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WORLD RAINFOREST MOVEMENT
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OUR VIEWPOINT

- Land grabbing and the importance of words

Among many indigenous peoples, words are considered sacred, and must be used with care. But in today's digitalized, high-speed, globalized world, words are not viewed this way. They are used carelessly, often without realizing the true meaning of what is being said or typed. And sometimes, often without meaning too, we end up inadvertently reinforcing ideas, concepts and values implied by the words we use.

On the other hand, those who promote the globalized market economy, such as big corporations, who are determined to continue pursuing limitless growth and have led us into so many serious problems, tend to devote a great deal of thought to the names they give to things.

What we walk on every day they call land or property. It is something that, from their point of view, basically serves for production or profit-making. It is where they can find the "natural resources", minerals, oil, water, etc., that are seen to be at our disposal, ready to be exploited.

However, peoples with a connection to the land speak instead of territory and refer to it as their "home", a place that protects them, that gives them what they need to produce food, medicine and tools, as well as meeting spiritual and cultural needs. While land is being increasingly reduced to the question of ownership, individualized, privatized and commodified, territory cannot be sold, because it is a collective space, a space for everyone to share.

In the pursuit of greater revenue from land and property, land grabbing is on the rise, especially in the countries of the South, as a means of maximizing profits. Forests are reduced to a mere grouping of trees, according to FAO, and are preferably planted as large monoculture plantations, genetically modified to create "supertrees" in which one trait is modified to dominate the others, with no concern for the as yet unknown collateral effects.

In the globalized economy, peoples in all their diversity are not valued. People are merely consumers, as well as a source of labour, preferably outsourced and cheap. For this economy, there is no such thing as different cultures and identities, there are only markets, whose goal is to grow and to create new markets and profit-making opportunities.

For this economy, energy means electricity, and no consideration is given to other forms or meanings of energy for traditional peoples, who are probably much better prepared and most able to confront our uncertain future. But the globalized economy is determined to centralize and control not only the land, but also the way energy is viewed, through its powerful multinationals, promoting an energy model chosen primarily for its profit potential, be it run as currently on oil and coal, or on so-called renewable energy sources. In an unsustainable and just framework these technologies become part of a globalised energy model that maintains existing injustices and shows little concern for the consequences.

The globalized economy doesn't talk about nature, about its mysteries, or about its importance for the way of life that millions of people have developed in a way that does not destroy nature, considering themselves to also form a part of it. The globalized economy talks about "environmental services" that must be ensured so that they can be used to provide the "rights" to continue polluting in other places – or even be traded on financial markets, while arguing that human beings are destructive. Local communities suffer the consequences of placing a price on nature, facing restrictions and prohibitions in places where the sale of these

“services” is implemented. In a way, they are being “punished” for having conserved nature until now.

The fight against land grabbing and other grabs of the globalized economy is also a fight against the subtle imposition of new words and concepts that encourage new customs, ideas and values. This is why it is important not only to halt land grabbing and its many tentacles – the focus of this bulletin – but also to halt the process of “grabbing” and domination of the words imposed by the globalized economy, which disregards important values and ideals which the peoples the world over have developed over the course of many, many centuries, and that are now being rapidly destroyed.

The people fight back any way they can, they resist because they want to live in peace, not only in their territories and with nature, but also with their own words for everything that gives life meaning.

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THE TENTACLES OF LAND GRABBING

- Territoriality vs. Land grabbing

According to the dictionary, to “grab” is to seize suddenly or roughly, sometimes forcibly or unscrupulously. It carries a connotation of greed, of grasping what one wants with no concern for the welfare of others.

When it comes to land grabbing, specifically, this is something that has occurred throughout history, carried out by powerful forces, from the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the politically powerful aristocrats of ancient Greece, the patrician families of the Roman Empire, the feudal lords of Europe, China, Japan and India, the institution of the Catholic Church, and the colonizers of the Americas and Africa, right through to today’s agribusiness transnationals, to name just a few. In all cases, at some point, the process of land grabbing has been violent, and has trampled over the sense of identity and community attached by communities and peoples to their lands and territories, defined as “sacred” by indigenous peoples.

We have addressed the subject of land grabbing numerous times in previous issues of the WRM bulletin, and in issue 177 we talked not only about the grabbing of land but also of the water and air, which we called “earth grabbing”. We noted that in the current process of land grabbing, the main actors are from the financial world. The entire planet is increasingly being turned into a giant market open to investment and speculation. Everything that nature offers, whether tangible or intangible, is turned into commercial assets; investments move rapidly from one region to another to undertake projects like large-scale industrial plantations (of trees, legumes, grains) for export, mining, tourism, dam construction, etc. These activities are generally carried out in countries of the South, at ever greater speed and with ever larger dimensions.

As defined by GRAIN, land grabbing refers to the acquisition of large tracts of land either through lease, concession or outright purchase (1). In the case of farmland, this process has served to deepen the “financialization” of agriculture, as powerful financial and economic actors are increasing their control over natural resources, displacing and destroying peasant

farmers and other rural communities. When it comes to farmland acquired for the production of basic foods for export, GRAIN notes that according to the World Bank, 56 million hectares of land had been leased or sold in 2008-2009, while the Land Matrix project placed the figure at 227 million hectares as of 2012.

In this global land grab, an ever greater role is being played by financial funds, including pension funds, private capital funds and hedge funds. According to GRAIN, of the 100 billion dollars from pension funds estimated to be invested in commodities, between five and 15 billion has gone into farmland acquisitions, and this figure is expected to double by 2015 (2). In the meantime, numerous governments are heavily supporting and promoting these acquisitions, while multilateral financial institutions are also playing a key role in facilitating land grabs (see the article on the World Bank and land grabbing in this issue of the bulletin).

In the face of this capitalist onslaught that excludes the most dispossessed, the local communities, the most vulnerable sectors, other concepts of territory are being upheld, ones that consider other values beyond those of the market and that encompass a deeper, more diverse and colourful dimension of human and social life. Some refer to these conceptual approaches as "territoriality". Jean Robert, in his article "Guerra a la subsistencia. Crisis económica y territorialidad" (The War on Subsistence: Economic crisis and territoriality) (3), confers it with a meaning that goes beyond classic land claims to encompass "a territory with its water, its forests or its scrubland, its horizons, its perception of 'ours' and 'other', in order words, its limits, but also with the imprints left by its dead, its traditions, its sense of what the good life means, with its celebrations, its way of speaking, its language or turns of speech, even its ways of walking. Its cosmovision."

The advance of land grabbing imposes its own rules, denying the rights of those who can tell the stories of their territories as evidence of their genuine tenure. "If this is your land, then where are your stories?" a member of the Gitksan indigenous peoples of British Columbia, Canada asked a government representative during a hard-fought legal battle for the recognition of his peoples' territories. Not only do the land grabbers have no stories to tell about these lands; they obliterate those stories. This is business, pure and simple, in which the powerful always win and the most vulnerable always lose.

As we noted earlier, grabbing takes many different forms. The occupation of vast tracts of land for agribusiness has been the most visible phenomenon in recent years, but enormous areas continue to be destroyed for oil exploration and drilling, or the excavation of giant open-pit mines; ecosystems are flooded for the construction of massive hydroelectric dams and power plants; coastal mangrove forests are destroyed to create shrimp farms; "green deserts" of monoculture tree plantations continue to expand; and so on and so forth.

There is also another more subtle and perverse form of land grabbing that comes disguised as "conservation": REDD+ projects also represent the grabbing of territories in that they strip local communities of their habitat, their livelihoods, and ultimately, their identity.

Peoples' understanding and use of territory is key to resisting land grab in the search for collectivity and solidarity.

