
Venezuela: an isolated giant

Smurfit Carton in Venezuela, a subsidiary of giant Jefferson Smurfit, is a good (bad) example of how depredatory the activity of a company can be, and of how local people can successfully resist it.

In 1994 Smurfit switched its pulp production from sugarcane bagasse to wood and began to plant eucalyptus in Portuguesa State, while at the same time cutting tropical forest to supply its pulp mill with raw material. In 1997 the relationship between Smurfit and local communities was critical since its spraying of herbicides had destroyed 190 hectares of peasants' crops and intoxicated school children. The situation became even worse when the company purchased the estate La Productora, which the inhabitants of adjacent communities Morador and Tierra Buena had expected to receive as part of the government's agrarian reform programme. As a result, they occupied the estate but were brutally repressed by the National Guard and forced to abandon it. Plantations are not only usurping the land, that is a scarce resource for peasants, but also impacting on other vital resources such as water and wildlife.

The company tried to change its image by launching a public relations press campaign in local newspapers, carrying articles which highlighted some minor donations to the communities. But it did not manage -in spite of trying - to co-opt local peasants and environmentalists, who went on with their struggle.

Local people have carried out numerous actions, among which the blockade of the highway through which Smurfit's lorries transported tropical forest wood to its industrial plant, a letter campaign to the new president, the organization of fora to publicize their case, networking and gaining support from national and international organizations, among others. The result is that now, in spite of its enormous power, the company is increasingly isolated, while the mobilization capacity of local landless peasants has increased. The struggle is not over, but the situation has favourably changed for the local communities.