South America: "Green" Destruction in the Amazon Rainforest

For decades, Latin America and the Caribbean have suffered from the world's highest rate of tropical deforestation—higher than Africa or Asia. Much of the destruction in Latin America is concentrated in the Amazon region. In 2021, of the 10 countries with the highest loss of primary tropical forests in the world, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia ranked first, third, fifth and sixth, respectively.

To understand the process of deforestation, we must understand not only the most visible causes—such as timber extraction and the advance of agribusiness and mining—but also the underlying causes. These tend to be hidden, less discussed and poorly understood; they are closely linked to various forms of oppression under the capitalist-racist-patriarchal system, as well as to the region's colonial legacy. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand how projects recently touted as "solutions" to the climate crisis have, themselves, become new underlying causes of deforestation.

The first and only comprehensive UN-led analysis of these causes on a global scale was carried out in 1999, with significant participation from civil society organizations from major countries with forests. In re-reading the causes identified in 1999, what is most striking is that most of them are still extremely current (1):

- Large "development" or infrastructure projects, such as dams, roads, and mining and oil-extraction schemes, are perpetuated by corporate-state alliances;
- Agribusiness, arguably more destructive today than it was in 1999, continues to advance—as part of a larger process that includes logging, forest fires, speculation, and land grabbing;
- Investment patterns, indebtedness, macroeconomic policies, global commodity flows, and trade relations continue to be central to deforestation processes worldwide;
- Laws allow public land to be granted, for example, to large timber, mining, or tree plantation companies;
- Many "nature conservation" projects continue to harass and dispossess forest peoples in order to set up official protected areas;
- States, global corporations and conservation NGOs (and sometimes all three at once) continue to employ militarized methods to centralize control over forests;
- The territorial rights of indigenous peoples and traditional communities are still not adequately recognized, and discrimination persists. In recent years, the criminalization of communities and peoples has increased; meanwhile, destructive activities are "decriminalized", and sometimes openly encouraged;
- Attacks on the livelihoods and struggles of forest defenders continue to undermine forest protection.

The Same Old Causes of Deforestation

There is more deforestation in Latin America and the Caribbean than in other regions, not only because the Amazon is the largest tropical forest in the world, but also because of the speed of growth and the scale of agribusiness, mining, fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure activities.

For example, due to the economic crisis in Venezuela, predatory extractivism has taken hold; and it is based not so much on oil as on other forms of mining. The largest project, financed by private international capital, is the Orinoco Mining Arc; it covers 12% of the entire country, part of which is in Venezuela's Amazon region. In 2016, the government created a Special Economic Zone—a geographic area with special laws that drastically relax environmental standards and the recognition of social rights, among other problems. Simultaneously, the government has made deals with participating companies, the details of which have not been publicly disclosed. The army has also been given special powers to suppress resistance and ensure the continuance of mining. (2)

Another example are infrastructure projects, erected under the guise of promoting "development" and "integration" in South America. However, these highways, railroads, waterways, ports, airports, and hydroelectric dams serve mainly to enable the exportation of a growing volume of raw materials and products from extractive activities. They do not meet the needs of local populations, and often leave nothing but devastating impacts.

The main plan for South America is the Initiative for the Integration of South American Regional Infrastructure, or IIRSA. The IIRSA Plan was launched in 2000 by 12 South American governments, and it envisaged more than 500 projects. Infrastructure investments have gradually become the newest form of financial capital expansion, and they have a potential for huge profits. These initiatives are mainly carried out through public-private partnerships, which are advantageous for the private sector, and leave national governments to shoulder the risks. Nowadays, we hear about "extreme infrastructure" projects. These are mega-corridors which, on an ever-increasing scale and speed, connect places where extraction is cheap with centers of manufacturing and consumption. (3)

One example of a mega-corridor project is the construction of a stretch of the “inter-oceanic highway” between the city of Cruzeiro do Sul in Brazil and Pucallpa in Peru, which would link northwestern Brazil to southwestern Peru. This construction project began more than 20 years ago. Indigenous peoples from both countries have opposed the project in an open letter, denouncing that “the construction of the highway is part of a predatory development model that includes mining, timber, oil and gas exploitation. In this region, which has the largest freshwater basin in the world, there are indigenous lands that have not been demarcated, as well as peoples in voluntary isolation, who continue to be ignored and denied.” (4)

