



## WRM Bulletin 233

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### Struggles for land, forests and life: No to industrial tree monocultures!



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## **Struggles for land, forests and life: No to industrial tree monocultures!**

### **Our Viewpoint**

#### **Women say, “We want our lands back!”**



Large-scale monoculture plantations “rob women of everything they have as they take the agricultural lands and forests that women depend upon for their livelihoods and for feeding their families”. This is part of the final declaration of a workshop organized in Port Loko, Sierra Leone, in August 2017, which brought together women from Sierra Leone’s Northern, Southern and Eastern regions, together with representatives from Cameroon, Liberia and Guinea. (1)

The workshop aimed at facilitating a space for them to share, exchange and denounce their particular experiences as women faced with an alarming expansion of industrial oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa. Multinational agribusiness, backed-up by governments and security forces, have been occupying millions of hectares of land that belong to communities under the false promise to bring so-called ‘development’. This occupation and imposition has created disastrous consequences for communities, women and their environments.

Women explained how companies have taken and destroyed most of their farmlands and forests while diverting nearby rivers to irrigate the palm trees. They also voiced the harassment, systematic control and violence they face from police and the companies’ security guards if they are found entering the plantation areas or if they are caught with palm nuts in their possession. They are accused of stealing even though they use oil palm trees products traditionally for generations. Women also denounced that the expansion of plantations increased “sexual violence such as rape and other sexual harassment, with a consequence that women are restricted from moving around freely and are afraid of leaving their houses or going to work.”

However, against all odds and despite the abuse and criminalization towards the women who denounce the impacts of plantations, they keep resisting those corporations and their allies in order to get their land and forests back.



The stories shared by the women participating at the workshop in Sierra Leona however, are not isolated stories. Traditional and forest-dependant communities across the world, whether in Asia, Latin America or Africa, whose land and traditions have been stolen by plantation companies, have similar stories filled with resistance, criminalization and oppression.

WRM joins once again the International Day of Struggles against Monoculture Tree Plantations (September 21<sup>st</sup>) as a way to make visible the many stories and voices of local communities against industrial plantations. Voices that are mostly silenced through repression and structural violence and racism imposed since colonial times. Repression, violence and racism that are reinforced by the economic and political powers entrenched in the continuation and expansion of this destructive industry. Governments, certification schemes, pulp and paper as well as biomass energy and carbon companies, land speculators, financial backers, developmental aid agencies, international forestry agencies, mainstream media, among others, are all partners of this and share responsibility.

Women in Sierra Leona declared that they want their land and forests back *“to provide livelihoods that allow for good, healthy lives in dignity for communities.”* This bulletin, launched in the framework of the September 21<sup>st</sup>, hopes to support in breaking the circle of enforced ‘silence’ and is therefore dedicated to the numerous voices and stories resisting the expansion of industrial plantations around the world.

(1) Read the Port Loko Declaration here: <http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/port-loko-declaration-women-say-we-want-our-lands-back/>

## **FERONIA in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Harassment, violence and oppression**



Oil palm plantations managed by the Canadian-based agribusiness company FERONIA Inc have been opposed by local residents ever since they were established by the previous owner of the plantations, multinational food company Unilever. Incidents of violent abuse and conflict arising from the company’s oil palm plantations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have been a regular occurrence. In 2015, seven children were left orphaned after police killed both indigenous pygmy parents for taking some oil palm fruits from the plantations to feed their children.





FERONIA Inc, majority owned by the UK government's financial institution CDC and other European and US development banks, occupies over 100 thousand hectares of disputed lands in DRC for its oil palm plantations. The company claims to possess legally valid, 25-year renewable leases for all of the land used for the oil palm plantations acquired with its purchase of Plantations et Huileries du Congo (PHC) from multinational company Unilever back in 2008. However, resulting from a history of colonial occupation, the lands of Unilever's plantations across the Congo Basin have not been returned to their inhabitants. They have instead been sold at a profit to a new batch of companies, among which is FERONIA (See article from [WRM Bulletin 224](#), May-June, 2016).

The company occupies land that is essential to the livelihoods of local people and fails to provide decent wages and basic services, leaving them with little alternative but to work in the company's plantations under extremely poor conditions. As a report released in 2016 by African, European and international organizations exposed (1), in September 2015 the CDC stated that the average wages for FERONIA's plantation workers were increased by 70 per cent to an average of 4 US dollars per day following its 2014 investment in the company. However, pay stubs from "superior" workers (*manoeuvres supérieurs*) at Lokutu plantations – location of one of the three FERONIA plantations in the DRC - show that wages throughout 2015 remained at only 2 US dollars per day. Moreover, the wages for daily labourers, which constitute the vast majority of FERONIA's plantation workers, are even lower — at no more than 1.25 US dollars per day, which is below the national minimum wage of 1.75 US dollars per day for a manual labourer. It is widely acknowledged that the current minimum wage rate is insufficient to cover the basic costs of living in the DRC. The problem of low wages is greatly compounded by the company's frequent failure to pay wages on time. Workers also reported that a portion of their wages is paid with products such as refined palm oil and soap. These products are then deducted from their wages according to Kinshasa market prices, if and when wages are paid.

Adding to this tremendous injustice, Congolese National Police agents routinely arrest local people for having a few palm nuts in their possession, even though there are natural palms on the outskirts of their villages. On March 2017, during a workshop organized by Congolese organization RIAO-DRC in Brazzaville, communities' delegations from the Boteka plantations' area reported the murder of two indigenous pygmy people and the injury of several more.

According to the allegations made by community members (2), on 07 March 2015, when Mr. Jeudi Bofete Engambi, a worker in FERONIA's Boteka plantations who lived in the Bokula workers' camp, returned from work, there was a dispute between him and Ms. Thethé Mputu Ikeke, his wife. She insisted to have some means for feeding their 7 children. The husband told his wife to be satisfied with the few palm nuts he gave her for cooking, as the company had imposed restrictions to workers against taking any palm nut, an essential ingredient in local cuisine. The company security guards strictly supervise these restrictions.



A member of FERONIA's security, Mr. Mokase, reported the couple's dispute to the commander of the Congolese National Police (PNC, for its French acronym) for the FERONIA camp. Mr. Jeudi Bofete Engambi was called in at the Boteka PNC post where he was severely beaten because of the palm nuts. Mr. Jeudi Bofete Engambi was taken to the hospital in Boteka as a result of the abuse and died the following day, on March 08, 2015.

Ms. Thethé Mputu Ikeke and family members brought the body of the deceased to the company guards in Boteka as a way of protesting. In view of the gathering, the PNC dispersed them with gunfire and Ms. Thethé Mputu Ikeke was shot and died, leaving seven children orphaned. Others were severely wounded.

But this is not an isolated case. People who use a road near a FERONIA plantation had already denounced in 2013 the systematic control and confiscation of palm oil processing equipment by police officers on the road. The villagers surrounding the plantations said that they also own oil palm trees and that their use of the products represents traditional use. (3) In 2014, the arrest and torture of four people for allegedly stealing palm nuts triggered three days of clashes between the police and the residents of Lokutu town and the village of Yambi Enene. (4)

As the 2016 report mentioned above showed, since January 2013, FERONIA has received 118 million US dollars in financing from European and United States development finance institutions (DFI). The UK government owned CDC currently owns 67 per cent of FERONIA's shares. The African Agricultural Fund (AAF)—a Mauritius-based company that manages the investments of DFIs of France and Spain, as well multilateral banks such as the African Development Bank—has invested 27.5 million US dollars in FERONIA since 2012 and currently owns approximately 26 per cent of the company. In December 2015, several other European DFIs, from Germany (DEG), Netherlands (FMO) and Belgium (BIO), as well as a consortium of other DFI investors participating in an infrastructure fund, committed to lend FERONIA's DRC plantations subsidiary, Plantations et Huileries du Congo, an additional 49 million US dollars, after "a comprehensive due diligence process". As FERONIA has registered multi-million dollar losses in every year of its existence, the company has relied on these cash injections from DFIs to maintain its operations.

Furthermore, the report shows, there is strong evidence that FERONIA engaged in actions that not only violate the objectives and guidelines of the CDC and other DFI owners, but that could be in violation of DRC's national laws to which FERONIA and its various subsidiaries are bound. These actions transpired before and after significant financial involvement by the various DFIs.

A full and open inquiry into FERONIA's operations has to be carried out in complete transparency by the governments of DFIs that have provided funding to FERONIA. Community demands for the return of their lands, reparations relating to the illegal occupation of their lands and forests since 1911, and to the long-standing use of forced labour and violence on the company's plantations have to be immediately addressed.



## RIAO-RDC, GRAIN et WRM

- (1) Land conflicts and shady finances plague DR Congo palm oil company backed by development funds.  
<http://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/new-report-land-conflicts-and-shady-finances-plague-dr-congo-palm-oil-company-backed-by-development-funds/>
- (2) *Sur L'exécution Sommaire A Boteka D'un Couple De Peuple Autochtone (Pygmees)*, 03 May 2017, RIAO – RDC.
- (3) <http://www.radiokapi.net/actualite/2013/02/06/province-orientale-la-societe-civile-de-luete-accuse-les-policiers-dextorquer-les-biens-de-la-population>
- (4) <http://www.radiokapi.net/actualite/2014/10/06/reprise-des-activites-apres-des-accrochages-entre-policiers-populations-lokutu>

## Eucalyptus and silent poisons: The expansion of plantations in the southernmost part of Bahia, Brazil



Photo: CEPEDES

The process of territorial transformation in the southernmost part of Bahia is closely intertwined with agriculture in Brazil, and is based on an extremely unequal territorial structure that has been in place since colonial times. But this has recently been exacerbated by the imposition of a single model of extensive and intensive production, using land, water, agrochemicals, chemical inputs, large machinery and biotechnology. This is agribusiness in general, and in particular, the eucalyptus plantations that supply huge pulp mills.

### Eucalyptus, agrochemicals and ideological manipulation

Eucalyptus plantations designated for pulp production involve the covert use of agrochemicals. Agrochemicals are chemicals that—along with other substances and products—were re-purposed from their original military functions following the two world wars. Explosive materials turned into synthetic and nitrogenous fertilizers; lethal gases became agrochemicals; and war tanks were transformed into tractors (1). Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century, the Green Revolution was launched with the promise to increase agricultural production as



a means to end hunger. What is not clear is how tree plantations, such as eucalyptus, can help end hunger—since trees cannot be eaten!

The Green Revolution in Brazil was linked to the government's Plan of Goals in the post-World War II era. With the 'help' of the United States, this program sought to modernize agriculture. For example, the manufacturing of tractors was included within the automobile industry's goals, and agrochemicals within basic industries, since "the goals were to be defined and implemented in close harmony with each other, so that investments in certain sectors could be positively reflected in others." (2)

While the Brazilian government was creating strategies to justify the use of these products—which increased after the military coup of 1964—Rachel Carson, a marine biologist and writer from the United States, warned that same year about the dire consequences of these products in her book, *Silent Spring*. According to Carson, this is the most alarming human attack on the environment, as it involves the contamination of air, soil, rivers and seas with hazardous and lethal materials. This is irreparable and irreversible, because nature cannot absorb these substances that humans have created, and they cause damages to occur in chain effect on all living tissues. Carson also said that the apparent need to develop more and more substances is a direct consequence of their use. For example, in order to survive, insects develop resistance to a certain substance. This promotes the production of new substances that are more potent and lethal than the previous ones (3).

With its so-called Plan of Goals, Brazil thus entered the era of conservative agricultural modernization, which sustained the violent and perverse implementation of capitalism in the countryside. Poisons came to Brazil wrapped in a package called "development." The countryside would no longer be backwards. This was the deal various sectors of the economy made with each other, united to promote what would later be called agribusiness; and they were cheered on by science, mass media and politicians. Herbicide and glyphosate consumption alone increased by 5,400 per cent between 1965 and 1979. While Agent Orange 2,4-D was being used as a chemical weapon to kill millions of people in the United States' War on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1960s, it was already being heavily used in Brazil. The Amazonian Bank weekly bankrolled almost 50,000 litres of Agent Orange, mainly used by German and North American companies in the Brazilian Amazon and Savannah (*Cerrado*) (4).

In the 1970s, the Ministry of Agriculture allocated 20 per cent of agricultural funding to agrochemical companies, on the grounds that these products were necessary to produce food. The National Agricultural Development Plan (PNDA by its Portuguese acronym), in addition to financing agrochemicals, required that they be used. This led to an increase in agrochemical industries—from 14 factories in 1974 to 73 factories in 1985 (5). It is worth noting that close ties existed between the military dictatorship and large agrochemical companies. For example, the Minister of Agriculture at that time, Nestor Jost, took office while he was still Chairman of the Board of the German chemical company,





BAYER; in fact, he used State financial resources to participate in company meetings (6).

### **Eucalyptus and the rain of poison**

A person passing through areas with eucalyptus plantations cannot imagine the danger hidden in their silence: synthetic chemicals with different functions, which help maintain and boost transnational corporations' profits.

