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## [?Reclaiming land in Misiones, Argentina: A Fight for Social Justice and a Dignified Life](#)

The Independent Producers of Piray Cooperative in Misiones Argentina (PIP by its Spanish acronym) was formed in 2005 to stop the advance of pine tree monocultures, and to reclaim land, food security, health and a dignified life. Their constant resistance and unity achieved something rarely seen: the expropriation of land from the multinational industrial plantation company, Arauco (previously Alto Paraná). After 18 years of struggle, there is still a lot to do. The members of PIP continue to work together, keeping the pursuit of social justice at the center.

### **Resistance against industrial monocultures in Puerto Piray <sup>(1)</sup>**

Alto Paraná S.A. (APSA) is the largest plantation company in Argentina, and one of the largest in Latin America. Since 1996 it has belonged to Chilean group, Celulosa Arauco, which is the second largest pulp producer in the world. Since its creation, Arauco has received numerous tax benefits that have facilitated its continued expansion.

Arauco owns 264,000 hectares of land in Argentina, of which more than 131,000 are planted with tree monocultures. In the province of Misiones, the transnational company manages a pulp mill located in Puerto Esperanza, and two nurseries, a remanufacturing plant, a medium-density fiberboard (MDF) plant, and two sawmills—including the largest one in Argentina—in Puerto Piray. Every day this sawmill releases formaldehyde from its chimney, a toxin that residents describe as “a substance that smells like rotten eggs.”

Currently, Arauco owns almost 12 percent of all land in Misiones. In the municipality of Puerto Piray alone, it owns 63 percent of the land. According to Argentinian news agency, Tierra Viva, it is estimated that each planted hectare consumes three liters of agrochemicals per year, which would mean that the company dumps over 70,000 liters of chemicals in Piray per year. The effects on the population’s health include cancer, respiratory and skin infections, deformities, and other ailments. In addition to this serious impact, Arauco has taken over lands from indigenous and peasant communities, destroyed their livelihoods and biodiversity, contaminated their water sources, and evicted their inhabitants.

In the year 2000, in a context of profound social and economic crisis in Argentina, the lack of land and work led families in Piray to start to organize. By 2003, four grassroots groups had been formed, each with between eight and ten families. All of them were united by some collective project: production of honey from bees, sugar cane production, raising chickens or canning jams. Two years later in 2005, the neighborhood groups from Unión, Santa Teresa and Kilómetro 18 formed the organization, the Independent Producers of Piray (PIP). Today, PIP is part of the Land Workers Union (UTT, by its Spanish acronym), which brings together organizations in resistance across the whole country.

From the beginning, PIP’s main fight was for land. This is why they had to confront Arauco, the

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biggest land hoarder in Misiones. The multinational company's pine plantations had not only invaded the territory and surrounded the families, but also caused health problems due to the use of agrochemicals.

After many marches, protests, roadblocks and campaigns at different levels, in 2013, the House of Representatives of the Province of Misiones passed a law that declared 600 hectares of Arauco's land in Piray to be of public interest and subject to purchase and expropriation. The transfer of these lands was scheduled in stages, respecting the timeframes to cut the pine trees that the company had established. The first batch of 166 hectares, originally scheduled for 2013, was not transferred until in mid-2017, and only in 2021 was it definitively titled.

Therein, the families of PIP began to plant corn, beans, sweet potatoes, cassava, watermelon, melon, cabbage and dozens of other crops. Upon the expropriation, each member of the cooperative received one hectare of land on the condition that they work it in an agroecological and community manner. Another 45 hectares are worked collectively for annual crops. And there are lands that cannot be planted yet, as they are degraded and contaminated and in a process of recovery.

Its strong commitment to healthy eating meant that in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, PIP harvested and bagged more than 30,000 kilograms of cassava and sweet potatoes. These were sent to Buenos Aires and distributed in the network of UTT soup kitchens to alleviate the situation of those who were suffering most from the health emergency. Meanwhile in Piray, they prepared and offered bags of fruits and vegetables, which could be paid for through donation—under the motto “PIP feeds you, door to door.” Those who could not afford to pay got to keep the bags anyway.

But the fight goes on. To date, two thirds of the lands promised to be expropriated have still not been transferred. Arauco should have already transferred a second batch of land—107 more hectares. This has led peasants to once again organize protests, marches and roadblocks to make their just demands visible.

World Rainforest Movement (WRM) spoke with Miriam Samudio, one of the key members of the larger PIP family, to reflect on the process of struggle and the lessons learned.

**WRM: Before the fight for expropriation of lands from Alto Paraná (Arauco), had you had other fights or collective actions? Had you had other experiences?**

Miriam: Before the fight for land, as an organization and as neighbors, we were organized in neighborhood commissions. We started to fight for the community's rights. We united the three neighborhoods and we formed the Integrating Committee, which was open to all residents' claims. We fought to have the road repaired, for streetlights, for drinking water. We saw the need to have Primary Health Care Centers (CAPS by its Spanish acronym), first-aid clinics. In other words, we succeeded in getting some basic things for our community, and we did it together as a Neighborhood Committee.