This article is based on the following sources:

(1) "El acaparamiento de la tierra agraria: otra amenaza para la soberanía alimentaria", GRAIN, <http://revistasoberaniaalimentaria.wordpress.com/2011/01/29/el-acaparamiento-de-la-tierra->

[agraria-otra-amenaza-para-la-soberania-alimentaria/](#)

(2) Pension funds: Key players in the global farmland grab, GRAIN, June 2011,

<http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4287-pension-funds-key-players-in-the-global-farmland-grab>

(3) Guerra a la subsistencia. Crisis económica y territorialidad, Jean Robert, Fobomade,

<http://www.fobomade.org.bo/art-2010>

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MONOCULTURE TREE PLANTATIONS

- Uganda - Promotion of plantation agriculture - a disgrace to human kind and environment

Uganda like many other African countries is in the campaign drive of promoting plantations under the guise of creating income and other benefits for Ugandans, destroying a lot of natural resources including forests, wetlands and up hills. In the past ten years, thousands of hectares of forests have been destroyed and replaced by monocultures.

But Uganda shows, at the same time, a commitment internationally to forest protection and reducing deforestation as one of the countries in Africa participating in REDD+. After its Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) was approved at the 9th meeting of the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)'s Participants Committee (PC), based on the status of Uganda's forest and its benefits for forest dependent communities and forest owners, Uganda will receive US\$3.4 million to prepare a REDD+ strategy, a reference scenario and a system of measurement, reporting and verification (MRV).

However, this commitment contradicts with the current expansion of monoculture plantations in the country. An example happened when in August 2011 the government decided to use the shortage of sugar in the country as an excuse to propose to give away 7,100 hectares of forest land to MEHTA, the owner of Sugar Corporation of Uganda (SCOUL), to expand its sugar plantation. People resisted, including reporting in the media, the local leaders and also CSOs while the international community was also made aware, amplifying the voices of Ugandans and forcing the government to halt the giveaway of the forest.

A country like Uganda, which is signatory to a number of conventions like CBD and Ramsar (on the issue of wetlands), shouldn't have thought of giving the forest for the cheap, short term economic gains at the expense of environment and people, without proper assessment of the vital roles of the forest and also without understanding the various underlying causes that lead to failures within the sugar processing industries. It is worth noting that the current machinery used in the extraction of sugar from the canes is outdated. It dates back to the 1960s which means that the efficiency has gone down. In other words, sugar production could be increased by improving technology rather than converting more forest lands into arable land for more monocultures. And in spite of Uganda's commitment in halting deforestation, projects like this one encourages deforestation and forest degradation

In the same vein, the Ugandan government is promoting oil palm plantations in Kalangala, funded by a number of financial institutions like IFAD/World Bank and oil palm companies like Wilmar and others. A lot of contradictions and violations have been recorded including disrespect of the CBD convention, with a lot of flora and fauna being destroyed. Again, the

government has double standards promoting oil palm at the expense of natural forests and promoting REDD+ allegedly for the conservation of forests. Around 10,000 hectares of land have been planted with oil palm. People in Kalangala have been deprived of their rights to clean water and a sound environment, they are exposed to cultural erosion, their livelihoods have been compromised, and they face food insecurity just to mention but a few of the consequences.

Another example of a plantation project with impacts on local communities is in Kikonda, forest, in the Kyankwanzi district, where the South Africa-based firm Global Woods established a pine plantation in 2002, displacing traditional communities who have been using the forest reserve for agriculture. The impacts of that action are even being felt today.

Also REDD initiatives, as is the case with plantation development, have been causing impacts on local forest-dependent people in Uganda. For example, due to a REDD programme, the government evicted indigenous groups. The 'pygmies' of the Semliki forest have been living in the forests since time immemorial but the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) - in close collaboration with the National Forest Authority - evicted them as if they were encroachers.

Uganda must develop a mechanism that regulates plantation development in such a way that it does not override the existing natural forests and the rights of the local people. Any meaningful development should put people at the centre and include social aspects. Moreover, the case of Uganda reveals that a common approach is needed, so that both the forest destruction gets really halted and development projects like plantations do not have negative impacts on people and the environment but are set up in such a way that they can benefit people. Such a project design can only take place if people are meaningfully involved and able to give their consent or not to development plans with huge impacts on their livelihoods.

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- Land grabbing for oil palm in the Philippines

The indigenous network ALDAW in the Philippines (Ancestral Land/Domain Watch) is deeply concerned about the findings of a recent study it carried out in Southern Palawan. The research shows that oil palm development is impoverishing local indigenous communities while destroying biologically diverse environments. The ALDAW case study "The Palawan Oil Palm Geotagged Report 2013. The Environmental and Social Impact of Oil Palm Expansion on Palawan Unesco Man & Biosphere Reserve (The Philippines)", can be accessed at <http://www.regenwald.org/files/pdf/The-Palawan-Geotagged-Oil-Palm-Report-Part-1.pdf> and <http://www.regenwald.org/files/pdf/The-Palawan-Oil-Palm-Geotagged-Report-Part-2.pdf>

Below a summary of the report's findings that are most relevant to the land grab dimension of oil palm expansion.

The ongoing expansion of industrial oil palm plantations

From the time of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos to the actual presidency of President Benigno Aquino III, a rhetorical discourse on the potential benefits of oil palm (e.g. poverty eradication and increased economic independence from imported oil) has set the trend.

Plantation schemes have been implemented mainly through the initiatives of private investors (owners and heads of palm oil mills/processors and oil palm growers/planters) and with support from government bodies such as the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and also of the local government units (LGUs).

From the 2009 data provided by the Philippine Palm Oil Development Council (PPODC), a total of 46,608 ha have already been planted with oil palm. It reflects a 160% increase in a span of only four years.

In the Philippines, oil palm companies have difficulty in acquiring large tracts of land for conversion into plantations. In fact, as a result of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL), approved on June 10, 1988, land was distributed to a myriad of farmers – either individually or forming cooperatives or associations – for the purpose of enhancing social justice, and access to land sought to promote the quality of life of landless farmers. This, in turn, should have boosted agricultural production both on private and public land.

The land-grabbing dimension of the palm oil industry

Today, in those areas where tracts of land are owned individually through a Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLO), oil palm companies are trying to bring fragmented lands and individual farmers together into oil palm cooperatives with which the companies themselves enter into different types of agreements.

The Philippine Oil Palm Development Plan also states that the area potentially available for oil palm development nationwide include about 304,000 ha of idle and underdeveloped lands. However, most of the so-called 'idle' and 'underdeveloped land' include areas that are utilized by the rural and indigenous populations for different purposes (gathering of NTFPs, medicinal plants, swidden cultivation, etc.). These areas also incorporate rivers providing drinking water to rural households.

In addition to the alarming expansion of nickel mining in the province of Palawan, indigenous peoples and lowland farmers are now being confronted with the threats posed by oil palm development.

In Palawan, at least 15,000 ha out of the targeted 20,000 ha for oil palm development are being developed by three companies: the Agusan Plantations Group, the Palawan Palm and Vegetable Oil Mills Inc. (PPVOMI) (60 percent Singaporean and 40 percent Filipino-owned) and its sister company Agumil Philippines Inc. (AGPI).

There is a scarcity of public records showing the processes and procedures leading to the issuance of land conversion permits and environmental clearances to oil palm companies in Palawan. The ALDAW field assessment has revealed that land acquisition procedures and land clearing by oil palm companies have disadvantaged and marginalized lowland indigenous communities, while massively contributing to the loss of biodiversity.

A majority of members of indigenous communities who have 'rented' portions of their land to the oil palm companies, have no clear understanding of the nature of such 'agreements' nor do they possess written contracts countersigned by the companies. Not only indigenous peoples' rights but also those of the contract growers, seem to have been violated to various degrees. Farmers' ability to cope with food shortage and harvest failure is put at risk, since they are not allowed to intercrop other edible plants inside the plantations without the permission of the company; furthermore wet-rice intercropping is not allowed.

Growers that are growing oil palm or AGPI are particularly vulnerable since the management of their land under an oil palm regime may be handed over to AGPI, if the company is not satisfied about the way in which the land is being managed. AGPI also applies management fees to growers for covering various costs, such as the so called 'project restoration'.

More detailed investigation needs to be carried out on the ambiguous nature of 'rent agreements' and 'land leases' leading to the conversion of indigenous ancestral land into oilpalm plantations. The length of such leases is about 20-25 years (which is equivalent to the productive lifespan of oil palm). Other hidden disadvantages include that at the end of the lease, the traditional indigenous occupants and local farmers might be left with old and dying palm trees on their fields. The latter, after years of intense fertilizers and pesticides uses, will be rendered without much use for growing food crops. Highly depleted soils will be unsuited for traditional farming activities and any attempt to bring the nutrients back will require very costly interventions which the government is unlikely to support.