The problems associated with the use of agrochemicals in eucalyptus plantations are found in several regions. In João Lisboa, Pará State, the President of the Rural Workers Union and other councillors denounced the agrochemical contamination in Celmar S/A's eucalyptus plantations, in Varejão dos Crentes district. This was in 1995. A team from Maranhão Federal University detected the absence of safety equipment. Some of Celmar's products include Bromex (trade name) which is methyl bromide, a chemical banned in Europe, and DMA 806, which is 2,4-D. Other highly toxic products were also found, including Garlon 480 (triclopyr) and Goal BR (oxyfluorfen). The report highlighted the lack of specific trials verifying whether there could be possible adverse effects. (7).

In 2003, Espírito Santo's newspaper, *Século Diário*, published a complaint by Health Sciences doctor, Luiz Henrique Borges, who was head of the Department of Collective Health at Emescam School. He denounced the annual use of 1,839 tons of agrochemicals, which Aracruz Celulose (currently FIBRIA) dropped as poisonous cocktails over two municipalities, Conceição da Barra and São Mateus (8).

Technical Opinion No. 138 from 1985, which authorized Veracel Celulose to use the poisons glyphosate and sulfuramid in Bahia State, considers these substances to be non-toxic—i.e., causing no effect on the environment or people. However, the Pataxó indigenous peoples, and rural workers and communities have denounced these poisons on multiple occasions. In 2011, in the public hearings on the extension of Veracel Celulose's license, the people present clearly said NO to the expansion of plantations. Their main argument was the uninterrupted use of poisons and its harmful consequences. Globally, there is extensive literature confirming that glyphosate and sulfuramid are hazardous substances.

The communities living near Suzano Papel e Celulose and FIBRIA's eucalyptus plantations in Bahia are also suffering the impacts of agrochemicals. In mid-2013, their plantations became infested with the brown caterpillar, or leaf-cutting caterpillar. These caterpillars became butterflies that infested cities and communities (9). Later, the caterpillars attacked Veracel Celulose's crops. The emergence of new pests is a natural consequence of the imbalance generated by monocultures. Faced with this problem, the companies got together and sprayed a rain of poison over the whole region. This practice had already been used on coffee plantations. It is a dangerous practice, because "less than 0.1% of the agrochemicals applied to crops actually attack the pests that are the target. Thus, large quantities of these products are spilled during their



application, causing adverse effects on human health and beneficial biota, and polluting the soil, water and atmosphere of the ecosystem." (10)

Through billboards and brochures published throughout the region, the Agricultural Defence State Agency of Bahia (ADAB, by its Portuguese acronym) disseminated the information that pests were being controlled through the use of a biological insecticide. According to manufacturers and contracted scientists, the product would be "(...) specifically aimed at caterpillars, and not present any risk to human or animal health" (11). The trade name of this product (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is DIPEL, and it is manufactured by Chemical-EUA. In affected areas, a spraying plane passed over communities and villages almost every day between 2014 and early 2016. The Quilombo I and II settlements, Zumbi dos Palmares in Mucuri Municipality, and the Quilombola communities in Alcobaça Municipality—such as Juerana, Aldea Mucugê I and II, Craveiro, Nova Esperança, and several others—began to feel the harmful effects of these products on people, crops, rivers and lakes of the region. Many people got sick, and domestic animals like cats, dogs and chickens died—as well as food crops.

Impacted populations later discovered that several products associated with DIPEL—"biological insecticides," as their proponents call them—were being used. Because they are "biological" does not mean that they do not cause impacts, but that is for another discussion. This apparently inoffensive insecticide did not achieve its objective, so reinforcement was necessary through the use of several other substances. At the environmental public hearing held in Mucuri in July 2016, landless workers, councillors and beekeepers reported that the planes sprayed not only DIPEL, but also other products. One participant pointed out that: "The company only says they use DIPEL in aerial spraying, but they are actually using Evidence, Thiamethoxam and Actara, an expensive and strong product." In light of this situation, the Centre for Studies and Research for the Development of the Southern Tip of Bahia (CEPEDES by its Portuguese acronym) sought information about these products from Bahia's Agricultural Defence Agency (ADAB) and Regional Engineering and Architecture Council (CREA, by its Portuguese acronym).

In CREA's list from 2013, 2014 and 2015, one sees products from the neonicotinoid chemical group, which are nicotine derivatives. The 2014 list shows that 52,857,000 litres of DIPEL were used. Along with DIPEL, there was an astonishing increase in insecticides from the neonicotinoid chemical group, amounting to over 43 million litres. In particular, field workers and communities identified that Actara, Evidence and Thiamethoxam were used, the latter containing both neonicotinoid and pyrethroid. The total amount of these chemicals, plus DIPEL, reached 96,022,100 litres in 2014. In 2015, the use of DIPEL dropped to 7,946,000 litres, but the use of neonicotinoid chemical products increased, altogether totalling 153,194,750 litres.

In addition to the herbicide Glyphosate, the companies FIBRIA, Suzano Papel e Celulose and Veracel Celulose use other chemicals to control forests. These include the oxyfluorfen-based herbicides, Isoxazole, Triazolone Cyclohexene and Dicarboximide; and insecticides, germicides and fungicides like *Bacillus Thuringiensis* (DIPEL), Benzalkonium chloride – Quaternary ammonium,



Neonicotinoids (Actara, Evidence 700, Thiamethoxam); Organophosphates (Orthene 750 BR); Inorganic dicopper chloride trihydroxide; Pyrazole; Sulfluramid (Mirex) and Trifloxystrobin. The main manufacturers of these chemicals are the German companies, BAYER and BASF, the U.S. companies, DOW, GRIFFIN Corporation and MONSANTO, the Swiss company, SYNGENTA, and the Japanese company, SUMITOMO CHEMICAL.

### **Violations and injustices of silent poisons**

At least two or more active ingredients are needed for eucalyptus plantations: one to kill ants and another to smother the emergence of invasive plants, which is how technicians define the few plant species that manage to break through eucalyptus's solitariness. In addition, more than one component can be used for these cases, because, according to manufacturers, products become ineffective as plants and insects develop resistance to them. This requires higher doses of the same product, or new formulas and mixtures that are applied relentlessly—given that some areas have trees of all ages, permanently supplying pulp mills that operate 24 hours a day.

Thus, the discourse about proper dosages and safe use is not real, but rather exists to build a positive image in order to hide the harmful effects on health and the environment. This demonstrates the aggressiveness of the strategy, reinforced and endorsed by hegemonic science, which supposedly ensures proper amounts and low toxicity of lethal products. Yet people and the environment are being poisoned daily, and water sources are being contaminated at unknown levels. On top of this, fast-growing eucalyptus plantations require enormous quantities of water, leading to water scarcity. The brown caterpillar's recent emergence further reinforces the situation of imbalance in the ecosystem, and it has led to the afore-mentioned aerial application of a greater number and variety of chemical products.

One observes that all this perverse exploitation—including the poisoning of people, and in particular the rural population—occurs in order to produce pulp to supply the Global North with disposable paper. Furthermore, this exploitation occurs with the participation of the State and of Science, who together are building a world of poisoned paper that absorbs the life, sweat and blood of the earth. This world is only possible because of deep inequalities, which enable violent expropriation through usurpation, the exploitation of human labour, and most of all, impunity for violators.

### **Final Considerations**

The intense lobby of agribusiness continues to this day, leading to tax exemptions and generous subsidies for agrochemical and pulp companies, which expanded dramatically in the 1970s. Transgenic eucalyptus was born at the nexus of the pulp and agrochemical industries. Suzano Papel e Celulose, through the biotechnology company, Futuragene, obtained permission in 2015 to release these transgenic crops. Field tests for their large-scale commercial use have already begun. This implies an even greater use of water and agrochemicals.



It is also important to note how history repeats itself. Ever since the political-legal-media coup that deposed President-elect Dilma Rousseff, setbacks in workers' rights have deepened, while agribusiness encroaches upon the traditional lands of peasants, indigenous peoples and quilombolas. In Bahia, around 300 families were displaced from areas where there was conflict with the company, Veracel Celulose. One also observes the attack on regulatory and oversight bodies, such as the National Agency for Sanitary Vigilance (ANVISA, by its Portuguese acronym), which is responsible for assessing and reevaluating agrochemicals. Just as agrochemical and eucalyptus-pulp industries benefited under the civil-military coup of 1964, current agribusiness representatives—who are intimately tied to the agrochemical industry—named Blairo Maggi as Minister of Agriculture under the current government. Maggi is known nationally as the "King of Soy," and he authored Bill 6299 of 2002, known as the "Poison Bill," which aims to facilitate the marketing, use, storage and transport of agrochemicals. There are strong indications that the current coup, like the one in 1964, is based on strengthening companies in this sector. Thus, history repeats itself; and in this case, as a shameless farce devoid of ethics.

In light of this situation and current conditions, there is a clear need to eradicate this production model centred on eucalyptus and pulp mills. Likewise, there is a need to transition from a food production system based on monocultures and the intensive use of fertilizers and agrochemicals, to agroecological production that guarantees territories free of agrochemicals—as an alternative and a way to generate life and health for people and the environment.

Ivonete Gonçalves de Souza, [ivonetegsouza2017@gmail.com](mailto:ivonetegsouza2017@gmail.com)  
 Master of Public Health – ENSP/FIOCRUZ – author of the research, “Eucalipto e o veneno silencioso: expansão da monocultura de eucalipto no Extremo Sul da Bahia. Agrotóxicos, violação de direitos e manipulação ideológica”, 2016, available at [LINK](#)

This article is based on another, originally in Portuguese, which can be found at: <http://racismoambiental.net.br/2017/09/04/desertos-verdes-eucalipto-e-o-veneno-silencioso/>

(1) Dictionary of Rural Education, 2012, p. 86

(2) <http://cpdoc.fgv.br/producao/dossies/JK/artigos/Economia/PlanodeMetas>

(3) Carson, Rachel. Silent Spring, 1962. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, São Paulo: Gaia Publishing House, 2010.

(4) Pinheiro, Sebastião, 1989, “A Máfia dos Agrotóxicos no Brasil”.

<http://cpdoc.fgv.br/producao/dossies/JK/artigos/Economia/PlanodeMetas> (5) Rigotto, Raquel Maria. ROSA, Islene Ferreira. In: Caldart RS, Pereira IB, Alentejano P, Frigotto G, organizers. In Dictionary of Rural Education, Editora Expressão Popular, São Paulo, 2012

(6) Ibid (4)

(7) FANZERES, Anna. (Coord). “Temas conflituosos relacionados à expansão da base florestal plantada e definição de estratégias para minimização dos conflitos identificados”, “Relatório Final de Consultoria”, “Programa Nacional de Florestas”, “Secretaria de Biodiversidade e Florestas”, Ministério del Medio Ambiente, Brasília, March 2005.

(8) Século Diário: “Agrotóxicos da Aracruz Celulose: grave problema de saúde pública por Ubervalter Coimbra”

(9) <http://g1.globo.com/bahia/jornal-da-manha/videos/v/mariposas-invadem-a-cidade-de-prado-no-sul-do-estado/4306242/> and <http://g1.globo.com/bahia/noticia/2015/09/infestacao-de-mariposas-intriga-autoridades-de-cidade-do-sul-da-ba.html>

(10) Environmental Health Vigilance Department, and DSAST (Workers Health) – Ministry of Health <http://www.epsjv.fiocruz.br/sites/default/files/files/DSAST.pdf>

(11) [www.abaf.org.br/download/laqarta-parda.pdf](http://www.abaf.org.br/download/laqarta-parda.pdf)



## SOCFIN's plantations in Africa: many places of violence and destruction



Photo: SOCFIN

In 2016, the multinational agro-industrial SOCFIN Group - controlled by the Belgian Fabri family (50.2 per cent of the shares) and the French Bolloré group (39 per cent of the shares) -, announced its so-called “responsible management” policy. (1) This policy refers to strict environmental standards, respect for human rights, transparency, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification, good management, among many others. But these are hollow words when they do not represent transparent, responsible and respectful practices towards the communities living in and around the plantation areas, which experience daily the real behaviour of the company.

This article looks at what is happening on the ground in some of the countries where SOCFIN promotes its rubber and oil palm plantations. It reveals the large gap between its so-called “responsible management” policy and the reality of violence and destruction around those plantations, which, with the complicity of national governments, attempt to suppress people’s resistance.

### Nigeria

Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC is a Nigerian industrial oil palm and rubber plantation company. Okomu was founded in 1976 as a state company, but SOCFIN acquired part of the company in 1990 and now owns 63 per cent of the shares. In 1998, at least four villages were forcefully destroyed and the inhabitants evicted, with their houses, properties and farmland taken over by the company. The four villages are Owieke with 25 houses, Agbede with 31 houses, Lemon with 15 houses and Ijawgbini with 7 houses. A state investigation accused villagers of being illegal occupiers even though the same report recognized that they were already on those lands before the area was made a Forest Reserve in 1912. Besides, a forest ordinance of 1935 also affirmed the existence of these villages before that year.





