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Over the past several decades, large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations have spread throughout the tropical regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America. We spoke with the Latin American regional branch of the International Union of Food Workers (Rel-UITA). Rel-UITA has been involved in numerous cases of denunciations of human rights violations and union conflicts connected to oil palm plantations.

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I will begin by highlighting the relationship between two factors that are intrinsically connected, although this is not always apparent: the expansion of eucalyptus plantations and temporary migration, the clearest symbol of precarious work. This is a situation which in itself exposes the reality of the eucalyptus-pulp equation, integrated into the discourse of development and progress.

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The right to work is wider than the right to a job. For many rural communities, their traditional land and associated knowledge form the material basis of their way of living, their culture and their identity. If they lose their land they lose their right to work – a human right.

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OUR VIEWPOINT

- The green economy and labour: Will "green jobs" protect workers' health and safety?

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an estimated 160 million people suffer from work-related diseases, 270 million are involved in work-related accidents annually, and two million workers die from work-related diseases and accidents every year. ILO Director-General Juan Somavia has stated that the "green economy" – promoted by the UN itself and the central theme of the Rio+20 conference next month – should work towards greater protection of the health and safety of workers across the world. But will the activities that will be promoted as part of the so-called green economy actually contribute to achieving this goal?

The "green economy" of monoculture tree plantations

Among the companies that could benefit a great deal from the "greening" of the economy are those that promote monoculture tree plantations, which are considered to be "forests" by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO). FAO predicts a massive increase in these monoculture plantations, between 40 and 90 million hectares of "planted forests" by the year 2030, not including oil palm plantations. In the context of the green economy, many of these so-called forests will be monoculture plantations of trees that can serve as "green" energy sources, such as:

(1) Plantations that not only supply trees for pulp and paper production, but can also be used to produce cellulose-based agrofuels in an industrial facility known as a biorefinery. One of these facilities is already under construction in Finland.

(2) Plantations of fast-growing trees for biomass, for example, to produce charcoal as a source of energy for iron and steel foundries or wood pellets for electric power generation in Europe. There are numerous wood-fired power plants under construction in Europe, primarily in the United Kingdom.

(3) Plantations of oil palm, mainly in Indonesia, to produce oil that will be refined to obtain biodiesel, which can be burned to generate electricity or used as fuel for motor vehicles and airplanes, primarily in Europe.

There are also plans to establish millions of more hectares of plantations in order to "sell" carbon, for example, in Indonesia and India, where these plantations will "supply" industries in the North with "carbon credits" based on the false supposition that these "credits" can offset their greenhouse gas emissions.

"Green jobs"

In this scenario, the countries of the South will supposedly benefit from the creation of "green jobs". FAO itself, back in 2009, stated that "sustainable forest management" could create 10 million new jobs. Since the sustainable forest management practiced for centuries by forest peoples is under ever greater threat, and considering the enormous lobbying power that the monoculture tree plantation industry wields over FAO, we can only reach one conclusion: that according to FAO, green jobs are created through the establishment of industrial tree plantations, which continue to expand ever further.

Throughout the years, WRM has reported extensively on the conditions faced by workers, both men and women, on large-scale industrial plantations of eucalyptus, pine, oil palm and rubber trees. These workers tend to be people from local communities, who carry out particularly hazardous tasks, such as spraying toxic

chemical pesticides and fertilizers and operating chainsaws. In the last 20 years we have seen working conditions become increasingly precarious, through outsourcing and even “outsourcing of outsourcing”, payment on a piece-work basis, pay cuts, total disregard for workers' rights, and the obstruction of trade union organizing. How can safe and healthy jobs be created in these conditions?

These are the workers who were severely hit by the economic-financial crisis that erupted in 2008, when the global demand for industrial goods declined. Many were laid off, forced to face the despair of unemployment and to pay the price for a crisis they did not cause, to save the profit margins of the company owners. These workers may eventually be rehired, but they have no guarantee of employment in the medium and long term. What the companies want is flexibility.