In the Municipality of Espanola several indigenous families have sold their land for a very low price, in the light of quick economic gains. This, in turn, has forced other families to sell their land when they found themselves surrounded by oil palm plantations.

Evidence from other provinces indicates that portions of existing oil palm plantations are overlapping with the ancestral domain of indigenous peoples (e.g. in Bukidnon, Sultan Kudarat, Augusan, Cotabato). If a company intends to carry out its activities in such areas, it should first obtain community consent through proper Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) processes.

As the ALDAW team has found out, oil palm companies have resorted to illegal strategies to gain access to land. In several cases, according to indigenous informants, the community received only partial or false information about the company's plans and real targets. Lacking this information, several communities did not initially oppose oil palm plantations. For instance an indigenous representative from Maasin (Brooke's Point) told ALDAW that, according to his own understanding, the company was only going to use a limited area of land for building a nursery. He was then surprised to discover that, aside from the nursery, a much bigger area was going to be used for oil palm plantations. Indeed, the land converted into oil palm is part of the ancestral territory of the lowland Palawan communities of Maasin.

In order to expand their oil palm plantations, companies have often succeeded in entering forest land covered by tenure arrangements such as Community Based Forest Management Agreements (CBFMA), risking that CBFM applications could be withdrawn if the prevalent economic activity of the area becomes agriculture rather than forestry, leaving its holders with no tenure over forestland and with no resource-use privileges.

Also, oil palm plantations have expanded in areas used by indigenous peoples for the

cultivation of local varieties of upland rice, root crops and fruit trees. This has greatly affected the diversity of traditional cultivation while making local communities even more dependent on purchased food.

Oil palm plantations have also expanded to those areas lying between the lowland rice fields and the upland forest. This area coincides exactly with the land that indigenous communities traditionally use for their swidden agriculture and to which they apply fallow periods between 4 to 7 years or more. During the fallow period, which is essential for the land to restore part of its nutrients, the area may appear to the eyes of non-experts as unused and unproductive land. In reality this is the land that indigenous farmers will use again after the fallow period is completed or when the soil has reached the minimal nutrient requirements for being cultivated again. Currently, the expansion of oil palm plantations into indigenous fallow land (benglay) is reducing the number of rotational areas needed by indigenous peoples to ensure the sustainability of their swidden cycle thus leading to irreversible genetic erosion, as well as to the disintegration of indigenous identity and worldviews.

Oil palm plantations in Palawan are already competing and taking over cultivated areas and peoples' territories, which have been sustaining local self-sufficiency. In short, a type of intensive agriculture (oil palm monocultures) benefitting better-off farmers, companies and entrepreneurs is taking over traditional farming land which have for generations ensured the livelihood of small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples.

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CERTIFICATION

- FSC: Certified land grabbing

The certification of industrial tree plantations by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) has served as a tool to legitimize the large-scale monoculture plantation model. The FSC's internationally recognized certification scheme is supposed to ensure consumers that the companies that have been awarded its "green" label practise "environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable" forest management.

WRM and other organizations and social movements have long denounced the sinister role played by the certification of models of production that are intrinsically unsustainable and demonstrably harmful, to both the environment and to local communities, as in the case of the FSC certification of monoculture tree plantations.

The establishment of these plantations, typically by big corporations, also represents one of the many "tentacles" of the phenomenon of land grabbing: these companies take over vast areas of land and displace local communities and their family- and community-based, diversified production practices, in order to replace them with "green deserts".

Those who work on these plantations have no stories to tell of their close, loving bonds with the land and the gifts it offers. Instead, their stories speak of exploitation and hardships. They become day labourers for the plantation companies, earning meagre salaries and enduring harsh working conditions. And nonetheless, these companies are certified.

- The case of Alto Paraná in Argentina

The tree plantation company Alto Paraná S.A. (APSA), a subsidiary of the Chilean corporation Arauco that has been operating in the province of Misiones, Argentina for more than a decade, is once again seeking FSC certification. An evaluation of the company's tree plantations, spanning 233,664 hectares, was conducted in March by consultants from the international organization Rainforest Alliance, who assessed environmental, silvicultural and socioeconomic aspects. This is the company's second attempt to obtain the FSC seal of approval, after a failed attempt in 2006.

Upon learning of this new certification bid, a group of professionals from the forestry and academic sectors, together with the Independent Producers of Puerto Piray (PIP), the Union of Producers of Puerto Libertad, researchers from Conicet, popular journalists from Misiones, and the Rural Reflection Group (GRR), prepared a report on the negative impacts of APSA's forest management practices, which they planned to submit to the certification auditors, Freddy Peña and Ariel Zorrilla.

The report (<http://nosonbosques.com.ar/noticias/abajo-el-maquillaje-verde/#more-444>) stresses that there is nothing "environmentally appropriate" about the massive use of more than 100,000 kilograms of toxic agrochemicals a year, prepared with water from the local streams of Misiones. Nor can this description be applied to the company's deforestation of tens of thousands of hectares of land for the establishment of its plantations, often in violation of the province's environmental legislation.

Nor can the replacement of the province's most fertile farmlands with endless plantations of pine and eucalyptus, managed with machines and chemicals, be considered "socially beneficial" – not only because of the unemployment generated, but also because these plantations prevent the continued cultivation of food crops on family farms, cause human health impacts as a result of pesticide spraying and pollen, lead to the disappearance of communities of small farmers, and limit the economic growth of the local population.

The report further emphasized that it is not "economically viable" for the province to depend on a single economic activity, heavily controlled by this one single company: while its pine trees grow and its sawmills and pulp mills yield ever higher profits, the people and environment of Misiones become increasingly impoverished.

Anthropologist Andrea Mastrangelo provided the auditors with information and publications she has authored, showing how labour is increasingly precarious, on cutaneous leishmaniasis as an unrecognized disease in the tree plantation sector, and on restrictions on the freedom of union organization by plantation workers. She also denounced other negative impacts of the pulp plantation industry related to land use and zoning, referring for example to a current federal court case involving the planting of pine trees within the borders of the Alecrín indigenous reservation in the department of San Pedro, and the displacement of the population caused by expansion of Arauco's industrial monoculture tree plantations, which affects not only small farmers but also forestry workers.

Mbya Guaraní indigenous communities in the province of Misiones held an Aty Ñeychyrô (Assembly of Chiefs) convened specifically to define their position on the FSC certification evaluation process. The declaration by the Mbya Guaraní communities, read before the Alto Paraná certifiers on March 13, states:

"Transforming our forest, rich in different animals, water and plants, into a green stain where

there is nothing but pine trees, where silence reigns because there are no animals, birds and fish, would profoundly damage us, it would lead to our devastation. When they destroy the forest to plant pines, or when they do nothing to replant the native trees in the places where they ripped out the ones that provided shade to the grandparents of our grandparents, they silently push us towards the cities, destroying our culture which dates back much, much longer than the interests of Alto Paraná.

“This company never approached our communities, except to clear the forest around them and plant pines. Our land, which once filled our lives with joy with every step, is now a desert of pine trees. Alto Paraná does not recognize that it is in indigenous territories, it does not give back the land, it does not acknowledge the damage it causes, which is easy to see in the case of Tekoa Alecrín.

“Why has this company just decided today to introduce itself to the communities, hoping to get them to sign an agreement without explaining its contents, seeking to take advantage of our good faith and trust? Where was Alto Paraná when intruders tried to invade the territory of Tekoa Alecrín? If it considered those lands to belong to it, why didn't it defend them? But the real owners of those lands did defend them: the Mbya Guaraní communities.

“This company brings only damage and suffering to our people. It only attempts to interact with us to protect its own interests. The wood that it sells is watered with the tears of our grandmothers and grandfathers who watched as the lapachos, the cedars, the timbós were toppled by chainsaws to be replaced by the foreign pine trees on our territories. We never thought of trees as money. For us, they are a very important part of our life. Without the forest, the Mbya cannot exist. The pine trees condemn our culture, and so do evil company owners.”