In 2010, another village, Makilolo, was to be evicted, but the people resisted Okomu's plans. In response, the village was locked-in by the company's security forces, cutting off any access with the outside world as an arm-twisting strategy. The company aimed to, first, gain support from the other villages to the eviction of Makilolo for more than three months (from November 17, 2010 to February 25, 2011) and, secondly, attempt to force Makilolo headship to sign an agreement with the company stating that the village is an illegal occupier on the company's property. At the end, the company managed to get an agreement signed, but only with a small group of people and not Makilolo Community members.

The agreement states that "Okomu Oil Palm Company is the legal owner of all land currently being used or occupied by occupants of Makilolo (...) and all occupants of Makilolo agreed that they are not the legal owners of the land and have no title or hold on the land (...) Notwithstanding the fact that Okomu Oil Palm Company is the legal owner, and holds all rights and title, according to Nigerian Law, it shall permit the occupants of Makilolo to remain and to carry out their daily tasks on the land defined herein". However, the company only left 50 acres [around 20 hectares] as a "donation" for the community and, on top of this, imposed restrictions over its use, such as limiting the right to plant food crops. Furthermore, the river on which the village depended for its water supply became contaminated with agrotoxins used in oil palm plantations. (2)

In 2015, the Edo State Government, under former Governor Adams Oshiomhole, ordered the revocation of those land deals involving the company because of their shadiness. The decision was published in the Edo State Gazette on November 5, 2015. The revocation order covers about 13,750 hectares spread through Okomu forest Reserves to Owan Forest Reserve, covering Ovia North East, Uhunmwode and Owan Local Government Areas.

But until now, Okomu has disregarded the Edo State Government's Revocation Order. Instead, the company has militarized the communities' areas and, under military shield, embarked on a continuous bulldozing of the forest for the expansion of their oil palm plantations. As a result, over 20 thousand peasant and forest-dependent communities have been displaced. Okomu village, Agbede, Ik camp, Makilolo, Lemo, Oweike, Avbiosi, Sobe, Uhiere, Owan, Ugbebezi, Oke-Ora, Ekpan, Oke, Atorumu, Ogbetu, Umokpe, Orhua, Ozalla, Sabo, Odiguetue, Agudezi, Uhunmora, Uzeba and Odighi are some of the communities directly impacted. (3)

On June, 21, 2017, in spite of several attempts at intimidation by security forces, oil palm impacted communities, peasants, women and civil society groups such as ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, organised a massive protest against the complicity of the present Edo State Governor Obaseki with Okomu's activities.

## Sierra Leone



In Sierra Leone, SOCFIN arrived in 2011, promising jobs and scholarships to the people of Malen Chiefdom in Pujehun District, Southern Province. But instead, they imposed payments on landowners and took land on which the local people depend. As crop compensation for the oil palm plantations (palm trees and land) that the communities lost, SOCFIN paid the amount of 200 US dollars per acre [around half a hectare] for a period of 50 years. SOCFIN also pays an Annual Lease Rent of 5 US dollars per acre, 50 per cent of which goes to the land owners and the rest is paid to local authorities and the central government. These amounts are ridiculous, considering that families could earn over 200 US dollars per acre per year by working on their land. The few community members that could get jobs in the company are paid very little.

SOCFIN wanted to relocate some communities, but people resisted. In 2011, the Malen Land Owners and Users Organisation (MALOA) was created, after 40 landowners were arrested by the local police during a protest against SOCFIN activities. Since then, members of MALOA have suffered constant intimidation, including arrests. At least five criminal cases have been filed against MALOA leaders and members, including six MALOA leaders in 2013 and eleven members in 2015. In all cases, the MALOA members were detained for several days, and sometimes for weeks, without trial. On 4<sup>th</sup> February 2016, the six MALOA leaders were sentenced and given a fine of around 35 thousand US dollars. The draconian fine was paid through an international fundraising drive. In July 2017, the eleven MALOA members were fined 27 US dollars each.

In 2015, MALOA registered about two thousand people from the area as members, but the registration process came to a halt when seven MALOA members, including members in charge of process, were arrested in September 2015 for “writing down names of people” without the knowledge of local authorities. In March 2017, the Chief of Staff in the President’s Office contacted MALOA declaring that he had a mandate from the President to open a dialogue between SOCFIN and the communities, but some of the mediators and contact people he proposed are on record for criticizing MALOA and other organisations opposing SOCFIN, which was unacceptable for MALOA. Since then, the Chief of Staff has held two meetings with representatives of MALOA but the political will needed to advance the dialogue seems to be absent, so the dialogue is yet to take off.

Women members of MALOA complain that the working conditions in SOCFIN’s plantations are bad, especially for them. One worker, a mother, declared that she has to leave her home at 04:30 in the morning to go to work, while her children are left malnourished. She complains that before SOCFIN came in, she could feed her children with the food she produced on her field, and with that income she could pay the school fees. Now, the money she earns from working on SOCFIN’s plantations is too little to pay the school fees. Besides, her very absence from home and thus the lack of attention for her children has created other problems. Women also suffer from violence, abuses and arrests. A pregnant woman was arrested on the allegation of “stealing” oil palm fruits from the company.



MALOA members have organized sit-ins and demand a review of the concession agreement as well as an independent investigation of their claims. They also demand the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report on the Environmental Protection Agency-sanctioned investigation of the contamination of the Malen River by chemicals used by SOCFIN. They also want the return of some farmland and proper compensation for their lands and crops, as that would mean a small improvement of their current situation. However, they know that without their lands, the situation will never be the same and therefore they will continue the struggle until they get their lands back.

## **Liberia**

In Liberia, SOCFIN has been operating since 1983. Through its two subsidiaries, Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC) and Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC), it has managed to gain access to almost 130 thousand hectares through land concessions, of which more than 18 thousand hectares are for rubber tree plantations (4).

Communities in and around the plantations suffer extreme poverty. In May 2006, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) published a report that described the dire human rights situation on the plantations: child workers under the age of 14, widespread use of sub-contracting, the use of carcinogenic products, the quashing of trade unions, arbitrary dismissals, connections with private militias, and the eviction of peasants obstructing the expansion of the plantation area.

The testimony of a woman from a community affected by one of Salala's rubber plantations shows the dire situation they are facing: "I grew up in a town that was given by my forefathers. We used to have free movement in our communities. We had plentiful land, which was used for agriculture activities, forests for hunting and collecting medicinal plants and rivers for fishing. One sunny day in 2010, while we were in our town, we saw a group of men with cutlasses, axes, and other working tools, walking towards us. When they arrived, we asked them why they were here. They answered that the land we are occupying was bought by the Salala rubber company long time ago from the government. That statement was totally strange to our ears because this land is where we were born, grew up and had our kids; how then can it be from the company. They then told us that the clearing of our town was going to happen the next day because the company was ready to start its operations.

The night after their visit, they came while we were sleeping with the police and yellow machines. The yellow machines started breaking down the trees (rubber, coffee, cocoa, plantain, orange, etc.) surrounding the town and destroying our water sources. It was the sound of the machines that woke up the members of the town. People started crying and left without any of their belongings. Each went his or her own separate way to find a new place where to start a new life, so the community is no longer together and we are landless. We had children as little as one month old and we had to walk two to three hours to reach the closest town. During our long journey we had nothing to eat or water to drink.



We went through so much pain with our legs and feet swollen. We arrived to the nearby town having no clue where we could sleep for the night. For many months, we slept on the floor of an old abandoned kitchen. Other towns around the company operations also had similar experiences or even worse.

The SOCFIN Company destroyed all our farms we labored for, destroyed my parents grave site, destroyed our fruit trees, our cultural sites and sacred sites, our traditional schools for girls and boys. The company also destroyed our healing site for sneak bites and damaged the women sacred site for giving birth.

We have now become beggars because of the damage they created in our lives. We rent a small piece of land for planting crops for survival from landowners in our new town. The chemicals used in the rubber plantations have also infected the river used by the members of the new town. Our water source is swamp. We open holes in the morning and water comes out. The water from the swamp hole is not clean but we have to use it for drinking and other water related activities. We do not want to die from the chemical polluted water.

We, the women, our old enough children and men have no jobs. Children have to stay home and do not go to school due to the lack of a school in the community. There are no health facilities, so we have had many deaths for common sicknesses, not to mention the death of pregnant women and their unborn babies. I have a family of five including my blind father. I am now involved in general labor jobs which involves brushing, weeding, scratching, planting rice, etc. I work from one farm to another doing any job assigned to me and receive one dollar for working all day, which is used to provide food for my five member family. I have nothing else to do that could help improve my standard of living”.

*(The identity of this woman is kept anonymous for security reasons)*

## **Cameroon**

In Cameroon, the government created SOCAPALM in 1968, a national oil palm company that was privatized in 2000 and sold to the SOCFIN Group. In 2005, the state secured communities 20 thousand hectares of land, however, failed to inform communities about SOCFIN purchase agreement. Only in 2008, community members discovered that in spite of the privatization, community rights were secured in the contract between SOCFIN and the state of Cameroon. Nonetheless, the company continues to promote and expand oil palm plantations on land that belongs to the communities, paying no rent or compensation for it.

In 2010, community people living inside SOCFIN's plantation areas formed “The National Association of Peasant and River Populations of Cameroon” (SYNAPARCAM), an organization that brings together members from six different plantations and aims to defend their rights. Only in 2014, the government recognized their organisation.



SYNAPARCAM, together with organizations in other countries like MALOA in Sierra Leone and others, created an alliance of people affected by SOCFIN. In 2013, they organized actions in 4 countries to protest against SOCFIN and to claim their rights as communities. This resulted in a meeting in France in October 2014 with Vincent Bolloré, the French owner of SOCFIN. But Bolloré did not take his responsibility for the problems and violations SOCFIN is causing. Instead, he suggested that people should solve the issues with the national branches of his company in each country, like SOCAPALM in Cameroon. Not surprisingly, however, the dialogue is not advancing significantly.

Several NGOs filed a complaint against SOCFIN at the level of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2010, accusing the company of negatively affecting traditional livelihoods of people and plantation workers. (5) For example, based on an analysis of water samples, the complaint alleged water contamination by agrotoxins. The OECD held the allegations admissible, and an action plan was elaborated. But the company has not made real efforts to implement it and, according to SYNAPARCAM, many problems and impacts continue.

Thus, the struggle of the communities surrounded by SOCAPALM plantations continues with protests, road blockades, dissemination of information nationally and internationally, among other tactics. In the short term SYNAPARCAM demands access for the communities to a vital space of 250 hectares of land around villages.

### Final comments

While SOCFIN formulates responsibility policies and plans, the practices on the ground, such as those described here, are completely opposed. People face the crude reality of destruction of community lands, livelihoods and culture and severe violence in many of the company's plantation areas on a daily basis. On the ground, that seems to be the prevailing policy. More evidence of how so-called "responsibility" policies and plans amount to little more than empty discourse. These will also remain empty discourses as long as impunity prevails. This is further facilitated if they are based on voluntary commitments, like RSPO certification, and other non-binding policies and guidelines.

But affected communities have not given up. On the contrary, they keep resisting against all injustices, and increasingly they do so in an articulated way. They deserve all our support and radical solidarity!

We share here an on-going international petition in support of the communities struggling against the Okomu Plantation in Nigeria. Please sign-on here <http://erafoen.org/index.php/2017/07/28/uphold-edo-state-government-revocation-order-on-okomu-oil-palm-company-plc/>

(1) <http://www.socfin.com/en/sustainable-development>

(2) <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/nigeria-okomu-oil-palm-company-destroying-communities-for-oil-palm-expansion/>





- (3) <http://erafoen.org/index.php/2017/03/07/field-report-okomu-oil-palm-plc-clears-forest-farmlands-for-industrial-agro-business-in-edo-state/>  
 (4) <https://secured-static.greenpeace.org/france/PageFiles/266171/Brief%20Liberia-Cameroun%20version%20finale.pdf>  
 (5) [https://www.oecdwatch.org/cases-fr/Case\\_200](https://www.oecdwatch.org/cases-fr/Case_200)

## The Green Invasion: Promoting Plantations in India



Photo: Swarup Saha

### Forests? Or Plantations?

According to data presented by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) in their biennial State of Forest Reports (SFR), India's forest cover has been showing a consistent increase for the last several years. For instance, the SFR released in 2015 mentions a net increase in the area of very dense forests. How does one explain this data, given the apparent scale of deforestation, including large-scale illegal logging as well as diversion of forests for other uses that results in forest destruction? FSI interprets it mostly as a result of plantation activities undertaken by the state forest departments. However, the same SFR says that 'man-made forests' contain only 5.31 per cent of the total forest area, while 'natural forests' occupy 80 per cent.