The trend of companies undertaking ever larger industrial projects has tended to further aggravate the situation. In Brazil, the conditions faced by workers on the construction site of what will be the world's largest pulp mill, owned by Eldorado Brasil – as described in this edition of the WRM bulletin – leaves no room for doubt: these projects generate insecurity and even desperation in the lives of the workers, most of them brought in from outside the region, as well as for the local population.

How can safe and healthy jobs be created?

Quite often, the temporary workers hired by the companies connected to monoculture plantations were formerly peasant farmers. When they had their own land, they had labour security and could live in peace, in an intact environment that offered them such riches as pure water, food, natural remedies, etc. This is the story of the communities in Indonesia who saw their environment destroyed by oil palm companies who promised that the plantations would improve their lives. Disillusioned, they have decided to fight back to reclaim their lands. The story of one of these communities is also presented in this edition.

To pursue the goal of truly safe and healthy work, a number of urgent measures are required, among them:

- Public policies to control and monitor companies to ensure that they respect the rights of workers, and strict penalties for companies that violate them.
- Public policies that guarantee the land rights of communities and provide support for their production of food and other crops, so that they have the security to continue working their land and, at the same time, to preserve the natural environment on which they depend.
- Policies to halt the ongoing process of privatization and concentration of land ownership in the name of investments in the green economy, for example, for the establishment of monoculture tree plantations for biomass and agrofuel production.

These measures could genuinely contribute to the creation of decent work, ensuring and promoting safer and more ecologically sound workplaces, with the native vegetation preserved intact, so that people can work and live happily.

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- Women oil palm plantation workers in Asia: Gender inequity and exploitation



In Asia, as in many other parts of the world, forest areas have been inhabited by successive generations of indigenous communities. For these peoples, the forest has come to play a central role in their socio-cultural identity and their survival as a community. But today, many of these forests are being cleared and replaced by industrial oil palm plantations – in many cases, on lands granted to companies by the state on the pretext that they were vacant or idle lands!

The arrival of large-scale oil palm plantations has generally implied major changes in the social and economic structure of local communities. The loss of land that formerly provided them with a source of livelihood forces them to go out in search of employment. In the best of cases they can find work with the plantation companies. But these companies do not always hire the local population; often they take advantage of immigrant labour, since these workers are more vulnerable and thus easier to exploit with lower salaries and heavier workloads.

Within this general context, women face an especially difficult situation. As documented in a report by the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) (1), women who find work on the plantations tend to be employed as sprayers of pesticides and fertilizers, exposing them to severe health hazards posed by chemicals like paraquat. Quite frequently, they are not informed of these chemicals or provided with protective equipment, nor are they protected by health and safety regulations.

In other cases, the pressure on women to provide food for their families forces them to seek alternative sources of income as migrant workers. According to the same FPP report, prostitution is on the rise in Cambodia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, coinciding with a higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases among female oil palm plantation workers.

In Indonesia, the Suharto government, with the support of World Bank financing, introduced the nucleus estate model in the 1980s. Under this system, oil palm plantation companies were not only granted land concessions by the government to establish their industrial plantations, or so-called nucleus estates, but were also supplied with the harvest from so-called “plasma” or satellite plantations – smallholder estates of two hectares associated with a transmigration scheme. Under this model, the smallholders have a dependent relationship with the companies, which exercise power over them as the only buyer to whom they can sell their harvests (a situation known in economic terms as a monopsony). Women are subjected to double dependence, subordinated to their husbands or fathers, since only men are recognized as smallholders by the nucleus estate companies. Although women, along with their children, typically work on the oil palm plantations, they do so as mere “helpers” of the men, which means they work without remuneration, as revealed in a research report by Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights (2).

The transmigration programme, which has been implemented in Indonesia since the

Dutch colonial era and has led to major displacements of the population, has proven to be extremely useful for the oil palm plantation industry. Only men are eligible for ownership of smallholdings, and the role of women is limited to being the “partners” of their husbands. This discriminatory policy of the programme has led to the marginalization of unmarried women and widows, who are denied the possibility of participating in the programme and accessing the opportunity to own a “plasma” oil palm plantation.

