
Colombia: Communities unite against a monster named Smurfit Westrock

*“The land is not for sale, it is to be loved and defended.
And when it has been taken away,
it is recovered so that it can flourish once again.”*
– leader from the Misak People

This article is an opportunity to tell a story, especially to communities and social movements in the Global South who are defending their land, territory, nature and food sovereignty. It is the story of how peasant and indigenous communities in the department of Cauca, Colombia, have organized to face one of the world's largest multinational paper and cardboard manufacturers: Smurfit Westrock. Smurfit Westrock acquired Smurfit Kappa Cartón de Colombia.

We write from the municipality of Cajibío, a region affected by multiple and profound problems. The concentration of land ownership has reached a Gini coefficient of 0.87 (1), placing us among the most inequitable areas of the country (2). Added to this situation is the historical presence of armed groups, both legal and illegal. These groups are fighting for territorial control to perpetuate extractive models that are in opposition to life itself. Cajibío is also characterized by State abandonment, with a lack of access to rights such as education, health and infrastructure, as well as the presence and expansion of illicit crops, which are exacerbating the social and environmental crisis.

Our alliance of indigenous, peasant, and Afro-descendant communities is the result of a process of coordination among peasant communities organized through the Agrarian National Coordinator (CNA, by its Spanish acronym), the Misak indigenous peoples, and the Nasa indigenous peoples. We have come together under the name **Cajibío Interethnic and Intercultural Territory of Life (TEVIIC, by its Spanish acronym)**, in order to achieve Agrarian Reform through autonomy and concrete actions. In our context, wherein there is an overcrowding of productive activities, we have faced conflicts over access to land (3). Some of these have left people injured and caused profound divisions and tensions within communities. This has shown us that lack of land is not a problem between neighbors, but a structural problem resulting from an economic model that concentrates property and destroys nature.

According to the context analysis we have developed at TEVIIC, Cauca is following an agro-export model that prioritizes monocultures of coffee, sugarcane and trees earmarked for international markets. This has displaced the production of staple foods and has increased dependence on imports (4), which in turn has eroded food sovereignty and led to increased vulnerability in the face of global crises around food prices and availability.

TEVIIC emerged in the midst of the 2021 national strike, which was one of the largest mobilizations in Colombia's recent history. TEVIIC identifies Smurfit Westrock as the main culprit for the lack of land in Cajibío. This multinational corporation, which has a presence in 40 countries and more than 120,000 hectares of tree monocultures in Latin America, owns 67,500 hectares in Colombia – almost 3,000 of which are in Cajibío (5).

Several documents describe the company's actions. For example, in the report, *Smurfit Kappa Colombia: impactos socio ecológicos y violaciones de derechos humanos*, the company is listed among the corporations with largest market concentration in the global packaging industry – allowing it to impose highly destructive production models in countries in the Global South (6). Pine and eucalyptus plantations affect ecosystems by altering the water cycle, reducing the availability of water, impoverishing the soil, and displacing native biodiversity. This is something our ancestors have long been aware of.

Other research shows that the massive land purchases Smurfit has made since the 1980s have coincided with the gradual expulsion of peasant families, the replacement of native forests with industrial plantations, and an increase in local agrarian conflicts. Monocultures have been shown to cause the following impacts: a drop in the water table, the disappearance of water sources, loss of biodiversity, and contamination of soils and rivers due to the intensive uses of agrochemicals (7). In her thesis, *Conflicto entre conservación y producción: Los monocultivos como amenaza para la integridad de los bosques altoandinos en Colombia*, (8) Soriano confirms that plantations significantly alter the structure and composition of high Andean ecosystems.

The advance of monoculture farming has undercut food sovereignty and displaced communities. Meanwhile, companies use climate rhetoric to justify these monocultures by claiming they are carbon sinks. This highlights the contradiction between corporate green rhetoric and the reality in affected territories.

We know that in many parts of the world, other communities are fighting similar battles against transnational capital; they seek to remain in their territories, build new and better ways of living in the world, and strengthen political, social and economic models that defend life and nature.

This coordination between peasant and indigenous peoples in Colombia is happening thanks to their land recovery process. After Smurfit's activity in the territory, which led to dispossession of communities, the land recovery process is merely restoring social justice. So far, this movement has recovered 300 hectares.

Basically, we have come together to block pine and eucalyptus monocultures through citizen mobilization actions. By doing so, we seek to claim the right to land – as enshrined in Article 64 of the Colombian Constitution – so that we can live, grow food, and care for nature. We have exhausted other avenues that have not yielded results, including seeking dialogue and making demands of the multinational company and the Colombian State. In this respect, our actions are, in fact, part of a historic tradition of agrarian struggle in Colombia. This struggle has made it clear that without effective land redistribution, it is not possible to build territorial peace. Building a common agenda among peoples with different historical relationships with the land – such as peasants and indigenous peoples – is a political strategy that breaks decades of social fragmentation imposed by dispossession.

“By recovering these 3,000 hectares, we would be able to settle more than 1,000 peasant and indigenous families, we would be resolving the issue of land for a large population in Cajibío”.
– Peasant leader

Our territory has the highest number of socio-environmental conflicts recorded in the department. Many of these conflicts are associated with tree plantations and Smurfit Westrock's operation, where

there have been well-documented impacts on water resources, soils and biodiversity, as well as systematic patterns of harassment towards community leaders.

