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Green Capitalism Expanding on Communities and Territories



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The articles in this Bulletin are written by the following organizations and individuals: Witness Radio Uganda; a researcher from China; GeaSphere Africa; a member of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku in Ecuador; an activist from Indonesia; and members of the WRM international secretariat.

Green Capitalism Expanding on Communities and Territories

Our Viewpoint

Resisting a (Mono)Culture of Devastation



Poligrow's oil palm plantation in Colombia. Ph: Environmental Investigation Agency

Sixteen years ago, community organizers from peasant, indigenous and traditional communities struggling against the expansion of monoculture tree plantations in Brazil, decided that a day was needed to commemorate this resistance. Simultaneous actions and expressions of solidarity from around the world on that day have since provided additional attention to the many strong and diverse struggles against this devastating industry. That is how the 21st of September – the Day of the Tree in Brazil - became **the International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations**.

The plantations model is based on the idea of ensuring the highest possible productivity and thus the highest possible profits. This also means, in consequence, ensuring the lowest possible costs. The ecological and social impacts of these tree plantations, whether for producing timber, pulp and paper, fibre, rubber, palm oil, wood chips for bioenergy, carbon credits or for “restoring green cover”, are deeply destructive and borne foremost by communities whose lands have become invaded, encircled and/or polluted by these plantations.

The article from **Uganda** is a clear example of this, where many of the evicted people that were left with nothing more than 15 years ago, when The New Forests Company began its plantations, continue struggling to get back their lands, livelihood and above all, their dignity. Another article in this bulletin provides a historical description of tree plantation programs in **China**, and evidences how plantation companies are searching for new opportunities to make profits, such as an alliance with digital companies for supporting “green” consumerism.

Plantation companies plant one single tree specie to increase productivity, typically on the most fertile and flat land they can find (or most often grab), with enough availability of water sources for their trees. Heavy machinery for planting and harvesting is commonly used, along with a substantial amount of chemical fertilizers and agrottoxins. An article in this bulletin from **South Africa** alerts on the serious impact that tree plantations make on local

water sources and how, despite the sound evidence on this, companies keep intensifying production - with biomass' demand as a recent push for further expansion.

The plantation model also relies on communities' land titles and deeds mostly being insecure, vulnerable and not recognized by the states. As a result, massive seizing and invasion of community forests and land in the global South is a common practice. States, on the other hand, generally facilitate the implementation and expansion of this model by both giving financial and fiscal incentives, as well as making their security forces available to ensure displacements, evictions and the criminalization of resistance. This violence is mostly done in tandem with corporate security agents. An article in this bulletin from **Colombia** highlights the role of an oil palm plantation company in grabbing territories marked by violence, displacement and conflict.

Plantation companies, in turn, claim to bring "development", contribute to forest conservation, and even define their vast monoculture plantations as planted "forests". But as Marlon Santi of the Kiwicha people of Sarayaku, **Ecuador**, explains in another article of this bulletin: *"For us, "conservation" is seeing the forest as a living being, or as a living forest. Only in this way do we understand what kind of "conservation" we must do (...) In order to live well and for forests to be preserved, it is essential that the word "development" not be used (...) Because this changes our world, and I say world referring to this living space. "*

Despite the vast amount of community voices and research exposing the negative impacts, monoculture tree plantations are still being promoted and sometimes financed by governments, the World Bank, the UN, NGOs, developmental agencies and other institutions. They claim that these monocultures are the solution to the world's most pressing problems: climate change, forest degradation and energy.

These same actors also pressure for and facilitate the expansion of other damaging false solutions. An article from **Brazil** reflects on how despite the alarming increase in forest destruction, several Brazilian Amazon states continue to receive REDD+ funds from the German government. Moreover, an interview with an **Indonesian** activist alerts on the contradictions behind the so-called Ecosystem Restoration Concessions and the threat of constructing a coal-hauling road through the first of such Concessions in the country.

Each year – and despite the certification schemes, offset programs, "green" plantation campaigns and other corporate tactics that try to hide the underlying harm and violence behind the plantation model, - several communities and movements rise up during this month to give visibility to their struggles and to denounce the detrimental impacts tree plantations have on their lives and territories.

The WRM joins once again the International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations in solidarity with the many communities and groups who tirelessly continue to defend life.

Join the struggle!
Plantations are not forests!
NO to industrial monoculture tree plantations!

The Agony of a Tree-Planting Project on Communities' Land in Uganda



Some mothers who lost children due to the lack of food after New Forests Company's evictions. Ph: witnessradio.org

Misery is what fills the hearts of the residents of seven villages in the Mubende district where the New Forests Company illegally evicted close to 1000 households from their land.

The UK-based New Forests Company (NFC) was founded with the vision of creating “sustainable timber products” in East Africa amidst rampant deforestation. NFC plantations are also a carbon project, which generates additional profits for the Company from the selling of carbon credits. The first tree was planted in Mubende, Uganda, in 2004. Since then, the Company has rapidly expanded with four new plantation areas in Uganda as well as in Tanzania and Rwanda.

The expansion has however come with unimaginable pain to hundreds of households and gross human rights abuses, mainly in the Mubende district. Between 2006 and 2010, more than 10,000 people were evicted from their lands in the district of Mubende, in some cases with the use of violence, to make way for the NFC plantations.

NFC and the World Bank, one of the Company's financial supporters, were once in dialogue with their evictees but abandoned them. According to documents seen by Ugandan media platform witnessradio.org, NFC was dragged into dialogue with its evictees after a critical report exposed in 2011 the lack of respect for communities' human rights in the name of a carbon credit project. (1) The report, which was released by the NGO Oxfam, accused NFC and its security agents for committing human rights violations/abuses with impunity. The World Bank appointed a mediator from the Office of Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman (CAO). The CAO handles complaints from communities affected by investments made by the International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of the World Bank.

By 2011, NFC had attracted investment from international banks and private equity funds. These include **the European Investment Bank (EIB)**, EU's financing institution, that had loaned NFC five million Euros (almost US 6 million dollars) to expand one of its plantations in Uganda. The **Agri-Vie Agribusiness Fund**, a private equity investment fund, focused on food and agribusiness in sub-Saharan Africa, had invested US 6.7 million dollars in NFC.

Agri-Vie is in itself backed up by development finance institutions, notably the **World Bank's private sector lending arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC)**. But the most significant investment came from **UK bank HSBC** (around US 10 million dollars), which gave HSBC 20 per cent ownership of the Company and one of the six seats on the NFC Board. All these investors have, in theory, social and environmental standards in order to maintain and manage their own portfolios.

Long-lasting suffering and violence

After a 15-months long dialogue facilitated by the CAO, evictees were offered very little compared to what they owned before. The little payments were not based on the results of any valuation exercise to assess what the evictees had lost due to the violent and forceful evictions.

[Witnessradio.org](http://witnessradio.org) has uncovered that during the dialogue, NFC forced evictees to establish a Cooperative club if they were to get any payment from the company. Also, evictees were forced to pay subscription fees to become a member of the club and benefit from the company's contribution. Many could not afford this fee, but the handful of people that managed to pay their subscription fees to the Cooperative, were at the end of the day given an acre of land each (less than half an hectare). Only 48% of the 10,000 evictees received this piece of land.

Our investigations indicate that after NFC paid 600,000,000 Uganda Shillings (close to US 180,000 dollars) through the Cooperative club's account for 8,958 hectares of land and other damages suffered by the evictees, the stakeholders involved abandoned the evictees to suffer the anguish.

The Company's plantations have shuttered lives and caused irreparable damages to the affected communities.

According to the evictees, NFC's plantations have caused a big number of deaths among children due to malnutrition. At the time of the evictions, all children dropped out of schools and married at a tender age. Further, many families of the evictees began to live in refugee camps after failing to obtain food to feed their families, while hundreds of families broke up. And the list of long-standing impacts goes on.

The testimonies of forceful evictions and lack of due compensation overshadow the social development projects that the company flags whenever it talks about its achievements.

Shantel Tumubone, aged 50, and her family, was evicted 10 years ago from their ancestral home in Kyamukasa Village, Kitumbi Sub-county, Kassanda District. They were promised compensation that would enable them to find alternative land for their settlement.

She moved to a nearby village as she looked for land in anticipation of receiving compensation.

"I have waited for the money to date. There is no single coin that we have received as compensation and we don't know if it will happen" Tumubone, whose hope is fading away, tells witnessradio.org.

