
Policies and actors behind monoculture tree plantations

The present expansion of monoculture tree plantations has not happened by chance or just because some governments got this idea. On the contrary, it is the result of the action of a group of actors that set out to promote such plantations.

In the fifties, the FAO became the main ideologist behind the large scale monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantation model in the South (as part of the so-called Green Revolution, promoted by this organization), as a response to the needs of large industrial companies that were exhausting their traditional sources of raw material.

In the subsequent decades a series of actors entered the scene – the World Bank, IMF, Inter American Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations processes on forests (IPF, IFF, UNFF), bilateral agencies such as GTZ and JICA, consulting firms such as Jaakko Poyry- providing arguments in favour, technical knowledge, research and funding to convince governments about the benefits of this model. The plantation model quickly expanded as a result of the growth of a voracious consumer market – encouraged by industry itself – until reaching its present enormous expansion.

As a result of those external influences, many southern governments put in place national policies -already defined and often copied with slight variations– for the promotion of tree plantations aimed at export markets: the cosmetic industry and recently agro-fuels from oil palms, timber and pulp from pine trees, pulp and paper from eucalyptus, and rubber for the automobile industry.

According to the conditions in each country, State policies adopted various forms of promotion, ranging from direct and indirect subsidies (such as tax breaks, partial refund of plantation costs, soft long-term credits, tax rebates on imports of machines and vehicles, infrastructure, equal benefits for foreign investment, research), to concessions in forest lands.

Direct subsidies were instrumental in countries such as Chile and Uruguay, while concessions in forest lands –including commercial logging and subsequent conversion to plantations- was the main mechanism for promotion in Indonesia, Malaysia/Borneo.

At the same time, States undertook – with no cost to the companies – social control and -whenever necessary- repression of local opposition. In most cases, repression is part of the “promotion,” both to ensure eviction of peasant and indigenous communities to transfer their lands to the companies in the case of concessions – such as happened in Indonesia, Colombia, Papua-New Guinea, Swaziland, South Africa – and to guarantee the stability of the property in the hands of large national and foreign companies in the case of land acquisition.

In both cases, the State took on the function of guaranteeing safe land tenure to the companies, repressing any local claim, as has been the case with the Mapuche in Chile, the Tupinikim, Guarani and Pataxo in Brazil, the Afro-descendant communities in Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, the indigenous communities in Western Kalimantan in Indonesia and Sarawak in Malaysia, the Lahu, Lisu and

Palaung ethnic groups in Thailand, just to name a few.

In fact, the development of large-scale tree plantations took place, in many cases, under the protection of military dictatorships, as was the case in those countries having the largest plantation areas: Indonesia during the genocidal regime of Suharto, Chile during the dictatorship of Pinochet, South Africa during *apartheid* and Brazil during the military dictatorship.

As if the existing stimulus to the promotion of plantations were not enough, the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in December 1997 as part of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, has become another important actor in the promotion of large-scale tree plantations, insofar as it enables industrialized countries to “compensate” their carbon dioxide emissions with the establishment of tree plantations in unindustrialized countries. As pointed out in the editorial, the Kyoto Protocol endorsed the creation of an international emissions trading market, worth US\$ 30 billion in 2006. The market mechanism for “carbon credits” thus results in an additional subsidy for the promotion of tree plantations.

The new agro-fuel business is yet another turn of the screw in the promotion of industrial tree plantations, creating another market outlet for oil palm as raw material for biodiesel and likely to span other tree plantations, such as eucalyptus, for the production of cellulosic ethanol from transgenic trees.

However, simultaneously with the promotion of tree plantations, processes resisting them have taken place, adopting various forms, ranging from legal mechanisms to grass-roots’ struggles, and generally taking on both forms. The result is that State bodies are now having pressure put on them to adopt measures to limit the expansion of these monoculture plantations. The following are some examples to illustrate this situation:

In Chile, Parliament recently adopted Agreement Project 416, that entrusts the Natural Resources and Environmental Commission with investigating and compiling the social, labour and environmental impacts of the forestry model, implying a request for reports from ministries and the summoning of various persons to declare before the Commission.

In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE), is putting forward a constitutional proposal to the Constitutional Assembly, including the following concepts: “The State shall permanently seek the overall and sustainable development of agriculture, animal husbandry, artisan aquiculture and fisheries, and agro-industry, supplying quality products for the internal market, with the aim of achieving food sovereignty for the population, giving priority to the supply of nutritional requirements over the production of bio-fuels...” “A sustainable farming model implies the preservation and enhancement of crop genetic diversity, the prohibition of transgenic crops and monoculture practices in general, all reducing genetic diversity.” “The amassing of land and latifundia are prohibited, and the lands shall serve to integrate small-holdings in productive units, promoting community property and cooperative organization.”

In Tasmania, King Island Council banned plantations on farm land and eliminated tree plantations as an acceptable agricultural land use from its plans (see WRM Bulletin no. 115). There has been increasing mobilization against the pulp and paper company Gunns, with a large demonstration in the capital city, Hobart, in which 15,000 people took part.

It should be mentioned that some regulations in force have contained the indiscriminate expansion of monoculture tree plantations. Such is the case of the South African National Water Law (No. 34 of

1998), which recognizes that the reduction of water courses can be caused by tree plantations and establishes limits to their expansion.

Here below, and as a typical case, we present a more detailed analysis of the situation in Brazil (one of the countries hosting the largest areas of plantations): the actors promoting the large-scale plantation model, the process of its implementation, the diverse mechanisms that end up by shaping State policy. Various grass-roots initiatives are also described, giving voice to the many sectors that have been deprived of their lands and livelihoods, their culture, their environment and their future and who, through organized struggles, are also paving the way to hope.