Current investments in and expansion of tree monocultures in Africa

In 2020, WRM denounced and warned about a report by the African Development Bank (AfDB) and WWF Kenya. The report called on financial institutions to support the establishment of 500,000 hectares of new tree monocultures in sub-Saharan Africa, while ignoring the harmful, often violent, impacts that these plantations have on grassroots communities. (1) The report also recommended the creation of new funding mechanisms to generate more profits for investors. This article looks at the extent to which these recommendations have materialized since then, and reports on recent investments in industrial tree plantations and the expansion of this activity in Africa.

Recent investments and financial mechanisms pushing for the expansion of tree monocultures

In recent years, public and private institutions have invested in the expansion of industrial tree plantations in Africa to boost their profits. The following three initiatives offer some insight into how the business works – that is, who is putting money where, how, and for what purpose.

Africa Sustainable Forestry Fund – ASFF (operated by Criterion African Partners)

In 2019, when the aforementioned AfDB–WWF Kenya report was published, the US-based private company, Criterion Africa Partners (CAP), described itself as “the largest private investor in Africa’s sustainable forestry sector”. (2) Since then, through its Africa Sustainable Forestry Fund (ASFF II), CAP has administered 150 million in investments. Some of these investments have come from the AfDB, whilst the lion’s share has come from governments in the Global North through their financial institutions – such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), FMO (Netherlands), BIO (Belgium), FinDev Canada (Canada). (3)

Available data indicate that CAP currently controls at least 135,000 hectares of industrial eucalyptus, pine, and teak plantations across several countries in Africa – including South Africa, Tanzania, Mozambique, Uganda, Ghana, Gabon, and Namibia. (4) More recently in 2025, CAP announced a new fundraising round to establish a new investment instrument, the AFSS III, (5) which aims to raise USD 180 million. It has already secured USD 30 million from the Dutch development bank FMO. (6)

African Forestry Impact Platform – AFIP (operated by New Forests group)

Another recent and major initiative was the creation of the African Forestry Impact Platform (AFIP) in 2022. The AFIP is backed by a USD 200 million investment from the governments of Norway, Finland, and the United Kingdom via their development finance institutions. AFIP is managed by New Forests, one of the world’s largest private managers of land and industrial tree plantations, overseeing more than USD 8 billion in assets and more than 4 million hectares globally. (7)

AFIP’s first act was to acquire Green Resources, a company that proclaims itself to be “East Africa’s largest 'forest' development and wood processing company”. (8) Green Resources’s long track record of violations against rural communities in Tanzania, (9) Uganda (10) and Mozambique

(11) seems to be irrelevant to its new owners and northern investors. More recently in 2025, AFIP acquired another timber plantation company, Rance, thereby expanding its operations to South Africa (12) and increasing its range of control to over 50,000 hectares of eucalyptus and pine monocultures.

ASC Impact Forestry Fund (operated by Nixdorf Impact Movement Management)

A third relevant and recent initiative was the launch of the ASC Impact Forestry Fund in 2022 by the Austrian Kirchmayer family. ASC Impact has already raised over USD 40 million and currently controls over 60,000 hectares of tree monocultures in Ethiopia, the Republic of Congo and Angola. (13) It aims to increase its fund to USD 200 million and expand its plantation area to up to 150,000 hectares. (14) ASC has promised investors an annual return of 20 percent. This seems to be a risky gamble, given that ASC has already started to fuel distrust among indigenous communities in Ethiopia due to its lack of transparency and unclear consent processes. Communities fear that the initiative will lead to dispossession and loss of their livelihoods. (15)

What do these corporate proposals have in common?

None of the initiatives above, or others that we came across when writing this article, corresponds exactly to the funding model that WWF Kenya and AfDB called for in 2019. Nevertheless, a comparison of the financial architecture of the three proposals reveals that they do have some aspects in common. What stands out, for instance, is the fact that the three investment initiatives are registered in tax havens: ASFF, which was initially registered in Canada, is now registered in Mauritius; (16) AFIP is registered in Singapore; (17) and ASC is registered in Switzerland. (18) These three tax havens offer some of the most favorable conditions for enabling corporate tax abuse – the artificial reduction of corporations' taxable profits to low, or zero, tax. (19) This means that governments lose revenue that could fund public services, in particular in the countries where the economic activity actually occurs.