After waiting in vain, Tumubone managed to get casual employment on a farm in the Kabweyakiza Village, which is a few kilometres from where she used to live with her family. Having lost everything during the eviction, Tumubone later lost her husband because they could no longer afford the medical bills. Even worse, she did not have where to bury her husband and, thus, a swap deal was made between her and the plantations company: in exchange of her carrying out casual work in the plantations for eight months, the Company would give her a piece of land in her former village valued at 1 million Uganda Shillings (around US 270 dollars) so that she could bury her husband.

Tumubone is one of the many people who have been driven into poverty and landlessness by the New Forests Company. People who used to own land for cultivation and survival have been turned into beggars, while several others have become labourers at the Company working on what used to be their land.

Many of the people that Witnessradio.org spoke to dispute reports of due consultation and of compensation for alternative land.

“We were never consulted or agreed to what the New Forests Company did. We have been reduced to paupers and who would choose such a life. I personally used to own 15 acres [6 hectares] of land where I planted a variety of crops,” said one of the residents who is now a casual labourer at the Company’s plantations.

Despite all this, in its 2011 report to the UN, the New Forests Company claims that the people vacated their land voluntarily and peacefully, which does not tally with the situation at hand when you talk with and listen to the affected communities.

FSC: Certifying devastation

What is also striking is that NFC managed to obtain an FSC certification for its plantations, which allegedly vouches for a company’s “socially beneficial” practices. The FSC certification is supposed to ensure that products with the seal come from responsibly managed plantations that provide environmental, social, and economic benefits.

In an audit report conducted in 2010, FSC declared regarding the evictions that the company had followed peaceful means and acted responsibly.

With the situation in the areas where the New Forests Company is implementing its tree planting projects, there is no doubt that the company is flouting the certification company’s standard criteria in acquiring land. In consequence, many homeless people have been left with limited hope of returning to their land and homes.

The chairperson of the displaced households, Mr. Julius Ndagize, has said that several meetings with the managers of the New Forests Company have not been fruitful.

“The Company only managed to resettle a few families after we managed to secure 500 acres [200 hectares] of land in Kampindu Village, where each family managed to get an acre of land and the rest are landless”. Says Mr. Ndagize.

Background to the increasing large-scale investment

Following the spike in commodity prices in 2007-2008, investors expressed interest in 56 million hectares of land for agriculture and timber production, and Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 2/3 of this expressed demand. Despite the poor record of large agricultural investments in Africa and parts of Asia, the global median project size of 40,000 hectares implies that these investments could have major implications for rural land rights and existing land users, especially smallholders.

Alarming, countries with weak legal frameworks for recognizing rural land rights as well as poor environmental regulation for business operations are most likely to be targeted by large-scale investments.

The Ugandan constitution states that “land in Uganda belongs to the citizens of Uganda”. But stories of non-compensation for over ten years point to gross abuse of the Ugandan law and total abuse of the citizens’ rights to whom the land belongs.

Forced evictions also constitute gross violations of a range of internationally recognized human rights, including the human rights to adequate housing, food, water, health, education, work, security of the person, freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and freedom of movement.

The impacts of forced evictions go far beyond material losses, leading to deeper inequality and injustices, marginalization, and social conflicts.

With the evictions happening in Uganda unabated, there is no doubt that the margin between the rich and poor is widening on top of gross abuse of human rights.

The Witness Radio team, Uganda
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(1) WRM Bulletin 171, Uganda: New Forests Company – FSC legitimizes the eviction of thousands of people from their land and the sale of carbon credits, 2011, <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section2/uganda-new-forests-company-fsc-legitimizes-the-eviction-of-thousands-of-people-from-their-land-and-the-sale-of-carbon-credits/>; and Oxfam International, The New Forests Company and its Uganda plantations, 2011 <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/new-forests-company-and-its-uganda-plantations-oxfam-case-study>

From the ‘Greening Motherland’ Campaign to the ‘Ant Forest’ App: Tree-planting in China’s environmental politics



Board in Alxa Left Banner, China, showing the logo of Alipay and Ant Forest. It indicates: No. 281 Forest Field in Ant Forest; Type: haloxylon ammodendron; Total Number: 238,500 trees; This field is planted and maintained by China Green Foundation. Ph: China Green Foundation..

In July 2020, echoing president Xi Jinping’s “Beautiful China” policy (1), the recently amended Forestry Law officially sets March 12 as the National Tree-planting Day.

Already before this amendment, every year on this Day, stories of different levels of governments, including the highest leadership of the central government, participating in tree-planting activities, have always appeared at the forefront of news coverage in China. The history of China’s Tree-planting Day can be traced back to several decades ago, when the Nationalist Government set this date for mourning Sun Yat-sen, who was the first president of the Republic of China and who did much to promote tree-planting during his life.

The Tree-planting Day is an epitome of the environmental politics of contemporary China, in which planting trees at an industrial scale plays a fundamental part.

Since 1949, a series of large-scale forestation projects have been launched and directed by the Chinese government. These well-known forestation projects started in different time periods, with vastly different political and economic conditions, so each has a unique structure and agenda. The most recent one being the Ant Forest App – a programme for smart phones that allows consumers to take part in tree planting and/or conservation as they consume online, – which has gained substantial social influence in quite a short period of time.

The trajectory of the tree-planting projects in China after 1949 shows that the driving force of forestation in China has been increasingly changing from political power to market incentives.

‘Greening Motherland’

In 1956, to support industrial development and reduce the frequency of floods, the Chinese Communist Party launched the ‘Greening Motherland’ Campaign (GMC) (2). Within the two years that followed, 80 per cent of the citizens in China had participated in different kinds of

tree-planting activities, and 16 million hectares of trees had been planted (3). GMC was initiated and directed by a few political elites from the Chinese Communist Party, such as Mao Tse-Tung and Zhou Enlai. It had a very strictly top-down nature. To ordinary people, environmental awareness was not yet cultivated. The worship of political leaders and ideological zeal was the reason for them to be mobilized in this massive campaign (4). Nonetheless, the campaign failed since it contained huge uncertainty led by relying too much on the personal will of the political leaders.

From 1958 onwards, a mind-set focused on furthering “progress” and “development” within governmental officials started to prevail. The Great Leap Forward Campaign (GLFC) was launched for a period of five years with the aim to rebuild the country from an agrarian economy into an industrialized communist society. During this period, the government urged rapid industrialization of China and made unrealistic production plans, which resulted in massive environmental degradation. For example, to increase the production of steel, a large number of backyard furnaces were built, and people would melt whatever steel object they could find. For powering these furnaces, immeasurable areas of forest were destroyed. Ironically, the same political power that promoted the GMC resulted this time in the most significant man-made environmental devastation in modern Chinese history (5).

Three-North Shelterbelt Forestation Project (TNSFP)

The Three-North Shelterbelt Project (also known as the Green Great Wall) covers vast land areas in the north, north-west and north-east parts of China. These places have been threatened by desertification and droughts for many years. Between the 1960s and 1970s, 29.67 million hectares of land, including arable land and meadow, deteriorated significantly, even turning some into what is known as the Gobi desert (6). In 1978, the Chinese central government launched the TNSFP as the biggest forestation project in the world, in order to hold back the expansion of the desert. It has a very ambitious aim: to raise the total tree coverage area of northern China with almost 38 million hectares, which means to increase the tree coverage rate from 5% to 14.95% by the end of 2050 (7).

The planned duration of this project is 73 years, from 1978 until 2050, divided into eight stages. During the second stage (after 1985), in order to motivate more people to participate, the notion of ‘eco-economic forests’ (8) started to be promoted. This resulted in the introduction of economically valuable plants, such as fruit trees and herbs as well as more advanced cultivation techniques.

Meanwhile, the government started an economic reform to develop the private-sector economy, which supposedly benefited the people planting trees on the land they contracted from local governments or village collectives (9). These reforms underline the increasing importance of the market economy in forestation projects in China. This was also reflected in the decreasing proportion of unpaid work done by the general public, which contributed in different phases of the TNSFP.

In rural China, a system called ‘two-work’ (*liang gong*) had long been in operation. It requires the physically able rural residents to undertake certain amount of compulsory workload every year in projects like tree-planting, flood prevention, road construction, school facilities restoration and irrigation facilities construction (10). Before this system was completely abolished in 2006, it played a large part in the TNSFP. Between 1978 and 2000 (Stage 1 to Stage 4), the total investment for the TNSFP amounted to 71,582.72 million RMB (more than US10 billion dollars). The value discounted from the unpaid work contributed by ordinary people accounted for 65.57%, while the investments from the central government, local governments and other public sectors accounted only for 13.84%, 14.83% and 5.75%, respectively (11). However, with the deepening of the economic reforms in China, the TNSFP had to offer payments to be attractive in the labour market. Accordingly, the amount of unpaid

work in the total investment decreased drastically, from 96.14%, 90.79%, 75.61% to 14.64%, in the four stages respectively (12). In this sense, the TNSFP was driven increasingly by market forces and less by political power.

