
Main initiatives to expand tree plantations in Latin America, Africa and Asia

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Years before governments adopted the Paris Agreement, international initiatives promising millions of hectares of reforestation and forest restoration were launched, supposedly to benefit the environment and local communities. Yet, not one example of reforestation at scale exists that has achieved the promised benefits for communities and the environment. The one experience that has "worked" is the planting of hundreds of millions of hectares of eucalyptus, pine, rubber and oil palm plantations — which the UN, governments and companies misleadingly call "planted forests." Analyzing international plans more carefully, is it clear that communities in countries where the "reforestation" and forest restoration plans now announced in connection with the Paris Agreement should be on high alert.

The Bonn Challenge (1) was launched in 2011 in an event sponsored by the German Ministry of Environment and the conservation organization IUCN—the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (2). According to its website, the Bonn Challenge is "a global effort to restore 150 million hectares of the world's deforested and degraded land by 2020(..)." The initiative emphasizes the importance of a "landscape approach" instead of a "limited approach." Promoters say that 124.32 million hectares have already been "pledged" for this purpose, and that the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests has endorsed the Bonn Challenge — thereby increasing its goal to no fewer than 350 million hectares and moving its deadline to 2030.

However, we cannot find a clear explanation on the Bonn Challenge's website of the kind of "restoration" that will take place. It is unclear whether this might be with monoculture tree plantations, remembering that there are no examples in the world of native "restoration" programs on the scale of millions of hectares. The only "reforestation" on this scale that "worked," has been the planting of tens of millions of hectares of monoculture eucalyptus, pine, acacia, rubber and oil palm. This expansion has occurred — almost without exception — on fertile lands, forest areas or natural pastures which were essential for communities that previously depended on them. People from these communities have become landless rural or urban workers, and their lands degraded due to "restoration" with tree monocultures. In many places, communities have managed to resist and are fighting to reclaim their lands take for initiatives mislabeled as "forest restoration".

Disturbingly, the German Ministry of the Environment interpretation is that monoculture tree plantations count as "restoration" under the Bonn Challenge if a few native trees are included throughout monoculture plantations.

According to the Bonn Challenge, "Regional platforms (...) are appearing throughout the world." In this vein, let us see what has happened in Africa, Latin America and Asia:

Africa

The African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), launched in an event parallel to the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, claims it will "restore" 100 million hectares of deforested and

degraded land in Africa by 2030—almost 30% of the Bonn Challenge's entire goal. AFR100 is presented as an initiative to mitigate climate change and "benefit" populations in African countries. In the first AFR100 regional conference in October 2016, it was announced that 21 countries have joined the initiative so far, committing to restore 63.3 million hectares of forest. (3)

The World Bank is the main investor and promoter of AFR100, and has promised to invest US\$ 1 billion in 14 African countries by 2030. The German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) will finance the institutional set-up of AFR100, complementing the World Bank's contribution. The FAO and World Resources Institute (WRI) are also key contributors. There are also private investors such as the Dutch Sustainable Forest Investments Fund (SFI). The total amount committed by private financiers has reached US\$ 540 million. (4)

Complementing the AFR100 is the initiative, "Forests for the future: new forests for Africa." This initiative hosted a conference in Ghana in March 2016 with the participation of Green Resources. Green Resources, one of the leading plantation companies in Africa, has been repeatedly denounced for the negative impacts its plantations cause to local communities. (5) The African Resilient Landscapes Initiative (ARLI), also funded by the World Bank and the German government, states that it will "work with agricultural land, forest areas and pastures through interventions based on climate-smart agriculture, restoration of forests and ecosystems, the preservation of biodiversity, and pastures management." Another initiative worth mentioning is the African Landscapes Action Plan (ALAP), which receives support from the Dutch government. (6)

The World Bank's FIP — the Forest Investment Program — supports AFR100 and contributes financially to AFR 100. In June 2016, the Bank announced that it endorsed FIP country programmes in Mozambique and Ivory Coast. Programmes in both countries promise to reduce deforestation through REDD initiatives and to encourage "reforestation." Two points in these countries' proposed plans deserve special attention. First, World Bank-backed plans have targeted rural communities and their practices — for example nomadic agriculture or firewood collection — as the main cause of deforestation. Second, for the World Bank "reforestation" through monoculture tree plantations are an important solution. For example, the FIP Plan in Ivory Coast discusses planting of 100,000 hectares of "industrial tree plantations," while the Mozambique Plan aims to promote "commercial forest plantations." Both praise the private sector. For example, the Plan of Ivory Coast speaks of counting on the expertise of the private sector, which has promoted oil palm and rubber monoculture in Ivory Coast. Meanwhile in Mozambique, the FIP Plan aims to complete activities that led to the largest expansion of eucalyptus and pine plantations in South and East Africa in recent years, with adverse impacts on the local peasant population. In addition to further harming rural communities, another aggravating factor is that most of the World Bank financing comes from loans, thus increasing the Mozambique's national debt and placing a greater burden on people. (7)

