

Open letter against tree monocultures – Brazil 2019

Public letter from Brazilian organizations to IUFRO – International Union of Forest Research Organizations- World Congress, which will take place from 29th September to 5th October 2019 in Curitiba, Brazil

In Brazil, a country with several biomes, each with forests and a wide diversity of plants, animals and human communities, a small group of companies and researchers, supported by the government, insist on the establishment of exotic tree monocultures for pulp and wood export, calling this practice “reforestation”.

This is false. Forests involve diverse and interdependent ecosystems, combining functions carried out by different sorts of animals, plants and fungi, interconnected through a multiplicity of biotic and abiotic factors. Among other things, forests are responsible for the production and reproduction of hydrologic cycles, with a crucial role in tropical areas, where the soils need a substantial cover of vegetation to store water and preserve springs. Large areas covered by a single tree species are not forests but monocultures that promote draughts and constitute “green deserts” in both the environmental, and social and cultural senses.

In this sense, tree monocultures represent a malefic model for communities and their territories. In Brazil, expansion of tree monocultures has destroyed the social fabric and expelled from the countryside peasants, indigenous, traditional peoples as well as traditional communities such as *quilombolas* and *gerazeiros*, among others. Invading lands, disrupting important local productive systems and destroying food production, putting at risk food security and the economic basis of these territories, this model not only sterilises soils but also, and mainly, has been eradicating founding aspects of national culture and memory, which depend on them. This is about the destruction of productive activities and environmentally friendly and historically adapted social habits which have co-evolved with the land, without any real compensation. Employment is not created, water sources are exhausted, the use of agrotoxins spreads illness, causing increasing instances of abortions and birth defects which exacerbate the crisis. This story is the same for each region, affecting primarily women, children and older people.

In the case of eucalyptus, impacts are happening faster, as current clones grow so fast that in certain places companies are cutting three-year-old trees. Public resources provided for research that subsidize these corporations show the unfairness of a system which concretely threatens the fundamental human rights of entire populations.

Brazil was the first country in Latin America to deregulate a genetically engineered (GE) or transgenic eucalyptus. The permit was obtained in 2015 by Suzano, the largest eucalyptus plantations company and one of the largest land-owners in the country. That transgenic eucalyptus underwent a genetic modification which resulted in faster growth, reducing the rotation cycle by 20%. This deregulation happened to serve the interests of capital, ignoring uncertainties about this technology’s environmental and socio-economic impacts. The introduction of higher productivity transgenic trees can lead to further expansion of tree monocultures in the country and, therefore, cause more and greater damage.

This genetically engineered eucalyptus contains a marker gene for antibiotic tolerance, gene npt-II, which can contaminate honey and other beekeeping products. Its health impacts are

unknown, and therefore it will cause an economic impact on hundreds of thousands of beekeepers, who will lose access to organic products on international markets. Currently other transgenic trees (another eucalyptus and citrus) are being assessed in Brazil with support from the CTNBio, the National Biosecurity Technical Commission.

To serve our population, the government should promote planting of diverse native trees, at a small scale, for multiple purposes and under local communities' control. It should encourage the adoption of agroecology-based models instead of benefiting transnationals which appropriate financial and tax incentives while destroying our peoples' and communities' possibilities of maintaining their livelihoods. It is important to highlight the fact that today we are facing a particularly dangerous and unique situation, with the president of the republic declaring himself an enemy of the natural environment and encouraging the destruction of the Amazon forest, as well as the *mata atlântica*, the *cerrado*, the *caatinga*, the *pantanal*, the *pampa* and the coastal-marine area, even threatening Brazilians who dare to defend the socio-eco-biodiversity so far conserved. All of these biomes are highly endangered by these governmental policies, that encourage agribusiness, mining and promote disdain for the rights of indigenous peoples and *quilombola* communities, among others. The government is dismantling the monitoring systems over these conserved territories, as well as environmental and labour legislations, while excluding civil society from decisions about these policies and encouraging the invasion of indigenous, peasant, *quilombola* and other traditional communities' territories. Furthermore, it is enabling people to carry weapons while spreading hatred against environmentalist and social movements, thus increasing the levels of violence in the cities and countryside.

All of this benefits large companies that profit from tree monocultures. The Bolsonaro administration exposed its complicity with these companies by announcing, this June, that the Ministry of Agriculture intends to support the expansion of tree monocultures in Brazil with more than two million hectares until 2030. It repeats the false argument that these plantations would help reduce the pressure over forests, which continue being destroyed to establish pasture for cattle and monocultures. In fact, the expansion of tree plantations is highlighted among the causes of destruction of conserved areas in all Brazilian biomes. The way the Brazilian government is handling this tragedy recently motivated a group of environmental and human rights lawyers to sue president Bolsonaro in the International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity and the environment.