Another aspect that these three initiatives have in common – and which is also shared by WWF Kenya and AfDB – is their vision of planting trees in Africa. They use the following arguments: the market opportunities for timber products are immense because global demand is on the rise (a demand that is actually triggered, at least in part, by a permanent corporate lobby – as WRM has alerted about in a recent paper); (20) Africa's vast and cheap 'empty lands' are a promising ground for profitable long-term investments; "any domestic production expansion would be beneficial" for Africa; (21) and, finally, the climate crisis presents the opportunity to multiply investments and increase profits through carbon and biodiversity credits. The project documents of the companies involved read more like propaganda leaflets to attract or justify investments than serious sources of information about the context of the expansion of industrial plantations in Africa. Their strategy has nevertheless succeeded in mobilising money from the Global North for investments in industrial plantations in Africa, with the three investment funds mentioned above raising almost USD 500 million to date.

With such significant amounts of money flowing from the Global North towards the expansion of tree monocultures in Africa, has the area of these industrial plantations increased at the expected pace?

What has actually expanded?

One way to describe the expansion of industrial tree plantations is the way international institutions, such as FAO, typically do: in terms of hectares. Another way to talk about the expansion of industrial plantations is to cite the multiplication of conflicts with, and the violence against, communities that are facing the invasion of monocultures in their territories. We will discuss this later in the article.

In terms of area, the FAO data indicate that, between 2020 and 2025, the area of commercial tree plantations in Africa has grown by nearly 600,000 hectares. (22) Africa is home to the second largest expansion after Asia. Breaking this down by region, the increase has taken place mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Western and Central African countries, where the total tree plantation area surpassed that of Southern and Eastern Africa. Both regions have exceeded 5 million hectares, as shown in the chart, while the total area on the continent in 2025 was 11.8 million hectares, according to the FAO figures.

Image

Source: Prepared by WRM by aggregating country-level data available at https://fra-data.fao.org/*.*

At the country level (see map), the data show that the significant expansion of industrial plantations in Western and Central Africa has not been driven by one country or just a few specific countries; rather, it appears to be a widespread phenomenon. Meanwhile, in Eastern and Southern Africa, the increase was concentrated in Mozambique, Ethiopia and Uganda.

Table – Dynamics of commercial tree plantations by country between 2020 and 2025:*

Image

**Only countries with a plantation area greater than 15,000 hectares were colored. For countries where the area changed by less than 1* percent*, it was considered that the area remained the same (yellow).*

A violent narrative with violent consequences

The FAO data indicate that the 500,000-hectare expansion that the AfDB and WWF Kenya predicted in 2019 for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa has basically materialized. While the reliability of this data is uncertain, what ‘is’ certain is that the lands where the trees have been planted were not 'readily available' – as WWF Kenya and AfDB claim. After all, the ‘myth of land abundance’ ignores the fact that areas often labelled as ‘vacant’ commonly support grazing, shifting agriculture, foraging, cultural practices, and other fundamental aspects of traditional rural communities. (23) In other words, this land is far from empty, among other reasons because it is fertile – and therefore in the interest of plantation investors.

This corporate way of referring to the land in Africa – which is, ironically the continent with the highest share of its population living and depending on rural areas (nearly 80percent in several countries) – reflects the same spirit and intentions of the investment initiatives mentioned earlier in this article. This is a way of viewing a given territory whereby, if it is not yet producing commodities linked to capitalist markets, it is considered ‘readily available’ for capitalist ventures. In the non-publicised calculations of the investors, it may well be that the conflicts arising from plantation initiatives, as well as the communities themselves, are simply omitted or included in the investment matrix as 'risks' or 'costs'.

Community struggles and resistance

The practical consequence of such a vision is that industrial plantations cannot expand without generating conflicts. It is not a coincidence that the recent growth in the area of tree monocultures in Africa has been directly associated with several community struggles reported over the past five years.

In **Tanzania**, in the districts of Iringa, Mufindi and Kilombero, eucalyptus and pine plantations that have been promoted as a climate ‘solution’ and operated by Green Resources – now owned by the African Forestry Impact Platform (AFIP) – continue to be associated with illegal land appropriation, deforestation, destruction of grazing lands, land conflicts, food insecurity and unfulfilled promises. These impacts deepen the impoverishment and social disintegration of affected communities. (24)

In **Gabon**, in the province of Haut-Ogooué, the company Sequoia has claimed to have obtained 60,000 hectares to establish a eucalyptus monoculture project aimed at selling carbon credits. Despite the local communities’ rejection of the project, and the absence of free, prior and informed consultation, the project developers continue moving it forward. (25)