Ant Forest (13): A Market-based Forestation Project

In August 2016, Ant Financial - the largest Chinese financial technology company - launched a mobile gaming programme called Ant Forest. This programme allows consumers to participate in tree planting and conservation as they consume online. It depicts the carbon footprint of the users' consumption records (based on the data generated by Alipay, the biggest online payment platform in China and a product of Ant Financial). User's "green behaviours" are rewarded through the allocation of "green energy points". As their points accumulate to certain levels, game users can choose to plant a tree in the real world or virtually claim a small piece of land in one of the conservation areas co-funded by Ant Financial. Based on the amount of green energy points, the game users can choose between several kinds of tree species, including the saxaul, apricot tree, sea-buckthorn, oriental arborvitae, Chinese pine, Scots pine, rose willow, scoparium, and desert poplar.

Ant Forest also has interactive functions which allow the users to co-plant trees, steal points from friends (collect points from others), and water trees for others (donate points to others). These features are very popular among users and contribute to their active engagement with the programme, leading to a growing adhesiveness of users. According to the Alipay Sustainability Report from 2019-2020, by May 2020, the participants of Ant Forest had amounted to 550 million people, and more than 2 million trees had been planted in the real world (14).

Apart from its enormous social influence, Ant Forest also brings substantial competitive advantage to Ant Financial and its related business entities through mainly two ways. Firstly, as a "green" initiative planting millions of trees, Ant Forest has created a positive image of its related business entities, such as Ant Financial and the Chinese Alibaba Group, the world's largest retailer and online trade company. In turn, Ant Forest users generally see Alibaba as a mega-sized leading business group with much sense of social responsibility and environmental awareness.

Secondly, Ant Forest enhances users' dependence on Ant Financial by creating the game rules. Ant Forest requires players to act in specific ways to earn "green energy points", such as walking, hiring shared bikes or making payments with the Alipay app. These actions are defined as "green behaviours" in Ant Forest. Almost all possibilities to earn "green energy points" in the game, except for walking, are exclusively related to the adoption of services or products from Ant Financial or Alibaba. For example, only by buying cinema tickets through the Alibaba-owned online platform Taopiaopiao, and not any other similar platform, can generate points. As a result, users are increasingly relying on the services of Ant Financial, especially on Alipay.

Ant Forest is a programme based on the idea of "green" consumerism, and it aims to cultivate a "green" lifestyle for addressing environmental problems. However, the capitalist logic of expansion, accumulation and competition has been fully reflected on the rules of Ant Forest, and thus results in a clear contradiction between its environmental goals and its real influence on users. It also delivers simplified information about complex environmental issues and creates the idea that consumption can be compensated with tree-planting or conservation activities. Therefore, it actually hinders its users from fully understanding the environmental implications of their consumption behaviours (15).

The trajectory of forestation projects in China: from GMC to Ant Forest

China has long been puzzled by the ecological consequences caused by large scale deforestation, such as rapid desertification and frequent floods, which seemingly justify the importance of tree-planting projects. However, there are different voices questioning the effectiveness of these projects, arguing that these further result in new ecological problems. (16) For example, according to professor Cao from the Minzu University of China (17), more than 80% of the tree plantations in the Three Norths region involve monoculture plantations, which result in a vulnerability of trees to plant diseases and insect pests as well as an array of other impacts. Despite the critiques, forestation is still one of the main focuses of Chinese environmental politics.

This article introduced three well-known afforestation projects in China in different time periods. In the 1950s, GMC was launched for tackling the frequent flooding and for producing more wood. In late 1970s, the TNSFP, established at the same time as the national economic reforms, began to establish the bases for a free-market economy in forestation projects in China. And more recently, the Ant Forest App created deep resonance with the public with its “green” consumerism goals, which enabled it to acquire a large number of users while working with the state in tree-planting projects.

In 2020, according to the plan made by the National Department of Forestry, Ant Forest is going to financially support the planting of 720 million trees (18). From GMC to Ant Forest, the mass forestation projects implemented since 1949 outline a trajectory evidencing the increasingly important role of capital and market forces in rural China.

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- (1) “Beautiful China” was first put forward as a governing concept by former President Hu Jintao on the 18th National Congress in 2012. It underpins that achieving an ecological wellbeing is one of the prominent tasks of the Chinese government, along with the development of economy, politics, culture and society. President Xi Jinping reaffirmed this task on the 19th National Congress in 2017 and since then, he has been continually enriching this notion.
- (2) Long, J.J, 2007, 中国现代环境保护运动的先声--20 世纪 50 年代 “绿化祖国植树造林”运动历史考察 “The Herald of Modern Environmental Protection Movement in China: a study on ‘Greening the Motherland’ Campaign in 1950s”
- (3) Ibid Long 2017
- (4) Ibid Long 2017; Sun T., 2018, 中国近现代政治社会变革与生态环境演化, “*The Changes in Sociopolitical Conditions and the Environment in Modern and Contemporary China*”, Intellectual Property Publishing House, Beijing
- (5) Ibid Sun, 2018; Xu, B., 2014, 近 400 年来中国西部社会变迁与生态环境, “The Social Change and Ecology in Western China in the Past Four Centuries”, China Social Science Press, Beijing
- (6) Zhang, B. X., 2013, 三北造林记, “*The Records of Three-North Shelterbelt Forestation Project*”, Xinhua Publishing House, Beijing
- (7) Ibid Zhang 2013
- (8) Ren, Y., & Gao, Z.Y., 1996, 关于生态经济型防护林体系基本理论框架的探索, “Exploring on the Basic Theoretical Framework of the system of Eco-Economic Protection Forest”, *Journal of Beijing Forestry University*, Vol.18, Supp.2, pp.1-7
- (9) Ibid Zhang 2013
- (10) Song, B. C., 2000, 规范管理农村‘两工’, “Standard Management of Rural “Two-Work” System, *Agriculture Knowledge*, 2000-10, pp.49
- (11) Ibid Zhang 2013
- (12) Ibid Zhang 2013
- (13) According to Ant Financial, Ant Forest is designed as an archetype of personal carbon account system
- (14) Alipay, 2020, *ALIPAY SUSTAINABILITY REPORT 2019-2020 :Towards A Better Society For the Future*, Ant Group, [online] <https://gw.alipayobjects.com/os/bmw-prod/e39c99c2-0193-40fc-8265-cf4f72a8367e.pdf> , (Access on 24 June 2020)
- (15) Zeng, 2018, *Saving the World by Being Green with Fintech: the contradictions between environmentalism and reality in the case of Ant Forest*, Lund University, Lund, available on < <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/8960186>> , (access on 6 June. 2019)

(16) Zastrow, M. 2019, "China's tree-planting drive could falter in a warming world", *Nature* (London), vol. 573, no. 7775, pp. 474-475; Cao, S.X., 2008, Why Large-Scale Afforestation Efforts in China Have Failed To Solve the Desertification Problem, *Environment Science & Technology*, 42:6, 1826-1831

(17) *ibid.* Cao, 2008

(18) forestry.gov.cn, 2020, 中国绿化基金会扎实开展“蚂蚁森里”项目春季造林工作 “China Green Foundation Firmly Promotes the Spring Afforestation Project of Ant Forest. National Department of Forestry, available on < <http://www.forestry.gov.cn/main/1100/20200428/101111370757153.html>>, (accessed on 8 Aug. 2020)

South Africa: Death by Eucalyptus Monocultures



Sappi's Ngodwana Mill in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Ph: PapNews

The multinational South African Pulp and Paper Industries (Sappi) started its operations in 1936 in South Africa. Now it has operations all over the world. Sappi Southern Africa operates five mills and has access to 529,000 hectares of plantations.

In 2014, a new cellulose production facility was implemented to expand Sappi's Ngodwana pulp mill, situated on the banks of the Elands River, approximately 50km west of Mbombela, the capital of Mpumalanga province, South Africa.

The pulp mill was established in 1965, and over the past few decades had undergone various upgrades, primarily aimed at raising the production capacity for pulp and newsprint.

Due to the global decline in demand for printing and writing paper, the company decided to diversify their cellulose production capacity by developing the 'Project GoCell' at the Ngodwana Pulp Mill, with the aim to produce what is called as 'Specialised Cellulose'. As Sappi explains in a press release, "Specialised Cellulose is a sought-after natural, renewable fibre with a wide range of uses in the textile, consumer goods, foodstuff and pharmaceutical industries." (1) The project was first introduced to the public in 2012.

