
Southern production for Northern overconsumption

The increasing paper and wood demand at the global level, together with the need to preserve the remaining forests, are used to justify the expansion of tree plantations for the production of paper and wood. At the same time, the threat of global warming is used to promote plantations as carbon sinks. But the issue of overconsumption of paper, wood and fossil fuels -which are at the basis of the current crisis- are not included in the equation.

The paper industry is constantly and actively promoting new uses of paper for business and household uses. The proclaimed benefits of an increase in paper consumption is an argument frequently used by pulp plantation promoters to justify them and present them as positive for human development. The industry tries to associate paper consumption with literacy, cultural level, access to written information and thus to a better quality of life.

But the truth is that a large part of the cellulose produced in the South is not used to supply the populations of these countries, but those of the North. The literacy argument -even understanding it as the mere ability to read and write, and supposing that its rate only depends upon the availability of printed materials- is not as relevant as it would seem: while 40% of world paper production is used for packaging and wrapping, only 30% is used for writing and printing paper. Moreover, a huge part of paper consumption for writing and printing purposes is used for advertising. In sum, a great deal of today's pattern of environmentally unsustainable paper consumption is socially unnecessary.

Increasing wood consumption is also presented as something necessary and the argument goes that plantations can alleviate pressure on forests by supplying the world with the wood it needs without having to cut the latter. But here again the arguments are false. Plantations are not aimed at providing local communities with the wood they need (for housing, firewood, crafts, tools, etc.) but at feeding wood overconsumption in the North. At the same time, forests continue being logged because wood from plantations is not considered to have the required quality to produce a large number of wood products which are therefore still produced from native forests. It is thus false that plantations help to alleviate pressure on forests.

Fossil fuel consumption is one of the major causes of climate change. Northern countries emit the highest volumes of greenhouse gases derived from the combustion of fossil fuels. Their "solution" is to plant fast-growing trees -mostly in the South- as carbon sinks, in order to avoid taking actions to effectively counter the greenhouse effect. The real solution should aim at substituting fossil fuels by clean, renewable and low impact energy sources and at an efficient use of energy. Technologies are available, but there is a lack of political will to implement them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Northern NGOs can implement consumer awareness-raising campaigns, linking overconsumption with the spread of plantations -and their impacts- in the South
- The NGO community in general could put pressure on the UN system to limit its paper consumption to a certain level within a certain time (half in two years?), thus giving an example of environmental

consciousness to the world

- Southern NGOs could generate awareness on the unsustainability of the prevailing consumption patterns which are also being promoted in the South