp factories.

As a result of having absorbed many other companies, Suzano has accumulated immense social and environmental liabilities, a large history of violations and illegalities, as a result of its promotion of a nefarious model of large-scale industrial eucalyptus monoculture over the course of several decades. The *quilombola* communities of the southernmost part of Bahia know this reality well, for they are part of this history.

On March 29, 2022, a public hearing was held during which the Federal Public Prosecution Office (MPF) and the Public Defense of the Union Office (DPU) for the first time opened up a space for *quilombola* communities to give testimonies on the social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts they face as a consequence of eucalyptus monoculture in the southernmost part of Bahia.

WRM talked to **Célio Pinheiro Leocádio – president of the Volta Miúda *Quilombola* Association, in the municipality of Caravelas, and of the Southernmost part of Bahia *Quilombola* Cooperative** – about communities' incessant struggle in defense of their territory and to preserve what still remains of their culture in a region where the pulp industry has caused immense damage.

WRM: What is the greatest challenge currently facing the *quilombola* communities of the southernmost part of Bahia in terms of their territory and, more broadly, in terms of their struggle for their rights?

Célio: In the southernmost part of Bahia there are just eight *quilombola* communities certified as such by the Palmares Cultural Foundation, the agency that recognizes *quilombola* communities. (1) They are: Candido Mariano, Rio do Sul and Helvécia, in Nova Viçosa municipality; Volta Miúda, Mutum and Naiá, in Caravelas municipality; Vila Juazeiro in Ibirapuã and Mota in Itanhém. But we know there exist many other communities that are uncertified.

Out of the eight, only five communities have managed to open territorial demarcation processes with INCRA [National Colonization and Land Reform Institute], and that was over ten years ago. The only one with the report already published and with people contesting it is Mota community. Despite the fact that INCRA is advancing the rights of this community, it is a curious situation: in the area surrounding Mota community, the activity is agriculture and livestock rearing, not eucalyptus monoculture; it does not affect Suzano. The other communities have everything ready, but we know that at present, INCRA is holding back the communities' reports for them not to be published, and we don't know the reason. On account of this, Volta Miúda community has a public civil suit ongoing since 2019 with the Federal Public Prosecution Office.

Almost all the *quilombola* communities in this territory live surrounded by eucalyptus. The communities of Mutum and Naiá were practically made extinct by eucalyptus monoculture.

All the *quilombola* communities of the region are being violated and massacred by eucalyptus monoculture. Not a single community is living, so to speak, in "comfort". Today, all of them are vulnerable to the same question and, to make matters worse, the public policies to which we are entitled are not carried out.

Volta Miúda, Rio do Sul and Vila Juazeiro are the three communities that are most exposed to eucalyptus, because the eucalyptus is on top of people's properties and homes. They are exposed to the poisons they put onto the eucalyptus and to the loss of their springs. We no longer have any living springs inside the communities.

The community of Helvécia, which is more compact, does not have eucalyptus very near it, but we do know that even in the cemetery the eucalyptus is right on top, leaving no room for the community to say: "Look, we need an area here to enlarge the cemetery". Because many people are dying in their community, and most people, including from other communities of ours, are buried in the Helvécia cemetery.

WRM: What is the link like between the *quilombola* communities of the southernmost part of Bahia and their territory, and how did this change with the arrival of eucalyptus monoculture?

Célio: Look, to tell the truth, my age, I'm 44, is practically the time since when eucalyptus arrived here in the region. But I remember that we've had much better days, that we've had our natural habitat, when we lived with plentiful production of everything. Today, the degradation that was brought about with this monoculture of eucalyptus has in fact changed the lives of all of us.

The river that is on the border of Caravelas municipality with Nova Viçosa municipality, which is my community's river, used to be full of fish. Every year during flood season, we'd put a net where the water flowed. Next day we'd go there with donkeys and baskets and we'd come back with our baskets full of freshwater fish, back when we had flood seasons. Nowadays, none of that exists any longer. This river, which was hard to cross because of how deep it was, today we walk in it with water up to our knees or even below our knees. Now, 95% of the springs have died, and the lagoons don't exist any more.

So this is something we can see that has changed. We look forward to having our territory in our hands so that these degraded areas are rehabilitated once again. Maybe not for me to enjoy, given my age. But our thinking relates to the people yet to come, to the new generation, so that they may enjoy what we enjoyed in the past. But this won't happen if the State continues to approve environmental licenses for more plantations.

