
Plantations: Looking back for moving forward

The negative impacts of tree plantations on forests and forest peoples have been highlighted by WRM since its creation in 1986. The 1989 “Penang Declaration” which set out the shared vision of the WRM's members, identified tree plantations as “part of the policies and practices leading to deforestation throughout the world in the name of development”.

The above was not an intellectual “discovery” but the result of the identification of local struggles that were being carried out in India against tree plantations. Analysis of and support to those struggles led to include the issue in WRM's agenda.

While at the time tree plantations were still perceived by most governmental and non governmental organizations as something positive promoted under the guise of “planted forests”, an increasing number of communities impacted by them began to fight back. WRM was thus involved in supporting anti-plantation struggles in countries such as Thailand, Chile, Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia and others.

In 1993, a South-East Asian Regional Workshop on Plantations was held in the Philippines, bringing together people from the region and from Latin America to jointly strategize future actions. A year later, discussions on plantations at the WRM meeting held in India led to the decision to carry out a detailed study on the actors promoting plantations and on the social and environmental impacts of tree plantations. The end result of the study –the book “Pulping the South”- became the major tool for action regarding opposition to plantations.

At its 1998 meeting in Uruguay, the WRM decided to launch an international campaign against plantations, reflected in the Montevideo Declaration which stated that “In view of these concerns, we pledge our support to an international campaign to:

- * support local peoples' rights and struggles against the invasion of their lands by these plantations
- * encourage awareness of the negative social and environmental impacts of large-scale industrial monocrop tree plantations, and
- * change the conditions which make such plantations possible.”

Since then, the WRM has been supporting opposition to plantations in an increasing number of countries including Brazil, Chile, South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, India, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Uruguay and others.

Experiences from those and other countries have been documented and analysed by WRM regarding different types of monoculture tree plantations: pulpwood, oil palm, carbon sinks. An extensive list of books, briefings and articles have been produced as a means of sharing those experiences with all people affected by plantations.

At the same time, WRM has actively tried to incorporate the plantations issue at international processes such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel and Forum on Forests, the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Major efforts have been carried out on the emerging issue of “carbon sink plantations” promoted by the Convention on Climate Change. In 2000, the WRM summarized its position in the Mount Tamalpais Declaration, which explained the four main reasons for opposing the inclusion of plantations as “sinks” in the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism:

“- Using “sinks” to help Northern countries meet their Kyoto Protocol emissions reductions targets cannot promote a liveable climate since those targets are themselves insufficient to do so.
- Trading emissions for tree carbon would intensify regressive redistribution of world resources.
- Large-scale industrial tree plantations are a threat to communities and ecosystems the world over.
- Using tree plantation projects to “compensate” for the climatic effects of carbon-dioxide emissions is scientifically incoherent and sanctions external political interference in the social policies of host countries.”

On that same year the WRM published the briefing “The carbon shop: planting new problems” as a means of providing people with relevant analysis on this until then relatively unknown issue. Two years later, the WRM created Sinks Watch to closely monitor and oppose the promotion of carbon sink plantations within the Kyoto Protocol.

The issue of certification of tree plantations has been another important area of WRM work. Given that local communities’ struggles against plantations were being weakened by the certification of those same plantations, WRM began to document such cases and to disseminate analysis and information based on them. The main aim was to influence the Forest Stewardship Council. On September 2004, the FSC launched its Plantation Certification Review, to a large extent resulting from criticism such as that put forward by WRM.

Another new issue emerged: genetically engineered trees. WRM worked together with a number of organizations opposing the release of GE trees, among which the Global Justice Ecology Project and Friends of the Earth International. The book “Genetically Modified Trees: the Ultimate Threat to Forests” was published in 2004.

At the same time that all those activities were being carried out, the WRM actively promoted regional networking activities to strengthen the campaign. The WRM was instrumental in the creation of the Latin American Network against Tree Monocultures. In South Africa, the WRM worked in close collaboration with the Timberwatch Coalition and facilitated linkages with neighbouring Swaziland. In the Mekong region, WRM supported TERRA in bringing together organizations from the region with the aim of creating a sub-regional network. In Indonesia, WRM collaborated with WALHI and others in the organization of a regional meeting on plantations held in 2004.

Moving forward

In spite of all the above activities, the fact is that plantations are still advancing in many countries. At the same time, new threats are emerging: pulp mills are being increasingly built in the South, paper and palm oil consumption are growing, palm oil and plantation timber are being targeted for biodiesel production, carbon sink plantations and GE trees are being officially promoted by the Convention on Climate Change, governments continue to promote the spread of plantations.

However, the situation has dramatically changed in many respects: public perception about plantations is increasingly negative, plantations as “forests” are now questioned, basic information and analysis are readily available, plantation certification is on the defensive, organized opposition is much stronger in many more countries.

In football terms, in the 1980s plantation promoters were beating us 3-0. Today, the score is 3-2. What is needed to first draw and then pass on to win?

- to strengthen local and national opposition, bringing together all the relevant actors
- more South-South and North-South collaboration
- more and stronger regional and international networking
- campaigns in the North on consumption, on International Financial Institutions, on policies that promote plantations in the South
- campaigns in the South for changing government policies that promote the spread of plantations.

One of the main aims of this international plantations meeting in Vitoria, Brazil was to share the diverse knowledge, experience and ideas of participants from all over the world to make the above possible