We face a riddle here, or several. How much of India's 'increasing' forest cover consists of plantations, or as the FSI calls them, 'man-made' forests? If natural forests are so plentiful, how does one explain the expanding plantations, which, according to the 2015 FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment, have jumped to more than 12 million hectares in 2015 from just under 6 million hectares in 1990? According to another official estimate from 2009, the plantation area in India at the time amounted to 32,57 million hectares, accounting for "17 % of the global forest plantation".<sup>(1)</sup> Yet another study from 2014 mentions that annually between 1 and 1,5 million hectares has been afforested since 1980.<sup>(2)</sup>

One question that arises is why the FSI does not maintain systematic and reasonably accurate data about plantations. Also, why routinely include



plantations in forest cover figures? Raising similar questions, several studies in recent years have pointed out that India is witnessing severe deforestation and forest degradation, despite FSI's claim to the contrary. (3) It has been observed that while there is no clarity as to how much of the total area reported as forests under SFR is made up of 'forest plantations', it is also not known if natural or secondary forests are being converted to plantations without making this conversion statistically visible (4). Moreover, India's 'native forests' are being eroded steadily. (5)

It is clear that the official agencies in India use the terms 'forest' and 'plantations' interchangeably. All tree plantations, on lands more than one hectare in area, and with a tree canopy density of more than 10 per cent, are treated as forests. Peter Smetacek, an environmentalist based in Uttarakhand, northern India, thinks that this conceptual muddle can be traced back to the Germanic origins of Indian forestry. (6) It is known that Dietrich Brandis, a German forester, introduced the practices of commercial forestry in India. Smataeck observes that in German a '*Forst*' is a plantation of commercially important forest trees, while a 'natural forest' is called a '*Wald*'. Smataeck further observes that because Brandis failed to establish an official difference between *Forst* and *Wald*, forest departments in India had ever since continued to 'plant' forests, without pausing to think that you can only create a '*Forst*' by planting, not a '*Wald*'. Natural forests cannot be planted.

Puyravaud, J. P et al suggest that in India, plantations have steadily replaced forests over the years. (7) Comparing FAO and FSI data, they conclude that while the total forest cover rose from 660,337 km<sup>2</sup> in 1995 to 690,250 km<sup>2</sup> in 2005 (FSI), plantations expanded from 146,200 km<sup>2</sup> to 300,280 km<sup>2</sup> over the same time interval (FAO). Consequently, the authors point out, forests have declined from 514,137 km<sup>2</sup> in 1995 to 389,970 km<sup>2</sup> in 2005, which translates into a mean loss of 2.42 per cent per year. What type of trees came up in the 'planted forests'? The most prominent plantation species are eucalyptus, poplar, acacia, silver oak, rubber, teak and pine. (8) According to FAO, nearly 45 per cent of India's 'forest plantations' are fast-growing, short-rotation species. (9) In particular, India's forests, countryside and farmlands have been filled up with various species of Eucalyptus, at great social and ecological costs.

### **'Social Forestry' and Eucalyptus**

The Eucalyptus colonization of India is closely related to the much-hyped social forestry project, which was sponsored by the World Bank. It has been observed that the so-called 'social forestry' project was, in its early days, largely a product of development aid. (10) The ambitious project led to large-scale afforestation mainly in the 1970s and 1980s when plantations were established at a rate of 1.4 million hectares a year. (11) In the states of Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal in particular, Eucalyptus trees spread like wildfire, evoking and leading not only to a raging environmental controversy, but also social discontent and active resistance. Eucalyptus plantations reportedly drained huge volumes of water from the plantation sites as well as their neighbourhoods downstream, sucked the soil dry of nutrients so that other plants could not come up. They also release toxic substances into the soil, suppressing growth of



native species. (12) In Karnataka, the plantations have allegedly resulted in severe drought-like situations, forcing the state government to ban the cultivation of all *Eucalyptus* species. (13)

Though *Eucalyptus* plantations are usually short-rotation and known to bring quick monetary returns, the benefits are limited mostly to the rural elite. Even in case of state projects like the social forestry, it is the landed and the upper-caste sections of the rural populace who benefitted from the plantations. (14) Moreover, communities have shown explicit concern over the diversion of fertile food producing land as well as pasture to *Eucalyptus* plantations. During the 1980s, the area under the traditional staple food, ragi, had declined significantly in Karnataka. In the Kolar district, for instance, between 1977 and 1981, ragi cultivation dropped from 142 thousand hectares to 48 thousand hectares, producing a marked reduction in yield from 175 thousand tonnes to just 13 thousand and increasing its price by 200 per cent in the market. (15)

### **A rich legacy of resistance**

State-run plantation programmes have provoked intense resistance from forest communities and peasants. People who had traditionally depended upon forests for food and livelihood resisted the conversion of forests to monoculture plantations of exotic/introduced species such as *Eucalyptus* and Teak. Peasants opposed *Eucalyptus* plantations in particular because these often led to wholesale desertification of their agricultural landscapes, besides encroaching upon village commons as well as good cultivable lands. Major movements against plantations flared up across India in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The now famous Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas started as a people's protest against clear-felling of hill forests for commercial interest. (16) The 'Jangal Katai' (cut forests) Movement in the tribal areas (today's Jharkhand) of erstwhile Bihar came up as a response against the forest department's efforts to raise commercially valuable Teak monocultures in natural Sal forests. (17) Peasants of Karnataka opposed a project of *Eucalyptus* plantations in the village commons by a forest department backed private company. (18) And the *adivasis* (indigenous people) of Bastar in the undivided village of Madhya Pradesh put up a strong resistance against a World Bank-funded plantation of exotic blue pines. (19)

### **More plantations, more attacks on community rights**

Undeterred by the legacy of the popular resistance against plantations, the Indian government continues to promote huge plantation programmes. While its flagship Green India Mission (GIM) has a target of raising 5 million hectares of new plantations for 2024, the government promises to spend more than 15 billion US dollars in the coming years for 'afforestation' purposes. A major part of the money would come from the Compensatory Afforestation Fund, previously known as CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority), expressly after a new legislation called Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act has been enacted in 2016 (See [article in 217 WRM Bulletin](#), August 2015). Another contested scheme of leasing out 40 per cent of



identified 'degraded forests' to private corporations for raising plantations is in the pipeline.

Because the government agencies responsible for carrying out the afforestation programmes do not clarify where the huge amount of land required for raising new plantations would come from, there is every reason to suspect that community lands—cultivable as well as pasture—would be encroached upon. Besides, in the name of restoring degraded forests and raising compensatory afforestation, community rights over forest commons would be violated. Sporadic incidents of land-grabs for plantations have already been reported from Odisha, Chattisgarh, Telengana and Andhra Pradesh. In Pidkia village in the Kandhamal district of Odisha, for instance, land for which title has been issued to communities under the Forest Rights Act has been fenced off. (20) In other areas, *podu* (swidden cultivation) lands have been taken over and forests have been cleared. (21) In Chattisgarh, village farmlands are being filled up with plantations of Eucalyptus and Teak. (22) In Telengana and Andhra Pradesh, village commons, *podu* lands and agricultural areas have all been enclosed for raising plantations that are supposed to compensate the loss of forest lands by the controversial Polavaram dam project (23). Apart from the state-run plantation programmes, big private players such as ITC (Indian Tobacco Company) and JK Paper Limited (24) have virtually taken over hundreds of thousands of hectares of agricultural lands in Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Odisha and Chattisgarh for raising plantations of mainly Eucalyptus (25).

Community access and control over forests are being undermined in many ways. Though the new Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act is yet to come into force and its rules have not been framed, money from this and the Green India Mission are flowing to the state forest departments. Defying the mandate of Green India Mission, its funds are going to the Joint Forest Management Committees set up by the forest department, and not community institutions such as *Gram Sabhas* (26).

As the attacks upon communities and their forests and village commons escalate, it is expected that the resistance will also grow correspondingly stronger. As in the past, the *adivasis* and other poor and landless people in India will not allow the new green invasion to take root.

*Soumitra Ghosh, who works among forest communities in North Bengal in India, can be contacted at [soumitrag\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:soumitrag[at]gmail.com)*

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## Industrial teak tree plantations in Ecuador: occupying and destroying fertile lands and water sources



Photo: Acción Ecológica

Teak is a native tree from Southeast Asia, and it played an important role in colonialism in that region. British loggers extracted most of the native teak from Northern Thailand in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They also carried out violent teak extraction campaigns in Burma, which continued in the post-colonial era,





this time at the hands of the Burmese state (1). In Burma, teak was at the centre of a colonial employment system for agroforestry and plantation activities, called *taungya*, which began in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This system allowed the Karen and other indigenous groups to grow crops among young teak trees that had been planted on cleared lands—under the condition that they take care of the trees and eventually leave the land. *Taungya* later expanded to other countries. In Indonesia, where this tree is not native, teak plantations were established over 200 years ago (2). Due to its natural resistance to climatic factors, teak wood is highly valued for the construction of outdoor furniture and mainly luxury boats; hence, there is great demand for this tree.

Thailand's current policy on teak is complex and corrupt. After its extraction was banned in 1989, the teak supplying Thai sawmills presumably comes from illegal seizures and from logging on sites intended for hydroelectric dams. But in fact, this teak is mixed with illegal imports from the Salween River region in Burma, as well as from plantations managed by the Parastatal Forest Industry Organization and other state companies. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) encourages this type of looting and corruption in the teak industry through its Thai teak certification programs.

The over-exploitation of these native forests—which are found only in India, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand—and the increasing global demand for teak, have led to the establishment of industrial teak plantations in other countries. Teak is now known to be planted in about 36 tropical countries, and the area planted with teak is growing in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria and Tanzania in Africa; Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama in Central America; Ecuador and Brazil in South America; and India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Laos in Asia (3). The main global buyers of teak are China (42 per cent), India (37 per cent), Japan (5 per cent) and France (4 per cent). (4)

### **The expansion of teak plantations in Ecuador**

Ecuador is one of the ten most diverse countries in the world. Among Latin American countries, it also has one of the highest deforestation rates proportional to its geographic area. According to the Ministry of the Environment, the main cause of this deforestation is the expansion of the agricultural frontier. However, recent studies point out that small-scale peasants' crops, which feed the country, have not increased. Meanwhile, there has been a rapid growth in agribusiness—African palm, sugarcane and eucalyptus, pine and teak plantations—which is obviously the cause of this deforestation. In this context, Ecuador exported 190,000 square meters of teak wood in 2014, with all the environmental impacts that this entails. The Ecuadorian government is responsible for the promotion and expansion of teak in the country—which undermines agricultural biodiversity—and for the supplanting of native ecosystems, such as the dry forests in Guayas and Manabí provinces.

Teak plantations in Ecuador are not intended for domestic consumption. All of the teak is exported. Exports to India account for 95 per cent of all the teak in



Ecuador—between 150 and 160 thousand tons per year— which translates into about US \$30 million worth of profit for the industry. There are very few economic benefits for the areas where teak is produced, due to the small amount of labour it requires, producers' non-existent social investment, and the loss of food sovereignty and water scarcity that this industry causes.

In 2015, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Agriculture (MAGAP) announced plans to develop 100,000 hectares of teak by 2017. In 2016, teak exports grew significantly in the first half of the year—by 52 per cent in tons and 30 per cent in the value—as compared to 2015, which also was a year of growth (5). According to official data, Ecuador currently has around 50,000 hectares of teak; but according to the Ecuadorian Association of Teak and Tropical Wood Producers (Asoteca), there are 200,000 hectares of this tree (6). The discrepancy between MAGAP's and Asoteca's figures reflects under-accounting and a lack of updated information. Over 90 per cent of these plantations are in Guayas, Manabí, Esmeraldas and Los Ríos. Meanwhile, in the longer term, timber producers and businesses are projecting to have about one million hectares of teak forest plantations between 2032 and 2042 (7). Official data on the number of hectares planted are not clear; even less so are the environmental impacts, given that the State does not exercise any kind of control over these plantations.

MAGAP's Incentives Program for Commercial Reforestation defines itself as "a non-reimbursable economic transfer, which the Ecuadorian State gives (...) to individuals or legal entities, communes, associations and productive cooperatives to disburse and/or reimburse part of the costs of setting up and maintaining a forest plantation." "The program will provide economic incentives to individuals and legal entities [private companies] of up to 75% of the cost of set-up, and up to 75% of the cost of plantation maintenance in the first four years." (8)

MAGAP ensured that from 2011 to 2016, over US \$53 million have been invested to set up 52,395 hectares of forest plantations through this program (9). Of this total, almost 20,000 hectares are teak, as it is the forestry species which has expanded the most. Most of these resources have been allocated to private companies.

### **Devastating Effects**

In Guayas Province, the area with the greatest number of teak plantations in the country (mostly in the Balzar area), the teak landscape is desolate.

On a teak plantation there are no animals. Local peasants attest that the trees do not even serve as shelter for birds: *'no birds nest here.'* Teak trees do not interact positively with the environment, because due to their rapid growth, they absorb large amounts of water and nutrients. They also require agrochemicals.

The Indian government requires that teak logs and planks be fumigated with methyl bromide at the point of origin. The use of methyl bromide is banned in Ecuador due to its high toxicity. Therefore, Ecuador has proposed fumigating



with aluminium phosphide, a highly dangerous element. When aluminium phosphide comes into contact with the air, it releases a gas called phosphine, which is very toxic to the human body. From a public health perspective, this pesticide is to blame for high rates of fatal diseases among affected populations and spaces. Using this chemical to meet industry demands thus implies a very high risk to workers, neighbouring towns and the environment.