Relegated to the position of mere wives, women take part in every stage of work on the plasma plantations, beginning with clearing and weeding, followed by the treatment of the land – usually through the spraying of fertilizer – and finally the harvest, in which women are generally responsible for picking up and gathering the fruit that has fallen to the ground. Thus they work, although indirectly and without payment, for the nucleus company which these family plantations supply with palm fruit.

Women carry out these tasks in addition to their domestic chores. And even though the wives of palm plantation smallholders in the Indonesian transmigration programme work alongside their husbands, they have no right to land nor are they recognized as landowners.

The research report by Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights looked at the situation of the many women from the villages of Olumokunde and Kamba, in the province of Central Sulawesi, who had gone to work at a nursery owned by the oil palm company Jaya Abadi, a subsidiary of the PT Astra group. Some of them are hired as contract labourers, while others are not given a work contract. Women contract labourers usually take their children with them to help them finish their work more quickly. Their work day at the nursery is seven to eight hours, with a one hour break. However, a woman labourer's day usually begins at four in the morning, when she gets up to cook and leave food prepared for her family. In 2010 they were paid approximately 3.6 U.S. dollars (32,800 Indonesian rupiahs) a day; if they worked a full month, they could earn a salary of 86.5 dollars.

The women labourers reported that the company did not provide them with protective equipment or even the adequate tools, so that they often had to bring their own tools like machetes, hoes and buckets. One of the women working in the nursery told the researchers:

When we first started working, the company didn't provide us with adequate tools. We were only given fabric for a facial mask, it's only the last few months the company provided the mask and other tools.

These masks were only provided by the company after the women labourers complained and directly asked for them, because of the toxic products they were exposed to. These include Matadol, an insecticide produced by Syngenta whose product description notes that it can be irritating to the eyes or skin, fatal or poisonous if swallowed, harmful if inhaled, and may cause itching, burning or numbness of exposed skin. The women also work with Decis, an insecticide produced by Bayer and described by the company itself as toxic to fish, aquatic organisms and bees. As for humans, it is fatal or poisonous if swallowed or absorbed through the skin, potentially fatal if inhaled, and severely irritating to the eyes and skin.

According to information gathered at the community clinic in the village of Olumokunde, many of the women labourers are treated for aches in the waist area,

stiffness, itchiness and even full-body allergic reactions. The women reported that the company does not provide any treatment for the health problems that they suffer as a result of their work in the nursery.

These are some of the testimonies gathered by the researchers:

It's dangerous working at the company, a lot of diseases or health problems. Have to leave at four and come home only in the afternoon. The children become neglected.

Working in the (company) fields is very hard... You have to accept the heat and being rained on. Apart from the responsibility in the house, there's also the work outside of the house, from morning until the afternoon, and once home there is still more house chores that must be done.

Before the establishment of the oil palm plantations, a large majority of the women in the villages worked in the rice fields. After the rice harvest, they were left with free time and took part in social activities, such as those around the celebration of Independence Day on 17 August. In the past women actively participated in sports competitions and community arts such as vocal groups during these celebrations. But now, the women labourers complain, there is no time left for these activities. According to ibu Lian aka mama Yosua, one of the local women interviewed:

The presence of oil palm is killing the community arts, especially for the women. Proof of this is the women don't participate anymore in the competitions at the 17 August celebrations.

The prospect of earning a salary in a nursery or on an industrial plantation has appealed to many women as a way to increase their household income. Their entry into the monetary economy has also brought about changes in consumption patterns. They now buy more than they used to, and buying on credit has introduced debt, something that was practically non-existent before, and sometimes chains them to salaried work and the company.

It is more than obvious that in Asia, as various research studies demonstrate, working in the industrial oil palm sector has not improved women's lives: gender inequity has persisted or even worsened, while women also suffer exploitation in the workplace both on industrial plantations and in the nurseries.