For their part, the Independent Producers of Piray (PIP), an organization created six years ago by some 200 families in Piray Kilómetro 18, Barrio Unión and Barrio Teresa (communities in the municipality of Puerto Piray, in the department of Montecarlo) also sent a statement to the FSC certification auditors, which was released publicly as well, and which states:

“We are not in agreement with the certification of Alto Paraná (APSA), because beyond the 70 metres which we have to live on, there is an endless sea of pine trees, and we feel like we are being drowned; because beginning in August and throughout the entire [Southern hemisphere] summer, the pollen from the blooming of the pine trees pollutes our atmosphere; because we breathe the contaminated air and the yellow powder is everywhere, on our tables, on our plates, in our beds, in our water tanks; because they fumigate with toxic agrochemicals near our homes; because they are making our children and older people sick: headaches, vomiting, dizziness, stomach pains, angina, conjunctivitis, bronchitis, asthma, allergies and miscarriages; because people are dying of cancer; because our animals are dying; because they pose a danger and a threat to future generations; because they evicted seven communities from kilómetros [settlements of small farmers in the municipality of Puerto Piray] that no longer exist. Those communities live on in our memory, they are part of our history. They were well-established communities. We do not want to leave. We want to live with dignity. We want to work the land, and produce healthy food.”

The families who make up the PIP added: “We want community development where the company is involved in order to ensure that other kilómetros do not disappear, to ensure the development of family farming, to produce and sell healthy food to Montecarlo, Eldorado and our beloved Puerto Piray, to strengthen our productive projects, to keep our young people

from leaving, and to defend our identity.”

- The case of Veracel Celulose in Brazil

Veracel Celulose is a joint venture of the Swedish-Finnish corporation Stora Enso and Norwegian-Brazilian company Fibria (formerly Aracruz). In March, 350 workers on its eucalyptus plantations in Eunápolis, in the state of Bahia, launched a strike to demand higher wages, which are currently below the legal minimum wage. According to the workers, the strike is the outcome of a longstanding situation of exploitation and lack of dialogue, and they have staged it to demonstrate that they are prepared to take action and demand the respect of their rights.

The workers denounced that they must travel long distances every day to work in difficult-to-reach areas on the eucalyptus plantations, which means that in some cases they must set out as early as 3:00 a.m. and do not arrive back home until 9:00 p.m. But despite these long working days, Veracel only pays them for the eight hours they spend working on the plantation.

The work they carry out also causes serious health impacts. According to the workers, chainsaw operators often suffer injuries caused by the high levels of vibrations from inadequate equipment, which must be operated on uneven terrain marked by dips and slopes. They are also forced to fulfil “excessive production quotas, 31 m² per hour, which means cutting around 120 trees an hour,” reported one of the workers.

In the meantime, the long distances they must travel in vehicles with no air conditioning along dusty unpaved roads give rise to a high incidence of allergies and respiratory disorders.

Yet neither the poor working conditions, nor the low wages, nor the concentration of land ownership entailed by the business of monoculture tree plantations for pulp production have prevented Veracel from obtaining the FSC “green” label that eases the conscience of its customers.

For those who live with the reality of the eucalyptus plantation and pulp mill companies in the state of Bahia, the FSC label is like a bad joke. It is a farce. It is a guarantee for the impunity of rights violations. It represents the certification of cruelty, of social, environmental and cultural injustices. As for those who purchase products with this label, are they victims of deception, or are they accomplices?

FSC certification also supports land grabbing by these companies, which use the “green” label to obtain the licenses and permits they need to expand their operations – and thus the negative impacts of their activities – from government authorities. For all these reasons, there is an urgent need for a large-scale campaign against FSC certification and other false seals of “sustainability” for industrial tree plantations.

The case of Argentina is based on reporting by journalists Sebastián Korol of Revista Superficie, a publication based in the province of Misiones, and María Inés Aiuto, a member of the anti-tree plantation campaign by Grupo de Reflexión Rural (Rural Reflection Group), an organization in the province of Corrientes.

The case of Brazil is based on information provided by CEPEDDES, email

cepedes@cepedes.org.br, and the article “Trabalhadores da Veracel em greve alegam que recebem salários abaixo do mínimo regido pela CLT”, by Irlete Gomes, 22/03/2013, available at <http://www.girodenoticias.com/noticias/geral/3019/trabalhadores-da-veracel-em-greve-alegam-que-recebem-salarios-abaixo-do-minimo-regido-pela-clt-22-03-2013/>

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OIL

- Land grab for oil: The crude reality of oil drilling in the Niger Delta

While land grabbing is generally associated with the taking over of land for large scale monoculture plantations, grown for export-crops or conservation projects like REDD, the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta have faced another form of land grab – the loss of their territories, traditional lands, fertile mangrove and river systems to the oil companies that have been devastating the region for decades. A recent visit of EJOLT participants (see EJOLT blog <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/04/crude-justice-ecocide-in-the-niger-delta/>) to the villages of Goi and Bodo City in Ogoniland provided a shocking reminder of the cost that communities pay when they live in the vicinity of some of the most profitable oil drilling in the Niger Delta. The visit also involved experiencing the dignity and determination with which Ogoni communities have for decades been demanding justice and that oil companies clean up the oil they have let spill into mangroves, onto fields; oil that has seeped into the soil and crept into the tissue of people condemned to living with oil destruction on an unimaginable scale, and from which they derive no benefit but for which they bear an immense cost. “They only came to put a sign saying this land is contaminated, and to keep off”, comments a 58 year old resident who had to leave his village after an oil spill rendered life in the village unviable. “They didn’t clean up anything. Nobody knows the levels of contamination and pollution in our communities.”

The decade long struggle for justice continues, because the gross injustice inflicted on the communities in the Niger Delta continues: Each year, the equivalent of one Exxon Valdez tanker full of crude oil is allowed to spill into the mangroves, rivers and soils of the Niger Delta. In volume terms, the oil that spilled into the Gulf of Mexico caused by the explosion that wrecked BP’s Deepwater Horizon rig in 2010 was less than the oil leaking out of the Niger Delta’s network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms every year. And yet, these spills have been happening almost unnoticed, with no major headlines in international press devoted to them, and with companies, governments and consumers of Niger Delta oil preferring ignorance over action for justice to those affected by the decades of oil spills. Without this international attention, the cost to people, communities, to rivers, mangroves and the soils on which food continues to be grown remain invisible to those of us who use the products of oil that shape everyday life, in particular in the centers of consumption.

Oil spills have been occurring with increasing regularity in the Niger Delta as the oil infrastructure ages but they have been a constant reality that accompanied oil extraction since Shell started pumping oil in Nigeria in the late 1950s. “Since large scale oil exploration started in the Niger Delta in 1958, there have been over 4,000 oil spills in the Niger Delta – and not one of them has been cleaned up”, explained Godwin Ojo, director of Environmental Rights Action, who support communities affected by the destruction from oil drilling in Ogoniland. Over 400 km of ageing, often rusty pipelines at risk of rupture, several hundred drilling sites, many poorly dismantled after they are taken out of production, more than a hundred gas flaring

sites - formally banned in 1984 and declared "unconstitutional" by the Nigerian supreme court in 2005 yet they continue burning because it is cheaper for the companies to flare rather than capture the gas and turn it into electricity – security forces, often armed and involved in conflicts that claim the lives of hundreds of people annually, have turned into a daily struggle what used to be a good life. A life of plenty in a region where fertile mangroves (see Bulletin 151) provided food for both subsistence and for sale at the local markets. "Life expectancy in Nigeria hovers above 50 years, nearly 20 years below the world average. But in the communities around the oilfields, it is 41 years. A United Nations Environment Program report on the Ogoni region found water with 900 times the safe level of carcinogens. Local complaints of health problems include respiratory diseases and skin lesions, drinking wells poisoned with benzene. With acid-rain corroding the tin roofs of the houses, even the rainwater is too toxic to drink. "There was always food", several residents remarked. Throughout the delta, communities continued with their traditional agriculture of rice, cassava, yams and sugar. They fished periwinkles, crabs, other seafood and fish from the creeks. "But when the spills happened, life in the mangroves was destroyed. The choice we have today is to eat nothing or to eat food we know will kill us", a villager in the now abandoned village of Goi remarked.

