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## [Brazil: Women impacted by eucalyptus plantations speak out](#)

World consumption of paper has exploded over the past 50 years. Only about 1/3 of paper production is used for writing and printing paper, most of it is used for advertising. And almost half of all paper produced is used for packaging.

For ensuring increasing paper consumption levels, huge areas of large scale tree plantations are being established in Southern countries by the pulp and paper industry. This industry is among the world's largest generators of air and water pollutants, waste products, and the gases that cause climate change. It is also one of the largest users of raw materials ranking first in industrial consumption of freshwater and fifth in industrial energy use globally.

Country after country land is appropriated by large, often foreign, corporate landowners, local communities are displaced by the fast-wood monoculture tree plantations that feed the pulp and paper industry. Serious social, environmental and economic impacts for local populations and ecosystems derive from them. Water resources are depleted and polluted by the plantations while soils become degraded.

European companies, aid agencies and institutions play a significant role in promoting the expansion of the pulp and paper industry in the South. Furthermore, paper consumption rates in Europe -together with the United States- are among the highest.

### **Feeding European markets**

While most of pulp for export production is based along the Atlantic coast, in recent times the pulp industry is expanding more intensively to the most Southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, called the "sul-rio-grandense Pampa" (grassland area of the state of Rio Grande do Sul). The Pampa landscape, characterized by grassland vegetation, with prevailing plain relief, and by denser, shrublike and tree vegetation in slopes and along streams, apart from the existence of swamps, is experimenting an extensive transformation where the native ecosystem is replaced with "green deserts": the eucalyptus monocultures.

**Since 2003, environmental licenses for eucalyptus plantations are being released on a precarious basis, breaching rules and without having completed an Environmental Zoning for Forestry activities in the State of Rio Grande do Sul.**

Three main actors moving to that region are: Aracruz Celulose, Votorantim Celulose Papel and the Swedish-Finnish Stora Enso. While Aracruz and Votorantim are Brazilian companies, the markets for their products are mainly European countries.

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## Daily subsistence at stake

The expansion of forestry activities have led to loss of productivity of land in different regions and put at stake the livelihoods of families who opt for staying in the rural areas. It has been necessary to use fertilizers more intensively in family farming.

*(In the past) It wasn't so necessary to plough so much the land, use fertilizers, and today you have to or you won't get anything. We planted rice because there were small ponds, where dairy cows were left to drink water. (...) It is difficult even to plant sweet potato and manioc; formerly we got them from one year to the other, now there are no more. (Woman worker of Herval).*

The family dairy production is becoming each and every time more unfeasible; given that production is not being collected close to the farm, it is necessary to transport milk to a more distant place. The awful condition of the roads, caused by the plantation company' trucks, makes it difficult and many times it even impedes the circulation of the truck that gathers the dairy production:

Water shortage is another outcome of monoculture eucalyptus plantations. In São José do Norte water does not have the same quality as in past times and there is water only in few places.

In other places, eucalyptus planted near farms have caused a barrier against the wind that prevents the circulation of air and enables flies to propagate thus contributing to infections and diseases.

Monk parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) generally live in forests. Upon their disappearance they found in eucalyptus a perfect place to build their nests in the highest branches where they are protected from the attack of their natural enemies and can easily find food in nearby corn crops. The few rural producers who still plant corn suffer the attack of parakeets causing many of them to desist from planting corn.

Predatory wild boars (*Sus scrofa*) have reproduced in an uncontrolled manner in RS and use the monocultures of eucalyptus as hideout and shelter.

Life has become harder for rural communities. But not only for them: many families who have been forced to sell their lands for pulp companies went to live in the cities. There, they face difficult conditions of daily subsistence, because many of them have low degrees of schooling and this makes it difficult to obtain a good job. Besides, there they are not able to have gardens for family subsistence. Women who go to the city generally end up obtaining jobs as maids in urban family houses:

*Poverty increases in cities because these people who sell their lands go to the outskirts. And they go to the city to do what? (Rural woman worker of Encruzilhada do Sul)*

## What jobs?

Plantations mostly offer jobs to men while the few opportunities open to women reinforce their role in services considered as inferior and less visible. Tasks developed by women for the pulp companies are almost insignificant and they may only work as cooks for the labourers who plant the eucalyptus.