At its fourth and final harvest, when it is 20 years old, Ecuadorian teak maintains live roots—just like eucalyptus. These roots generate offshoots, which are all cut except for one. The remaining shoot grows, and in just eight years acquires the height and diameter of a 20-year-old tree. In these eight years, the tree absorbs the minerals and water that it initially did in 20 years, accelerating processes of erosion and the drying up of rivers with each growth cycle. According to local testimonies, this regrowth can apparently be endless.

Companies tend to the growth during the first three years of the plantation, and the first five meters of the tree's shaft, which is where 60 per cent of the value of the wood lies.

It takes four people per hectare for the initial planting of the trees. Then in the first three years of intensive work, three people are hired. From the fourth year on, the industry usually only needs one person to take care of hundreds of hectares of teak trees. This worker usually settles on the plantation with his family, in the middle of a green desert, with no possibility of having a social life or sharing with the village or community. *"I have plantations here from 2001, and for which I only pay the field boss; they are 14-year-old plantations and do not need maintenance."*

The Ecuadorian organization Acción Ecológica, together with the World Rainforest Movement and the Chilean organization Mapuexpress, toured Balzar (Guayas Province) in 2016. To our surprise, we found that most of the trees on the teak plantations, as well as the ground, showed traces of having been burned. It seemed as if a fire had swept through and reached at least 80 centimetres up on each trunk. The ground was also blackened, and instead of fallen leaves, we only found ashes.

Peasants burn the teak plantations at least once a year, believing that it gives the heart of the trunk—the only valuable part of this wood—a better colour. The more yellow, the higher the price it fetches. *"We burn it so that the wood is harder, more finished...and has more colour. Because nowadays they are not buying the white wood. They are not buying wood that is really white inside anymore. They only buy the ones with colour. That is why we burn them year after year, so that they obtain more colour."* At the same time, this clears the ground of fallen leaves, and thus lowers costs, as it is not necessary to hire personnel for this task. However, according to local peasants' testimonies, the fires worsen the air, which fills with smoke and particles, causing an increase in respiratory illnesses during the "burning season."

Furthermore, local people say that two years after setting up plantations, the level of rivers and wells has fallen, the soils are very eroded, and the



regeneration period is very long: *"Before, when there was no teak, there was water all the time. Now that teak is here there is no water."*

*"When teak is extracted, the land is unprotected and has no minerals. We have to pull out all the roots, and teak is a plant with deep roots. It goes six meters deep. The first root that goes down goes really deep. After pulling out the teak it is very difficult to recover that land. We have to grow "sicapé," a small plant that must be watered. That restores the land. It is a bean, but not edible; a legume. Cattle can eat it."*

According to locals, teak leaves that fall on the ground do not decompose, and this inhibits the growth of other plants; thus there are no food crops around plantations, much less inside them. One can plainly see that the soil is very pale yellow in colour and dusty. *"The areas end up devastated; there is no food left and nowhere even to grow a tomato. So people have to go to the markets. That's the problem." "It is predatory, it ruins everything in the soil. It leaves the land barren. And if there is a teak tree next to another plant—corn, for example—the other plant will not grow. Birds cannot even build their nests in teak trees."*

In Balzar, peasants have teak plantations mostly because they feel forced to, not because they want to. This is due to the rapid natural expansion of this tree. Peasants say that the tree's seeds sprout on their own very quickly, and that both trees that have grown and those that have been cut down can generate new trees. Peasants are resigned to the fact that, year after year, teak gains ground on their food crops. Importers pay a lower price for teak from peasants, since it is wild (it reproduces alone, not on a plantation) and thus has knots, rather than being straight and having the yellow hue they seek. *"My father took seeds from the first teak tree they brought here. Before that, there was no teak, but it began to invade on its own. He did not plant anymore. It invaded on its own."*

On our field visit to Balzar we visited the largest teak company in the area. The owner and manager told us that when establishing a plantation, the most important thing was to acquire the best possible land, with high productivity and specific mineral and water conditions. In other words, despite the fact that the Inter-Ministerial Decree—signed in 2012 between the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture—states that forest plantations must be grown on degraded lands or lands in the process of desertification, degraded lands are not actually bought or used for this purpose.

## Reflections

Because it is an exotic species, teak in Ecuador could be classified as an invasive plant, since it has no biological controls or other species to compete with. Because it takes over more and more land and the available water, this tree should be considered a threat to the country's native ecosystems.

Teak plantations are growing at an alarming rate worldwide, and most are financed by the governments of producing countries. This is to the detriment of



small-scale peasants, forest inhabitants, and forests themselves—which, at least in Ecuador, are disappearing to make room for this species.

By occupying the best agricultural lands, teak plantations are causing erosion and water shortages, and they are undermining the traditional farming lifestyle. Meanwhile, policies aimed to strengthen food sovereignty, and maintain, restore and repair forests are poor or practically non-existent. Isn't it time to stop supporting forest-based mega industries, and start strengthening small-scale peasants, rural populations and people who inhabit forests?

*Nathalia Bonilla, foresta [at] accionecologica.org*  
 Acción Ecológica, Ecuador, <http://www.accionecologica.org/>

\* *Testimonies are from personal interviews taken with members of the Federation of Agricultural Centres in Guayas (FECAOL, by its Spanish acronym), from November 2016.*

- (1) Raymond L. Bryant, "Consuming Burmese Teak: Anatomy of a Violent Luxury Resource," 2009.
- (2) Nancy Peluso, *Rich Forests, Poor People*, 1992
- (3) <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/129569/icode/>
- (4) Trade Map in PROECUADOR, MERCOSUL, 2013
- (5) EL COMERCIO newspaper, visited on July 20, 2017. <http://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/exportaciones-madera-crecimiento-teca-ecuador.html>
- (6) El Universo journal, visited on July 20, 2017. <http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2015/05/13/nota/4867046/ecuador-pasa-primer-lugar-ventas-teca-india>
- (7) El Universo journal, visited on July 20, 2017. <http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2015/05/13/nota/4867046/ecuador-pasa-primer-lugar-ventas-teca-india>
- (8) MAGAP, 2016 p. 6
- (9) MAGAP, 2016 Incentives Program for Commercial Reforestation. The Incentive is Effective! <http://ecuadorforestal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/SPF-FOLLETO-PIF-2014-050614.pdf> ; and MAE, March 2014, Forest Restoration Plan. <http://sociobosque.ambiente.gob.ec/files/images/articulos/archivos/amrPlanRF.pdf>

## **Greenwashing continues: FSC certifies industrial tree plantations as forests and RSPO oil palm plantations as sustainable**



For over 20 year now, certification schemes such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (1) have helped plantation companies secure their profits and protect their reputation.





How do they do that, when the impacts of large-scale industrial eucalyptus, pine, acacia and oil palm plantations are so obvious for all to see?

When reports of plantation companies breaching FSC and RSPO standards come to light, the certification schemes refer to their internal complaints and conflict resolution processes developed to address these situations. Reference to these processes gives rise to a false impression that their labels are trustworthy. FSC and RSPO market the message that their labels stand for thorough field assessments of practises at the plantations; that the 'multi-stakeholder' processes from which the certification standards emerged, were open to all concerned parties; that products carrying their label stand for decent working conditions on the plantations, and that expansion and management of these large-scale monoculture plantations minimize harm to communities and their cultures and customs, to soil, water, land and landscape. This marketing world of plantation schemes is far away from the reality in which communities enclosed by large-scale industrial tree plantations live. Theirs is an experience of an inherently unsustainable and harmful industrial plantation model that grabs prime agricultural land, turns diverse forests into monocultures; destroys and pollutes water sources, and causes grave harm to local communities, their economies, cultures and customs. (2)

Yet, the 'green consumption' promise is powerful and attractive in European, US-American and urban markets in so-called emerging economies with growing numbers of environmentally conscious buyers. In fact, the 'green consumption' promise that FSC and RSPO plantation certification labels provide, is crucial to maintaining consumer support for an excessive and destructive production and consumption model of which these plantations companies are part. These labels mask the reality that plantations carrying the green seal nonetheless are part of a model that is a root cause of current crises including climate change, soil degradation and the major wave of extinction of biological diversity (see also article ['Why the RSPO facilitates land grabs for palm oil'](#) in the WRM Bulletin 219, 2015).

### **More misleading marketing messages**

Although websites and marketing material of both FSC and RSPO prominently feature images of small-scale producers, the labels have proven particularly useful to large corporations. By August 2017, RSPO had certified 2,46 million hectares of oil palm plantations, producing more than 11,7 million tonnes of RSPO-certified palm oil (around 19 per cent of globally traded palm oil). (3) Only about 12 per cent of 2016 volumes of RSPO-certified oil was grown by smallholders who are part of corporate outgrower schemes or are otherwise obliged to sell to corporate mills. Less than 0.4 per cent of RSPO-certified palm oil was grown on plantations of independent smallholders. (4) Figures for 2015 show the extreme concentration of RSPO-certified palm oil production in the hands of a few very large producers: 65 per cent of global RSPO-certified palm oil supply was produced by only 10 companies. Oil palm plantation giant Sime Darby alone produced 25 per cent of the global RSPO-certified palm oil on its roughly one million hectares of certified plantations (5).



Perhaps, such figures are no surprise considering that while appearing inclusive and consensus-oriented on paper, "RSPO certification largely favours three dominant groups of stakeholders when it is implemented: the downstream agrobusiness firms, the international environmental NGOs and the largest palm oil producers." (5). Palm oil buyers which dominate the global palm oil trade to 'green' consumer markets in Europe or the US, hold over 80 per cent of votes in the RSPO's General Assembly. Among the top-ten countries for RSPO membership, only one is a palm oil-producing country (Malaysia), and among ordinary members, oil palm growers are far outnumbered by palm oil processors, traders and global food companies such as Unilever. (4) Researcher Denis Ruyschaert notes that almost all local social and environmental NGOs have left RSPO, and that no local actors remain on the RSPO Board of Governors since Sawit Watch, a network of Indonesian social organisations, gave up its seat in 2012. (5)

The situation is similar for the FSC, where in 2015, certified 'smallholders' accounted for only 4 percent of the total of 198,6 million hectares of FSC certified forests and plantations, and. Worthy a note also that the FSC defines forests as "a tract of land dominated by trees". With such a definition it is perhaps no surprise that the FSC continues to greenwash plantations by including them in statistics as FSC certified 'forests'. In fact, over 17 million hectares of what FSC markets as 'FSC certified forests' on its homepage should correctly be labelled as plantations – the large majority most likely large-scale industrial tree plantations occupying thousands of hectares. According to the FSC 'market info pack' 2016/17, 9 per cent of the total certified area and 27 per cent of 'forest management' certificates are in reality handed out to plantations companies, not for forest management. This figure is likely at the low end, because many additional plantation areas are included in what FSC calls 'semi-natural and mixed plantation and natural forest'. (6)

One consequence of this extreme imbalance between small-scale producers and large-scale industrial operations that carry FSC or RSPO labels is that certification de facto allow large-scale producers to dominate this 'green' market and further consolidate their dominance in the global market. In addition, the bias of certification towards industrial tree plantations creates the false impression that industrial plantation companies operate in a more environmentally and socially benign way than small-scale producers whose products do not carry these 'green' labels.

### **Certify first, request end to violations later**

Both FSC and RSPO have developed impressive - some might say, intimidatingly large - online libraries filled with documents explaining their respective 'Principles and Criteria' and the various national adaptations and other policy decisions relevant for certification. But the quantity of documents cannot hide laxness of criteria and inherent contradictions they contain. Despite well-documented negative impacts of industrial eucalyptus plantations, for example, on biological diversity and water, (2) many such plantations have been certified by FSC as complying with its Principle 6 on 'Environmental Values and Impacts'. On paper, this principle requires that in certified



plantations, the continued existence of naturally occurring native species and genotypes is effectively maintained, the loss of biological diversity is prevented; that natural water courses are protected or restored and that negative impacts on water quality and quantity are avoided, mitigated and remedied. It is hard to image how any industrial eucalyptus plantation managed for maximum yield and profit could possibly satisfy such a condition. And yet, thousands of hectares of industrial tree plantations in South Africa, Brazil and elsewhere carry the FSC logo.

Both certification schemes have issued certificates even though auditors note violations ('non-compliance' in the language of the certification schemes) of the certification standards. This is possible through a tool called "corrective action request". These "corrective action requests" are issued where management of a plantation does not meet certification requirements, but where a certificate already has been or will soon be issued regardless of the violation. Depending on the seriousness of the violation, auditors might carry out another visit to assess whether some action has been taken to end the violation of the standard, but eventually, an auditor will downgrade any 'major' violation to a 'minor' one, and a certificate can be issued or renewed even though the violation might be far from resolved.