This article is based on the following reports:

(1) "Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia: Trends and implications for local communities and indigenous peoples", Forest Peoples Programme, Sawit Watch and others, 2011, <http://www.forestpeoples.org/oil-palm-expansion-in-south-east-asia-trends-implications-local-communities-indigenous-peoples>

(2) "The Oil Palm Plantation System Weakens the Position of Women", Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights, 2010, http://wrm.org.uy/subjects/women/OilPalm_women_SW.pdf

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- Oil palm plantation workers in Central America: The experience of Rel-UITA



Over the past several decades, large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations have spread throughout the tropical regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

We spoke with Giorgio Trucchi, a correspondent for the Latin American regional branch of the International Union of Food Workers (Rel-UITA, its acronym in Spanish) in Central America. Rel-UITA has been involved in numerous cases of denunciations of human rights violations and union conflicts connected to oil palm plantations.

- Rel-UITA has member unions in most of the countries of Latin America. Are there any oil palm sector unions among its affiliates in Central America?

The situation of oil palm plantation workers in the different countries of Central America is very similar: the existence of trade unions in the sector is inconceivable. We have monitored the expansion of plantations in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where unionization is hindered by outsourcing and company pressures.

According to the testimony of people who work or have worked on oil palm plantations, it is impossible for them to organize, because the company immediately reacts by firing you, and sometimes even puts you on a blacklist which makes it difficult for you to find a job on other plantations or estates. The big landowners all have the same policies when it comes to labour, rights and business practices.

Another characteristic of these oil palm plantations is that the owners of the estates almost never appear in person. The person who deals with the workers is the contractor, who is locally based and knows the area and the people's needs very well. The contractor negotiates a specific job proposal directly with the company: the number of hectares to be planted, the amount and terms of payment (per unit of work or per day), the terms and conditions of the food provided for the workers and the percentage that the contractor will receive for each worker. Once the deal has been agreed upon, the contractor goes out to look for workers.

- What are the labour relations between the workers and contractors like?

There are basically four different forms of labour relations:

Permanent workers with contracts, for whom all social security contributions are paid. This category includes high-level management, foremen and engineers, but never the workers involved in harvesting or other work directly associated with the plantation.

Permanent workers without contracts, who do not have access to social security benefits but in some cases reach an agreement for the payment of social insurance contributions.

Temporary local workers, who live with their families in the community near the plantation, where they might have a small plot of land of their own for subsistence farming, but complement their income with seasonal work on the plantations, without a contract or any type of social security benefits.

Temporary workers who come from faraway. If a contractor needs to hire people for seasonal work, he will put out a call for applications through different types of media in other parts of the country. People who have no work in their own communities and respond to this call end up living in dismal conditions on the plantations, with no social security benefits, far from their families, and without the sustenance they used to get from their parcels of land. They are left dependent on the ups and downs of seasonal work and the conditions imposed by the contractors and engineers.

One strategy implemented with non-permanent workers is to hire them for two or three months (depending on the country) and then lay them off. They go home for a month, and are then rehired. This means that they do not need to be registered with the Ministry of Labour or insured.

More than 90% of oil palm plantation workers have no social security coverage, work on a subcontracting basis, and are also under the pressure of knowing that behind them there is a line of people waiting to take their place. As a result, it is practically impossible for these people to organize unions to demand their rights or even to push for improvements in their working conditions.

- This model of large-scale production of an exotic tree species requires the use of significant amounts of toxic agrochemicals. Has this had any impact on the health of the workers?

There is very little said about this issue. There is almost no information on it because of a lack of official records, the result of the high levels of outsourcing and precarious employment. When we speak with the workers, they all talk about the lack of hygienic and work safety measures in the application of agrochemicals, and the fact that they are not provided with the necessary protective equipment. Often the backpack sprayers they use to apply the chemical products leak onto the workers' bodies. There are cases of poisoning, but the problem is always "solved" by the contractor, who assumes the risks. For the workers who are lucky enough to be treated at public hospitals, it is very difficult for them to afford the medications or to keep up the treatment prescribed; if they do not work, they have no money. As for the workers who develop chronic illnesses or die, there are no protections whatsoever. The companies distance themselves from these situations, and take absolutely no responsibility for what happens on the plantations.

