Brazil: The hushed issue of water in Aracruz Celulose business

The huge Aracruz Celulose high-tech pulp and paper complex located in Barra do Riacho in the Southeast region of Brazil has led to major conflicts since the company's encroachment upon land belonging to the Tupinikim and Guarani indigenous peoples. However, not only land but also water is being taken over by the company's mill and large-scale monoculture tree plantations which spread along more than 175,000 hectares in the north of the State of Espirito Santo and the Southernmost part of the Bahia State.

Aracruz hushes when it comes to water issues, notes the recently published report "H2O para Celulose x água para todas as línguas" carried out by FASE Espíritu Santo. Its authors reveal that from the company's annual reports, web page, magazines, and publications just incomplete or fragmented information can be gathered, with no evidence of a clear water policy for the whole complex including mills, tree nurseries, tree plantations, port and infrastructure.

What is the role of the water in the whole industrial process of Aracruz Celulose? To whom does the water belong, from whom is it seized and in what conditions is it returned to the environment? By which means does the company take hold of and use the water? In what quantities? How much does it pay for it? Those are unanswered questions on the part of Aracruz Celulose.

Water is one of the primary materials used in the whole process of cellulose production; it is consumed in several sectors and moments of the pulp productive process --like digesting, bleaching, and mainly to feed boilers. After being used in the industrial process the water returns back as an effluent carrying along wastes and pollutants.

The long record of testimonies from neighbouring Guarani, Tupinikim, Quilombola, and peasant communities evidence the disappearance of several streams and ponds as well as the great difference in the level of rivers and streams since the arrival of the eucalyptus plantations. This is because eucalyptus requires high levels of water, from the moment that it is planted as well as during its growth and also because the cutting cycle has been shortened. Heavy machinery used to cut and pile up timber has further impacts on the water problem since the heaviness of the machines compresses the soil thus hampering rainwater absorption and contributing to water runoff. The residents of the region testify that what little remained of the water reserves, has been taken for eucalyptus irrigation by the companies contracted by Aracruz Cellulose.

The right to water has been completely violated by Aracruz. The waters of the Doce River have been diverted after a suspicious licensing process and most of the 14 streams that crossed between the town of Itaúnas and the headquarters of the company in the village of Conceição da Barra are now dead, which has greatly affected the quality of life of local population. Many houses now get their water from makeshift wells that have been recently dug. Given the poor quality of this water, the sale of water has now become big business for commercial establishments in the area.

The water problem along the homogeneous tree plantations is not only quantitative but also qualitative. The intensive use of agrotoxic substances and chemical fertilizers pollutes the water

resources of neighbouring communities. The rivers that cross their territories are no longer safe to drink, or even to bathe in, and few people still fish.

Ten thousand families lived in the area before Aracruz arrived. Now, just 1.500 people stay, strive for their survival and resist the neoslavery imposed by the company by several ways: separating families and pushing them out of the land, isolating them, depriving them of their food sovereignty and their culture which is directly linked to the forest, sacrificing family agriculture, suppressing gatherers and fishers with its private armed police. Once abundant, now the water is scarce and the communities compete with the army of eucalyptus of Aracruz Celulose for every drop.

The daily water consumption of the company to provide for its cellulose production capacity of 2,000,000 tons/year is enough to supply a city with a population of two and a half million, and the company pays nothing for it. Aracruz's private port, Portocel, is the point of departure for most of its production which goes to Europe, North America, and Asia. The pulp will be used in the production of sanitary napkins, paper used in surgical procedures, paper bed sheets, specialized papers for writing and printing, serving the high -- and unsustainable --demands of First World consumption patterns. In the North remain the best employments, the highest added value, and the least environmental risks. In the South remain the "green deserts" of eucalyptus plantations, a few exclusive employments and some meager more, scant taxes and several environmental conflicts.

The misappropriation and use of river watersheds for pulp production and eucalyptus monoculture are distinct traits of environmental racism, concludes the study. Also the distribution of water in the State of Espirito Santo reveals a clear environmental injustice: abundant and free for Aracruz Celulose; scarce, payed and contaminated for indigenous people, quilombolas, landless people, peasants and fishers.

The hushed problem has been voiced as well as the claim for several measures to be adopted among which the first one is to stop immediately the expansion of industrial eucalyptus plantations.

Article based on: "H2O para Celulose x água para todas as línguas", Daniela Meirelles and Marcello Calazans, FASE, 2006, e-mail: fasees@terra.com.br, http://www.fase.org.br/noar/anexos/acervo/12_h2o.pdf; "Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights Violations in Eucalyptus Monoculture: Aracruz Cellulose and the State of Espírito Santo", FASE, http://www2.fase.org.br/downloads/2004/09/553_relat_desc_es_ing.pdf