Traditionally, in South Africa, the production of paper and pulp requires primarily fibre from pine trees, thus the majority of Sappi's so-called 'Forests' in the area consist of pine plantations. Yet, the production of cellulose can also be produced with eucalyptus fibre, and that is why Sappi plans to convert several of their pine plantations into eucalyptus plantations.

Moreover, Sappi has a 30% stake in a 25 MW biomass energy unit at Ngodwana Mill, which falls under the South African government's Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Programme (REIPPP). In this Programme, the Department of Energy in South Africa will procure 27 new projects, paving the way for significant future investment in the renewable

energy industry. This biomass energy unit is expected to contribute to the national grid already in 2020. The project will use biomass from surrounding plantations. (2)

More plantations, less water

South Africa is a water stressed region. The areas where plantations have mostly been planted are on the higher rainfall areas, significantly on the 'escarpment' or 'mist belt' region, where the high veld plateau drops off to the Lowveld - where average rainfall is normally above 700mm per year.

In recent years however, the rainfall average in the area dropped significantly. Some areas of the escarpment region received less than 550mm rainfall. Climate change models predict a further 60% decrease in the stream flow for this eastern part of southern Africa in the near future. It is imperative that any developments take cognisance of the high probability of much less available water, and plan appropriately.

Timber plantations' high water consumption has been a contentious issue for many years in South Africa. As far back as 1915, small farmers were already complaining about the impact of pine, and especially eucalyptus plantations, on the water sources and catchment areas. As timber plantations are established in the upper catchment areas, these get the first access to rainfall. In some cases this leads to very little or even no water further down in the river system. The lack of stream flow in the rivers often impacts the most vulnerable communities, which are dependant on small-scale farming and available natural resources.

Timber plantations consist primarily of alien tree types, such as pine and eucalyptus. These trees are 'evergreen' and consume water whenever it is available. Most indigenous trees are deciduous and shed their leaves during the dry winter months, making more water available for other parts of the ecosystem. For this reason, eucalyptus trees are called 'the selfish' trees, as they will constantly use water even when there is little water available to sustain the integrated environment.

In 1935, the British Empire Forestry Conference was hosted in South Africa. Due to the many complaints that small farmers made about the plantation industry's increasing water use, a series of 'paired catchment' experiments were initiated to verify timber plantations' water consumption. These experiments were conducted in many parts of South Africa and proved that the timber plantations' water use is very significant. They also demonstrated that eucalyptus trees use 30 to 50% more water than pine trees. The data obtained was used to draft the regulations governing the establishment of timber plantations in South Africa as well as the licensing guidelines.

Timber plantations are the only dry land crop in South Africa which is classified as a 'Stream Flow Reduction Activity'. Therefore, a 'water use license' is required to establish timber plantations. The license will be granted or denied depending on the availability of water in each particular catchment. Mpumalanga province was declared as 'over subscribed' in terms of timber plantation's water use allocations, and for the last several years, no new licensing applications for timber plantations have been considered or approved.

Timber growers can convert from one genus to another, such as from pine to eucalyptus, but only if a revision to the licensing conditions had been applied for and approved. Due to the higher water use of eucalyptus plantations, these can only be planted in smaller areas to allow some water retention in the remaining areas.

From pine to eucalyptus industrial plantations

Throughout 2020, residents have raised concerns regarding pine plantations being converted to eucalyptus plantations. Apparently, various pine plantation areas belonging to Sappi have already been converted to eucalyptus without authorisation. Some other local plantation companies, such as the state owned SAFCOL, also have plans to convert their monocultures into eucalyptus.

Local residents are mainly concerned about the eucalyptus trees' increasing water use, since this tree also has faster re-establishment and rotations periods. This high impact extractive model of biomass production will put an even greater burden on an already stressed environment.

It is known that several timber plantations have already been converted in the area surrounding the Ngodwana Mill. Timber companies, including Sappi, have not applied for a revision to their water use licenses, nor have they reduced the areas planted to compensate for more water being used. In response to concerns that various residents raised, a representative of 'Forestry South Africa' - the industry association representing Sappi and other plantation companies – delivered a presentation to the IUCMA (Inkomati Usuthu Catchment Management Authority), wherein he claimed that no revision to the water use license is required. The reason given was that the difference between eucalyptus' and pines' water use was supposedly 'statistically insignificant'. This claim was misleading as the study quoted focused primarily on evapotranspiration. Critical issues such as impact on groundwater were not discussed, and the valuable data obtained from more than 75 years of paired catchment experiments was dismissed.

In contrast, government authorities insist that a revision to the water use license must be applied for, and if there is a conversion from pine to eucalyptus trees (a heavier water user) a smaller area should be planted in compensation.

Government authorities are still reviewing the situation. A formal complaint has been registered with the certification scheme FSC – which still gives Sappi its label despite the irregularities. According to FSC Principle 1, timber plantations must be legally compliant. As it seems that the conversion to eucalyptus plantations happened without authorisation, Sappi's FSC certification must stop.

Rivers are under severe stress. There is less rainfall. Much of the landscape in the region has changed to industrial monoculture plantations, which are constantly seizing any available water resources. The water and soil retention capacity of the biodiverse grasslands has been diminished, and there is a dramatic increase in sedimentation of many local rivers, with a dramatic impact on aquatic fauna and flora. This, needless to say, has severe and detriment impacts on those who have been confronting the expansion of these plantations for decades.

Converting monocultures into eucalyptus plantations on a large scale and without the appropriate authorisation is irresponsible –to say the least- and can lead to further impoverishment of the region's potential. Water is the most precious resource, without which no subsistence is possible. The timber industry must realise that profits and growth has its limits, and these had long been surpassed in this fragile environment in the south of Africa.

Philip Owen
GeaSphere Africa

For more information see article from NewFrame:
<https://www.newframe.com/big-timber-accused-of-unauthorised-tree-switch/>
www.facebook.com/geasphere

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Colombia: Palm-producing Company Poligrow Plans to Grab more Land under the “Small Producers” Scheme



Indigenous Jiw and Sikuani protesting against the restrictions imposed by Poligrow.
 Ph: Justice and Peace

Oil palm monoculture, together with the oil industry and other extractive activities, continues to advance onto indigenous and peasant territories in the *Atillanura* [high plains], a subregion of the Orinoquía region of Colombia. This territory has historically been marked by violence and the forced displacement of the population. In their wake, these large-scale developments leave a trail of impacts on the communities: land dispossession, pollution, water scarcity, restrictions on movement and restrictions on the traditional use of forests and savannahs.

Despite the fact that communities have repeatedly denounced these injustices, the Colombian government continues to promote the palm industry, in collusion with companies, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and international cooperation agencies.

One example of this is the August 2020 announcement about a project that promotes allegedly strategic alliances between the Italian-Spanish multinational company, Poligrow, and peasants or “small producers” in the municipality of Mapiripán, in the department of Meta (1). This company, which began operating in Colombia in 2008, has been the target of serious and numerous complaints of land-grabbing (2), involvement with both paramilitary groups and forced dispossession, and contamination (3).

Peasants from Mapiripán with whom WRM communicated said they had expressed their refusal to work with Poligrow. They prefer to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

Meanwhile, indigenous Jiw and Sikuani communities are in a serious situation of vulnerability, having already been displaced from the neighbouring department of Guaviare

due to the armed conflict. They are now suffering from water scarcity and pollution as a result of palm cultivation and oil processing. Additionally, the company imposes restrictions on their movement within, and use of, the territory (4).

Industrial palm cultivation in Mapiripán began more than a decade ago with the arrival of Poligrow. To date, the company has occupied about 7,000 hectares for monoculture, and it plans to expand to 15,000 hectares. In 2014, it built an oil extraction plant capable of processing 15 tons of fresh fruit bunches per hour; it plans to expand this plant as its cultivated area increases.

Denounced by civil society organizations and even by the State for appropriating more land than allowed by law (5), Poligrow has been trying to increase its planted area for at least seven years—through contracts with peasants and “small producers,” to get them to grow palm on their land (6).

In this context, on August 14, 2020, “Mapiripán, a peaceful territory with sustainable development” was unveiled. This is a joint project of the Colombian government and the FAO, and is funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, which will contribute 2.4 million euros (approximately US \$2.8 million). Some objectives of the project include: “to improve the quality of life and food security of the residents of Mapiripán” (7).

However, it is hard to imagine how this project could bring about an improvement for the population—given that the only production shown over and over again in the project presentation video is Poligrow’s palm monoculture (8). There is ample evidence of the negative impacts of industrial palm plantations on the life of local communities, in both Mapiripán and other municipalities of the region.