However, since the first plantations appeared in Brazil, resistance has also appeared. Since then, men's and women's indignation is increasingly being met by the real poverty promoted by plantations: environmental, social, economic and spiritual poverty. While tree monocultures were expanding, many people united in the struggle against monoculture in the countryside, cities and universities. The International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations was created, and is a day when the people reaffirm they want to live in freedom and dignity in their lands, and not starving fenced by plantations. Aware of that we are rights holders, desire to live in dignity, with access to quality and food without agrottoxins, we reassert: **PLANTATIONS ARE NOT FORESTS!**

Despite these adverse times, we remain firm in the struggle against the green desert and all the monocultures which make Brazil a "paradise" for agrottoxin companies, at the expense of tragedies for rural workers. We reject ecocides and defend the rights of the communities, with their identities, their cultures, their ways of life, in their traditional territories and respecting the generations still to come. We support the communities who resist the advance of plantations,

who promote taking back and occupying territories ruined by tree monocultures. We repudiate all forms of persecution, criminalization, harassment, cooptation, belligerence and violence, encouraged and put in practice by companies, government and repressive organs. We emphasise that the struggles are just and necessary because the land must fulfill its social function. The people need the land for living well, and it is unacceptable that the interests of a few companies, some national and international investment funds and other actors would prevail over human rights and our people's history and culture, just to profit even more. We demand more action from the authorities, like the Public Prosecution Service and the Federal Police, in support of local peoples and populations, as well as of all groups and organisations acting in defense of their rights.

We reject the discourse according to which we need more tree monoculture plantations, falsely called "reforestation", to solve the serious problem of global warming. According to this false argument, tree monocultures would suck up from the atmosphere the CO₂ that causes global warming. In reality, the struggle against global warming demands that we stop burning products based on petroleum, coal and natural gas, as well as the protection of forests and vegetation which are characteristic for each biome, respecting also the rights of the populations who have conserved these environments for generations, in an interdependent relationship. We don't accept false solutions such as carbon plantations which, besides deepening the climate crisis, will have negative impacts on the populations living in the territories covered by these plantations.

IUFRO Congress

It is in this context that the XXV IUFRO World Congress will be held in Brazil (IUFRO stands for International Union of Forest Research Organizations). The event will take place between September 29th and October 5th, 2019 in Curitiba, state of Parana, bringing together companies, scientists, governmental agencies and representatives from the forestry sector. This year's motto is "forest research and cooperation for sustainable development". However, the "forest research" promoted by IUFRO focuses on encouraging industrial tree plantations, promoting transgenic trees and publicising false solutions to the climate crisis such as "carbon storage" in tree monocultures where the trees will be cut after a few years, and the carbon emitted again, returning to the atmosphere.

It is worth stressing that for FAO—the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization—one of the IUFRO sponsors, eucalyptus monocultures are forests! FAO has promoted an international definition of forests serving only the interests of logging and tree plantation industries. When FAO calls a "forest" a bunch of trees of just one species, it is despising biodiversity and its associated ecological systems, and opening the door for large scale monocultures, even genetically engineered, to be considered "forests" and used for greenhouse gas storage. By ignoring all relationships between plants and other living beings, including humans, which constitute a forest, FAO contributes to their invisibility and destruction, which is even worse if we consider the mission for which FAO was created in the first place: helping eliminate hunger and malnutrition and food insecurity in the world – two of the most serious impacts occurring where tree monocultures are established and expanded.

Another sponsor of this congress in Curitiba is the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council). Founded in 1993 as a response to concerns about global deforestation, the FSC is a forum which defines what would be a "good" forest management. It was initially presented to certify industrial

management of logging in forests. Then it included the certification of industrial tree plantations, with a jargon stating that these plantations would be environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable, capable to result in positive changes for local communities. But in fact, the FSC promotes a very useful greenwashing to tree monoculture companies. With this label, companies present themselves as environmentally and socially responsible companies, misleading consumers. This greenwashing promoted by the green certificate hides the fact that large scale eucalyptus monocultures, certified or not, that replace the native vegetation with plantations, are destroying communities and territories and, therefore, the life of the planet's biodiversity.

Finally, we reject the propaganda this first IUFRO World Congress in Brazil is disseminating about large scale tree monocultures. We reject the field trips to visit plantations and a series of technical "propaganda" sessions, included in the agenda, mystifying the false benefits and greenwashing the damage resulting from the Brazilian "forestry" model.

We also reject this event because it is organised by the current federal government of Brazil, which operates as an ally of corporations and promoting the destruction of forest, conserved areas and all the communities which live in and depend on these territories.

We further denounce that the forest fires, which have horrified the planet and hide the death of communities, the extinction of species and the destruction of cultures, are another consistent step for the advancement of capital over forests, especially soy and maize monocultures, and eucalyptus as well, leading to the destruction and desertification of the Brazilian Amazon region.

Plantations are not Forests! – Say no to the Green Desert!

Signed by:

Agapan

Amigos da Terra Brasil

Apa Sto Antonio

APISBIO

Associação Brasileira de agroecologia

BiomaBrasil

Campanha Nacional em Defesa do Cerrado

Centro de Estudos Ambientais (CEA)

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Comitê dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais do Pampa

FASE

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INGÁ - Instituto Gaúcho de Estudos Ambientais

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Movimento Ciência Cidadã
Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB)
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