Industrial tree plantations in eastern and southern Africa

From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, while under the political rule of Britain – the main colonial power in the region at the time - many African governments were pressured to establish timber plantations as a response to the perceived depletion of forests in their countries. In 1876, South Africa was among the first countries to establish eucalyptus plantations to provide fuel for railways, and pine plantations for timber used in construction. Plantations were set up soon after in Swaziland, Uganda and Kenya. From 1945, after the end of World War II, timber plantations were expanded to increase production of wood-based products and materials that had become scarce in industrialised countries.

As countries declared independence from Britain during the 1960s onwards, they received further funding from various development institutions for setting up ‘forestry’ departments as well as for establishing industrial plantations. One of these was the British Colonial (later Commonwealth) Development Corporation (CDC), which financed extensive plantations as well as pulp and paper mills in several countries of eastern and southern Africa, including Tanzania, South Africa and Swaziland. Another international institution supporting this process was the World Bank, which has financed industrial plantations in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Swaziland, as well as in Zambia, together with the CDC. More recently, so called development agencies, like the Norwegian NORAD agency, have financed tree plantations in Uganda and Tanzania, while the Finnish government has promoted tree plantation expansion in Mozambique and Kenya.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies based on the neoliberal economic model imposed “structural adjustment programmes” on countries in the global South during the 1980s and 90s. In order to access money from the IMF to pay off debts to Northern governments and banks, states were obliged to promote privatisation, liberalise trade, and offer export incentives and subsidies to – mostly foreign and transnational – companies, including for industrial tree plantations. Over the last 10 years, further privatisation and financialization of land (1) has allowed corporations to access cheaper state-owned and community land, and make low-cost investments in new and existing tree plantations across Africa.

As in other regions in the global South, a key player for introducing and promoting the Northern ‘forestry’ tree plantation model throughout Africa has been the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This industrial model with European roots is based on a distorted definition in which a forest is seen only as a ‘bunch’ of trees with the primary purpose of producing timber. The misleading ‘forest’ definition of the FAO includes industrial, large-scale, even-aged monocultures, usually in plantations of millions of non-native, potentially invasive trees, including genetically engineered eucalyptus and poplar varieties. These are misleadingly described by FAO as ‘planted forests’. This biased definition fails to recognise other essential functions, benefits and values of real forests. It equally ignores the important role of human communities which sustainably live with, protect, and depend on forests, for their livelihoods and their cultural identities.

Who is behind the new wave of ‘land grabbing’ for plantations?

In most African countries land officially belongs to the State. In practice, land belongs to local communities whose inhabitants have lived there for generations. The way land is used and organized is still determined through customary law in many places. In many countries, local communities and indigenous peoples, together with support groups, are engaged in struggles for the State to recognize their customary, collective use of land.

The new wave of tree plantation projects across Africa is consequently directly impacting local lives and livelihoods. Over the past 10 years, as part of the broader land grabbing process taking place in the global South, finance capital has been exploring long-term speculation in land, including for development as tree plantations, as a new investment option. Many of these investors include The African Development Bank (AfDB), The European Investment Bank (EIB), the World Bank together with its subsidiary lending to the private sector, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), as well as private entities such as commercial banks, pension funds, and so-called ‘green investment’ funds, which use private and public money.

To facilitate land grabbing, countries in the global North have created new financial instruments designed to make investments in foreign land and infrastructure easier. For example, in 2004, the US government set up the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which plays a key role in commodifying farmland across Africa and opening it to US-based agri-corporations. MCC has projects, for example, in Madagascar and Mozambique.

In Mozambique for example, several million hectares of land have passed into the hands of companies and investors in recent years, including for growing tree plantations. Additionally, the land targeted by tree plantation and agribusiness companies is that with the best agricultural potential. When governments facilitate access to fertile land by giving investors land leases or concessions, they exempt them from the need to invest in buying land, and this encourages them to occupy even more land from which they can increase their profits even further.

Another expansion threat comes with the UN Paris Agreement on climate change, which classifies tree plantations as ‘forests’ with the potential to (temporarily) store carbon. This provides an incentive to create more ‘forest cover’ with tree plantations, also erroneously called ‘planted forests’ in the jargon of the FAO.

The most ambitious ‘reforestation’ plan announced in Paris was the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100). It claims that 100 million hectares of ‘deforested’ and ?degraded ? lands across Africa can be restored by 2030. This scheme aims to complement (1) the Bonn Challenge, a commitment to restore 150 million hectares around the world by 2020; (2) the New York Declaration on Forests, which builds on and extends the Bonn Challenge to 350 million hectares by 2030; and (3) the African Resilient Landscapes Initiative (ARLI), to promote integrated landscape management with the goal of adapting to and mitigating climate change. The World Bank announced that it will provide AFR100 with 1 billion US dollars in institutional investments in 14 countries by 2030. This will be complemented by Germany‘s federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) which will provide financial and administrative support for the AFR100 initiative. FAO is also one of the key partners in the project, as well as the World Resources Institute (WRI). The private funders are mainly capital investment companies. To date, commitments from African governments include pledges from Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique Malawi and Uganda. (1)

Another key group of actors that promote and have a direct financial interest in tree plantation expansion globally, are international ‘forestry’ consultancies, mainly from countries in the global North with established wood-based industries such as Finland, Sweden and the US. Indufor and

Pöyry from Finland, for example, help identify ‘new markets’ and ‘assist’ national governments in drawing up their national ‘forest plans’ that often have a strong emphasis on new tree plantations. For example, in 2011, Pöyry produced a “Review on industrial forest plantations in Africa”, which reveals which countries “have good potential for expanding plantation development”. Eastern and southern African countries are profiled as countries with potential for tree plantation development.