While details of the initiative are, as yet, unknown, Poligrow representative Carlo Vigna revealed that: “We will guarantee purchasing and technical assistance for all small producers who will be involved in the oil palm project for the lifespan of the project—that is, 30 years” (9).

These kinds of contracts with “small producers” are not new in the oil palm industry, and the results for peasants—in Latin American countries, as well as in Africa and Asia—have been quite unfavourable, and in some cases even ruinous (10).

Among many other factors, this is due to the fact that the peasantry lose their food sovereignty, given that their ability to produce crops for their own consumption is affected. They also incur debts with companies who provide inputs, and they are no longer able to decide who they can sell their production to. In short, they lose their autonomy and can even lose their land; because very often, it is the peasant families who must bear the risks in the event of failed production, fire, pests or inability to pay off debts incurred with the company.

And this expansion tactic that palm companies use particularly impacts women, who have to increase their workload when they lose their subsistence crops, and who have to deal with soil and water contamination. Consequently they must do more care-taking work within their families and communities.

Palm in the Colombian Altillanura

Colombia is the largest producer of palm oil in Latin America, and the fourth largest worldwide. Successive governments for more than 50 years have actively promoted palm monoculture through policies of violence and dispossession. Palm oil is used both for the domestic market and for export, in the food industry, cosmetics industry, and more recently for the production of agrofuels.

Palm is grown and processed in different parts of the country: In the centre and north in at least six departments; to the southwest in Cauca and Nariño; and to the east in the Orinoquía region, in the departments of Arauca, Casanare and Cudinamrca; and in the *Altillanura* subregion, which includes the departments of Meta and Vichada.

Since 2002, the Colombian government has been pushing for the *Altillanura* to become “a great agricultural pantry,” that is, a region that produces raw materials or commodities for export.

“National and foreign businessmen have gotten involved with this development logic, and have tried to make the *Altillanura* look like the Brazilian Cerrado [savannah], serving as an agricultural enclave with large-scale, highly mechanized and vertically integrated crops.” So highlights a report produced by a dozen social, legal and human rights organizations that denounce the serious impacts of the “development plan” for the Orinoquía region (11). “This strategy ignores the region’s inhabitants, since the emphasis for the extractive projects and raw material production is on meeting international demand; it is not actually about improving the needs of inhabitants in this area,” they point out. According to the same report, almost 45% of the population does not have their basic needs covered, and in Vichada it is almost 67%.

This new onslaught on the territory and its population adds to the history of extreme violence that this region has suffered. In 1997, Mapiripán was the site of one of the worst massacres in Colombia, when paramilitaries murdered 49 people. The disregard for memory, and the lack of real effort on the part of the political and economic powers to repair these communities, was evident in the project presentation made by the government, the FAO and Poligrow. “As Colombians, we are all particularly sensitive when it comes to Mapiripán. We remember the pain that this community has had in the past. We want to leave it behind, we want a new generation, we want the children who are being born now to think that this is a horror story and that it never happened,” said Emilio Archila, Presidential Advisor for Stabilization and Consolidation.

Land Dispossession

The violence, massacre and forced displacement that have taken place in recent decades in the course of the armed conflict in Colombia have served to advance extractive projects, including industrial cultivation of oil palm.

During the conflict, thousands of political leaders were murdered and disappeared, and countless massacres were perpetrated. Colombian organizations say that paramilitaries committed these massacres in complicity with the armed forces, which led to forced displacement, dispossession and abandonment of territories—as one of the objectives of the paramilitary strategy was territorial control in order to give way to business projects (12).

In these processes, the responsibility of companies like Poligrow is undeniable. “There is a pattern of illegal business practices, with companies taking advantage of abandoned properties after threats, murders, massacres and recurring violations of human rights. This is exemplified in situations resulting from the armed conflict in various regions of Colombia. The law has corroborated this pattern, showing that companies such as Cementos Argos S.A., the Carmen de Bolívar Agribusiness Corporation, San Simón S.A., Poligrow and a group of mining companies—among others—benefitted from the displacement and dispossession of peasant communities (...) in order to directly take ownership of lands, refusing to investigate the contexts of the regions where they operate with due diligence.” So states a report by the “José Alvear Restrepo” Lawyers’ Collective, which was presented before the Truth Commission of Colombia in May 2020 (13).

In the specific case of oil palm, a recent study published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* explain that “large-scale dispossession occurred during Colombia’s civil war, when millions of peasants were displaced from their lands, or forced to sell them below their true value. Participants in earlier land reforms were supposedly protected from land grabbing. So oil palm plantations looking to expand were able to secure control, not of the land directly but of its produce, by establishing ‘alliances’ or ‘supply partners’ with smallholder groups and processing their harvest at company plants. However, questions remain about whether current alliance members were legitimate participants in the land reform, and about the level of protection that legitimate participants actually received. In the more remote parts of the Eastern Savannahs (*Altiplanura*) which were largely “alliance”-free, coercion was enough for powerful actors to ‘grab’ control of the land and sometimes plant it with oil palm, as in the case of the Poligrow Plantation” (14).

Meanwhile it is important to note that, in many cases, land grabbing would not have been possible without the participation and collaboration of public officials, who are willing to make various kinds of manoeuvres to “legalize” dispossession.

In this context, the situation of vulnerability and danger in which thousands of displaced people find themselves when they try to return to their territories is highly worrisome. By way of example, local organizations point out that since 2011, in the department of Meta alone, there have been at least 5,000 applications from conflict victims seeking restitution of their lands. And in one of its municipalities, Mapiripán, most people have not been able to return. “Police forces report that conditions aren’t safe enough for people to return; meanwhile it is safe to restore land,” they affirm. “The result of this equation is a strategy of formalization and legal security of land ownership that favours private investors” (15).

According to the Colombian organization, Justicia y Paz, “in the municipality [of Mapiripán] paramilitary structures are still present, and because of their presence, silence, fear and injustice are latent among the population. Paramilitary control and state abandonment have allowed the Poligrow company to develop a palm project in the region, appropriate fallow lands, and in some cases obtain territories through the use of threats.”

Affected Communities

The Colombian high plains are a region of flatlands (also known as the eastern plains), with savannahs, gallery forests and *morichales*. The latter are swamps formed by groups of

moriche palm trees, where small waterways originate and then flow into rivers. These are the main sources of water for the communities.

Oil palm monocultures is the second most water-consuming crop in the country. It is also sprayed with pesticides, which along with other wastes from this activity, are dumped in the ground and waterways, contaminating them (16).

Indigenous Jiw peoples face health problems from consuming contaminated water from the Yamu “tap” (a water course), whose headwaters are found on one of the company’s plantations. This was exposed by the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, which is supporting the communities’ claims (17). The Commission also denounces Poligrow for restricting community members’ movement through their territory and for restricting them from hunting, gathering, fishing, and using wood.

These situations are not new. In June 2016, the Colombian environmental agency, Comarcarena (Corporation for the Sustainable Development of the La Macarena Special Management Area) ordered Poligrow to suspend its operations due to environmental violations, and it initiated a sanctioning process. In particular, it ordered Poligrow to stop: dumping industrial wastewater in local forests and *morichales*, impeding the natural flow of water through a cement dam it built without permission, disposing *raquis* (wastes) from the palm crops directly on the ground, using water from the Macondo river for industrial use, and dumping leachate from the company’s composting area (18).

At this point, it is unacceptable for both the Colombian government and the FAO to promote the expansion of palm monocultures—and especially in the case of Poligrow, considering the company’s track record of contamination and rights violations. What is even more disturbing is that they promote this in the name of peace and supposed progress for the communities, and through schemes that are presented as “alliances” with peasants and “small producers”—which ultimately only benefit the companies, as experience shows.

It is not surprising then that Poligrow displays ISO 9001 and Rainforest Alliance certifications on its website, and that it is accepted as a member of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), from which it expects to get certification in 2020 (19).

Poligrow is presented as the first company in Colombia to have the Rainforest Alliance’s Sustainable Agriculture Network certification (SAN). This is despite the fact that communities still in the territory have denounced the intensification of threats in recent years, as well as the degradation and contamination of their territory and in particular their water sources.

Once again, it has been exposed that the RSPO and other certifiers—as well as national governments and institutions like the FAO—systematically ignore the claims and real needs of local communities, even in contexts of extreme violence, criminalization and vulnerability. And all of this is to favor the expansion of the palm industry, which monopolizes land, violates rights and lives, and severely affects the food sovereignty of communities.