The 'spills' that residents of the now abandoned village of Goi refer to are the 2008-09 oil spills when "oil was left shooting into the air for more than two months, in fountains up to two storeys high." Over five years later, the fishing boats still sit along the shores of Bodo creek in Bodo City, as if the spill had happened recently. Residents expected Shell, the company whose pipelines ruptured and caused the spill, to stop the oil spewing and clean up the damage so the boats could be taken out to fish again soon. But the clean-up never happened, and a group of villagers filed a case against the Anglo-Dutch transnational Shell in a Dutch court (see Bulletin 187). On 30 January 2013, the Dutch court ruled that Shell was responsible for polluting the Niger Delta, affecting heavily the lives of people at Ikot Ada Udo in Akwalbom State. But the court, inexplicably also ruled that in the case brought by villagers of Goi – who had suffered from exactly the same, and possibly even more extensive environmental destruction as the people in Ikot Ada Udo - Shell was not liable because supposedly Shell had done enough to maintain their pipelines and that the spills were the result of 'sabotage' by people that were stealing oil. "When Shell eventually came we thought they would say something reasonable. But the reverse was the case. We only decided to go to the court system by the time we were pressed to the wall. We have now decided that justice must be done to that legal battle." And a fellow villager remarked: "We have not got justice but at least our case has been heard." Villagers in Goi and the organisations that supported their case are preparing to appeal the decision in favour of Shell, so they will not only be heard but also receive justice.

Seeing, smelling and feeling the coarse coat of crude oil that countless spills have spewed over the fertile soils and mangroves surrounding Goi, Bodo City and the many other communities affected by the destruction that oil has brought to the Niger Delta, reinforced the need to strengthen the call spearheaded by the OilWatch network to "Leave Oil beneath the Soil, Coal in the Hole and Tar Sands in the Land" – not just because doing otherwise will deny future generations the ability to avoid runaway climate change, but also because communities like those in Bodo City and the Ghost village of Goi have for far too long been bearing the cost so "companies such as Shell continue to reap some of the highest profits of any corporation in the world in 2012", some US\$28.6bn or about US\$2m an hour.

Article based on:

- (1) Notes from WRM visit to villages of Goi, Bodo City in March 2013
- (2) Getting away with Ecocide: Shell in the Niger Delta. Leah Temper. EJOLT - Environmental Justice Project <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/04/crude-justice-ecocide-in-the-niger-delta/>
- (3) UNEP Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland.
<http://www.unep.org/disastersandconflicts/CountryOperations/Nigeria/EnvironmentalAssessmentofOgonilandreport/tabid/54419/Default.aspx>

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REDD

- Brazil: Open letter from Acre challenges legitimacy of REDD+ “consultation” in California

Organizations and individuals in the state of Acre and other states in Brazil sent an open letter this month to the governor of California and the California REDD Offset Working Group, challenging the legitimacy of a “consultation” carried out – through three workshops in California and over the internet, in English – regarding the inclusion of REDD offsets, primarily from Acre, in California’s carbon trading scheme. As of April 30, 2013, the working group will consider this “consultation” to be concluded and will submit its recommendations to the government of California.

The initiative to include REDD offsets in California’s cap-and-trade system stems from an agreement signed in 2010 by the governors of California (USA), Acre (Brazil) and Chiapas (Mexico), under which Acre and Chiapas would “supply” carbon offset credits generated by REDD+ projects, while polluting industries in California would benefit from these credits by purchasing the “right” to continue polluting.

The open letter from Acre and Brazil stresses, first of all, that this entire process is illegitimate: “As organizations and activists based in Acre and Brazil, (...) we are writing to you to express our opposition to the proposal of the government of the U.S. state of California to ‘reduce’ its CO2 emissions through the acquisition of REDD+ offsets from the states of Acre and Chiapas, instead of pursuing emissions reductions in California itself. In addition to our opposition to this proposal, we also challenge the legitimacy of the ‘consultation’ process underway in California with regard to this matter, due to the lack of effective participation by the communities in Acre and Chiapas who depend on the forests to maintain their way of life and will be directly affected by this REDD+ proposal.”

The open letter also emphasizes that the “green” image presented to the world of Acre as a model of “sustainability” and of how REDD+ projects can be carried out in tropical rainforests – often using the figure and ideals of Chico Mendes to back up this image – is in fact a far cry from the reality in the state. “REDD+ will not effectively reduce global carbon emissions, and much less the destruction of the world’s forests; it deepens existing social and environmental injustice; it criminalizes the traditional practices of forest peoples and communities; and it is a profoundly neocolonial initiative.”

The letter recommends that the government of California cancel the illegitimate consultation process currently underway, “unless it undertakes, in the near future, a wide-reaching

consultation with the parties affected in the territories from which it plans to obtain REDD offset credits.”

A large group of international organizations and individuals have endorsed the open letter and have sent a statement of solidarity, which declares: “Decisions regarding REDD+ legislation or programmes already do and will in future affect forest peoples' way of life. Given that such meaningful participation was absent from REDD+ processes in Acre or during the elaboration of recommendations to the government of California in this matter, we urge you not to include REDD offset credits into the California carbon trading scheme.”

The statement continues: “We also share the additional concerns on the REDD+ mechanism and support the demand made in the Open Letter that California should not include REDD offsets credits from Acre in its carbon trading scheme, and rather engage in efforts to reduce emissions at home.”

The full texts of the open letter and statement of solidarity are available at <http://wrm.org.uy/subjects/REDD/AcreSolidarity-OpenLetter.pdf> and <http://wrm.org.uy/subjects/REDD/OpenLetter-Acre.pdf>

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- Violation of the right to be consulted paves way for more REDD land grabbing

REDD has been contentious ever since it was presented during UN climate talks in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007 as a way to supposedly reduce deforestation. In addition to pointing out that REDD as a carbon market instrument is a false solution to climate change, many indigenous peoples in particular have expressed concern that REDD will undermine indigenous peoples' rights, become a mechanism that divides communities and will put indigenous peoples' control over and access to their traditional territories at risk. Despite many promises by international institutions like UN-REDD and the World Bank's FCPF to respect indigenous peoples' rights and to ensure 'FPIC', 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent' in their REDD initiatives, and to apply 'safeguards', the risks many indigenous peoples warned about already in 2007 are becoming reality. In Panama and Honduras indigenous peoples' organisations have exposed how rights to 'FPIC' have been violated in national REDD processes.

In Panama, no guarantees for respecting indigenous rights

On 27 February 2013, Traditional Authorities of the Indigenous Peoples in Panama, through their Coordinating Body, COONAPIP, withdrew from the UN-REDD initiative in Panama. In a letter announcing the withdrawal, COONAPIP explains that UN-REDD “does not currently offer guarantees for respecting indigenous rights” or “the full and effective participation of the Indigenous Peoples of Panama”.

In his 10 March 2013 letter in support of the COONAPIP decision to withdraw from the UN-REDD process in Panama, Jesus Amadeo Martinez, Senior Advisor to the Central American Indigenous Council (Consejo Indígena de Centro América – CICA), writes that “In my capacity as Senior Advisor of the CICA, I worry that the actions of the UN-REDD program in Panama with COONAPIP are not isolated, but form a new practice of racial intolerance and

discrimination with Indigenous Peoples and organisations.”

In Honduras, REDD facilitates loss of territories and increasing landgrabbing

Honduras was one of the six countries to present its national REDD plans to the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility in March 2013. The experience with the preparation of the documents in Honduras resembles those in many other countries where indigenous peoples and local community organisations have been side-lined in the process.

In a statement of 3 April 2013, OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña) writes that “Once again the state of Honduras violates the right to consultation granted in the ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to join the program on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) by excluding the Garifuna peoples of the consultation process in the development of the so-called R-PP (Readiness Preparation Proposal) funded by the Partnership Facility Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF for its acronym in English) and the UN-REDD Programme.” (original: Una vez más el estado de Honduras viola el derecho a la consulta consignado en el Convenio 169 de la OIT y en la Declaración de Naciones Unidas sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, al incorporarse al programa de Reducción de las Emisiones Causados por la Deforestación y Degradación del Bosque (REDD+) al haber excluido al pueblo Garífuna del proceso de consulta en la elaboración del denominado R-PP (Readiness Preparation Proposal) financiado por el Fondo Cooperativo para el Carbono de los Bosques (FCPF por sus siglas en inglés) y el Programa ONU-REDD.”)