Since we began the land recovery process four years ago, we have experienced countless attacks by repressive State forces, paramilitaries, and men linked to Smurfit Westrock. To cite just a few examples: there have been violent attacks at demonstrations; physical assaults on peasants engaged in land recovery efforts; intimidation of peasants by armed men from the Army and from Smurfit Westrock; and shooting attacks against social leaders from TEVIIC. Death threats have also been issued to get people to abandon the struggle and the recovered territory, which in some cases has led to the forced displacement of peasants. Not to mention the recurring drone flights over places where TEVIIC members meet, as well as the criminalization of activists by the media and the State. This repression has already left countless people injured, and is to blame for the murder of the young peasant, Huber Samir Camayo, in 2021 (9).

This pattern coincides with reports from human rights organizations, which warn about the criminalization and repression of those who defend land in Colombia (10) (11). These repressive actions, along with stigmatization campaigns and litigation, seek to fracture community cohesion and curb resistance, causing temporary displacement and crop losses.

We understand that this struggle is not easy, and that we are facing a multinational corporation that has had political, economic and even legislative power in Colombia for decades. For this very reason, Smurfit has developed ways to legalize its exploitation, and has even maintained an image of being an environmental protector and driver of the local economy – all whilst intimidating, persecuting and stigmatizing those of us who are now demanding that Smurfit leave the territory and make amends to our communities for the harm it has caused.

Faced with an adversary with so many tentacles, this year we launched the **Alliance for Life, Nature and the Territories**, which coordinates various organizational processes at the local, national, and international levels. These processes not only support and strengthen the struggle in Cajibío against Smurfit Westrock, but also allow us to recognize other struggles globally and coordinate with them. We are aware that imagining and creating transformation in favor of life is only possible by uniting different processes around the world that are resisting the extractive model and building kinder ways to inhabit the planet, from different realities.

We know that the world is organized in a system that concentrates political and economic power in the Global North, while exploiting resources and peoples in the South. Therefore, we recognize existing and developing struggles in different countries in order to make them our own, and to understand how they are opposing transnational capital and the proliferation of relationships of exploitation and domination. We do this to get inspired, and to have a broader and deeper geopolitical understanding.

We also want these international networks and alliances to be reflected in meetings, in the development of international political advocacy strategies that allow us to open spaces for dialogue, in film forums, in presentations at academic spaces, and with social movements. We also want to see citizen mechanisms for questioning and pressuring different governments; this is so that we can demand that Smurfit respect human rights and make amends to our populations for the environmental and sociocultural damage it has caused. We also want to see Smurfit leave the territory, so that our TEVIIC communities are able to carry out the Interethnic and Intercultural Life Plan.

In this Plan, we propose to allocate the recovered land for agroecological production, reforestation with native species, protection of water sources, recovery of native seeds to strengthen food sovereignty, and the construction of our own local and anti-patriarchal justice mechanisms. We echo the African Food Sovereignty Alliance's call (AFSA) to understand food sovereignty and energy sovereignty as inseparable (12), and we explicitly oppose the entry of mining projects and new industrial monocultures.

Finally, we are making a fraternal call for material solidarity. Every military operation destroys crops, temporary housing, and seedbeds. We need support to rebuild and to continue resisting. Therefore, any donation will help us in the difficult, risky and historic task of continuing to resist. This struggle is for Cajibío, but also for all peoples who defend water, land and life.

*Because we, the people, are the ones to implement agrarian reform;
let us all go and take down the fences,
to reclaim the land, so we can reclaim everything.*

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References

(1) Indicator that makes it possible to quantify inequality on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represents equality and 1 represents absolute inequality.

(2) DANE, 2014. [Land ownership concentration index](#)

(3) A concept that illustrates the overcrowding of families living in specific territory, in which – if land were to be distributed taking into account the UAF (the basic calculation of hectares needed for a peasant family to survive, which in Cajibío ranges between 4 and 10 hectares) – the majority of the population would be left out.

(4) Campo, C., & Sandí, H., 2025. De la seguridad a la soberanía alimentaria: análisis sobre la seguridad alimentaria y su defensa comunitaria por parte del campesinado en el departamento del Cauca, Colombia 2024. Master's Thesis, International University of la Rioja

(5) Smurfit, 2024, [Sustainability Report](#)

(6) González, E. Ramiro P., 2022. [Smurfit Kappa Colombia: impactos socio ecológicos y violaciones de derechos humanos. OMAL, SumOfUs, LASC](#)

(7) FAO, 2021. Evaluación de los impactos de los monocultivos forestales en suelos y agua. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6022es/cb6022es.pdf>

(8) Soriano, K., 2025. Conflicto entre conservación y producción: Los monocultivos como amenaza para la integridad de los bosques altoandinos en Colombia. [Specialization thesis]. University of Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia.

(9) [Report on the human rights situation in Cajibío, Cauca, June 2025](#)

(10) Front Line Defenders, 2024. Informe anual sobre personas defensoras de derechos humanos en riesgo. Available at: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/es/resource-publication/2024-annual-report>

(11) Global Witness (2023). Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis. Available at: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/standing-firm/>

(12) WRM, 2025. [Reclaiming Energy and Food Sovereignty Through Agroecology](#)