Latin America

The 20X20 initiative was launched in 2014 to restore 20 million hectares in Latin America and the Caribbean by 2020. Today, it includes 12 Latin American countries, which together have promised to restore 27.7 million hectares in this timeframe, and have secured US \$730 million from private investors. In order to guarantee these investments, the initiative says it will "reduce risks" — at an unprecedented and ambitious level — and "collaborate with the private sector for the development of ecologically, socially and economically sustainable investments on the ground in a variety of restoration activities, such as agroforestry, silvopasture and assisted or natural reforestation." In conclusion: this is a huge incentive for the monoculture tree plantation industry. (8)

In Brazil, in 2015, the government announced that by 2030, the country would "reforest" 12 million hectares and use 20% "renewable" energy sources, as well as hydroelectric power. (9) But what can we expect from the 20X20 initiative and this announcement, when we look at Brazil's recent experience in this area? In 2003, the Brazilian government created the National Forests Council which developed a National Forest Plan. Yet, instead of minimally restoring the country's vast areas previously deforested, between 2003 and 2007, the plan subsidized the construction of new pulp mills and expanded the area of industrial tree plantations by 2 million hectares — primarily with eucalyptus trees to feed the new pulp mills. Between 2003 and 2009 the government invested US \$1.95 million through the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) for this purpose. (10)

The state of Mato Grosso plays a big role in Brazil's 20X20 initiative. It is also a key state in terms of deforestation. By 2020, the state government aims to recover no fewer than 2.9 million hectares of forest in legal reserves and Permanent Preservation Areas (PPAs). It is striking that that government announced it will increase the area of "planted forests" by 0.5 million hectares. (11) To predict what kind of "reforestation" might occur in practice, one need only recall the new Brazilian Forest Code, which now allows legal reserves to be "recovered" with monoculture tree plantations of exotic species such as eucalyptus. (12)

Regarding its goals to increase its national share of "renewable energies," Brazil's experience is directly connected to the large-scale monoculture model — for example the use of sugar cane to produce ethanol fuel, and the use of energy co-generated from sugar cane bagasse produced as a by-product (residues) in the country's dozens of sugar cane processing plants. Soybean, another monoculture, are counted toward Brazil's goals of biofuel production. Companies in Brazil and Chile want to obtain incentives and supply the European market with 'wood pellets' for biomass. Currently, plantations located in the United States and Canada dominate this market. (13)

Management of large-scale monocultures requires large amounts of fossil fuels, in the form of petrol and petrochemical products. Given this enormous consumption of agrochemicals and chemical fertilizers, and the mechanized and globalized model of production and transportation that is part and parcel of these tree monocultures, they will never be a solution to the climate crisis or industrialized countries' addiction to fossil fuels.

Asia

For years, governments of several Asian countries have been promoting plans to significantly expand tree monocultures. Thus, they welcome new international initiatives to expand plantations — in order to remove "excess" CO₂ from the atmosphere and support other actions supposedly meant to mitigate the climate crisis.

Six years ago, Indonesia announced it would expand plantations as carbon sinks. In 2010, the Minister of Forestry and Environment at the time announced a target of 21 million hectares of "planted forests" to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere. (14) Considering the nearly four million hectares of existing plantations for pulp and rubber, this would indeed imply a mega-expansion. The expansion would be smaller — but still huge — if the government decided to include the 10 million hectares of existing oil palm plantations. In fact, this has already occurred. In line with the FAO's "forest" definition, the Indonesian government decided to consider its oil palm plantations as forests, and not as agricultural crops.

Oil palm companies in Indonesia and Malaysia, the world's top producing countries, have been operating on the "clean energy" market for years, betting on the increasing use of palm oil as a

“biofuel.” This is mainly the case in Europe — where palm oil consumption increased sixfold between 2010 and 2014. By 2014, almost half of this oil was used as fuel for land transport. (15) Meanwhile, the expansion of oil palm and other monoculture plantations is directly linked to ongoing deforestation, wherein huge forest fires occur every year in order to make way for plantation expansion — a process for which affects the population of Indonesia in many ways. (16)