OFRANEH further exposes how in “the draft R-PP dated September 2012, OFRANEH is mentioned as ‘The organization that shapes indigenous policies in the Garifuna territories, is involved in advocacy and ensures the rights of the peoples’”; that the same draft also includes the organization's name as participant of capacity and pre-consultation workshops that ONFRANEH was never made aware of nor participated in, and how in the R-PP of March 2013 that was presented to the FCPF meeting in Washington, OFRANEH is not even mentioned anymore as the organization representing the Garifuna peoples. (original: En el borrador del denominado R-PP de septiembre del 2012 , la OFRANEH es mencionada como "La organización que dicta las políticas indígenas en los territorios Garífunas, hace incidencia política y vela por el derecho del pueblo", además en el mismo borrador se incluye a la organización en los talleres de socialización y preconsulta que nunca fueron realizados. Como por arte de magia y sin haber contactado los funcionarios estatales o de Naciones Unidas a nuestra organización, en el R-PP de marzo del 2013 , la OFRANEH desaparece del documento como la organización representante del pueblo Garífuna.)

In its 2005 report, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) documented among othersthe connection between politicians and those who deforest in Honduras. Yet, the REDD plan presented to the World Bank FCPF fails to mention these links, or proposals for how to tackle this collusion that continues to result in forest loss. Instead, OFRANEH and others are concerned that REDD+ in Honduras will turn “into a plunder of indigenous peoples' territories”, and will facilitate the loss of territories and increase landgrabbing.

They point out that the same institution that now is involved in REDD, the World Bank, has for over a decade been promoting a controversial Property Law that was adopted by the Honduran state in 2004. A petition to repeal the law is currently pending before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The law poses a serious threat to communal

titling of indigenous peoples' territories and favour individual title of indigenous territories, a trend that indigenous peoples' associations have been concerned about in relation to REDD.

Article based on <http://ofraneh.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/redd-estado-de-honduras-y-onu-redd-violan-el-derecho-a-la-consulta/>, <http://www.kepa.fi/tiedostot/nota-coonapip-31-13-resmision-de-resolucion.pdf>, and <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2013/03/06/coonapip-panamas-indigenous-peoples-coordinating-body-withdraws-from-un-redd/>

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BRICS

- BRICS, development and land grabbing

In March 2013, the presidents of the so-called BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – met in Durban, South Africa. Surrounded by security barriers so that no one who would dare to protest could get near them, the presidents of these nations discussed a number of issues, including cooperation proposals.

One of the proposals most widely highlighted in coverage of the event was the creation of a BRICS development bank, with USD 50 billion in seed capital contributed in five equal parts by the bloc's member countries.

Experiences with development banks in countries like Brazil (BNDES) demonstrate that this type of bank promotes a vertical model of development, which benefits big corporations and contributes to land grabbing. In Brazil, for example, BNDES has intensively supported the expansion of millions of hectares of monoculture plantations of eucalyptus trees for the production of pulp for export and of sugar cane for export, as well as ethanol production. It has also heavily financed the beef export sector – driving deforestation for the expansion of cattle grazing, even in the Amazon – as well as the construction of hydroelectric dams and power plants, mining, and the oil industry. The latter has undergone major growth in the very midst of the global environmental and climate crisis, and has led to unprecedented “land” grabbing off Brazil's shores, as well as generating pollution that threatens the livelihoods of thousands of small-scale artisanal fisherfolk.

Dozens of non-governmental organizations in Durban during the meeting also expressed concern over the transparency of the development bank initiative, given that BNDES is currently one of the least transparent banks, and lacks any sort of social policy aimed at preventing financing for projects that contribute to land grabbing, as well as other forms of social and environmental injustice.

One organization, Oilwatch International, issued a statement stressing that although the BRICS countries pretend to be “standing up” to a world dominated by the wealthy countries, the idea of BRICS actually came from Goldman Sachs, the powerful investment banking and commodities firm based in the world financial centre of New York. One could therefore conclude that this grouping of countries was not created to benefit and effectively involve the people of these countries, but rather in the interests of a handful of corporations, in the BRICS countries themselves and in the North.

Oilwatch notes that, in fact, the big corporations in the BRICS countries are no different from

the multinational corporations of the North: they apply the same logic and the same methods, and seek to extend their reach both inside and outside their own national borders. Countries are viewed as markets, and their populations as a source of labour, which is sought out where it is cheapest. Countries are not considered territories, with peoples, identities and cultures. But it is these peoples who suffer and will continue to suffer the consequences of both the “greater cooperation” among the BRICS countries and the activities of a new development bank, while the big corporations in these countries take over more and more territories to drive up their profits.

As Oilwatch observes, “Of late, land grabs have supplemented the grabbing of other African resources. Through these grabs, BRICS and similar blocs seek to entrench failed neoliberal agendas as well as an already obsolete fossil fuel- and dirty energy-driven civilization. The BRICS do not seem to realize that the destination of their planned drive on wheels of markets driven by dirty investments and the grabbing of resources is a brick wall.”

With regard to the proposal to create a BRICS development bank, Oilwatch maintains, “Such a BRICS Bank could only exacerbate the social, economic and environmental chaos already caused in part by multilateral financing. Existing development finance institutions in BRICS countries – like South Africa’s Development Bank of Southern Africa or BNDES, the Brazilian development bank – offer sobering lessons. Oilwatch International denounces the contraption called BRICS and all other groupings set up to drive divisive and exploitative agendas around the world. We believe the time has come for the peoples of the countries in groups such as the BRICS, G8, and G20 to demand that their elected leaders shun those harmful blocs that destroy formal multilateral spaces and plunge the world into violence and deeper crises as evidenced by spiralling climate change, financial, economic and food crises.”

This article is based on the following sources:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2013/03/130327_brics_paralelo_social_mm_rc.shtml; and the Oilwatch International statement issued on 26 March 2013: “BRICS to sustain the oil-based system”, available at <http://www.oilwatch.org/en/home/132-several/documents-en/568-brics-to-sustain-the-oil-based-system>www.oilwatch.org/en/home/132-several/documents-en/568-brics-to-sustain-the-oil-based-system

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WORLD BANK

- The World Bank and land grabbing

In an international context of growing privatization and concentration of wealth, a process that is also manifested through land grabbing, financial actors are seeking out mechanisms that will enable their speculative activities. The circulation of enormous amounts of money is needed, and the international financial institutions and multilateral banks have fulfilled this role.

The World Bank has been instrumental in the promotion of policies that have led to the current state of affairs, in which deforestation worsens, climate change continues, and social inequalities grow deeper.

In terms of forests, the World Bank has promoted a system of trade concessions on the one

hand, and “forestry” activities – which have primarily taken the form of industrial monoculture tree plantations – on the other. Both policies have served the transformation of wood into a market commodity, with devastating consequences both for the world’s forests and for the people who depend on them. In the meantime, other types of policies, such as the privatization of electricity generation, for example, have also acted as a factor in deforestation, in places like Zambia, as we denounced all the way back in 2001 (see WRM Bulletin 50): the increase in electricity prices resulting from privatization pushed local people to turn to charcoal for energy, leading to its commodification and thus driving the clearing of forests as more and more trees were cut to produce charcoal.

Although the World Bank has provided copious sums of money to finance activities involving the acquisition of land, at the recent Annual World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, held in April, the World Bank Group issued a statement in which the group’s president, Dr. Jim Yong Kim, declared that it shares the concerns about the risks associated with large-scale land acquisitions (1).

But this concern expressed by the World Bank is not reflected in what has been and continues to be its line of action.

The bank claims to be committed to promoting policies that “recognize all forms of land tenure,” yet as Oxfam points out (2), its programmes have resulted in the loss of land and livelihoods for vulnerable communities in countries like Cambodia and Guatemala, and to conflicts in Cambodia, the Philippines and Panama, sometimes due to the promotion of private and individual land tenure, to the detriment of collective demands for the recognition of communal territories.