"Corrective action requests" are a convenient tool for certificate holders because it means they can violate principles and criteria without a risk of losing the certificate easily once they have received it. They can thus continue to market their operations as being in compliance with international certification standards when, in fact, they are in breach of them. A recent report released by the US-based NGO Mighty Earth, in collaboration with the Gabonese NGO Brainforest, for example, shows that Olam, an RSPO-certified company, has cleared about 20 thousand hectares of forests in Gabon across its four concession areas since 2012. (7) Many more examples could be cited. (8)

In a 2016 article, Marcus Colchester, Senior Policy Advisor with the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme, describes how through the use of "corrective action requests" in the RSPO system, in Indonesia, "land-grabbing based on imposed concessions remains the norm". (4) This happens when, for example, companies are certified to RSPO standards before they have demonstrated that they have fulfilled the RSPO requirement for free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). In addition to a violation of the requirement for *prior* consent, such a practise also puts communities in a very weak position to withhold their consent, because the company already has what it wants – the FSC or RSPO label which secures access to key consumer markets. Although both FSC and RSPO have set up complaints mechanisms that could be used in such cases, communities face a complicated, tiresome and in most cases, eventually unsatisfactory process to see their grievances addressed once a certificate has been issued. (9) In almost all cases where complaints have been filed by communities, the community has had to rely on outside support from NGOs familiar with the certification system and able to provide resources for a community to access the complaints system and present the evidence in a manner required by the certification system.



## **After drawing out conflict resolution mechanisms for as long as possible, companies give up certificate rather than address violations**

Most conflicts between companies and local communities are not registered as complaints in the certification systems and continue to affect community life and livelihoods despite the company holding a 'green' label. Of the complaints that are picked up by the RSPO and FSC certification systems, few are resolved to the satisfaction of communities. In comparatively few cases, companies do not succeed to see violations downgraded to 'minor' without the remedial action interfering with the company's bottom line or a community regaining access to land lost to the plantation company. In those situations, companies have repeatedly chosen to simply give up their FSC or RSPO membership rather than change their practises. One such recent example is the decision of Melka Group subsidiary Plantaciones de Pucallpa in Peru in late 2016 to exit the RSPO. The company was faced with RSPO complaint panel sanctions over destruction of more than 5 thousand hectares of forests in violation of the RSPO standard. "What hope for justice or reparation can there be for communities if companies can neutralize a complaint by simply withdrawing from RSPO?", the Forest Peoples Programme notes in a press release on the Plantaciones de Pucallpa announcement to terminate its RSPO membership, asking "What is the real value of this industry standard if members can simply withdraw when they fear that the Complaints Panel will rule against them?"

Another example is a subsidiary of one of the world's largest agribusinesses, Singapore-based Wilmar. PT Asiatic Persada, an Indonesian company partly owned by two Wilmar subsidiaries, had taken over indigenous lands in Jambi, Indonesia, without consent or compensation. After a seemingly endless dispute and efforts by a mediation panel to negotiate a solution, the company called in the local mobile police brigade, who chased the indigenous peoples off their lands, while equipment of company contractors was used to destroy their houses (11). When complaints continued, Wilmar sold off its ownership in PT Asiatic Persada in 2013 without any resolution to the certification standard violations or the harm caused through destruction of houses in the indigenous village. Despite refusing to take responsibility for the damage and harm caused by PT Asiatic Persada when Wilmar subsidiaries held substantial ownership of the company, Wilmar remains a certified member of RSPO to this day.

### **Nothing new, but worth reiterating**

RSPO and FSC are not working to transform a heavily concentrated and unequal production model that provides cheap vegetable oil and fibre for global food, energy or pulp and paper industries into a localized model of small-scale production based on agroecological and social justice principles. Their certification practise is also not aiming to end but rather to facilitate the continued expansion of this large-scale industrial monoculture plantation model with their countless negative impacts for local communities and their environment. They are about increasing the share of RSPO-certified palm oil and FSC-certified wood products and the safeguarding of corporate profits through providing a 'green' label to greenwash ultimately inherently unsustainable industrial monoculture plantations.



In the past, many social and environmental NGOs, especially in industrialized countries, focused on denouncing such destruction of forests for industrial tree plantations and making the contribution of these companies to tropical deforestation visible through public action. Today, such public action has been largely replaced by negotiations with agribusiness and pulp and paper companies. Instead of questioning the underlying model of large-scale plantations controlled by a small number of transnational corporations, they legitimize this concentration of control over community land by discussing voluntary certification principles and criteria with these companies. Yet, as we have seen, companies can abandon these standards without consequences if they do not like the sanctions imposed for violation of the certification standards. This joint involvement of NGOs and corporations in certification schemes often weakens local community struggles, for example when companies now say 'we have support from the NGOs'. And banks can continue to finance the expansion of the destructive plantations model with reference to financing only expansion of companies that adhere to RSPO or FSC (12). Yet, the destruction of forests and the violation of community rights continues where large-scale industrial tree plantations operate, whether they are certified or not.

*Jutta Kill, jutta [at] wrm.org.uy*

*Member of the international secretariat of the WRM*

- (1) The FSC was founded in 1993 with the mission to "promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests". FSC defines "environmentally appropriate" as management that "ensures that the production of timber, non-timber products and ecosystem services maintains the forest's biodiversity, productivity, and ecological processes". The RSPO was founded in 2001 as a joint initiative between the palm oil industry and some international NGOs, with WWF as one of the main actors. The RSPO now has over 750 members; only 13 of them are NGOs, the remaining well over 700 members are companies related to the international palm oil trade. The RSPO delivers certificates to palm oil producers, based on a set of principles and criteria approved by RSPO members and checked in the field by third-party auditors paid by the companies applying for certification.
- (2) See, for example, the collection of materials at <http://wrm.org.uy/all-campaigns/international-day-of-struggle-against-monoculture-tree-plantations-2017/> and <http://wrm.org.uy/browse-by-subject/tree-plantations/certification/>
- (3) RSPO website: Impacts. <http://www.rspo.org/about/impacts>
- (4) M. Colchester, 2016. Do commodity certification systems uphold indigenous peoples' rights? Lessons from the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil and Forest Stewardship Council. In: Pavel Castka et al. Certification and Biodiversity – How Voluntary Certification Standards impact biodiversity and human livelihoods. Policy Matters, Issue 21. [https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/policy\\_matters\\_21\\_chapter\\_10\\_do\\_commodity\\_certification\\_systems\\_uphold\\_indigenous\\_peoples\\_rights\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_roundtable\\_on\\_sustainable\\_palm\\_oil\\_and\\_forest\\_stewardship\\_council.pdf](https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/policy_matters_21_chapter_10_do_commodity_certification_systems_uphold_indigenous_peoples_rights_lessons_from_the_roundtable_on_sustainable_palm_oil_and_forest_stewardship_council.pdf)
- (5) D. Ruyschaert, 2016. The Impact of Global Palm Oil Certification on Transnational Governance, Human Livelihoods and Biodiversity Conservation. In: Pavel Castka et al. Certification and Biodiversity – How Voluntary Certification Standards impact biodiversity and human livelihoods. Policy Matters, Issue 21. [https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/policy\\_matters\\_21\\_chapter\\_3\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_global\\_palm\\_oil\\_certification\\_on\\_transnational\\_governance\\_human\\_livelihoods\\_and\\_biodiversity\\_conservation\\_0.pdf](https://www.iucn.org/sites/dev/files/policy_matters_21_chapter_3_the_impact_of_global_palm_oil_certification_on_transnational_governance_human_livelihoods_and_biodiversity_conservation_0.pdf)
- (6) FSC Market Info Pack. An overview of the Forest Stewardship Council market developments, statistics, and trends. <https://ic.fsc.org/en/for-business/fsc-tools/local-market-successes/fsc-market-info-pack>
- (7) Mighty Earth, 2016. Palm Oil's Black Box. How agribusiness giant Olam's emergence as a major palm oil trader is putting forests in Southeast Asia and Gabon at risk. [http://www.mightyearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Olam-technical-report\\_Dec-9\\_with-images\\_lowres1-002.pdf](http://www.mightyearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Olam-technical-report_Dec-9_with-images_lowres1-002.pdf) See also WRM Bulletin article "Green" oil palm plantations are a scam: The case of OLAM. WRM Bulletin 230. <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/green-oil-palm-plantations-are-a-scam-the-case-of-olam/>
- (8) For more examples, see FSC Watch website: <https://fsc-watch.com/>
- (9) WRM, 2013. FSC consultation and complaints procedures: the case of Veracel Celulose in Brazil. <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/new-briefing-on-fsc-certification-of-plantations/>
- (10) *Condena a Plantaciones de Pucallpa por destruir 5000 ha de bosques*. <https://www.servindi.org/24/05/2017/rspo-condena-plantaciones-de-pucallpa-por-su-destruccion-de-mas-de-5000ha-de-la-amazonia>
- (11) M. Colchester et al. 2011. Human rights abuses and land conflicts in the PT Asiatic Persada concession in Jambi: report of an independent investigation into land disputes and forced evictions in a palm oil estate. <http://www.forestpeoples.org/en/topics/palm-oil-rspo/publication/2011/human-rights-abuses-and-land-conflicts-pt-asiatic-persada-conc>





(12) Greenpeace, 2017. Dirty bank' cleaning up its act? <http://geographical.co.uk/places/forests/item/2326-dirty-bank-cleaning-up-its-act>

## Republic of Congo: “ATAMA Plantations is today a source of discontent for local communities and the entire nation”



Photo: OCDH

In 2013, Wah Seong Berhad, a Malaysian company with no prior experience on palm oil, announced its decision to invest US 744 million dollars over a ten-year period to establish an industrial complex and an oil palm plantation covering an area of 180 thousand hectares in the departments of Sangha and Cuvette, some 800 kilometers north of Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo. ATAMA Plantations, a subsidiary of the Malaysian company, obtained from the Ministry of land affairs and public domain of Congo the authorization to occupy 470 thousand hectares to develop oil palm plantations. The 180 thousand hectares located in Sangha are part of this concession.

The processing plant was supposed to create close to 20 thousand jobs and produce 720 thousand tons of palm oil once it reached full production. According to the company, it would be “the largest refinery in the Congo river watershed”. (1) In 2013, the company claimed that it would plant 2 thousand hectares of oil palm by the end of 2014. At the time, ATAMA had announced that production would start in 2017. However, to this day, very few oil palm trees have been planted and it seems very unlikely that palm oil production will reach anything close to the initial 170 thousand tons announced in 2013.

Nonetheless, ATAMA is harvesting a lot of wood with high commercial value. In fact, timber extraction is proceeding far more rapidly than the plantation of oil palm trees. In 2016, the company also announced that “since last year, we [...] also have reduced our participation to 49% and are prepared to abandon this venture”. (2) In February 2017, the Congolese government suspended the company’s fraudulent logging activities.

WRM talked with Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo, Natural Resources and Forest Community program officer at the Congolese Observatory for Human Rights



(OCDH, *Observatoire congolais des droits de l'homme*), about what she saw during her visit to the Sangha region.

**WRM:** You recently visited the Sangha region where ATAMA Plantations was awarded a 180 thousand-hectare concession to plant oil palm trees. What are the main findings of your field mission?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** In our latest mission conducted in March 2017, we were able to make several observations, in particular:

- A fleet of vehicles almost entirely made up of forestry equipment;
- A sawmill located in the middle of the forest that is running at full capacity and processing only wood with the highest-value;
- Timber from selective cutting in an unauthorized area;
- An oil palm plantation that is still in its incipient stage;
- Incinerated wood waste, with no possibility of eco-generation;
- Badly paid workers without any form of social security;
- Exploited communities that are intimidated and repressed so they don't assert their rights;
- A wood lot filled with high-value commercial timber;
- Noncompliance with the project's specifications.

**WRM:** What is the current situation at the oil palm plantation and processing plant? What happened to the jobs they promised to create with the palm oil refinery?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** As I said earlier, the plantation is still in its nascent phase. The plants in the nursery were not moved in time to start production. ATAMA Plantations is acting like a real forestry and agriculture company.

The promise of job creation has become a lure to attract the government and win its trust. All of the companies that establish themselves in our country always use this reason to convince the government, whose economic diversification policy is designed to create jobs. Like every other company, ATAMA Plantations had promised to create 20 thousand jobs. But the reality is that these jobs have never been created. Today there are only 80 employees at the site, five of which are permanent. The jobs created are not permanent jobs that can provide employees decent and acceptable living conditions. These jobs do not provide any form of social security. The workers are exposed. ATAMA Plantations was supposed to be a major economic development factor in the area and provide added value to the national economy. Today, we see the opposite happening. Local community members are not holding jobs nor are they benefiting from the impacts of ATAMA Plantations' operations. These communities, in particular that of Yengo-Mambili, rose up to demand several benefits from the company. The uprising was rapidly repressed. ATAMA Plantations is today a source of discontent for local communities and the entire nation.



The construction of the palm oil processing plant is far from complete because ATAMA Plantations is focusing only on harvesting wood instead of developing oil palm plantations. They haven't even taken the time to separate the oil palm plants in the tree nursery that have started producing. They still haven't finished clearing the 5 thousand hectares granted to them in 2013, but are making selective cuts of profitable timber species in the second block without authorization from the forest administration. It is already obvious that the goal for 2017 of completing the processing unit will not be met. The government needs to take measures to condemn this kind of company that comes here to enrich itself at the expense of local communities and indigenous populations. The decision taken last February to halt the fraudulent selective cutting does not apply to all of the company's operations, but rather only the fraudulent logging.