- The expansion of monoculture oil palm plantations implies changes in land use and ownership. What was on these lands before they were occupied by oil palm plantations?

In Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua alike, oil palm has replaced other monoculture crops (bananas, cotton, sugar cane) destroyed by climate phenomena or by falling world market prices, which have made them less profitable. But above all, oil palm plantations have taken over land that used to be in the hands of peasant farmers and indigenous communities.

One of the main impacts of monoculture oil palm plantations is land grabbing and concentration of land ownership in just a few hands. The big plantation company owners come in to buy land from indigenous and peasant communities. In many cases this is not so simple. The communities who have lived on the land for

centuries, with their subsistence crops, their culture, do not want to sell it. Very few families decide to sell their land voluntarily. In most cases they are coerced into selling through threats or repression, or through deception, with promises that are never kept. A prime example of this is the situation in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras.

Faced with this situation, families react in different ways. Some refuse to sell their land and endure the threats and repression. Others sell because they have been threatened, but they keep a small parcel of land to continue growing food, because they know they need it to survive; or else they sell it all and lease a hectare or half a hectare of land for subsistence farming. Finally there are the families who sell everything, and they are the ones who suffer the most from the loss of food security and sovereignty. They go from being small farmers with a certain degree of autonomy, to being totally dependent on the oil palm plantation. This makes them much more vulnerable to being pressured, and forces them to accept all of the working conditions imposed on them.

- At first oil palm plantations were geared to supplying the pharmaceutical and food industries; in recent years, under the pretext of climate change mitigation, they have begun to be used for the production of agrofuels and as carbon sinks.

In order to promote these initiatives, both the company owners and officials from the IDB and World Bank claim that these plantations bring investment, development and employment to rural areas with high rates of poverty. Do you see this in the communities where you have been?

The international financial institutions are promoting these monoculture plantations as CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) projects in countries of the South, used to justify continued pollution in countries of the North.

The major expansion of oil palm plantations since the 1990s has been promoted primarily by the IDB and the World Bank, with direct responsibility and using this discourse of their supposed benefits. In reality, they are generating slave labour and causing food insecurity, conflict and death.

In Honduras, for example, business magnate Miguel Facussé has said that oil palm brings well-being and development to the community. When you talk to the plantation workers in the Bajo Aguán, they tell you that this is what they were promised. But the fact is that since the arrival of oil palm plantations here, the only ones who have benefited, aside from the plantation owners themselves, are the owners of the pulperías or local food stores, and families have never been saddled with so much debt as now, when almost everyone works on the palm plantations.

Some of the workers comment, "Before I didn't have as much cash money as I do now, but now I don't grow food on my parcel of land anymore." With the money they earn on the plantation, they buy a range of products in the local stores that are imposed by the market. More money and more consumption do not equal more well-being. In addition, their wages are so low – usually less than a minimum wage – that their money runs out before the end of the month, and they end up buying on credit at the local store, with the money deducted from their next month's wages.

The oil palm plantations have created jobs, but comparatively fewer jobs than other monocultures such as bananas or cotton, with the added problem of the poor conditions in which people are forced to work. The expansion of oil palm plantations has not improved the lives of the workers' families or contributed to the development

of their communities.

- Do women work on the plantations?

Women are usually hired to work in the nurseries. They work under the same conditions and for the same hours, but they face pay discrimination, earning significantly less than men.

All of the changes described above (in forms of production, access to land, the rupture of social and family ties) have had greater repercussions on women, who are directly affected by them. If families no longer grow food crops on their own parcels, they have to buy food, but when there is no money or the money does not last until the end of the month, there is no food. And it is always the women who have to figure out a way to survive. Interpersonal relations within the family become strained; a man who has no work or who is overexploited at work is likely to take out his frustrations on his family, and especially on his wife.