To refresh our memories regarding the leading role played by the World Bank in the current process of land grabbing, we could take a look at a 2010 report from GRAIN (3), which reveals that the Bank’s commercial investment arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), is a major investor in private equity firms that are buying up rights to farmland, while its Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) is providing land grab projects with political risk insurance.

Based on information from the World Bank itself, GRAIN reports that MIGA put up 50 million dollars as cover for 300 million dollars in investments by Chayton Capital, a UK-based private equity firm that invests in farmland in southern Africa. MIGA’s role in protecting farmland investments has also been crucial for firms like British hedge fund SilverStreet Capital. If problems arise, “you’ll have the World Bank on your side,” one of the fund’s chief investment officers stated.

As we noted earlier, the World Bank claims to be concerned about land grabs. But do its new initiatives reflect this preoccupation? The Bretton Woods Project looked at the current priorities that are actually indicated by the Bank’s new initiatives, such as the announcement in late September 2012 of a contribution of 1.2 million dollars to support 10 countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia “that are adopting, or are considering the adoption of agricultural biotechnology.” These funds would be used to help the countries “make their biosafety regulations more efficient and harmonised” (4). This implies the insertion of these countries into an industrial agricultural model based on chemical and biotechnological inputs and large-scale production, which leads to farming without farmers. It implies greater appropriation by big capital. It implies increased concentration of land ownership and land grabbing.

Along these same lines, the World Bank is developing a programme called “Doing Business in Agriculture”, which has received official backing from the G8 and aims to stimulate reforms in the legal and regulatory environment to enable the development of agribusiness.

Meanwhile, in its October 2012 report “Africa can help feed Africa”, the World Bank advised Africa to remove trade barriers, based on the argument that a competitive food market will help poor people most. Does market liberalization actually benefit the most disadvantaged?

GenderAction, in its report “Gender, IFIs and Food Insecurity Case Study: Zambia” (5), noted that in the second half of the 1980s, the World Bank and other international financial institutions (IFIs) pushed the Zambian government to adopt neoliberal structural adjustment policies including trade liberalization, the privatization of state enterprises, and the removal of government subsidies and price controls, claiming that these measures would reduce poverty. In fact, however, the country’s economic growth stagnated, and these policies led to a deterioration in public service delivery, which hurt small farmers who were ill-prepared to face the challenges and exploit the supposed emerging market opportunities that come with market liberalization. The neoliberal policies adopted were particularly devastating for rural women, whose earnings decreased while unemployment rates and food prices rose, contributing to an increase in food insecurity in Zambia. In addition, a growing shift to individual land ownership resulting from the process of “modernization” and commercialization led to the marginalization of women who did not have the right to land ownership, despite carrying out the majority of Zambia’s agricultural work. Even though the government eventually abandoned these policies, the damage had already been done.

In October 2012, Oxfam International called on the World Bank to freeze all lending across the World Bank Group to projects that involve or enable agricultural large-scale land acquisitions, and to review its policies and procedures in order to ensure the rights of small-scale food producers, women and other marginalized groups to the land and the natural resources on which they depend (6). According to Oxfam, since 2008, 21 communities have presented formal complaints to the World Bank over violations of their land rights, despite the enormous difficulties faced by a community in initiating processes like these, which are costly, require the involvement of trained technical personnel, and can be extremely time consuming.

The World Bank has played a decisive role in turning agriculture into an industry, and promoting the ever increasing incorporation of natural goods into the market. Everything seems to indicate that it remains faithful to this role today, and continues to facilitate land grabs that represent great business opportunities for capitalists but greater dispossession for rural communities.

(1) “World Bank Group: Access to Land is Critical for the Poor”, World Bank Group press release, 8 April 2013, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/04/08/world-bank-group-access-to-land-is-critical-for-the-poor>

(2) “The World Bank and land grabs”, Hannah Stoddart, Oxfam GB, 15 April 2013, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2013/04/the-world-bank-and-land-grabs>

(3) “World Bank report on land grabbing: beyond the smoke and mirrors”, GRAIN, September 2010, <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4021-world-bank-report-on-land-grabbing-beyond-the-smoke-and-mirrors>

(4) “Call for freeze on World Bank ‘land grabs’”, Bretton Woods Project, www.brettonwoodsproject.org/art-571586

(5) “Gender, IFIs and Food Insecurity Case Study: Zambia”, GenderAction,

<http://www.generation.org/program/food/case/zambia.html>

(6) “Our Land, Our Lives’: Time out on the global land rush”, Oxfam International,
<http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/redactie/Downloads/Rapporten/bn-land-lives-freeze-041012-en%20%5Bembargoed%5D.pdf>

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GE TREES

- Genetically Engineered Eucalyptus Plantations Threaten Communities and Forests Around the World

In the United States, the US Department of Agriculture, which oversees the approval and release of GMOs in the US, has recently begun the process of legalizing the release of the very first genetically engineered (GE) forest tree in the US – a eucalyptus hybrid genetically engineered to be freeze tolerant. It will not, however, only impact forests and communities in the US, but all over the world.

The USDA has been a revolving door with the infamous GMO giant Monsanto. Many staff at the USDA once worked for Monsanto. As a result, the USDA has never rejected a GMO plant that industry has sought commercial approval for.

In January 2011, GE tree company ArborGen requested USDA permission to sell billions of genetically engineered freeze tolerant eucalyptus clones for vast plantations across South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

ArborGen also has many staff that come from Monsanto. Their former CEO, Barbara Wells, was previously the head of Monsanto’s RoundUp Ready GMO Soy Division in Brazil for 18 years.

The USDA has recently begun accepting public comments for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on ArborGen’s request to commercially release GE eucalyptus trees. This is the first time the USDA has ever prepared a full EIS on a GE plant without being forced to through a lawsuit. This indicates that the USDA knows that GE eucalyptus trees will have significant and dangerous impacts on the environment.

But this environmental impact statement is also the first step of the USDA process to approve GE eucalyptus trees.

Living Firecrackers

Eucalyptus trees are already documented as an invasive species in California and Florida. ArborGen has engineered them to be freeze tolerant, enabling them to survive temperatures down to 16°F – vastly expanding the range where they could invade. Due to their invasive nature, The Charlotte Observer called them “the kudzu of the 2010s.” Kudzu is the infamous vine that was introduced into the US in 1876 and has now taken over three million hectares of land across the same states where GE tree plantations are planned. It completely covers the landscape, smothering existing vegetation and swallowing any structures in its way.

But there is one important difference between invasive eucalyptus trees and invasive kudzu

vines. Eucalyptus trees are highly flammable. They have been called “living firecrackers” due to their explosive flammability in dry conditions.

A catastrophic eucalyptus wildfire in Australia in 2009 moved at speeds over 100 kilometers per hour and killed 200 people.

Eucalyptus plantations deplete ground water and can even worsen droughts. The US Forest Service points out that GE eucalyptus trees will use twice as much water as native forests.

Green Deserts

Non-native GE eucalyptus trees provide no habitat for wildlife. Threatened and endangered species could become extinct if millions of acres of GE eucalyptus plantations are developed.

In Brazil, eucalyptus plantations are called “green deserts” because they devastate biodiversity.

GE eucalyptus trees are not yet legalized. We can stop this irreversible environmental catastrophe before it occurs. But we need to act now.

But these frankentrees are not just a threat to the US. If GE eucalyptus trees are perfected here, they could be exported all over the world. Because they are freeze tolerant, they could grow where conventional eucalyptus could not. Thus the disaster of eucalyptus plantations could spread further North, South and to higher elevations – to ecosystems and communities previously untouched by the disaster of eucalyptus plantations.

Why GE eucalyptus? In the US, the main reason for developing GE eucalyptus trees is for biomass –to burn them for electricity production. Some will also be digested into liquid biofuels. ArborGen’s parent company Rubicon projects sales of half a billion GE eucalyptus seedlings every year for bioenergy plantations across the US South.

In the UK, coal-fired power plants are being converted to burn wood. Much of the wood they will burn will be imported from the US and elsewhere. Forests and communities are being threatened by schemes to turn wood into electricity under the guise of “renewable energy.”