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In Barra do Ribeiro the only source of employment that plantations provide for women are at the eucalyptus tree nursery.

Most women who work in the tree nurseries have tendonitis problems, causing injuries due to repetitive efforts. There have been also cases of serious skin allergies –presumably due to chemical products used at work.

When men leave to work in the eucalyptus plantations women usually become overburdened as they have to take care of the family and deal with traditional household chores without help. The women and the family are alone for a longer time and women need also to assume the tasks in the farm.

### **Violence due to plantations**

The expansion of eucalyptus monocultures with the arrival of foreign and unknown workers has promoted forms of sexual harassment as well as male chauvinist and sexist attitudes that have created situations of fear and insecurity for women and their families. This has obviously meant a setback in the independence and autonomy of rural women, thus contributing to a greater female disempowerment.

### **Loss of cultural identity and traditions**

During the workshop, one of the first impacts of eucalyptus industrial plantations narrated by women related to the loss of cultural identity because of the fact that they cannot live as a family of farmers. Difficulties are immense; public policies are not addressed to small farmers, to family farming, to agroecology. These difficulties contribute to the displacement of the rural population to the cities. This displacement, although not only due to forestry activities, causes the slow loss of local identity. With the exodus of families, many years of local knowledge related to the rural production where women have a significant role, disappear.

After the irruption of large-scale eucalyptus plantations the most visible change commented by all women at the workshop was the loss of medicinal plants of the Pampa, whose gathering is carried out by women. The tradition of gathering of the medicinal herb Macela (*Achyrocline satureioides*) --a plant used for digestive purposes-- in Rio Grande do Sul is being damaged with the expansion of the eucalyptus plantations in the field. Other medicinal plants will also be affected by the expansion of the eucalyptus, such as Espinheira-santa (*Maytenus ilicifolia*) --used in the treatment of gastritis and ulcer.

### **Resisting eucalyptus plantations**

In 2006, on International Women's Day, two thousand women of Via Campesina occupied before dawn the tree nursery of Aracruz Celulose in Rio Grande do Sul. In a sudden action, with lilac bandages on their faces, they destroyed thousands of seedlings of eucalyptus. The movement aimed at calling the attention of Brazilian public opinion to the impacts produced by monocultures of eucalyptus and pines on the people and local ecosystems. This demonstration had a very strong

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impact in Brazil and in the rest of the world.

In São José do Norte many rural families are “isolated” due to the plantations of pines and eucalyptus. However, they are resisting the sale of their lands.

In Encruzilhada do Sul, the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC) (Peasant Women Movement) is developing projects of strategies and resistance aiming at food sovereignty, as well as community gardens. They have also promoted debates in the community so as to clarify the problem of eucalyptus monocultures.

The participation of women in resistance movements targeted on land reform, food sovereignty, maintenance of families in rural areas, has altered their position or duties in the community. Women have transformed from invisible to visible, mainly by the direct action taken in Aracruz’s tree nursery in the municipality of Barra do Ribeiro in 2006. In March 8 2007, 1,300 women from Via Campesina, occupied four land holdings belonging to forestry corporations, to denounce that the green desert is stopping the agrarian reform and making peasant agriculture unfeasible. In the year 2008, again within the framework of International Women’s Day, 900 women, members of Via Campesina in Rio Grande do Sul occupied 21,00 hectares of monoculture eucalyptus plantations belonging to the Swedish-Finnish transnational company, Stora Enso, in the frontier zone with Uruguay. Women cut the eucalyptus and replaced them with native trees. The police then violently attacked the demonstration.

In every place plantation companies try to hinder the struggle against eucalyptus monocultures by interfering in local activities and life to create a good image of institutional social responsibility:

*These companies seem a large octopus with tentacles in all fields of society.*(Fisherwoman of São José do Norte)

Women are playing a leading role in the struggle against the expansion of tree monocultures. They have the potential to make “the new to happen”. Unification of the action of urban women with the action of rural women will strengthen the struggle against the expansion of mega projects of pulp companies in the sul-rio-grandense Pampa.