WRM International Secretariat

(1) [FAO Colombia: Agencia Italiana de Cooperación dona 8.846 millones para reactivar la economía y fortalecer tejido social en el municipio PDET de Mampiripán, Meta.](#)

(2) See: [Nueve malas prácticas empresariales que profundizaron la guerra](#), El Espectador, May 2020 and [El rol de las empresas en el conflicto armado y la violencia sociopolítica](#), “José Alvear Restrepo” Lawyers’ Collective, 2020; [La maraña de tierras y empresas de Poligrow](#) and [El negocio 'baldío' de Poligrow](#), La Silla Vacía 2013 and

- 2015; [Despojar y Desplazar, estrategia para el desarrollo de la Orinoquía](#), Mesa Copartes Misereor - Llanos Orientales 2017, p.41. And [Poligrow's response](#), 2018.
- (3) [Continúa grave afectación ambiental por parte de la empresa palmera Poligrow](#), Justicia y Paz, February 2018.
- (4) [Deterioro de salud en la comunidad Jiw de Mapiripán por desabastecimiento de agua potable](#), Justicia y Paz, 2020. [Indígenas Sikuani se oponen a ocupamiento de predios por empresa Poligrow](#), Contagio Radio, 2018
- (5) Idem 2.
- (6) [Proyecto agronómico de Poligrow](#). Excerpted from www.poligrow.com, August 14, 2020
- (7) Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. ["Estrategia de desarrollo territorial sostenible para la reactivación económica y la integración social en el municipio de Mapiripán"](#)
- (8) [Video de la presentación realizada el 14 de agosto de 2020 a través de la página de Facebook de Renovación Territorial Colombia.](#)
- (9) Idem 8.
- (10) Glass, Verena. ["Expansão do dendê na Amazônia brasileira: elementos para uma análise dos impactos sobre a agricultura familiar no nordeste do Pará"](#). Reporter Brasil, 2013.
- (11) [Despojar y Desplazar, estrategia para el desarrollo de la Orinoquía](#), Mesa Copartes Misereor - Llanos Orientales, 2017.
- (12) Idem 11.
- (13) [El rol de las empresas en el conflicto armado y la violencia sociopolítica](#), "José Alvear Restrepo" Lawyers' Collective, 2020
- (14) Potter, Lesley. [Colombia's oil palm development in times of war and 'peace': Myths, enablers and the disparate realities of land control](#). *Journal of Rural Studies*. Volume 78, August 2020, Pages 491-502.
- (15) Idem 11.
- (16) [Colombia: escasez de agua por palma y petróleo en Puerto Gaitán](#), Mongabay, October 2019.
- (17) [Deterioro de salud en la comunidad Jiw de Mapiripán por desabastecimiento de agua potable](#), Justicia y Paz, 2020
- (18) Environmental Investigation Agency. [Poligrow Colombia Ltda., Ordered to Suspend Operations due to Presumed Environmental Infractions](#). 2016.
- (19) [Poligrow on the RSPO website; https://www.rspo.org/members/308/Poligrow-Colombia-Ltda](#)

A Different Vision of "Doing Conservation:" The Kawsak Sacha of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku, Ecuador



Ph: Comunidad Sarayaku

Kawsak Sacha: Living forest and forest of beings.

As Amazonian peoples and nations, we practice a system of life that is built around coexistence with nature. It is a true incarnation in our bodies and spirits that ensures vital functions for each one of us, and for the living beings that surround us.

For the indigenous peoples who live in the Amazon, the rainforest is life. Each space has its masters and keepers. In each one of these spaces, there are Llakta (villages) with populations of Runa, which are also the houses and sanctuaries of sacred animals.

Everything that is a part of Kawsak Sacha is intertwined. (1)

Most governments, NGOs and corporations are promoting an increase in Protected Areas and conservation areas around the world. However, this model of “conservation without people,” or “conservation as a fortress,” has intensified the imposition of a colonialist and racist vision of conservation at the global level. In creating Protected Areas or conservation areas, it is not questioned who controls the land, who lives in these areas, or what activities inhabitants engage in to sustain themselves.

On the other hand, the creation of more conservation areas is useful for the “offset” market—whether it be for carbon emissions, biodiversity loss or other alleged environmental or ecosystem “services.” In other words, more “protected” areas are established to offset the increasing contamination and destruction taking place elsewhere. This approach reinforces a policy that allows companies and governments to continue to destroy forests, build large-scale infrastructure and extract more and more raw materials, etc. – as long as an “equivalent” amount of “protected” or “re-created” nature is established.

Therefore, the push to increase Protected Areas is directly or indirectly tied to forced evictions, harassment, violence, human rights violations, deforestation and militarization of territories, etc.

Thus, this dominant conservation model does not consider Indigenous Peoples or other forest communities as key agents in the preservation and care of forests. On the contrary, most Protected and conservation areas not only prohibit Indigenous Peoples from using their forests like they have for generations, but they prohibit the presence of humans altogether.

Below is an interview with Marlon Santi of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, a village that has historically resisted the entry of oil, mining and logging companies. In this interview, he explains what the Amazonian peoples of Ecuador consider to be *conservation*.

WRM: As the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, how do you preserve the forest and your territory? That is, what does “doing conservation” mean to you?

Marlon:

For us, “conservation” is seeing the forest as a living being, or as a living forest. Only in this way do we understand what kind of “conservation” we must do.

This is a philosophical concept of ours, because we believe that the rivers, lakes, trees, air and mountains are alive. The other world, the Western one, does not understand this philosophical precept. But if it did, the meaning of life and the meaning of mother nature and human beings—who are a part of her—would change greatly. Where this has not been understood, many living spaces have been turned into National Parks. However this is just a front, because the Ecuadorian state can violate this Protected Area when it wants to exploit any “natural resource” found therein. So it is clear that they do not understand the meaning of life, or of a living forest, either.

It has been shown many times that the best preserved forests in the world are in Indigenous People’s territories, even compared to forests in Protected Areas.

WRM: What is the Impact of Protected Areas?

Marlon:

The creation of Protected Areas deprives us of our relationship with the other living being, that is the rainforest. For decades, this prohibition has cut off the right to rituals of

coexistence with nature. Government controls appear, but they do not guarantee our survival.

In this way, the social dynamics of our daily coexistence with nature has changed. Sacred spaces have ended up inside Protected Areas, and people have not been able to return to them.

We need Indigenous Peoples' territories to be the new "conservation" spaces, and we should be the ones to protect them. States must respect our ways of thinking and preserving forests. In the case of my Kichwa village of Sarayaku, we want recognition of the categorization of KAWSAK SACHA, which means Living Forest.

WRM: What do you think is essential in order for forests to be preserved? And what is the role of Indigenous Peoples?

Marlon:

We have a close relationship with mother earth, in which respect prevails over greed. That is called "harmony."

In order to live well and for forests to be preserved, it is essential that the word "development" not be used, and that spaces not be destroyed beyond repair. How can you return water to the lake when oil is spilled or when chemicals are released? Because this changes our world, and I say world referring to this living space.

This has been happening for centuries, from the industrial revolution to the present day. This business of polluting in order to exploit seriously endangers our lives. When there is contamination, they are not only violating rights, they are violating the circle of an entire life process. This pollutes water, sound, the sky, trees, air, etc.

Indigenous Peoples have prevented this from happening. But now, many Indigenous People's territories are bordering Protected or "conservation" areas. And for the most part, these areas prohibit human entry; and they separate communities from their agricultural lands and/or livelihoods, and from their ancestral territories. And generally speaking, violence results from the "eco-guards" who prevent the entry and passage of people in these areas. This makes it harder to take care of the forest and avoid its destruction.

More information about Kawsak Sacha can be found in the following videos:

Kawsak Sacha for the world: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKHymZwjQ9k>

Kawsak Sacha, Living Forest: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmJjQ6tYp_4

(1) Sarayaku, Kawsak Sacha – Living forest,

<http://sarayaku.org/propuestasprogramas-y-proyectos/propuesta-kawsak-sacha/?lang=es>

Deforestation in the Amazon, and the REDD+ Money that Keeps Coming to Brazil



Demonstration against green capitalism in Xapuri..

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon is on the rise, and more markedly so since Jair Bolsonaro took office in 2019. The state of Acre is no exception. The tens of millions of euros that the state government received from the German government for its REDD+ program did not manage to stop deforestation. What is more worrisome is that even without positive climate “results,” and with the current increase in the deforestation rate, several Brazilian states continue to receive funds from the German government. The Brazilian federal government recently managed to receive REDD+ funds—almost US \$100 million from the Green Climate Fund—in spite of all the destruction that the government itself encourages. The question then is, what is the current role of REDD+?