The already harmful impacts of highways are compounded by railroad projects in the Brazilian Amazon. The so-called “Ferrogrão” railway, for example, which will connect northern Mato Grosso state with the port of Miritituba on the Tapajós River in Pará state, will pass through Conservation Units and Indigenous Lands. This project further aggravates the impacts of highway BR-163, which cuts into the Amazon from the central western region—the country's largest grain-producing region. Historically, projects of this kind have been main drivers of increased deforestation, causing devastating impacts for forest peoples.

The “Greening” of Destruction: New Underlying Causes of Deforestation

The fact that the underlying causes of deforestation identified in 1999 are still present does not mean that nothing has changed. Most of the “solutions” to deforestation—proposed since then by governments, banks, large conservation NGOs, and others—have become new underlying causes of deforestation.

The main cause is the REDD mechanism, which stands for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. REDD came out of the 2005 UN climate conferences and promised to

combat and reduce deforestation quickly, simply, and cheaply—and thereby also reduce carbon emissions and the impacts of climate change. The argument used was that it was more advantageous to "keep forests standing" than to cut them down.

To get a REDD project approved in a tropical forest, a company or NGO chooses an ostensibly threatened forest area and calculates how much of this area would be deforested within a span of 30 to 50 years. It then calculates how many hypothetical hectares would be conserved if the REDD project were to be implemented and, accordingly, the volume of carbon emissions that would be avoided. These calculations are then used to issue tradeable carbon credits, certified by consulting companies.

These credits are then purchased, for example, by corporations—mostly in the global North—that are in the business of oil extraction, aviation, food commodities, or mining. These companies “offset” the pollution they generate by claiming to conserve faraway forests. By doing so, they “buy” the right to continue polluting the atmosphere with an amount of carbon supposedly equivalent to what has been “stored” in the forest area whose destruction has been “avoided”. “Offset” is the buzzword for the REDD mechanism.

Forest-dwelling communities are blamed for deforestation, and are prevented from using their own spaces to carry out activities that are fundamental to their livelihoods. REDD systems thus reinforce the mistaken premise that people and forests cannot coexist, causing problems for communities on both ends of the deal: first, in forest communities near the activities of these companies from the Global North, which—thanks to REDD—can continue to pollute even more; and second, in forests where offset projects are located. (5)

Since the REDD mechanism was launched nearly two decades ago, deforestation has not been reduced, but rather has increased. Agribusiness, mining, monoculture tree plantations and other extractive activities have always been more profitable than keeping forests intact—which reveals the true intention behind projects like REDD: to perpetuate the right to pollute. Thus, REDD contributes to worsening the climate crisis instead of mitigating it.

Currently, 99 REDD projects have been certified or are in the process of certification in the four countries with the highest deforestation rates in the Amazon region (Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia). In addition, there is an unknown number of other uncertified REDD initiatives.

There are also several programs proposed by national governments in the Amazon region. In Colombia, for example, a 2017 decree allows companies not to pay “polluter pays” taxes, and instead purchase “offsets,” including through REDD projects.

There are also state government REDD programs, such as in the states of Acre and Mato Grosso in Brazil, which are financed by the governments of Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Payments in this case do not come from the sale of carbon credits, but rather are based on purported “results” related to deforestation rates over a period of time agreed upon by the parties. Depending on the agreed-upon deforestation rate and the baseline year used to establish the comparison, the result can be oppoused to the established goal; governments can receive payments even when deforestation is on the rise, as has been the case in Mato Grosso. (6) Furthermore, while this kind of REDD program is not funded by the carbon market, one of its main objectives is to prepare these states to enter the carbon market as soon as possible.

The New REDD: Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)

REDD's failure to reduce deforestation might suggest that the idea should be dropped, but that has not been the case. For some, REDD has not been a failure. Major conservation NGOs, carbon market companies, consultants who design and validate projects, national and state governments, certifiers, and others have collectively pocketed billions of dollars from REDD projects over the past 15 years. Nor has REDD been a failure for big corporations like oil companies, which have been able to expand their polluting activities by claiming to “offset” their emissions.