That is when we realized that, organized, we could accomplish a lot more. We realized that the health issue meant we all had something to do together, and that something was to stop the use of agrochemicals in the area, and for the pine trees behind our houses to be removed. All of this made it so that after a few years, as neighbors, we were able to organize and form an independent organization like PIP, the Independent Producers of Piray.

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We were greatly encouraged by the occupation and settlement that took place in San Pedro (100 km from Piray). The grit that that organization had...they fought together for the land and they got it. We have supported their last struggles, and that has totally encouraged us to to fight for what is ours. We also visited a group of 300 families in Paraguay that had occupied a large soybean estate a while back. They occupied 5,000 hectares. It was not easy; they made several attempts until they were able to stay there, even though they were still in conflict. Knowing about that fight was very motivating.

**WRM: In previous conversations with PIP we were told that it was the women (who stayed home working while the men looked for jobs) that started to become aware of the importance of having land. How did that happen?**

Miriam: From 1999 to 2000—which was the hardest time due to a crisis that affected not only the country but also the individual provinces—we mothers needed to stay home, and the men (fathers, brothers) went far away to work. In that situation, we would get together at school meetings and in the first aid center, and we would all say the same thing. We were worried that our children had wounds, respiratory problems, conjunctivitis, diarrhea. They all started having the same symptoms, and that was when the women started to realize that all of this was happening during pine tree blooming season. We realized that the pollen released in that period was harming not only the environment but also the health of our children and the elderly. That is when we realized that something was going on and that we—the women—had to do something.

We thought it would be easy. Obviously at first one cannot see the whole problem. We lodged formal complaints about the health problem to the municipality, and said the pine trees should be removed and that the use of agrochemicals should cease. Over time we started to realize that it was actually a big fight. And that's how it all started. We are always talking about how to have courage and bravery and continue to resist. We feel that it is a battle that will not end soon. We are always looking for strategies to keep moving forward. And oftentimes it is necessary to stop, in order to come back stronger and with more enthusiasm.

I see that the role of women in this struggle for land has been very important; it has been essential. Because we were the ones who—day to day—have had to see how to put food on the table for our children. And so it was as if we embraced the fight for land, because we understood that on that land we could produce food, and as a first step solve the issue of our families' subsistence.

I also know that despite all the challenges we face on a daily basis, we are able to dream, and to believe that what seemed so impossible can be possible if we all organize and fight together—if men and women and the whole community rise up. And we were the ones who started to talk about it and infect other families with our enthusiasm and encourage them to get involved. The conviction we had when we started to organize in our fight for land was very intense and hopeful. The women had a lot of conviction and commitment, and I don't think that has changed. We are always on the frontlines, and we are always cheering people on. While today the work is mutual, and the commitment is shared by both parts—men and women—it is the women who are always ready for action, just like we were at the beginning.

Balancing taking care of our homes, our children and the resistance is a daily struggle for us. We always say to each other “how are things going, how are you?” And we are always in the fight. We are always prepared, always organized. Despite everything we are doing, we also have time for ourselves. In addition to taking care of our homes, doing the cooperative work, organizing the fight, we always seek balance, you know? Attending to each part as is necessary, without neglecting

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anything.

**WRM: How do you make decisions in PIP today? What have been the main changes in the organization since its inception?**

Miriam: Decisions have always been made together. Assemblies and meetings of delegates are held; everyone is consulted and then decisions are made in a general assembly. So if we get it right, we all get it right. And if we get it wrong, well, we all get it wrong.

The changes have always been for the better, in the sense that we evaluate what can be improved; as something is proposed it gets changed and improved. But in decision-making, we continue to use that modality. So that everyone has a say, and everyone has the opportunity to make proposals. And so that we can make corrections so as not to make mistakes. And if we make a mistake, we go back and think about it differently.

**WRM: What have been the main obstacles that delayed or weakened the fight? How did you navigate them?**

Miriam: The main obstacle that arose at first was the community itself. The very people within our organization were afraid of the company because it is a multinational. Some even looked favorably on the company, saying “but they give us work,” without looking at the other part that is behind the work—which was everything that they were destroying. So it was about convincing them. It was about raising awareness among our own comrades and then among the community. Because at first, the community often saw us as trouble-makers, rabble-rousers, picketers. As if they did not understand that the fight was not just for our organization, but for the community itself. So that the community would not disappear, so that we ourselves would not disappear. This was very hard in the beginning.