And so women are doubly affected, by the direct impacts of work in the nurseries and by the impacts that oil palm plantations generate within the family unit, which end up affecting women especially.

- What has been the role of national governments in all of this?

In Central America they have fully backed the big landowners, with the usual discourse of how the plantations bring well-being and employment. They have passed laws on temporary and hourly work, and one of the sectors that has benefited most from these is the agricultural sector, and especially banana and oil palm plantations. Wherever there are unions, whether they are already established or just being organized, laws like these destroy them. They destroy the possibility for workers to protest or demand their rights, because workers are hired for three days, and if they behave well, they get rehired, but if they do not, someone else gets hired in their place.

- How has Rel-UITA worked on this issue and what challenges have you faced?

Rel-UITA has closely monitored the issue of monoculture plantations in Central America. What we have seen is that the most serious problems, repression, murders and violations of all kinds of rights – human rights in the broadest sense of the word – take place on oil palm and sugar cane plantations.

Through our press coverage we have given ongoing support to the workers and local communities, making local governments and the international community aware of the impacts of these monoculture plantations on people. This is how a number of concrete cases have been exposed, such as, for example, the situation in the Bajo Aguán. We formed part of the international fact-finding mission that went to the region to investigate the human rights situation. The final report, which has been submitted to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, among others, directly links the expansion of oil palm plantations with the violation of human rights.

As another example of our work, we are currently organizing and convening a public hearing and international seminar on human rights in the Bajo Aguán, in coordination with local human rights organizations and peasant organizations. We will also provide press coverage of the event.

We are fully committed to this cause, working in coordination with international

organizations like FIAN and WRM, among others, while continuing in the very important work of forging and strengthening ties with peasant and human rights organizations in each one of the countries affected.

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- Brazil: Eucalyptus and the growing precarity of work in Mato Grosso do Sul



Nothing likes eucalyptus. If you let cattle loose among the eucalyptus, they start grazing around the outside, which is supposed to be a reserve. The cattle don't like it, neither do the birds, or the wasps. The hardest thing about a place like that is the wasps, but not even the wasps like to be where the eucalyptus is. (Video interview with Manuelzão, a character from the novel "Corpo de Bailes" by João Guimarães Rosa)

I will begin by highlighting the relationship between two factors that are intrinsically connected, although this is not always apparent: the expansion of eucalyptus plantations and temporary migration, the clearest symbol of precarious work. This is a situation which in itself exposes the reality of the eucalyptus-pulp equation, integrated into the discourse of development and progress, given the fact that support for this economic activity is sought by publicizing its potential for creating employment, although the nature of the jobs created is never revealed.

This is a fundamental question in the case of Três Lagoas, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, a city that was recently proclaimed the "pulp capital" of Brazil due to the presence of pulp mills owned by such giants in the sector as IP, Fibria and Eldorado Brasil. In Três Lagoas, the dance of the numbers of jobs created is choreographed in such a way as to create a direct link between eucalyptus and employment in the minds of the public. As a result, the local press insistently reports certain figures from the general employment registry of the Ministry of Labour, such as the fact that 24,708 workers were hired in the local economy in 2011. However, that same year, the number of workers laid off was 22,818. Although the balance is positive, this should not and cannot be the main interpretation of the situation.

It is essential to point out, within these figures, a characteristic of the eucalyptus-pulp sector that is closely related to the instability of employment, because in the vast majority of cases, these are temporary jobs. In addition, the pulp mills operating in Três Lagoas are exempt from paying major taxes such as the ICMS and IPTU, as well as another tax, the ISS, while these plants are under construction. Added to this are the enormous amounts of financing granted by the federal government through the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDS). The most recent payout was 2.7 billion reais (1.5 billion U.S. dollars) granted to Eldorado Brasil – most of which is money from the public treasury, drawn from the Fundo de Amparo ao Trabalhador, or workers support fund.