They did, however, decide to change the name. REDD is now increasingly known as Nature-Based Solutions (NBS). NBS initiatives have become even more hazardous for forest-dependent peoples, because they are linked to another proposal—the so-called "30x30" plan, which aims to conserve 30% of the world’s natural areas by 2030.

The magic phrase for all sectors of global industry right now is to achieve “carbon-neutral” emissions. This has led to a veritable forest-land rush by companies and NGOs. Many communities are being bullied into signing contracts with “carbon” companies that are anxious to sell pollution credits to overseas industries, NGOs, and, increasingly, to companies and national governments. This new trend has not yet led to new NBS projects in the Amazon. But when it does, these projects are expected to follow the logic of the REDD mechanism—as we see that some REDD projects are being renamed as NBS initiatives.

Brazilian agribusiness is one of the sectors that has stood out the most in promoting NBS activities at the global level; for example, through expanding its monoculture eucalyptus plantations and so-called “low-carbon agriculture” initiatives. These plans include adding additives to animal feed, and introducing agroforestry and soil management practices. These are nothing more than a deceive, when we bear in mind the industry’s mega-expansion plans, which also include the fires and the deforestation necessary to carry them out. Additionally, there is the use of petroleum-based products throughout the entire chain of production, including chemical fertilizers and pesticides. All of this explains why the agribusiness food commodities chain is already responsible for up to 37% of all global greenhouse gas emissions.

The "Low-Carbon" or "Green" Economy

Big finance and industrial capitalists are not only greenwashing themselves through “carbon-neutral” projects; they are also claiming to have set in motion the transition of society's energy base. Yet, instead of actually moving towards a more climatically and socially just economy, they simply want to use the so-called “low-carbon” or “green” economy to maintain and strengthen their own hegemony and power.

It is a mistake to think that this new energy matrix, based on wind energy, mega-dams, biomass, solar, and other sources, will reduce deforestation and/or extractive activities. On the contrary, these projects will also demand large amounts of land. The symbol of the “low-carbon economy” is the electric car, which, in addition to requiring the usual metals and minerals—such as iron and aluminum—also requires several new minerals and metals whose extraction will imply even more destruction and deforestation.

Ecuador is an example of how the new "low-carbon economy" is already impacting the forest and its people. In recent years there has been a rush to extract balsa trees, which is an ideal wood for the growing wind turbine industry. Ecuador has already become the world’s largest exporter of this wood, mainly to China. Ironically, as China announces its goals of “carbon neutrality” through the

installation of more wind farms, the destruction of forests to obtain balsa trees is escalating in Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. This also leads to other impacts, including problems caused by mobile sawmills in communities—such as the pollution of rivers; forests thrown out of balance due to uncontrolled extraction; and social impacts, such as labor exploitation, conflicts, and divisions within communities. (7)

Final Considerations

The discourse of the “low-carbon” economy is extremely convenient for companies that are actually destroying forests on a large scale, as well as for those who benefit from the implementation of these projects—including conservation NGOs, certifiers of “offset” projects, and financial investors, etc.

This discourse includes perverse proposals and mechanisms like REDD and NBS. They are perverse because their central goal is to throw a lifeline to polluting industries—and their profits—while destabilizing the global climate in a short period of time. These proposals lead to an unchecked race for communities’ lands. There is, therefore, increased pressure on territories, both due to the usual destructive activities as well as to new “green” attacks.

This scenario underlines the importance of strengthening resistance in territories affected by the imposition of such destructive and/or “green” projects, as well as networking, unity, and mutual solidarity among impacted communities. This is especially important because in this scenario, projects that destroy forests and “green” projects depend on each other to be viable: they are both part of a single, nefarious logic that must be exposed and opposed.

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* This is the summary of an article published in the dossier “Agribusiness’ Global Trail of Fire”. You may access the full article in Portuguese; and you may access the dossier in Spanish, Portuguese and English here.

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