In **Sierra Leone**, in the Port Loko district, the company Carbon Done Right – which plans to establish 25,000 hectares of industrial tree plantations for the carbon market – has violated customary land rights and disregarded people’s right to free, prior and informed consent, according to research conducted with residents of 25 villages from the area. (26)

In **Mozambique**, in the provinces of Zambézia and Manica, there are persistent problems, such as land grabbing, the drying up of water sources, precarious labor conditions, and unfulfilled promises made by Portucel (a subsidiary of the European pulp and paper company The Navigator Company). (27) Tired of living surrounded and boxed in by eucalyptus trees, communities have united to fight back against the impacts of monoculture plantations. (28) The women in these communities have taken the lead by starting to reclaim plots previously occupied by eucalyptus in order to grow food.

Examples like the ones above show how plantations introduce different forms of violence, which communities continue to face as these monocultures increasingly invade their territories. But these examples also reveal that in many places communities are fighting back to defend and reclaim their lands.

'Restoration of degraded land': a misleading idea used to promote tree monocultures

Finally, it is important to highlight a misleading argument that is used to support the expansion of tree monocultures, particularly in Africa: the idea that these plantations contribute to the 'restoration of degraded lands'. First, there is not a single definition of 'degraded land'; it varies not only in biophysical terms, but also in terms of the perception, values, and objectives of the speaker. For a community that has built a relationship with land over generations – using a system that, at some point, outsiders labelled shifting or fallow agriculture – it does not make sense to assess its lands solely according to the parameters of 'modern agriculture'. Especially when 'modern agriculture' means to be highly dependent on synthetic chemical inputs, heavy machinery, and modified seeds.

Within the logic of corporate agriculture, the only parameter that matters in assessing land is how much monetary wealth it is producing or could produce. Therefore, in order to access the areas where they want to establish their monocultures, industrial tree plantation companies analyse soil fertility, water sources, and proximity to infrastructure, such as roads and ports. Simultaneously, they seek to influence land-use policies and government plans. They often look for land classified as 'underutilised', which usually belongs to communities. This land is not fully under cultivation, because part of it has been given time to recover its fertility – or perhaps it is used for hunting, fishing, gathering of food or medicinal plants, and cultural and spiritual practices. However, companies and governments tend to consider such land use systems as unproductive and claim that “sustainable forestry today means cultivating trees [monocultures] on previously degraded land”, as repeatedly stated in the British International Investment report. (29)

In other words, such companies are primarily interested in profits, which require the highest possible production through monocultures that, in turn, depend on fertile lands. It is true that there are lands that are naturally less suitable for agriculture (for example, lands that have undergone salinization or acidification processes, poorly drained soils, or regions with limited water availability), but these are not the ‘degraded lands’ that companies are looking for. In practice, the main function of the argument about restoring degraded lands is to conceal the land grabbing and the displacement of communities. Moreover, the very idea of restoring degraded soils through large-scale monocultures that inevitably reduce biodiversity and dry up springs and streams should, in itself, be considered a contradiction.

Final remarks

The expansion of industrial tree monocultures in sub-Saharan Africa must be understood as part of a broader dynamic of land control and resource extraction in the global South, driven by actors from the

Global North. Behind the discourse of ‘sustainable forestry’ and ‘restoration’, Northern financial institutions, development banks and private investors continue to channel large sums of money into projects in Southern countries that concentrate land, displace communities and deepen existing conflicts. The current expansion of industrial tree plantations in sub-Saharan Africa reveals that colonial patterns persist as a defining feature throughout the implementation of this activity. Yet, across the continent, communities continue to denounce land grabbing and defend their territories, reaffirming that their lands are neither ‘empty,’ nor available for external profit-making ventures.

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(22) The data on area provided in this section correspond to FAO’s latest data on “Plantation Forests”, available here. Be aware that, in practice, FAO depends on country figures that may or may not be precise, and that the FAO’s definition of “plantation forest” includes large areas of single-species trees, of even age and uniform spacing, intended to be harvested after a few years for commercial purposes (see the full definition in FRA 2025, p. 25). In 2025, these plantation “forests” represented nearly 85 percent of FAO’s more general category of “Planted Forests” in the African continent, with 83% of the area planted with exotic (non-native) species. To call such plantations “forests” is deliberately misleading and an indirect way of supporting timber, pulp&paper, and rubber corporations – whose business activities are, in fact, an underlying cause of forest destruction.
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