From the land, we've had plenty of food. Our seasons of the year were regular, there was the right time to plant things that go under the ground, like peanuts, potatoes. There was the season to plant maize. In the months of February and March the time begins – used to begin – to plant all else, beans, maize, pumpkin. The time of year to plant the maroon cucumber and okra is more from September onward. Today, we no longer manage to do this, many people irrigate their crops, but we didn't have this custom of irrigating, and if we were to try that today we wouldn't manage, because there's no water. Our production was plentiful, of all crops, we didn't use to buy these things, none of these we're talking about. That was the way my parents and grandparents did it. I remember my grandfather leaving here, my community, to go to the Nanuque market. He would take his produce and barter it for things they didn't have here in the territory. So I say to you, today there's none of that any more. Can you imagine someone who lives in the countryside having to buy cassava flour? Buying maize to feed chickens, buying beans to eat?

WRM: At the public hearing you gave your testimonies about the impacts of eucalyptus monoculture. Beyond that, what demands did you present to the Federal Public Prosecution Office?

Célio: The Public Prosecution Office made available five seats for each community. We registered five people from each community, which meant 55 people were present at the hearing, plus others who had been interested in registering separately. The communities that attended represented about 8800 quilombolas from the eight communities. (2)

On the day, each community took a certain number of issues to raise at the hearing. In other words, each community spoke on behalf of all eight communities. One example: Volta Miúda, my community, had three issues to raise. One of them was the demarcation of our territories, and we made this demand to the Public Prosecution Office about the process of demarcation on behalf of all the communities. And beyond the demarcation process, also considering everything I've been reporting to you, we questioned something. We argued that since communities have their certification as quilombolas, and their territories have been studied with an official map drawn up by INCRA, then why don't the Public Prosecution Office and the Public Defense of the Union Office file a lawsuit to make Suzano start vacating the communities' territory?

And furthermore, Suzano has to pay compensation for the use of our territory. And since we have all this ready, it is not necessary for us to wait for demarcation to be finalized for us to have rights of use of our territory. We also said that over the course of this whole period, the communities were not able to produce their own food as they had always done. So what the corporations would have to do is to vacate our territories so that the communities may restart their production, as they used to do.

The third point we raised is the question of the water crisis that the communities face at present, with the impacts on springs and animal deaths that harm the communities. And we also raised the question of why INEMA (Institute of the Environment and Water Resources), which is the state agency that grants the environmental license for the company to do all of its disaster, grants a water concession for the company to make use of what is left of our rivers and fill gigantic trucks with water for their plantation, while the communities can't use it because INEMA won't grant us a concession! What kind of distortion is that, you see?

We also raised the fact that currently the communities of the southernmost part don't have access to electricity. Today, there are a number of families surrounded by eucalyptus where children and adults need to use nebulizers. They have to walk 15 to 20 kilometers for people to get their nebulization because they have no electricity to be able to use a nebulizer at home!

Another super-important point was that the communities that weren't in attendance could watch the proceedings on YouTube, because these communities were interested in taking part in the hearing. Only we don't have that opportunity, because the eucalyptus gets in the way. Even this medium of communication the eucalyptus hinders because the plantations interfere with the mobile telephone and internet signals, leaving communities isolated.

We raised the question that when the companies arrived in this region, they said they'd bring many jobs to the communities, and this hasn't happened. In one community, out of more than a thousand people, there are four or five who are working. We also raised the expulsion of people, of the young people from the communities, the rural exodus. Day after day, this emptying is taking place, people going to the peripheries of major urban areas.

We raised the right to come and go that communities today don't have. The roads all blocked by eucalyptus. During felling season, the roads are taken over, people from the communities cannot pass, neighbors have to wait half an hour to pass sometimes. Furthermore, there are many other hazards people experience. There is the armed militia of the Suzano corporation, that prevents free circulation in the territory. Also, owing to the fact that the eucalyptus grows over the roads, blocking the view, a child was beaten to death by criminals. In case of a health emergency, not one community has a quality road to ensure that help arrives quickly. We mentioned all of this at the hearing.

WRM: You talked about the promises that the company made when it arrived. Could you tell us more about the arrival of Suzano in this region? What was this process like?

Célio: A company called FLONIBRA was the first to arrive on our territory, I'm talking about Volta Miúda in particular. Then, FLONIBRA became Bahia Sul, and after Bahia Sul it named itself Suzano. During this period of Bahia Sul, Aracruz Celulose also arrived, which later became Fibria. And later the two became a single company, which is today's Suzano.

When these companies arrived in this region, the *quilombola* communities were already here. The communities had no deeds to their land, while the companies illegally appropriated these lands through land grabs and fraudulent deeds, as was the case almost all over the country. (3) They even disrespected legitimate and good faith possessions, the 20-year chain of succession etc. And throughout the process of the arrival of eucalyptus, of the arrival of Suzano later, many quilombolas had to leave their lands, either because of the eucalyptus plantation or because they had no way of working any more owing to lack of land.

