
The stained whiteness of a sheet of paper

The whiteness of a sheet of paper hides obscure stories of environmental degradation and social dispossession. However, those stories are seldom known by consumers living far away from where the raw material --wood-- is obtained and from where pulp and paper are produced. It is therefore important to know --and tell-- the story.

The story usually begins in a forest, which is either clearcut to provide raw material to a pulp mill --and then left to regrow or replanted with a single species-- or is cleared for its substitution by a monoculture fast-growth tree plantation. In some cases, it is not forests but grasslands that are destroyed to give way to large-scale pulpwood plantations. In any of these cases, the impacts on local biodiversity, water and soils are huge.

Those environmental effects also result in social impacts. Forests and grasslands are not void of people. On the contrary, they are inhabited by millions of human beings, who obtain their means of living from those ecosystems. The story therefore continues with dispossessed local communities who suffer the consequences. Whenever possible, those communities stand up for their rights and have to face repression from state authorities that side up with the pulpwood sector. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they don't, but in all cases they have to endure the consequences of their resistance.

The next part of the story begins in a pulp mill. The cheap raw material --extracted at a huge social and environmental cost-- is brought to the mill to be processed. This process then results in water and air pollution that affects the health and life quality of communities living in the plant's vicinity. Here too local people are forced to fight back and face the consequences.

The story ends with the production and consumption of the paper produced in the process. What makes the ending even sadder is that most of that paper was never meant at satisfying real human needs but at creating unnecessary consumption so as to ensure the pulp and paper industry's profitability.

The story can however have a totally different ending. Consumption can be drastically reduced without this resulting in paper scarcity. A French citizen now consumes annually some 190 kgs of paper and cardboard, to a large extent used in packaging. Why should a Finnish citizen not be able to bring down his/her 430 kgs of yearly consumption to that figure? Why couldn't U.S citizens do the same with their current per capita consumption of 330 kgs? But even French figures imply overconsumption, and could be brought down to the 40 kgs consumed by an average Uruguayan citizen --whose consumption could be also easily brought down even further.

Bringing down consumption is not however a matter of individual choice; it is a political issue. The pulp and paper industry, together with its many associates --machinery suppliers, consultancy firms, export-credit agencies, private and multilateral banks and others-- will react to efforts for bringing consumption down. Successful opposition therefore needs to bring together all those impacted by plantations, deforestation and pulp/paper production with organized opposition in consumer countries

and to campaign jointly demanding both respect for the rights of local communities affected by the paper cycle and national and global policy changes concerning the use of paper.

The white sheet of paper does not need to be stained; it can be socially and environmentally clean. That's the challenge. And the aim of this issue of the WRM Bulletin is to contribute in that direction.