Then another obstacle was that we had to prepare ourselves, because who knew we were going to confront a multinational corporation and that we had to know some rights and articles of the Constitution? We began to study some things and train ourselves. Over time we have learned a lot of things. But it was necessary to go through that process first, which was also for our own good. Because we grew in that learning process and in that fight, and today that gives us a great deal of strength.

Another obstacle has been burnout, due to the long amount of time we have been in this process. We have been at it for many years. 14 years of uninterrupted struggle means a lot of burnout, and this is why at times there weren't as many of us, and then later we would rebound. But we have always been fighting for the interests of all families. Many times we have had to draw strength where there was none.

In terms of current obstacles, and I think this applies not only to now but to the whole process: Since the company sees that we are an organization, and we continue organizing to fight for the part of the land that belongs to us, what it always does is get to people within the organization to weaken us. They come around every four years during elections to seek votes, and that is always a headache. It seems like we still have not shaken the bad habit that when a politician comes and sounds convincing...I don't know why, but some people within our organization follow the interests of the company. And they start there and divide the waters, until elections are over and things go back to normal. Therefore one obstacle that, incredibly, we still face to this day, is that every time there are governmental elections, there are differences in opinions about the actions we want to take. It is obvious, it is very felt. And after the elections are over, it's like everything calms down and goes back

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to normal.

**WRM: Has there been a conscious learning process throughout the years?**

Miriam: I think that the learning process throughout this year—the awareness that each family, woman, man and delegate has gained—is much stronger than when we first started. When we make a claim, when a strategy is proposed, when an issue or concern is raised, it is clear that the comrades have a lot of consciousness when it comes to going for it and making the commitment and knowing how to defend life and our territories. And especially knowing how to accompany or support other organizations, or other communities that are being threatened with eviction.

PIP's strong commitment to continue supporting and standing in solidarity is very noticeable. We see this with the new people who join, because in a matter of no time they are proposing ideas and issues with a lot more strength.

**WRM: At PIP you not only decided to reclaim the land and put it to use for food production, but you also created a School for Adults. How and why did you organize this?**

Miriam: Yes, apart from the resistance in the territory and the struggle for land, in PIP we also seek options to be able to enjoy our rights. One of these rights is a school for adults, which entailed a long and persistent effort to get core studies approved—the SIPTEP, which is a comprehensive provincial education system. We were able to make our headquarters a nucleus, and it's open to the whole community.

There are many young people who didn't finish their schooling or high school, and a lot of older people who are doing grade school. And for us it is a source of pride to be able to say that we're not only thinking of ourselves but of the community.

Another thing we continue to do in PIP is try to be protagonists within our community around our demands and the rights that we deserve. We are always fighting for health, for roads, for water. For example, a plan to create a PIP Seed Bank is also moving forward, to preserve and revitalize local biodiversity. We try to be this voice in our community, and that also gives us a lot of strength.

**WRM: What are the most important things to keep in mind, in terms of self-organization, to start and maintain a fight? What are some things to avoid or be careful of in the process?**

Miriam: Whenever we get the chance to have talks or meetings with communities, or with other groups that are also fighting for their land, we try to share our experience with them. Above all, to tell them that if they have conviction, if they truly believe they have the right, if they really embrace that fight with everything—with their heart, soul and consciousness—then they have the chance to form a good group. And they can get more families involved, and engage not only the people in the group but also the community.

One of the things to be very cautious of is to not resolve things individually. There is always a danger there. Sometimes, in an effort to speed things up or to respond quickly, you can make a mistake. This has happened to us; some of our members went through this. So, always try to make decisions together. Move forward only when there is agreement. It doesn't matter if you lose a few more days or a few more weeks; the important thing is that the majority be in agreement, because that's the only way people are going to embrace that commitment and that fight. And they are going to push until they reach their goal.

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**WRM: Do you think that outside support or solidarity is important? What kind of solidarity have you received that you consider to have been valuable or useful?**

Miriam: Outside support is always, always important, whether it is from institutions, society itself, media outlets, officials, or different blocs. Because that's how it is: you must involve everyone. You must put the issue on the table and involve everyone who makes up our society.

I know that for us this has taken time. We have kept resisting, and little by little we have gotten all of those actors on board, who are important and invaluable when it comes to sharing opinions, making decisions, standing in solidarity and making our struggles visible.

It is always very important to seek allies, especially allies that can shed light on everything being done and everything we are fighting for, so that the issue is discussed in different spaces. This is very important. This has helped us a great deal.

(1) For more information about PIP's fight, please see the following links (in Spanish):

Tierra Viva, [Despiertan tierras dormidas](#), Argentina, 2020.

Tierra Viva, Productores Independientes de Piray: ["Donde había solo tierra dura, ahora crecen alimentos sanos"](#), Argentina, 2021,

Alianza Biodiversidad, Nélide Almeida: ["La agroecología es traer al corazón esos valores que están en la comunidad"](#), 2022