Why are tree plantations promoted?

Investors in eastern and southern African tree plantation projects often mention more than one purpose or product to promote their plantations, thereby hoping to expand the options to increase profits. These are some of the options:

- *Plantations for timber (saw logs) or energy (fuelwood/charcoal)*
Several investors affirm that their plantations will supply saw logs for furniture or timber for firewood, for both domestic and export markets. These companies often claim that their activities reduce pressure on native forests. However, the opposite is more often true. In Mozambique for example, after almost 10 years of investment in and expansion of eucalyptus and pine tree plantations, native forests continue to be destroyed for the extraction and export of high value timber from species other than eucalyptus or pine. In turn, tree plantation expansion has also been denounced as a direct and indirect cause of deforestation. For example, according to affected local communities, tree plantation expansion in the Niassa province of Mozambique has destroyed large areas of forest.

- *Plantations for pulp and paper production*
Wood is the main raw material used in paper production. In eastern and southern Africa, the escalating trend of new and expanding pulp plantations and mills in the global South has only materialized in South Africa, with 10 pulp mills mainly owned by multinational companies Sappi and Mondi. One reason for this situation is that new pulp mills need 50 to 100 thousand hectares of tree plantations near the mill to ensure a continuous supply of ‘fresh logs’. Construction of new pulp mills also requires an increasingly bigger investment of several billion dollars. This also requires that a company obtains government subsidies, either financial or through the state providing infrastructure, before deciding to go ahead with such a large investment. Few countries in Africa can offer such support. One country that pulp and paper companies are looking at is Mozambique. The Portuguese company Portucel is now expanding its timber plantations in the country, with the aim of establishing a pulp mill in the future.

- *Plantations as carbon sinks*
The idea of creating ‘carbon sinks’ has been driving tree plantation expansion in eastern and southern Africa for more than two decades. These plantations spread in response to the hope to make easy money by generating and selling so-called ‘carbon credits’, which would then offset the pollution of other industry or government elsewhere. In 1994, one of the first carbon-offset tree plantation projects was set up in Uganda by the Dutch FACE foundation (now called Face the Future). Covering 25 thousand hectares at the edge of the Mount Elgon National Park, this project resulted in severe human rights violations. Local people were expelled from the area and lost their livelihoods; and the project was denounced as a form of neo-colonialism. Similar carbon plantation projects continued to be set up in Uganda, Tanzania and other African countries over the following years.

- *Plantations for energy production from woody biomass*
Most of the alternative ‘green’ energy currently produced in the EU is comes from burning woody biomass. The EU is now importing increasing amounts of woody biomass, mostly from the southern

US. However, African countries could still be a potential exporter of woody biomass to the EU if demand increases.

Community struggles against tree monoculture plantations

The drivers of tree plantation expansion in southern and eastern Africa and the different purposes for which the plantations might be used may be many. Yet, the impacts on communities are often very similar, as most companies use the same model of large-scale, most often eucalyptus plantations, and also often apply identical strategies and tactics to promote their projects.

One of the main challenges for communities in the region is to secure and to maintain control over the land on which they depend, and which they use according to customary practices. This is especially true in eastern Africa where about 75 per cent of the population lives in rural areas. Most often, their livelihoods are dependent on the food they are able to produce. In cases where companies did not physically expel families from their homes, they often restrict access to customary agricultural land and forests yet, in many cases, deny that this happens.

Water scarcity is another challenge for communities who successfully resisted displacement, and remain in their homes after their land is invaded by tree plantations. Water becomes scarce usually after a few years, as the plantations grow bigger and consume relatively more water, especially during the dry season. The ongoing drought in the southern African region has further aggravated the impact of tree plantations on surface and groundwater sources. A tactic used by companies to appease affected communities is, for example, to promise to provide boreholes, as part of corporate social 'responsibility' programmes.

Another serious impact results from companies applying toxic agricultural chemicals. This includes herbicides and insecticides, used to prevent competing plant growth, or insecticides to kill ants and other insects or fungi that might harm plantation trees. Such poisons pose a serious health threat to workers who apply them. They can also harm wild animals and livestock that drink contaminated water from streams and around the plantations areas, as well as local people, who also use contaminated water from wells and boreholes for washing, drinking and cooking.

The already severe impacts are even more severe for women. It is women who perform tasks such as collecting water and producing food. In many African countries women provide 70 per cent of field labour, supply 90 per cent of domestic water, and are responsible for producing 60 – 80 per cent of the food consumed and/or sold by the family. They carry out 100 per cent of food processing, 80 per cent of food storage and transportation, and 90 per cent of the labour for preparing the soil before planting. In spite of this, their land rights are far less secure than those of men.

The present trend of expanding tree plantations in eastern and southern Africa shows, once again, the urgent need for a different process for the “restoration of land”. Not driven by corporate profit or corruption, but led by local communities and implemented in ways that they believe are needed in order to improve their livelihoods and well-being, whilst protecting their environments and ensuring their access to and control over resources and land. Community land that has been invaded by tree plantations should be given back to communities. There are examples from Brazil, Thailand and Indonesia, where tree plantations have been re-converted to a land use defined by the interests and priorities of, and controlled by the local community.

This article is based on the 2016 briefing published by the Timberwatch Coalition and WRM, “Industrial tree plantations invading eastern and southern Africa”. You can access the full briefing

with all relevant references at: http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-10-Plantations-in-ES-Africa-TW-WRM-med-screen.pdf

(1) See more information in an article from Bulletin 228, January 2017, http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/main-initiatives-to-expand-tree-plantations-in-latin-america-africa-and-asia/