
Plantations are not forests

The expansion of tree monocultures, especially in the South, is favoured by the combination of inexpensive land, low labour costs, fast tree-growth, subsidies, support from international “aid” agencies and multilateral development banks, technology provided by northern suppliers and advice by northern consultancies.

Plantations are not forests. Plantations are uniform agroecosystems that substitute natural ecosystems and their biodiversity, either in natural forests (e.g.: Chile, Brazil, Indonesia) or in grasslands (e.g.: Uruguay, South Africa). When natural ecosystems are substituted by large-scale tree plantations they usually result in negative environmental and social impacts: decrease in water production, modifications in the structure and composition of soils, alteration in the abundance and richness of flora and fauna, encroachment on indigenous peoples' forests, eviction of peasants and indigenous peoples from their lands, loss of livelihoods.

Pulpwood plantations

Industrial tree plantations occupy more than 100 million hectares worldwide. This production model is not based upon the material or spiritual needs of local people, neither aimed to favour them or their environment. Their goal is to provide the global paper industry with cheap raw material –mainly from eucalyptus- to assure the present overconsumption of paper and paper products, particularly in the North. Already 29% of the fiber used in the paper industry comes from fast-growing plantations and this figure is increasing.

Local people and social organizations from Brazil to Hawaii and from Spain to Congo have organized against this model. Nevertheless we need to be aware of some difficulties: generalized public opinion that planting trees is a good thing for the environment and for the preservation of natural forests, increase of paper consumption shown as associated to education and literacy in underdeveloped countries, lack of serious environmental impact assessments, proposal of alternatives to the dominant model, etc.

Timber plantations

The production scheme and consequences of timber plantations -pine, teak or other species- are similar to those of pulpwood plantations, with some differences in management, since they aim at the production of timber.

Oil palm plantations

Among non-timber plantations, oil palm is especially important. Global consumption of palm oil products increased 32% in the last five years. In Malaysia -the major palm oil exporter in the world- and in Indonesia, natural forests are being felled or set on fire to clear land for these plantations. Peasants are deprived of their lands and resources. Oil palm companies were responsible for fires that destroyed 80,000 hectares of forests in Indonesia this year. Plantations are expanding in Ivory

Coast, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Ecuador and other countries with similar negative environmental impacts.

Carbon sink plantations

Even if OECD countries are responsible for 77% of the world fossil fuel-related emissions of CO₂ -whose increasing concentration in the atmosphere is one of the main causes of global warming- they advocate for a "solution" that consists on using the photosynthetic activity of tree leaves to capture CO₂ and retain carbon in the wood. These so-called "carbon sinks" are fast-growing species' plantations to be installed in the South. The model is simple: the North will continue emitting CO₂ to the atmosphere and the South will be responsible of capturing it through the new installed "forest cover". They call it "joint implementation" and is the most recent argument used by plantation promoters to justify their activity. According to one calculation, 300 million hectares of fast-growing trees are required to absorb the annual global emissions of CO₂ if the present rate of emissions continues, as is expected. There's no scientific evidence of their efficiency, since their capacity to capture CO₂ can be much influenced by climate change.

The above named four types of plantations have commonalities:

- All of them are large-scale
- They are all monocultures that correspond to an industrial scheme, aimed at the production of an export good or service obtained at low cost in a Southern country.
- They result in strong negative social and environmental impacts
- Their implementation is the result of top-down oriented decisions that see reality only at a global scale and are focused mainly -if not exclusively- on the obtention of economic benefit.
- Local people and national societies are ignored at decision-making levels. They are just used to provide cheap labour force and their land and related resources are directly or indirectly appropriated by powerful national or foreign agents.