With its “jurisdictional REDD+” program, the state of Acre has always been considered a model of success by the World Bank, WRI, Forest Trends, WWF, TNC and other institutions. Since 2010, these institutions have been promoting the REDD+ program as a successful model for reducing deforestation (1). Additionally, the state of Acre would be prepared to sell carbon credits to whomever is interested in buying them, for example to polluting industries from California (2). However, after complaints from community leaders in the territories, more and more evidence emerged that this “success” was nothing more than an illusion. Perhaps the most unfortunate evidence came to light in August 2019, when the increase in deforestation in Acre was one of the highest in the Brazilian Amazon, as compared to other states in the region (3).

One of the main arguments that REDD+ promoters constantly use to explain why the mechanism was not yielding the expected results, is insufficient funds and even the low price of a ton of carbon (4). But between 2012 and 2016, the German government transferred 25 million euros (almost 30 million dollars) to the government of Acre through the **REM “REDD+ Early Movers” program**, administered by the **German public bank, KfW**. In 2017, a new contract was signed for an additional 10 million euros (almost 12 million dollars) for the subsequent three years. And the government of Acre also received other resources, including from the Amazon Fund (5). Therefore, the fact that deforestation has increased, and thus REDD+ efforts have not succeeded, has not been due to a lack of money invested

in the REDD+ program in Acre—especially considering that it is one of the smallest states in the Brazilian Amazon, with just 790,000 inhabitants.

An initial and striking incongruity is the Acre government's calculations, upon which payments from the German government were based. To justify the disbursements made between 2012 and 2016, deforestation could not increase beyond a certain level. In order to determine this level, the government of Acre used the average deforestation rate from the period of 2001-2010. This includes the years 2002 to 2004, when there was a significant peak in deforestation in Acre and throughout Brazil (6). So the question is, was it a stroke of luck for the Acre government that the years 2002-2004 were included in its calculations, to arrive at a relatively high baseline for average deforestation?

No. That selection was carefully thought out by government technicians. It is shameful that donors have been complicit in this deforestation data game, which unfortunately enables the Acre government to receive funds for “avoided” emissions from deforestation that only exist on paper. In fact, deforestation could even increase, and the government of Acre could still receive funds. In this way, REDD+ has become a self-contradicting mechanism: it says one thing while doing another. Equally shameful is the fact that, by playing this game, everyone involved is choosing to ignore the much more complex dynamics of the deforestation process and its causes.

In a reflection of this kind, it is always good to remember that in the last 20 years, the most significant drop in deforestation levels in Brazil took place between 2004 and 2009—before REDD+ projects, programs and policies began to emerge in Acre and across the country. The decrease in deforestation during those years was mostly due to effective investment in the entities responsible for controlling deforestation, and to integrated actions to combat it. Similarly, the fact that deforestation began to increase again in 2014 is directly related to the gradual dismantling of the State's capacity to combat it—especially in the current era of President Bolsonaro.

If REDD+ funds in Acre were not used to combat deforestation in a structural way, what were they used for? The fact is that, to date, there is not enough transparency to be able to say precisely how that money was spent. What we know is that part of it was invested in the state government structure, for example to assemble institutions, to carry out consultancies and other contract work around policies related to “climate change,” and to monitor deforestation. At the same time, the German government required most of the funds (70%) to be turned over to the local population. In its project report, the KfW claims that farmers and indigenous people “benefited.” But in the Chico Mendes extractive reserve in Acre, for example, the program did not help people live with or obtain their livelihood from the forests (7). On the contrary, restrictive measures were imposed on *seringueiros* (rubber tappers); meanwhile, the projects that were supposed to generate alternative livelihoods failed. With respect to the Indigenous Peoples of Acre, despite written promises, KfW money was never utilized for the urgently needed titling of indigenous lands that still have not been demarcated. Meanwhile, large-scale livestock, agribusiness and logging industry activities, which threaten Indigenous Peoples' territories and forests, managed to proceed.

Even with the rise in deforestation, the current Acre state government reported in September 2019 that **its REDD+ partnership with the German government would continue** (8). This is in spite of the state government's clear commitment to the advancement of agribusiness, which in turn is strongly related to the proliferation of forest fires that plagued the state and

part of the Amazon in 2019 (9). There is no news of funds transfers from the German government to the Acre government through the KfW in 2020. The only news found came from the Acre government itself, which announced in April that it was releasing a total of R\$2.2 million (almost US \$400,000) in the framework of the project with the German government, through the KfW (10).

Mato Grosso, another Brazilian state that signed a contract with the German government in 2017, received funds in a normal fashion from the German government through KfW in 2019 (11). This is another example of how an inflated deforestation baseline can enable payments to continue, despite deforestation actually increasing. This is the case even now, with the situation of calamity, emergency and agony in the Mato Grosso marshland biome—caused by the forest fires that have already destroyed 100,000 hectares in 2020 (12). In the midst of the deforestation crisis plaguing the country, it is quite disturbing that the German government continues to sign new REDD+ agreements for “results”-based payments in Brazil, like in the states of Pará and Amazonas (13).

The German government’s vision of REDD+, applied via KfW in Acre, is similar to and reinforced by the vision of Juan Chang, deputy director of the **Green Climate Fund (GCF)**. According to Chang, “if we look at REDD+ as a transition in which you’re providing sustainable livelihoods as opposed to unsustainable activities, then there is a point where you do not depend on the payments that REDD+ provides to sustain your livelihoods and keep the forest. That should be the end goal” (14). In other words, Chang reinforces the view that the populations who inhabit and depend on forests are responsible for deforestation; and therefore, they should be the target of REDD+. Meanwhile, the destructive action of loggers, land grabbers, miners and agribusiness—all implicated in large-scale deforestation—continues to be ignored. Indeed, the central element of the project that Brazil presented to the GCF, which was approved in 2019, is the “Floresta+” program—which is focused on small farmers, Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities. Jair Bolsonaro’s government received US \$96 million from the GCF for this purpose, which was justified by the alleged “result” of reduced deforestation in 2014 and 2015—another example of convenient and expert manipulation of the data.

What is the Current Role of REDD+?

In the logic of “results”-based payments used by the **World Bank, KfW and the GCF**, the REDD+ mechanism has become even more disconnected from the alarming reality of growing deforestation in the Amazon and its true causes. But just as it has done from day one, REDD+ continues to threaten forest-dependent populations, blaming them for deforestation and restricting their access to the lands and forests on which they depend.

It is incredible that the **German government** continues to provide payments to Brazilian state governments for “results.” Maybe it is because it needs to spend funds that were already earmarked for this purpose. Meanwhile, the **GCF** is being harshly criticized internationally for approving REDD+ “results”-based projects in countries where deforestation is on the rise, and where governments in power are encouraging deforestation (15). For Brazilian state and federal governments benefiting from the German government and the GCF funds, this is also instrumental to create a smokescreen in the midst of the real destruction taking place, as well as to silence critics and to create the outward impression that something is being done.

Faced with complaints about their involvement in deforestation (16), executives of **large national meat and soy agribusiness companies, as well as other multinational companies**, published an open letter in July 2020, ostensibly to demonstrate their concern about forest destruction (17). It is well known that, from the beginning, the national and international business community has supported President Jair Bolsonaro—who is extreme right-wing and neo-fascist. This support is based on his commitment to an ultra-liberal economic agenda that facilitates and increases business and profits for companies that invest in Brazil, promising to open up indigenous lands to the private sector and end environmental regulations.

The business executives who have signed onto the letter—several of whom head up companies with a long history of environmental and social crimes—say they are concerned about “the impact on business caused by the current negative perception of Brazil’s image abroad, as it relates to socio-environmental problems in the Amazon.” However they are not calling for an end to deforestation, but rather an end to “illegal deforestation;” since that their activities and plans for expansion entail even more deforestation. This is why they insist on REDD+: an offset mechanism that creates a carbon market where polluting companies can offset their carbon emissions by protecting a forest somewhere else. This is why the executives’ letter calls for the “valuation (...) of biodiversity,” and the “adoption of carbon credit trading mechanisms,” to offer a so-called “reduced carbon” economy—in order to “strategically plan the sustainable future of Brazil” where “there are no conflicts between producing and preserving.”

Nonetheless, the main controversy is precisely that by suggesting the REDD+ mechanism, executives are proposing nothing to stop the current capitalist economy, which is destructive by definition. On the contrary, they want to use REDD+ to justify their expansion. Furthermore, to build this “reduced carbon” economy, businesses need more minerals and metals, more land for agrofuels, more infrastructure, more tree plantations for biomass. All of this will lead to companies causing even greater deforestation. And to legitimize their actions, they are obviously thinking about so-called “offset” mechanisms, such as REDD+. The current trend described in this article suggests that REDD+ will lead to even more restrictions and problems for forest communities chosen to “offset” or “sequester” carbon.