Who are the migrant workers temporarily employed in construction in Três Lagoas? Let's look at the recent case of the construction of the "biggest pulp mill in the world", which is scheduled to be ready to enter into operation in 2014 and is owned by Eldorado Brasil. There are around 7,000 men working on its construction. The majority of them are from Northeastern Brazil, uprooted from their homes and in a highly vulnerable situation. As temporary migrants, they belong neither here nor there. They are viewed with distrust by much of the local population, and because of the low wages they are paid, these workers end up living in "accommodations" that in many cases could only be described as ghettos.

On four occasions in the past year, these workers have broken the silence with strikes and demonstrations, denouncing to the entire Brazilian public that they are currently the main victims of the social contradiction created by the eucalyptus-pulp model. What are they demanding? Rights, such as the payment of overdue salaries and overtime; better working and living conditions; more days off; and better transportation, not only to and from the construction site, but also into the city, since some of their lodgings are in the outskirts of the municipality. Despite the strikes, however, it has been observed that the situation has changed very little, and according to the workers, this can be explained by the fact that the agreements signed have gone unfulfilled. It should be stressed here that when we talk about work conditions, we should not limit ourselves to the construction of the pulp mills, but also consider work on the plantations where the eucalyptus trees are grown, which involves, for example, the application of toxic agrochemicals. Plantation workers begin their work day at four in the morning, and earn roughly a minimum wage. Another issue that is seldom discussed is the paradox underlying the expansion of eucalyptus plantations. It may be true, on the one hand, that they provide (precarious) jobs. But on the other hand, they also create unemployment, due to the leasing of ranching estates for the establishment of eucalyptus plantations, which leads to the destruction of pasture land and thus the loss of jobs for workers in the livestock sector. As a result of this process, dozens of families have emigrated from the countryside to the city of Três Lagoas in recent years, leading to the stagnation of local communities.

This precarization of work is intrinsic to the pulp-plantation sector. This most recent case is by no means an isolated one. When Fibria's Horizonte pulp mill was under construction, during 2007 and 2008, the city of Três Lagoas lived through a similar experience. There are records which reveal that in order to lower the costs of providing accommodation for the workers on this construction project, the companies that hired them overcrowded residences and hotels with "beds that never got cold", with no concern for the poor hygienic conditions in which the workers were forced to live, among other situations of precarity and violence. The situation was eventually denounced to the Public Ministry of Labour, which established a commission to investigate. It was determined at the time that there were over 120 places of lodging in the city (both residential homes and hotels) being used by approximately 250 companies subcontracted by Fibria for the construction of the mill. Inspections undertaken by the ministry also uncovered numerous irregularities, which even led to the interdiction of five locations used by the subcontractors to house workers.

Very frequently, as well, when strikes break out or the mistreatment of workers and violations of labour legislation are denounced, the companies attempt to escape scrutiny by the media, passing the blame for the situation onto the subcontractors or sub-subcontractors, as if they were not responsible for the construction project.

Because they know that periods of turbulence and coverage of labour conflicts tend to dwindle as the construction work moves closer to completion, these companies are

careful to ensure that work stoppages do not cause the work to fall behind schedule. To achieve this, hundreds of new workers are hired to replace the ones who fight back against their exploitation.

And what about the work situation in the eucalyptus-pulp sector when the construction is completed and the pulp mills are in operation? In theory, there are no work stoppages, demonstrations or strikes, because living labour is scarce. Instead, there is a sophisticated degree of mechanization (dead labour), which can account for as much of 85% of the work involved in planting and harvesting the eucalyptus trees – as promoters of the model boast.

In Brazil, migration driven by the irregular rhythm of public and private mega projects is nothing new; on the contrary, it is viewed as cause for celebration and a symbol of progress. Nor is there anything new about the strategy of portraying this phenomenon as something natural, downplaying the conditions and social effects of this temporary relocation of individuals moved by capital, through which they are desocialized without being resocialized.