**WRM:** Why is the company extracting logs far faster than it is planting palm trees?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** ATAMA Plantations is listed as an agricultural company in the Trade and Credit Register (RCM, for its French acronym). But in practice, it is carrying out an activity that should be exclusive to a forestry company with the selective cutting of high value commercial species. When you arrive at the ATAMA plantation, you notice something right away: this agricultural company has a fleet of vehicles that is primarily made up of wood transportation equipment. The company built a sawmill in the middle of the forest located about 18 kilometres from national road n° 2. The photographs show this. I wonder whether this is all a smokescreen. Could they be a logging operation disguised as an agricultural company?

**WRM:** Is it possible to estimate the loss that the treasury of Congo would incur if ATAMA terminated its concession contract now that it has extracted much of the existing high-value timber, but has not invested much in the oil palm plantation and oil production? How much would a forestry company have officially paid to extract that same volume of wood?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** An economist would do a better job of answering this question by performing a study. But to give you an idea, I think that we have to take into account forestry taxation. The timber produced by a forestry company generates more added value for the national economy because forestry companies pay corporate taxes, license fees, a stumpage tax, an area tax, an export tax, a surtax (on all exported unprocessed timber beyond 15 percent of the total produced timber). But if an agribusiness clears a forest area, it only pays the stumpage tax, corporate taxes and other taxes specific to the agricultural sector. In addition, forestry companies are required to process locally 85 percent of the timber production and create local and national jobs. Forestry companies must comply with social requirements in the interest of local communities and indigenous peoples by complying with project specifications that includes an implementation calendar. This provides communities with local development opportunities. In addition, a local development fund is created from a contribution of 200 CFA Francs [around US 0.36 dollars] per cubic meter of harvested wood to support economic activities carried out by communities.



These funds exist in the organized forestry concessions and communities develop economic activities to create wealth and thus contribute to national development.

**WRM:** The Ministry for sustainable development, forestry economy and the environment recently ordered a halt to the forest clearing. What reasons did it give for this? Did this measure stop timber extraction?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** The halt ordered in February 2017 applies to the fraudulent selective cutting operations in the second block of 5 thousand hectares, for which no authorization had been given, nor any stamping tax paid. According to the intent of this decision, ATAMA Plantations will continue its tree-felling activities in the 5 thousand-hectare area for which it has received an authorization and where there are still 3,500 hectares to be harvested. It will also continue to mill the timber harvested from this area, because the authorization states that the timber from that 5 thousand-hectare area is the property of ATAMA Plantations. Sanctions should be imposed on ATAMA Plantations for having carried out an activity exclusive to forestry companies in an area without authorization.

**WRM:** The project's real intentions have long been dubious. Could the suspension of timber harvesting be a first step before the full cancellation of the agreement, since the parent company declared in 2016 that it was considering abandoning the oil palm plantation project even before production started?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** The government has to take strong measures to terminate the agreement tying it to ATAMA Plantations because it is a one-sided contract in which the government is not gaining much and the company is making huge profits. These days, there is ever more talk of the social responsibility of companies, which involves compliance with social commitments, legality and the protection of the environment. ATAMA Plantations has nothing to lose by walking away. It has already recovered its investment by selling wood produced at a lower cost than that of forestry companies. This is a case of undeclared unfair competition.

**WRM:** What do the region's inhabitants think of the oil palm project? What are the effects of deforestation on their lifestyle?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** The expansion of oil palm monocultures always creates huge problems for neighbouring communities including the reduction of areas for rural activities, fishing, hunting (removal of wildlife species) and the gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFP), since the forest cover is completely destroyed. It will therefore be hard for communities to find caterpillar trees (*Uapaca guineensis*), honey and even medicinal plants. Right now, this problem is not acute because the plantations are only starting. But when they will fully extend themselves, nearby communities might have food security problems. It should be noted that in the exchanges we had with the peasant fisher organization, they informed us that some water sources and rivers are polluted by oils coming from insecticides and herbicides used in the plantations' plant treatment processes.



**WRM:** Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

**Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo:** ATAMA Plantations has not complied with any of its commitments. The communities have complained about this and declared that the company does not talk to them because of language barriers. There is a misunderstanding because the interpreter is the interface between these communities and the company and the communities say that they are misunderstood. The forest has an essential function for these communities. To replace it with large-scale oil palm plantations has a major impact on the way of life of these communities.

We thank Nina Cynthia Kiyindou Yombo, of the OCDH, for granting us this interview. (<http://ocdh-brazza.org/>)

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For more information on the ATAMA Plantations oil palm concession, see the report (in English): “Seeds of Destruction. Expansion of industrial oil palm in the Congo Basin: Potential impacts on forests and people,” Rainforest Foundation UK <http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/seeds-of-destruction-february-2013.pdf>

## Frankentrees: Genetically engineered tree plantations threaten forests and communities



Photo: STOP GE Trees Campaign

Genetically engineered (GE) trees are being developed to expand the existing disaster of industrial tree plantations. After more than 30 years of research, however, GE trees have only been approved in two countries. Black poplar trees engineered to kill insects have been planted on 450 hectares in China and faster-growing GE eucalyptus trees developed by Suzano subsidiary FuturaGene have been approved for planting in Brazil, though the company claims planting has not yet begun. Other research is being done in Brazil for freeze tolerant and herbicide resistant GE trees. The United States (US) Department of Agriculture has proposed to legalize freeze tolerant GE eucalyptus for planting across the South of the US. In Chile, insect resistant GE





trees are being investigated.

The forest products industry claims that GE trees are environmentally friendly. They say they would decrease the quantity of toxic herbicides and pesticides used on plantations, save native forests, mitigate global warming, replace fossil fuels, and even clean up toxic waste sites. But in reality, GE trees will worsen already severe impacts of industrial tree plantations including destruction of biodiversity, depletion of fresh water and soils, accelerated climate change, forced displacement of small farmers, and forest-based and indigenous communities, and serious effects on human health. Profit is the real motivation.

Wind can carry pollen from forests for hundreds of kilometres. The release of GE trees will therefore lead to widespread genetic contamination of native forests and non-GE plantations, bringing along all of their dangerous impacts, including many that cannot be predicted. Offspring of contaminated trees would then themselves become contaminants in a never ending and irreversible cycle.

### **The False Promises of Genetically Engineered Trees: Lessons from GE Crops**

Herbicide-tolerant trees: Genetically engineered (GE) crops, modified to tolerate toxic herbicide applications have resulted in up to three-fold increases in the use of these herbicides. The use of herbicide tolerant GE trees, would have potentially serious consequences for nearby communities. Herbicide-tolerant GE tree plantations would be sprayed from the air, causing the spray to drift into surrounding areas where it could be inhaled. It could also contaminate water and food sources for communities. In GE crops, the use of this trait has resulted in herbicide resistant “weeds” that have led to the use of significantly more toxic herbicides including 2,4-D, the active ingredient in Agent Orange.

Insect-Resistant Trees: Trees engineered to kill insects mean the entire tree is a pesticide. In crops, this has caused the evolution of pesticide-resistant “super-bugs,” which in turn result in the use of additional, more toxic pesticides. These GE trees would also harm beneficial insects – and perhaps other birds and animals that feed on the target insects.

Faster Growing Trees: Trees engineered to grow faster are of obvious benefit to the pulp and paper industry, whose bottom line is tied to fast rotations. Far from helping to take logging pressure off native forests, however, these plantations of fast-growing trees will quickly exhaust groundwater and soils, and accelerate conversion of native forests to new plantations. Escape of the gene for faster growth into forests would allow GE trees to out-compete other trees, and if these GE trees are already non-native and invasive—such as eucalyptus—they could easily crowd out native plants and animals, and impact communities that depend on native forests.

Contrary to industry propaganda, intensification of tree plantations has not helped protect forests, but led to their accelerated destruction. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, published a study that found that between 1990 and 2010, the amount of wood harvested per hectare of land increased by



50%, yet the amount of land covered by tree plantations increased 60%.

Not surprisingly, the US has a lead role in the development of this dangerous technology, with US-based ArborGen targeting regions in the US Southeast as well as Brazil for GE eucalyptus plantations.

Southern US forests house an abundance of plant and animal diversity, and pristine watersheds with many species that are found nowhere else in the world. But pressure for wood pellets to fuel European biomass facilities has led to rapid clear-cutting of native hardwood forests in the region. The introduction of ArborGen's GE eucalyptus trees to feed biomass would further accelerate this deforestation.

ArborGen has also emphasized the key role that Brazil will play in their GE tree plans, calling Brazil their "most important geography." From 2002 until 2012, ArborGen's CEO was Barbara Wells, who previously led Monsanto's Roundup Ready soy division in Brazil.

With their potential to devastate ecosystems and communities around the world, and lacking thorough risk assessments, the release of GE trees must be prohibited.

### **Local resistances against GE tree**

In Brazil, Chile, and around the world, rural and indigenous communities rely on intact native forests for their livelihoods, culture, shelter, water, fuel, and food. Plantations cannot meet these needs. In countries where native forests have been removed and industrial monoculture tree plantations developed, biodiversity and indigenous and rural communities pay a heavy price. GE trees, justified as a solution to the increasing demand for wood products will magnify these problems.

In many countries – Chile, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa – timber plantations got their start or expanded rapidly under authoritarian regimes. However, corporations continue land takeover and plantation expansion under the neoliberal economic paradigms that have flourished in the post-authoritarian years.

In Chile for example, plantation expansion has forced Indigenous Mapuche communities onto poor-quality lands. The communities lose access to water during the summer growing season and must rely on water trucks. Some have lost all access to water. The contamination of ground and surface water by pesticides and herbicides used on the plantations results in rising levels of sickness in their communities. A similar situation is occurring in Brazil in the rural and Indigenous communities where the tree plantations are located.

Since the explosion of the plantations on Mapuche land, poverty rates among these communities have risen dramatically. In Lumaco, one of the poorest regions of Chile, 60 percent of the population lives under the poverty level; 33 percent, in extreme poverty.



Those who oppose the plantations are subjected to political repression. In Chile, Mapuche activists are subjected to “anti-terrorism” laws created by the military to suppress opposition to the dictatorial Pinochet Regime. The use of these laws in Mapuche trials has been widely condemned, including by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights.

At the same time that new GE trees are being pushed in Brazil, the recent coup and takeover of power by right-wing president Temer, the situation of rural, landless and Indigenous communities is becoming increasingly dire.

Organizing against GE trees in Chile, Brazil and the US has been going on since the early 2000s, and in Brazil, thousands of women from La Via Campesina and the Landless movement (MST) have commemorated International Women’s Day on several occasions by destroying eucalyptus and GE tree seedlings, pointing to the important role women have on defending territories and resisting those which threaten their livelihoods and communities.

*Anne Peterman, anne [at] globaljusticeecology.org*  
*Global Justice Ecology Project, <http://globaljusticeecology.org/>*

## **Flying planes with palm oil?**

### **Oil palm companies could be the ultimate winners from ICAO’s “alternative fuel” plans**



From 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October, Mexico City will be hosting a High-Level “Conference on Aviation and Alternative Fuels” convened by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). ICAO is a specialised UN organisation with a long record of representing the interests of the aviation industry, i.e. airlines and aircraft manufacturers.



Ahead of the conference, ICAO's Secretariat has published a proposed "Vision" which would see enormous amounts of agrofuels burned in planes in the future: 128 million tonnes a year by 2040 and 285 million tonnes by 2050 [1]. By comparison, around 82 million tonnes of agrofuels were used in total during 2016 [2].

The volumes proposed by the ICAO Secretariat appear wholly unrealistic: airlines are highly sensitive to fuel costs and it is very rare for any agrofuels to reach price parity with fossil fuels. Right now, the cheapest agrofuels for aviation cost almost three times as much as petroleum-based kerosene [3] – which is far more than agrofuels used for cars. ICAO's Secretariat is backing industry calls for subsidies, but there will be a limit to the amount of subsidies states are willing to pay or pass on to passengers. However, as explained below, much cheaper aviation agrofuels could soon come on the market, suitable for blends up to 15 per cent.

Nonetheless, the ICAO proposals could, if adopted, cause very serious harm, with the aviation industry and oil palm companies as the only winners:

**1) *It will legitimise airport expansions worldwide, which will mean more greenhouse gas emissions as well as more air and noise pollution.***

The aviation industry's – and ICAO's – interest in agrofuels stems from the quest for never-ending rapid growth. Greenhouse gas emissions from international aviation grew by 87 per cent from 1990 to 2014, faster than those of almost any other sector [4]. The industry expects the volume of air travel to almost double by 2035 [5]. Growth rates far exceed the potential for efficiency improvements, and there are no techno-fixes on the horizon which would allow planes to fly without burning liquid fuels. In order to deflect demands for genuine curbs to emissions and thereby growth, ICAO has endorsed the industry's concept of future "carbon neutral growth". This relies primarily on aviation carbon offsets – widely condemned by over 100 civil society groups last year [6] - and on agrofuels, which are falsely classified as "carbon neutral".