But the rapidly escalating demand for so-called “bioenergy” is already driving a massive global land grab as communities are pushed off of their lands to make way for plantations of oil palm, jatropha, soy or other monocultures. With the addition of GE eucalyptus plantations for wood-based bioenergy, this land grab will only intensify, threatening some of the last forests and forest dependent communities. It must be stopped.

In late May, we will be confronting the GE trees industry at the Tree Biotechnology 2013 Conference in Asheville, NC. This is a bi-annual global gathering of researchers, industry representatives and students who come together to advance biotechnology in trees. We are organizing a series of protests, teach-ins, press conferences and other events in order to raise widespread public awareness about the dangers of GE trees, and remind researchers that there is widespread public opposition to their dangerous research.

To learn more about the campaign; to sign on as an organization to our call for a global ban on the release of GE trees into the environment, go to: <http://nogetrees.org>

By Anne Petermann, Global Justice Ecology Project, e-mail: annepetermann@gmail.com,
<http://globaljusticeecology.org>

See also the comments sent by WRM to the US authorities asking them not to release GE freeze tolerant trees at [http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/GMTrees/Comment by the WRM on the Petition ArborGen.html](http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/GMTrees/Comment%20by%20the%20WRM%20on%20the%20Petition%20ArborGen.html)

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PEOPLES IN ACTION

- No REDD in Africa Network launched at the World Social Forum

Outraged by the rampant land grabs and neocolonialism of REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest degradation), Africans at the World Social Forum in Tunisia took the historic decision to launch the No REDD in Africa Network and join the global movement against REDD.

“REDD is no longer just a false solution but a new form of colonialism,” denounced Nnimmo Bassey, Alternative Nobel Prize Laureate, former Executive Director of ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria. “In Africa, REDD+ is emerging as a new form of colonialism, economic subjugation and a driver of land grabs so massive that they may constitute a continent grab. We launch the No REDD in Africa Network to defend the continent from carbon colonialism.”

In the UN-REDD Framework Document, the United Nations itself admits that REDD could result in the “lock-up of forests,” “loss of land” and “new risks for the poor.”

REDD originally just included forests but its scope has been expanded to include soils and agriculture. In a teach-in session at the World Social Forum Tunis, members of the La Via Campesina, the world’s largest peasant movement, were concerned that REDD projects in Africa would threaten food security and could eventually cause hunger.

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- Brazilian Amazon: Military incursion in the territory of the Munduruku people for construction of mega dam

The Eastern Amazon Forum (FAOR) of Brazil issued a public statement in April in support of the Munduruku indigenous people, in response to the recent invasion of their lands in Medio Tapajós, Itaituba.

This indigenous territory is the proposed site for the construction of the Tapajós Hydroelectric Dam Complex, despite the fact that Munduruku community leaders have repeatedly expressed their opposition to these plans. In late March, the federal government launched “Operation Tapajós”, sending in soldiers and armed police to ensure the completion of the studies needed to move ahead with the planned construction of 30 hydropower plants in the Tapajós River basin.

FAOR denounces the failure of the Brazilian government, congress and judiciary to uphold the international agreements it has signed, such as ILO Convention 169, which requires that indigenous peoples be consulted regarding any projects undertaken in their territories. The organization also called for the immediate withdrawal of the federal troops, as well as the suspension of the studies aimed at paving the way for the construction of the mega dam.

More information is available (in Portuguese) at <http://faor.org.br/?noticiald=1003>

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- Opposition to mining in Guatemala leads to repression and death

On March 17, several indigenous community leaders from the village of Montaña de Santa María Xalapán, located in southeastern Guatemala in the municipality of San Rafael Las Flores, were kidnapped. The following morning, it was reported that one of them, Exactación Marcos Ucelohabía, had been murdered. According to one of the survivors, “They accused him of opposing the mining company, and said they would kill him.”

This situation has further aggravated an already extremely tense situation in the community, which has been waging a hard-fought battle for five years in defence of its territory and against mining operations. This battle was initiated by local women’s organizations to raise awareness about the impacts of mining in the department of Jalapa, and as part of the historic struggle to recover their territory (see the video “Martes Negro en San Rafael” [Black Tuesday in San Rafael] at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je9XLpbvbdY>)

The Latin American Network of Women Defenders of Social and Environmental Rights (<http://www.redlatinoamericanademujeres.org/>) stands in solidarity with the Xinca indigenous women of the Association of Indigenous Women of Santa María Xalapán and calls on other national and international organizations to support their struggle.

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- Converting coal plans to burn biomass only replaces one disaster with another

The big coal burning utilities in the UK and elsewhere are trying to get around new EU sulphur dioxide regulations that would otherwise require them to shut down. DRAX, the UK’s biggest coal power station, seeks to convert half of their facility to burn wood pellets in place of coal, thus receiving subsidies for what is classified and supported lavishly as “renewable energy”.

DRAX plans would require burning pellets made from nearly 16 million green tonnes of wood every year, and other UK facilities (Tilbury B, Ironbridge, Drax, Eggborough, AlcanLynemouth) are following this course which in total would burn pellets manufactured from nearly 50 million green tonnes of wood annually. Almost all of this wood is to be imported given that UK’s total domestic wood harvest, for all purposes, is only about 10 million green tonnes per year. These utilities are seeking supplies of wood from around the globe, putting the future of forests at ever greater risk.

Organised by Biofuelwatch with the support of 16 other groups, a demonstration and rally outside the annual general meeting of DraxPlc, at the Grocers’ Hall in London, on last April

24, highlighted the impacts that Drax power station's plans to convert half of its generating capacity to biomass will have in terms of increased deforestation, land-grabbing and carbon emissions (<http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/drax-agm-targeted-over-biomass-conversion-plans/>).

Also, 48 non-UK organisations and networks worldwide have signed the Open Letter Converting coal plants to burn biomass only replaces one disaster with another (<http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/DRAX-AGM-signon.pdf>) demanding that "DRAX and other UK utilities should halt their conversion plans and UK government must reverse course to avert catastrophic impacts on forests, climate and people."

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- River in Guatemala "grabbed" by oil palm and sugar cane plantation owners

In Champerico, Guatemala, the Bolas River had completely disappeared, after it was diverted and dammed to provide water for oil palm and sugar cane plantations.

The loss of the river, which normally flows into the wetlands and mangrove forests of Champerico, severely affected the ecosystems and communities in the area. The communities fought back by protesting this "grabbing" of the river and creating a committee to look into the problem.

On April 9, community representatives of Champerico and local authorities determined the location where the Bolas River had been diverted: a dam had been constructed on the La Finca estate, where there are oil palm and sugar cane plantations. The committee proceeded to open part of the dam to release the river water.

The communities succeeded in returning the river to its natural course.

Reported by Carlos Salvatierra, secretary of Redmanglar Internacional, email <salvatierraleal@gmail.com>

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RECOMMENDED

- " 'Quick-fix' development gives away more than it gets back." Samuel Nguiffo, from the Center for the Environment and Development (CED) in Yaounde, Cameroon, gives an overview of land grabbing in Africa from a grassroots perspective. At <http://www.palmwatchafrica.org/land-giveaways-quick-fix-development/>

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- "Special Focus: REDD+", a blog site devoted to academic articles on REDD, with a critical focus put together by Tracey Osbourne, a professor of Political Ecology at the University of Arizona. At ppel.arizona.edu

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- “EJOLT Environmental Justice Project updates”, April 2013. At <http://us2.campaign-archive2.com/?u=19d3da1852472c315fcece5dd&id=1853241149&e=e8c7b5f4d4>

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- “Land concentration, land grabbing and people’s struggles in Europe,” a new report by European Coordination Via Campesina and Hands off the Land network which shows that land grabbing and access to land are a critical issues today in Europe, and also reveals that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidy scheme and other policies is implicated in a variety of ways. At http://www.eurovia.org/IMG/pdf/Land_in_Europe.pdf

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- “EU ETS myth busting: why it cannot be reformed and should not be replicated,” a report released by a group of 45 organisations busting the myths that are holding up the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS). At <http://scrap-the-euets.makenoise.org/eu-ets-myth-busting/>

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