Later, some people started working for these companies, including my father, my uncle and many of my cousins. So when FLONIBRA got here, it had a certain level of care toward the communities. This I tell you in all certainty, despite the fact that it didn't let anyone enter its area, I remember this well. Just under 10 years ago, FIBRIA poisoned isolated oil palm and jack fruit trees in the forest reservations. We believe this was meant to prevent the circulation of harvesters from the communities. They even used a pretext: the law of the biodiversity convention. But their interest was in preventing the circulation of people. Father José and João Luiz from the Center for the Defense of Human Rights (CDDH for its Portuguese acronym) even denounced this at the time.

But after it became Suzano, it turned into this demon that you're seeing. Today the communities are disrespected in every sense of the word. As well as the impacts already mentioned, there is a lawsuit ongoing in federal court against us, a possessory action. This was a reaction by the company when

we started to denounce it. It alleges that we were preventing it from conducting its activities, so through this suit the company and its lawyers are trying to intimidate us.

In general terms, we see that since eucalyptus arrived, practically 50% of the population of these communities is no longer in their territories for lack of means to live. Many of these people are spread out, but are interested in returning if the territory is in the hands of the community. I firmly believe that, and we hear people talk; if there were a possibility of returning, they would. And we believe they really would come back because many are struggling in the peripheries of cities because they don't have the opportunity to return. They don't have the opportunity of being in their territory.

WRM: What are your hopes, based on the public hearing?

Célio: The Federal Public Prosecution Office and the Public Defense of the Union Office have already created a WhatsApp group and asked us to choose two participants from each community, and they have been put into the group. And they also asked for participants from Espírito Santo who also came here for the hearing to join the group and take part. In fact, one of them represents CONAQ (National Coordination of *Quilombola* Communities). And since then what happened was that an inquiry was opened. They gave us 15 days for us to present a list of all the springs, rivers, lakes, lagoons that we saw dry up or degrade due to the eucalyptus monoculture. Five of the eight communities have this material ready, but we couldn't leave the other three behind. So this list is being drawn up with the help of satellite images to present to the Federal Public Prosecution Office.

So this was one of the demands immediately put forward in the group, which included the need for this list for the company to recover these springs and lagoons, and necessarily it'll have to pull back. That was one of our demands. Furthermore, there is a very old promise, which is the question of the company creating many jobs for the communities. At present it's farcical for the company to claim it creates jobs in the region, because it doesn't. Especially not for the affected communities.

These two points drew the attention of the Federal Public Prosecution Office and the Public Defense of the Union Office, and will be looked into by them after the hearing. They also asked him [the public defender] to visit the first community on June 6, Volta Miúda community, so that he could see up close what can be done about the question of developing public policies and production. He is talking a lot to Volta Miúda because Volta Miúda has a Public Civil Action ongoing with the Federal Public Prosecution Office and they need to make decisions about these questions. But he said he would like to visit all the communities.

On our YouTube channel we have managed to put material that was filmed during the hearing, with each community's words, each leader, each person, for people to have a clear picture of what was dealt with at the hearing. (4)

We drew up a letter that was presented at the hearing. (5) This letter talks about many highly important points that the customers, shareholders and financial backers of Suzano should know about. They need to know that this corporation that seems so pretty, so kind from the outside, creates a lot of misery here. For the shareholders to have so many resources, so much money, many lives are being cut down here, and we don't have direct access to these people for the information to get out. To the customers I'd say: if you knew that to be able to sell you a product from here, many lives are being sacrificed, then, would you still want to buy it? I think not. That's it.

Eucalyptus monoculture makes the most of discriminatory public policies that evince environmental racism. It makes invisible the demands of the *quilombola* communities of the southernmost part of

Bahia; it threatens their memories and rights. Without the land, we have nothing. The *quilombola* struggle is for our ancestral territory, for our culture and for our social, economic and political well being. We don't want money, but as well as the *quilombola* territory, the company owes us a compensation payment, as a legal right, just what it says in the Constitution, which is all fair and good, but it's not complied with!

- (1) Government agency that has the attribution of issuing the certificate to the *quilombola* communities and of entering them into the general registry. This recognizes communities' rights and gives them access to government programs. But it does not recognize the right to the land; it is much more about the recognition of the community as a *quilombola* community.
- (2) MPF, [DPU e comunidades quilombolas articularam medidas para mitigar prejuízos causados pela monocultura de eucalipto no sul da Bahia](#).
- (3) [Grilagem terceirizada](#), by Teoney Araújo Guerra.
- (4) [Extremo Quilombo WebTV](#)
- (5) Carta Pública das Comunidades Quilombolas do Extremo Sul da Bahia. [Portuguese](#); [English](#).