**2) *Any large-scale use of aviation agrofuels will have to rely on palm oil.***

As a new report by Biofuelwatch [7] will show, the only type of agrofuels which are suitable for planes and which could be produced in substantial amounts without technical problems are ones made from Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO). Aviation fuels from sugar, wood, or algae are talked about but remain in the realm of science-fiction, even if tiny quantities have been produced at exorbitant costs. HVO relies on technology and infrastructure developed for oil refineries. During 2016, it accounted for 4 per cent of global agrofuel production, but grew more than ten times as fast as agrofuels overall [8]. At present, HVO fuels for planes are substantially more expensive than HVO diesel used in cars. However, companies expect that the cheaper HVO diesel will soon be approved for up to 15 per cent blends with petroleum-based jet fuel, which means that simply extending existing agrofuel subsidies to aviation could be enough to create a significant new market. Feedstock accounts for 60-80 per cent of the cost of HVO fuels, and palm oil is by far the cheapest, apart from waste cooking



oil and animal fats, which are in scarce supply. Moreover, the actual refining process is cheaper for palm oil than for other vegetable oils.

As I wrote in WRM May's bulletin [9], HVO production has been responsible for the steep increase in palm oil use in EU agrofuels in recent years, so if airlines were to start using it on a large scale, too, palm oil use would inevitably grow further.

So far, airlines have avoided using palm oil on any of the limited number of flights with agrofuel blends, because they fear bad publicity. ICAO will certainly not come out publicly 'endorsing' palm oil. Yet, it is impossible to see how aviation agrofuels could be scaled up without using palm oil.

One option for getting palm oil into plane engines is being pursued by the largest HVO producer, Neste Oil: Neste controversially classifies a fraction of crude palm oil as a "residue" [10], and it refuses to disclose how much of its "78% wastes and residues" consist of such palm oil. At the same time, Indonesia and Malaysia have stepped up pressuring the EU not to "discriminate" against palm oil in agrofuels, using and threatening to use trade negotiations and agreements to protect their growing markets [11]. Once an aviation agrofuel market exists, similar pressures and tactics can be expected.

**3) *Even if a new market for aviation agrofuels remains small, the mere hype about it could trigger more land-grabbing for and investment in palm oil.***

Hype about a future market can have just as severe impacts as actual demand. Thus, NGO ActionAid found that by May 2013, European investors had acquired 6 million hectares of land in sub-Saharan Africa for agrofuel production for the EU. Yet the EU has imported hardly any agrofuel feedstock from Africa. Land grabbing on such a vast scale was legitimised and incentivised by a mere "promise" of future demand.

Opposing the push for aviation agrofuels – both in ICAO and in different countries and regions – will thus be vital to prevent yet another market for palm oil emerging and fuelling plantation growth. At the same time, it is important for civil society not to inadvertently play into the hands of plantation companies by exaggerating the likely scale of such a future market and thus contributing to the hype about it.

*Almuth Ernsting, almuthbernstinguk [at] yahoo.co.uk*  
*Biofuelwatch, <http://www.biofuelwatch.net/>*

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## Argentina: New law promotes tree plantations in Cordoba Province



Photo : Ecos Córdoba

Located in the central region of Argentina, Cordoba is one of the five largest provinces in the country. Between 1904 and 2004, it lost 95 percent of its native forest, mainly as a result of the expansion of large-scale agriculture. Its annual deforestation rates are among the highest in the world, bringing serious consequences for the environment, health and food sovereignty of the population, according to researchers at the National University of Cordoba (1).

Deforestation in Cordoba has continued over the last decade, and today only three percent of its forest remains, according to data from the Paraguayan NGO, Guyra (2). As a consequence of the destruction of the forest, serious flooding has occurred in recent years in both the central and southern parts of the state.

In this context, the Government and Legislature of Cordoba decided to create the Provincial Agroforestry Plan (3), a law that promotes exotic tree plantations and the development of the forestry industry. In August 2017, they announced that they aim to reforest 150,000 hectares over the next ten years.



Cordoba's Agroforestry Plan is part of agribusiness's ongoing encroachment onto native forests and farming and indigenous lands in Argentina. The serious consequences of this extractive model have become more acute in the last 20 years, with the displacement of rural communities to poor urban neighborhoods, the increase in diseases caused by agrochemicals, floods caused by changes in land use, fires, and the loss of food sovereignty.

This new law was presented by authorities as a solution to environmental and social problems. However, the Provincial Native Forest Defense Coordinator—which brings together over 80 civil society, peasant and indigenous organizations from the province—opposed the law. Its members understood that this initiative is a false solution to the problem of deforestation, and only seeks to promote business for industrial plantations.

"It is an economic instrument to encourage the installation of pine and eucalyptus plantations, through which the State subsidizes the planting of these exotic species (...) and benefits agribusiness economic groups," the Coordinator stated in a public letter (4). "A law in the environmental sector must be designed to protect the environment. And pine and eucalyptus monoculture is not the way to achieve that objective," they asserted.

The law mandates that farmers plant trees on at least two percent of their farmland over the next ten years. However, it gives landowners the choice of not planting trees on their property, and instead buying a "share" of a plantation in what will be called "aggregated forests." These "aggregated forests" are plantations that will pool the mandatory area percentages that producers in the same region must meet.

The Government argues that this is an environmental protection policy because, it claims, tree plantations will regulate water levels, help soil conservation and capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. However, at least three central issues have not been clearly communicated to the public:

**Promotion of monoculture plantations:** The State of Cordoba makes no distinction between a rural producer planting native species on a small scale in order to regenerate the forest, and developing commercial plantations of exotic species—with all the impacts the latter entails.

**Impacts of tree plantations:** Industrial tree plantations exhaust the groundwater, deteriorate soils and cause damages to health and the environment, due to the use of agrottoxins. Furthermore, they contribute to greenhouse gas emissions because of the carbon dioxide released when trees are cut down. This is compounded by the increased risk of fires, which are already a serious problem in mountainous areas of Cordoba.

**Subsidies (and thus greater benefits) to those who have deforested:** Through tax exemptions and non-refundable contributions, the State will subsidize the reforestation of fields, without taking into account whether their owners logged illegally years ago. In Argentina, these benefits have existed since 1999, through the Cultivated Forest Investment Act (5). In May 2017, the



national government announced it will extend these benefits until 2030, in order to expand the country's plantations by 800,000 hectares, according to the local press (6). According to official data, there are 1.2 million hectares planted with commercial monocultures in Argentina today—mainly conifers and eucalyptus trees (7).

### **The wolf guarding the sheep**

The implementing authority for Cordoba's Agroforestry Plan will be the state's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, which presented the bill with the support of state agencies and agribusiness chambers of commerce. The Native Forest Defense Coordinator identifies these groups and entities as being responsible for the deforestation that has taken place in recent decades.

"The alleged enrichment of the forest that they say the agroforestry law promotes will be in the hands of the Ministry of Agriculture. Yet the Ministry of Agriculture allowed the province to be devastated by plantations and pesticide fumigations near peoples' homes," said Laura Dos Santos, a member of the Coordinator. "They are responsible for the flooding of the territory, which occurred because they destroyed the forest; now they are going to be in charge of the agroforestry plan."

Four months before approving the Plan, the Government of Cordoba had announced it signed a \$1 million agreement with Misiones Province to buy technology to develop plantations (8). The company, Biofábrica Misiones S.A., which develops biotechnology for commercial forestry species, will provide these services to Cordoba (9).

Misiones is one of the provinces with the greatest timber production in Argentina. In recent decades, forestry companies in Misiones—mainly the Chilean company Celulosa Arauco—have overtaken farming and indigenous lands and territories in a dramatic way, through the installation of plantations (10).

### **Absence of a forest land-use plan**

In addition to denouncing that the Agroforestry Plan is tailor-made for agribusiness companies, organizations defending the forest wonder where the trees will be planted, when there is no land-use map that accurately depicts the current situation.

Since 2007, Argentina has had a law mandating that provinces draw up a Native Forest Land-Use map, and that they update it every five years (11). In it, different regions with plant cover are identified and classified according to their level of protection. According to the law, this map must be drawn up through a participatory process that involves the whole society.

However, since December 2016, the Government of Cordoba has tried to move forward on updating its map and reforming the provincial forestry law without a



citizen participation process (12). Moreover, the changes it proposed enabled more deforestation to take place.

This caused a huge social backlash. It was at that time that citizen assemblies defending health and the environment, together with peasant, indigenous and environmental groups, organized to form the Native Forest Defense Coordinator. They began to share information and raise awareness among the population. As a result, in December 2016, and in March and June 2017, mass marches took place in the state capital, forcing the Government back off on its attempts to push through a land-use plan without citizen participation.

Unable to continue with the forest law reforms, the provincial government decided to expedite sanctioning of the Agroforestry Plan. The presentation of the bill and the political agreement reached in the Legislature was so swift, that there was no time for organizations to carry out the same information and awareness-raising process they had done so months earlier.

Nonetheless, due to popular pressure, some lawmakers proposed a change in the concept of "native forest enrichment." The original text of the project spoke of enriching forest with "native or exotic forest species of high commercial value." The modified text established that this could only be done with native plants.

Furthermore, an article was included that forces the regulating authority to develop and maintain an updated list of tree species recommended for each region, and a list of prohibited invasive exotic species. This list has yet to be distributed.

### **On the path of struggle**

The prompt formation of the Native Forest Defense Coordinator in late 2016, in the face of the new threat, showed once again that it is Cordoba's organized society that defends the forest from the onslaught of extractive, State-endorsed companies.

The speed which this organization took place reflects years of experience with struggle and resistance in the state of Cordoba. Among the most recent examples are the historic triumph of the community of Malvinas Argentinas, which in 2016—after four years of resistance—prevented multinational Monsanto from installing one of the largest corn seed factories in Latin America. Additionally, there have been struggles against fumigation, mining and real estate development in the forest.

With experience, and bolstered by the victories achieved, organizations in Cordoba are determined to continue defending the three percent of forest that is still standing.

*Lucía Guadagno, luciag [at] wrm.org.uy  
Member of the WRM International Secretariat*



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## Recommended

### **International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations**

On 21st of September organisations and individuals around the world give visibility to the countless struggles against the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations. Eucalyptus, pine, acacia, rubber, teak, oil palm and other types of industrial plantations cause disastrous impacts. This day also underlines the damaging impacts of this monoculture production model. Damage includes the depletion of water sources, the displacement or enclosure of communities, large-scale deforestation as well as air and water pollution due to the use of agrotoxins, violations of human and collective rights, labour and environmental regulations, destruction of local livelihoods, economies and cultures and widespread violence. Join the celebrations of fertile resistance that is growing in many places. Access the special section on WRM's website here: <http://wrm.org.uy/all-campaigns/international-day-of-struggle-against-monoculture-tree-plantations-2017/>

### **Study shows the harmful impacts of Eucalyptus on water ecosystems**

An international team of researchers published a study in the journal, *Ecology and Evolution*, which highlights the complex impacts of introducing an exotic species. This case showed that Eucalyptus has lethal and sublethal effects on the larvae of aquatic insects, which in turn affects various organisms that inhabit





fluvial ecosystems with eucalyptus plantations on their banks. The study explains how the larvae affected by eucalyptus are mainly found in rivers, as they prevail in environments that have had less external intervention (small headwater rivers). In these environments, in addition to being food for native fish, they break up the leaves that fall from the forest, which is a key process in the functioning of these ecosystems.

See an article (in Spanish) at this link: <http://www.naturalesudec.cl/estudio-demuestra-impacto-negativo-del-eucalipto-en-ecosistemas-acuaticos-dulceacuicolas/>

And the study here: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ece3.3094/full>

### **Karnataka state government in India bans planting eucalypt and acacia trees due to impact on ground water levels**

Large-scale planting of eucalyptus and acacia trees under a World Bank-aided project in India not only squeezed the rich underground water table in the districts of Bengaluru Rural, Kolar and Chikkaballapur, but also affected annual rainfall in the region. Assessing research papers and observations by forest officials, agriculture and geology researchers belonging to various organisations, an expert committee headed by the Minister for Forests, Ecology and Environment learned that the tree plantations were responsible for the recent parched condition of these districts. As a consequence, the government has banned planting of eucalyptus and acacia plantations in Karnataka since February 2017. Read the article here:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/karnataka-state-govt-bans-planting-eucalyptus-acacia-trees-owing-to-impact-on-ground-water-level/articleshow/58712822.cms>

### **A magazine from and for communities affected by SOCAPALM plantations**

The fifth issue of the journal "*Trait d'Union*", a trimestral magazine and liaison of the associations of populations surrounded by SOCAPALM plantations, workers' unions and oil palm planters, is available at this link. The issues of the Magazine Trait d'Union can be downloaded for free at [www.palmespoir.org](http://www.palmespoir.org)



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Editor-in-Chief: Winfridus Overbeek

Managing Editor: Joanna Cabello

Editorial Assistants: Elizabeth Díaz, Lucía Guadano, Jutta Kill, Carolina Motoki y Teresa Pérez

**WRM International Secretariat**

Avenida General María Paz 1615 office 3. CP 11400. Montevideo, Uruguay

Phone/Fax: +598 26056943

[wrm@wrm.org.uy](mailto:wrm@wrm.org.uy) - <http://www.wrm.org.uy>