
What 'Plantations' Really Mean

September is the month when communities from around the world, facing the many negative impacts created by the imposition of the industrial tree plantations model on their lands, commemorate the International Day of Struggle against Monoculture Tree Plantations.

The International Day of Struggle is also a day of solidarity. Solidarity with and among people's struggles for land.

In this edition of the WRM bulletin, we highlight materials, analysis and declarations in the framework of this Day, celebrated since 2004 on September 21st.

We want to pay homage, in particular, to the communities in DRC who have long been struggling to get their lands back from an oil palm company. Their courageous struggle showcases the multiple layers of oppression and violations that result from the plantation model that has been imposed on their lands since colonial times while, at the same time, exposes the blunt impunity of the actors involved, including the financial ones.

Plantations are not Forests

This is a common chant and slogan used by communities, networks and supporting organizations around the world to denounce the taking and destruction of community lands and forests for the imposition of what is usually referred to as 'green deserts.'

Readers of the WRM bulletin will be familiar with the fact that industrial plantations destroy diversity in its many forms and levels, and replace it with a monoculture model that is dependent on high levels of agrochemicals and heavy machinery. This destruction includes the communities that have coexisted with and shaped those forests and territories for generations. The impacts are innumerable and very often end in devastation for many Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities. Readers will probably also be familiar with the horrendous violence that industrial plantations entail, including criminalization, beatings, rape, unlawful arrests, harassment, surveillance and trauma.

It is therefore fundamental that when we say "Plantations are not Forest", we refer to and acknowledge not just the biological differences between these two ideas ('plantations' and 'forests') and all the impacts that these carry; but also, and most importantly, we need to acknowledge that the meaning of 'plantations' is about the colonial and racist imposition of power over forest-dependant communities, as the community struggle against Plantations et Huileries du Congo (PHC) in DRC shows. This imposition, in turn, destroys not only 'forests' in the biological sense, but also the social, political and economic structures and knowledge systems that have organized land in completely different ways.

An outcry against PHC/Feronia/KKM plantations in DRC

We express our solidarity with the struggles of the communities impacted by the company Plantations

et Huileries du Congo (PHC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a company that was owned by Canadian company Feronia and propped up with money from European Development Banks (1). Despite the millions of Euros pumped into the company, Feronia went bankrupt in 2021 and the banks agreed to hand over the plantations to yet another company, Straight KKM. By doing so, they ignored the long-standing call from communities for return of their ancestral land under community control.

The industrial oil palm plantations have been illegally occupying community land for more than a 100 years. These are plantations that helped build the palm oil empire of the food company Unilever. (2) Today, these plantations, under different owners and with different investors, are still stealing the same communities' lands and livelihoods, and are evidence of the deep violence and racism that this monoculture model is based on.

Reports from the villages denounce the constant harassment, violence and arbitrary arrests by company security forces working hand in hand with military and police forces against communities that are surrounding these plantations. After the most recent outburst of violence by company and state security, many villagers have abandoned their homes in fear that the military will enter their houses again, forcing the doors, to ransack through their homes in search for allegedly stolen palm nuts. They claim that community members are 'stealing' the fruits from the 'company's palm trees'. Communities have always harvested the nuts traditionally to extract oil. Continuing this tradition since the forests of their ancestors were stolen for industrial palm cultivation is taking a heavy toll on people confronting this injustice. (3)

The violence is serious. According to reports from Lokutu, one of the three sites where PHC plantations occupy community land, some people in Basoko district in the province of Tshopo, have been arrested in the night by military and police officers, accompanied by agents of the British multinational security company GS4 and the plantations' company security. It seems that the arrests are targeting community leaders who signed a community complaint in 2018 against the European Development Banks financing PHC/Feronia at the time.

The reports also talk about several women and young girls being raped, some of whom "are victims of serious sexual violence".

In the meantime, the Congolese Prime Minister, Sama Lukonde, said in a speech early October, during DRC's preparatory work for the UN climate change conference this November, that DRC is "a solution country" in the face of climate change. (4) Knowing the UN' view of forests as 'places for storing carbon', one can only imagine DRC's plans for 'saving the climate change problem'.

It is imperative to raise our voices louder to stop the crimes perpetuated for the benefit of industrial plantations and their investors. No more!

As Flávia, a quilombola woman, mother and activist, from the Angelim II community of Sapê do Norte, in the state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, who is also part of a long-standing resistance against industrial monoculture plantations in their territories, says in an interview that was released in the last WRM bulletin:

"So, the first thing: you have to take back the land. But, in order to take back land, it is necessary to have a minimum of organization to avoid failing. We need to be connected, to network, even if it is outside the state, outside the country. (...) It is also very important to take care of the lives of our defenders. And never give up, right? Because if we give up on any process of fighting for rights, one

way or another, we are going to die. If we are not defenders, we are going to be shot because we are black, or we are going to die of hunger because we don't have anything to eat, or we are going to die of cold because we don't have a place to live. We have to stay connected and try to stay alive. The priority is life, not giving up, and networking. Support is very important.”

- (1) WRM bulletin, [Development banks make shameless exit from a colonial land grab in the Congo](#), 2022.
- (2) WRM bulletin, [A Century of Agro-Colonialism in the DR Congo](#), 2022.
- (3) Au jour le jour, [L'armée sème la panique à Boteka pour mettre fin aux vols d'huile de palme à la plantation PHC](#), dénonce la communauté, Sep 2022.
- (4) Barmetre, COP27: [Jean François Mombia Atuku désapprouve la politique du gouvernement congolais](#).
- (5) WRM Bulletin, [Quilombola communities recover land and water after 40 years of eucalyptus monoculture in Brazil](#), 2022.