On July 10, 2020, the Brazilian federal government—which is also on the defensive when it comes to deforestation—met with the executives who drafted the letter (18). The Brazilian government appears to have taken note of their message regarding the need to invest in offset mechanisms. One of the most recent measures taken by the Ministry of the Environment is its own restructuring: it will transform the Secretary of Forests into the Secretary of the Amazon and **Environmental Services**, with “the mission of promoting the market for fees for environmental services,” and with one of these “services” being carbon. As Minister of the Environment Ricardo Salles said in the last UN climate conference, held in Madrid in December 2019, “[It is necessary to make] payments for environmental services viable, and ultimately, to bring money into Brazil—but in proportions that the country needs and deserves, not in small token amounts” (19). Indeed, REDD+ and destructive capital gains –which goes together with bad governance,- appear to be two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand.

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The Road that Threatens to Destroy the “Protected” Harapan Forest in South Sumatra, Indonesia



Ph: Sahabat Hutan Harapan

[You can access this article in Bahasa Indonesia here](#)

The Indonesian government has approved a project proposed by the mining contractor company Miner PT Marga Bara Jaya, to build a 88-kilometer road through an Ecosystem Restoration Concession (ERC) forest in South Sumatra. The approval decision came to light in June 2020 and it gives the company control of 424 hectares of the Harapan forest. The coal-hauling road is for transporting coal from the company’s mine to power plants in South Sumatra province. (1)

As explained in a [WRM Bulletin article from March 2020](#), much of Indonesia’s state-owned forests have been categorized as so-called “production forests” with Forest Concession Rights, mainly for the logging and plantation industries.

The category of Ecosystem Restoration Concessions (ERCs) was launched as a market-oriented tool, with the stated aim of reversing the increasing deforestation inside the “production forests” that are considered to have high potential for conservation. The regulation for managing ERCs establishes that the license holder should promote restoration activities to “re-establish a biological balance”. Once that balance is reached, logging can be allowed again.

The first company to receive an ERC was Resotrasi Ekosistem Indonesia (PT REKI) in 2007, for the Harapan Rainforest Project. That forest is also home to an indigenous, semi-nomad community, the Batin Sembilan. PT REKI is the license holder, while the British Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), BirdLife International and its Indonesian affiliate Burung Indonesia created a non-profit foundation that became the major shareholder of PT REKI.

The project covers an area of almost 80,000 hectares of lowland forest in the provinces of South Sumatra and Jambi. Previously, it was a state-run logging concession and was logged intensively in the past. Now, it is surrounded by oil palm plantations and it is filled with land conflicts, illegal logging and illegal forest clearings for oil palm plantations. (2) Yet, the road project is its single biggest and most destructive threat.

Apart from the deforestation, forest fragmentation and the overall disruption caused by the construction of the road, and subsequently by the constant passing of heavy coal trucks and workers, the road will unavoidably give access to more poachers, illegal loggers and encroachers in the area as well as an increase in human-wildlife conflict.

The approval of a road construction inside the first Ecosystem Restoration Concession in Indonesia is an emblematic example of its contradictions. While the government of Indonesia upholds an international image of being concerned with tackling deforestation, it is, at the same time, actively engaged in promoting plans and policies that lead to more deforestation. This was also a main reason why in August 2020, organisations from Indonesia and abroad sent an open letter to the Green Climate Fund, demanding it to reject Indonesian government's request for REDD+ funding for supposedly having reduced emissions from deforestation in the past. It is unacceptable that the Fund rewards governments that continue to heavily engage in and promote large-scale deforestation. (3)

WRM interviewed an activist committed to social and environmental justice in Indonesia, who has closely followed the situation in this concession area and the road project, in order to understand better the context and conflicts. His name is kept anonymous for security reasons.

WRM: Conservation NGOs claim that they are restoring the Harapan Rainforest, have you seen this happening? If not, what are the main problems?

Activist:

The condition of the Harapan Rainforest due to the ex-Forest Concession Rights, which have now transformed into the Hutan Harapan Ecosystem Restoration Concession Project, is very critical as a result of forest exploitation.

During the implementation phase of this project, not all the Batin Sembilan Indigenous Communities who reside in this area were invited to participate, one of those left out is the Pangkalan Ranjau People.

In my opinion, the restoration of what once were extractive areas through Ecosystem Restoration Concessions, like the Hutan Harapan Project, should be done by ensuring the strong involvement and guidance of Indigenous Communities at all stages: implementation, restoration, preservation, management, etc., because they are the ones who know the area best and the ones who have already been protecting the forest for generations.

WRM: Why have you been opposing the construction of the road?

Activist:

I am against all forms of exploitation of natural areas, including the exploitation generated by coal mining projects and the establishment of its supporting infrastructure.

The coal haul road is only a manifestation of a bigger problem of exploitation, namely the coal mine itself. Therefore, I firmly reject its presence.

In my opinion, the area is in a very critical condition, affected by all major logging companies due to previous extractive permits.

WRM: A road built in an area that should be restored and conserved does not make sense. Who is benefiting from and supporting such a proposal?

Activist:

The only beneficiaries of this road construction is the coal mining company itself.

WRM: How could the Harapan forest be best restored and conserved, considering the interests of the mining, oil palm and logging industries?

Activist:

The Hutan Harapan Rainforest Restoration must ensure the involvement and guidance of Indigenous Peoples in the area in all aspects and stages. They are the ones who are able to prevent the exploitation of the rainforest and protect the environment. Thus, a collaborative work is needed.

WRM: Now that the road project is approved, what are your plans and what kind of national and international solidarity actions you think are needed?

Activist:

We support Indigenous Peoples in preserving and protecting their customary areas; we continue to object and protest this road construction to the government and related parties both, at the national and international levels; and we are making litigation and non-litigation efforts to reject coal mining expansion in the country.

International exposure of this road project and other destructive projects in Indonesia is crucial to create pressure towards the government and the companies that plan to destroy large areas of forest that forest-dependent communities depend upon.

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RECOMMENDED

Feminist critique of corporate power

Women's March Global and Semperviva Feminist Organization (SOF) have produced a series of videos that bring a feminist critique to reflect on corporate power in three industrial sectors of exploitations: the food industry, the digitalization industry and the textile industry. The videos are in Spanish, Portuguese, English and French.

ES: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyvHWAa1OEP9HTje4jaAdW_ZmmFHexRrS

PO: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyvHWAa1OEP8CGMZi_1ZOFN7AjL7tWtY1

EN: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyvHWAa1OEP_i_Ji8aF2oZVY_5HDTKYbV

FR: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyvHWAa1OEP-dgiAGy7EKUq-rFzi3SMvd>

Land defenders facing ever-increasing violence

The NGO Global Witness recently released its 2019 report on the violence against land and environmental defenders - those who are at the frontlines of resisting the devastation and exploitation of people and territories. Their report evidences that 2019 was the year with the highest number yet of people murdered in one year since 2012, when the NGO began to publish data. 212 land and environmental defenders were killed in 2019, an average of more than four people a week. Over half of all reported killings occurred in two countries: Colombia and the Philippines. Read the full report in English here.

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>

“Meaningless certification”

Three-quarters of oil palm concessions in Indonesia and Malaysian Borneo certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) occupy land that was forest and/or wildlife habitat as recently as 30 years ago. A new study on certified oil palm plantations and their links to past deforestation, published in the journal Science of the Total Environment, concludes that RSPO's failure to account for past deforestation means that “every logged area ‘today’ could be certified as a sustainable plantation ‘tomorrow,’ in an infinite loop of meaningless certification.” Read an article from news portal Mongabay (in English) here:

<https://is.gd/Bqlyz8>

The donation farce during the battle against Covid-19 in Brazil

A network of civil society organizations and social movements launched a letter to expose how big companies (agribusiness, industrial tree plantation, oil and mining sectors) take advantage of this time of crisis with the Covid-19 pandemic to strengthen the image of their brands by making donations to vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, they continue operating in the midst of the pandemic. The letter also highlights the role played by social movements and NGOs that, without receiving the same prominent visibility in the media, do provide support to populations in need in urban and rural areas by donating food and cleaning materials and creating networks of solidarity throughout the country.

Organizations from Brazil and also from other countries are invited to sign-on this letter -until September 19- to support these groups resistance against the impacts of corporations in their territories. You can read the full letter and sign here <https://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/brazil-letter-exposes-the-donation-farce-of-agribusiness-industrial-tree-monocultures-oil-and-mining-corporations/>

A webinar was also organized by this network to expose the topic of false solutions and corporate capture. Community leaders from different parts of the country also shared their experiences about the impacts of these companies in their territories. You can watch the video (in Portuguese) here

<https://www.facebook.com/WorldRainforestMovement/videos/763101757837653>

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