Since its inception in the 1980s, Asian Pulp and Paper (APP) — one of the largest pulp companies in the world—has been considered responsible for the loss of one million hectares of Indonesian forest, and for other social violations. (17) Ironically, APP has become the leading private actor in the Bonn Challenge. The company says it is committed to restoring forests and degraded lands. (18) According to an announcement in March 2016, APP says that participation in the Bonn Challenge is in continuation with its "Forest Conservation Policy" and the "zero deforestation" commitment it made a few years ago. Of course, conserving forests is absolutely necessary for APP to begin correcting its destruction of natural forests to supply its pulp mills — actions which communities have denounced for years. What is striking however, is that — vis-a-vis the overarching goal of the Bonn Challenge to restore forests — APP did not announce any additional actions to restore part of the nearly one million hectares of forest that the company itself destroyed to date. APP annually produces over 19 million tons of pulp, paper and packaging paper, and it sells its products in 120 countries on six continents (19). Additionally, APP parent company Sinar Mas is also interested in generating "renewable energy," and in 2015 announced plans to operate wood-based biomass energy plants in Indonesia. The wood to feed these biomass power plants will come from: tree plantations. (20)

The Bonn Challenge also seems to be in line with ambitious plans in the Mekong and India. In the Mekong, large expansion of industrial rubber plantations has already been underway for the period of 2008-2018, with an expected increase of four million hectares, mainly in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. (21) In India, the Compensatory Afforestation Fund law (CAF) was approved in July 2016. In addition to violating the existing law — which recognizes use rights of forest communities and traditional peoples that live and depend on forests — this new law reinforces the permission to destroy native forests, since the destruction will be "offset." Social organizations in the country also denounce that the CAF law reinforces channeling resources toward government agencies that are incentivizing the planting of at least five million hectares of monoculture tree plantations.

Final Considerations

This brief introduction to the erroneously titled "reforestation plans," internationally promoted as an alleged solution to the climate crisis, reveals the need for more research on these international and national plans and the connections between them and towards the plantations industry. More importantly, even the cursory look at these plans reveals the need for ongoing denunciation of monoculture expansion and its known impacts.

(1) <http://www.bonnchallenge.org/content/challenge>.

(2) An important partner to the Bonn Challenge is the IUCN and its TRI initiative (The Restoration Initiative) which, with approximately US\$ 254 million in funding, aims to restore 10 million hectares in Cameroon, Central African Republic, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau Kenya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sao Tome and Principe y Tanzania. <https://www.iucn.org/news/iucn-and-partners-launch-global-effort-boost-restoration-degraded-forests>; On the New York Declaration on Forests, see <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/united-nations-2015-international-day-of-forests-theme-forests-climate-change-what-change/>

(3) <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/afr100-discusses-means-needed-to-restore-100-million-hectares-of-african-forests/>

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- (4) <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/AFR100/impact-investors#project-tabs>; y <http://www.cp-africa.com/2015/12/07/10-african-couche-the-afr-100>
 - (5) <http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/stop-plantations-expansion-in-mozambique/>
 - (6) <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/new-forests-for-africa-a-nice-slogan-for-promoting-industrial-tree-plantations/>; http://terrafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/resource-publications/Concept%20Note%20ARLI_Brochure_Nov%202015_Final.pdf
 - (7) <https://www-cif.climateinvestmentfunds.org/news/cif-endorsement-investment-plans-cambodia-cote-d%E2%80%99ivoire-mozambique>
 - (8) <http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/12/initiative-20x20-landscape-restoration-movement-rises-latin-america-and-caribbean>
 - (9) <https://noticias.terra.com.br/dilma-promete-reflorestamento-e-elevar-uso-de-energia-renovavel,672d50273e2a5b46685009c92a844891az72RCRD.html>
 - (10) http://wrm.org.uy/pt/files/2012/06/EJOLT_PORs.pdf
 - (11) <http://www.hipernoticias.com.br/politica/taques-propoe-zerar-desmatamento-em-mato-grosso-ate-2020/52347>
 - (12) <http://www.canalrural.com.br/noticias/codigo-florestal/plantio-arvores-nativas-alternativa-para-recuperacao-das-areas-preservacao-permanente-34610>
 - (13) <http://wrm.org.uy/pt/livros-e-relatorios/plantacoes-de-eucalipto-para-energia-o-caso-da-suzano-no-baixo-parnaiba-maranhao-brasil/>
 - (14) <http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf>
 - (15) <http://www.dw.com/en/new-palm-oil-figures-biodiesel-use-in-eu-fueling-deforestation/a-19298426>
 - (16) <http://wrm.org.uy/pt/artigos-do-boletim-do-wrm/secao1/temporada-de-queimadas-na-indonesia-o-que-as-plantacoes-industriais-e-o-estado-indonesio-fizeram-as-florestas-das-ilhas/>
 - (17) <http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf>
 - (18) <https://www.iucn.org/theme/forests/our-work/forest-landscape-restoration/bonn-challenge>
 - (19) <https://www.asiapulppaper.com/news-media/press-releases/asia-pulp-paper-participates-bonn-challenge-develop-forest-restoration>
 - (20) <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/01/08/sinar-mas-develop-biomass-power-plants.html>
 - (21) <http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf>
 - (22) <http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/india-support-forest-dependent-communities-against-plantations-expansion/>