
Swaziland: Timber plantations at the expense of Swazi people

Swaziland, a landlocked country with a population of 1,161,219 inhabitants in 17,363 sq km almost completely surrounded by South Africa, has timber as its second industrial activity after sugar.

During the Conference “Timber Plantations: Impacts, Future Visions and Global Trends” held in Nelspruit, South Africa, in November 2003, hosted by GeaSphere in association with the TimberWatch Coalition, Nhlanhla Msweli, from SCAPEI, gave a vivid testimony of Swaziland’s situation and grief linked to monoculture tree plantations.

Tree plantations were established more than fifty years ago in Swaziland, and with them the country imported the history of labour exploitation of South African capitalists. Three big companies dominate the sector: Sappi-Usutu, Mondi and Shiselweni Forestry (previously owned by Commonwealth Development Corporation /CDC). Together with some smaller ones, they manage a total area of about 135,000 hectares covered by industrial plantations of exotic pine and eucalyptus (gum) and acacia (wattle) species.

Sappi Kraft (Pty) Ltd, operating locally as Sappi Usutu, based at the village of Bhunya, is a subsidiary of South-African based Sappi (South African Paper Products Industry) and is the world’s second largest producer of unbleached Kraft pulp for cement bags, crepe paper and car filter systems.

Mondi Forests (a subsidiary of the giant Anglo-American Corporation), which operates in Swaziland through its associated company Peak Timber Ltd, and its South African owned sister company Mondi Timber, have about 32,000 hectares of land at the village Pigg’s Peak, in northern Swaziland.

Nowadays, about a fifth of land of the country which was used to grow food and graze cattle, and provided grass to build houses, has been converted for the use of a money making industry.

But what have industrial timber plantations meant for the Swazi people? They have meant evictions, exploitation, soil erosion, pollution and poverty. They have meant dispossession.

In Bhunya, where Sappi Usutu operates, people have been expelled from their fertile homeland to rocky marginal areas and were given as little as 1000 Rands (less than 150 USD) as a compensation. Grasslands and surface water disappeared, and the community of Tiyeni failed to raise their stock, which was a source of income and livelihood for them. Recently Sappi Usutu claimed to have invested 238 million Rand in expansion and upgrading programs at the mill. Local people know that this will mean more evictions, more soil erosion, more pollution of the air and the rivers next to the mills (see Bulletin N° 70) and more suffering to the rural people.

One of the usual claims made to justify the establishment of timber plantations and processing plants is that they will generate employment. Sappi Usutu used to employ about 8,000-10,000 people in the whole process, but it has already retrenched half of those people. Today it commands 3,000 workers of which only 700 (seven hundred) are full-time employees of the company. In a much published scandal in Usutu, they were known to have paid two of their senior executives bonuses equal to the

payment to 200 workers that they were retrenching at the same time --and the workers money was to be taxed until they fought and won that case. Sappi is known to be one of the lowest paying companies in Swaziland at shop floor level and with appalling working conditions. Hence, it had the strongest union until undermined by the process of privatization, and the oppressive government.

The real issue is that timber plantation companies in Swaziland do not provide employment security for the people they have displaced. In most cases, just very exploitative casual jobs with contractors. About 60% of the people in Bhunya are not employed at the moment.

Both the Pigg's Peak (only saw mills) and Bhunya processing plants account for quite a lot of the water and air pollution in Swaziland. The companies are simply not accountable to anyone in terms of their environmental responsibility. For the past two years they have not given out a report on their environmental assessment. The people living nearby have continuously raised problems regarding drinking the water from the river which Sappi uses for dumping its wastes.

The link between timber plantations and poverty does not appear in statistics but is experienced on the ground. Evicting people from their land accounts for almost confronting them to death, paying them peanuts is exploitation. That is what timber plantations and the whole timber process really mean for the people of Swaziland.

Article based on information from: "Impacts of Timber Plantations on Rural People of Swaziland", paper by Nhlanhla Msweli, Swaziland Campaign Against Poverty and Economic Inequality (SCAPEI), e-mail: scape@swazi.net , Msweli@union.org.za , <http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000323/index.php> ; Sappi Limited Website: <http://www.sappi.com/home.asp?pid=620&contactid=2436> ; "Swaziland Supply Survey", International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO (ITC), <http://www.intracen.org/sstp/Survey/wood/swazi.pdf>