Nevertheless, history is not a mere repetition of events, which is why we see the migrant workers of today using the weapons of their time, such as mobile phones, social networks and newspapers, to denounce their exploitation and demand the rights they are denied in the land of eucalyptus.

Imagine, you work eight hours a day. You go back to the place you're staying to have a shower, you're ready to get in the shower, but, where's the water. And somebody might think, "Wow, this guy is a real slob, he stinks, he doesn't shower." The next day you put on your uniform, you go to work, you come back, and there's no water. So what are you going to do? You're going to protest, because we are human beings. (Worker at the construction site of the Eldorado Brasil pulp mill, interviewed on Dec. 14, 2011 by Guilherme Marini Perpetua and Tayrone Roger Antunes de Asevedo)

By Rosemeire A. de Almeida, professor at UFMS/Três Lagoas Campus

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- Indonesia: Oil palm plantations erode the right to work on communal land



The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the UN agency that oversees labour issues, shaping policies and programmes mainly related to labour standards for the protection of workers.

However, the right to work is wider than the right to a job. The ILO has also incorporated the concept of decent work which recognizes that "work is central to

people's well-being. In addition to providing income, work can pave the way for broader social and economic advancement, strengthening individuals, their families and communities. Such progress, however, hinges on work that is decent. Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives" (ILO, http://www.ilo.org/indonesian/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1096&Itemid=952).

For many rural communities, their traditional land and associated knowledge form the material basis of their way of living, their culture and their identity. If they lose their land they lose their right to work – a human right.

The Indonesian National Human Rights Commission and Sawit Watch – the Indonesian network of NGOs against oil palm plantations – have recently published a report on the collision of the right to manage land granted by the state to companies (HGU) and human rights (HAM). "HGU & HAM Land Use Rights and Human Rights" brings evidence for the argument that the right of companies to manage state land supersedes human rights, which usually receive less consideration and are even ignored by the State.

The following is an excerpt of certain parts of the report which we have edited in order to produce a summarized focus on the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations on local communities' right to work on their lands.

Oil palm plantations in Indonesia cover a total area of 9.1 million hectares, 40% of which are large-scale plantations. Industrial oil palm production is controlled by 27 large groups with about 6,000 subsidiaries in 19 provinces. Yet, state-owned companies such as PTPN share the same large-scale model. And also, the type of plantation developed on people's land is the so-called "plasma plantation", i.e. plantations dominated by a core or "nucleus" company. This means that large-scale oil palm plantations account for most of the total area.

Oil palm is not a new plantation commodity in Indonesia. Large-scale planting of oil palm for commercial purposes began in 1911 in Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. After independence, in 1948, plantations of oil palm encountered some constraints, when then President Sukarno applied the policy of nationalization of Dutch and other foreign companies. However, the plantation industry bloomed by the end of 1980s when then President Suharto encouraged more large-scale plantations.

At present, various policies issued and applied by the Indonesian government have increased the rate of expansion of oil palm plantations, such as the agreement signed with the business sector for the allocation of three million hectares of land for oil palm, especially targeted at the production of biodiesel. The government has also provided incentives in the form of facilities and funds for revitalizing plantations and distributing state land to underprivileged people so they can work to meet the oil palm business' needs.

Some media have reported the government's plan, announced by the president, to open land in a total area of 1.8 million hectares along the border to develop the world's largest oil palm plantation. Data compiled by Sawit Watch indicate that almost all provincial governments have planned to open and expand lands for oil palm plantations, up to 19.8 million hectares in total.

This fierce push of the large-scale oil palm business is colliding with customary rights to communal land.

In Sanggau district, West Kalimantan province, oil palm plantations have been

established in the subdistricts of Kembayan and Parindu. The total area of Parindu – originally inhabited by two ethnic groups, the Malays and the Dayaks – is approximately 59,390 hectares.

The Dayak Parindu have a collective land ownership system under customary regulations where land is inherited but cultivation by each family/individual remains in the context of commonly held land or communal land. Traditionally, the Parindu community has applied shifting land cultivation, but this pattern has almost disappeared due to the expansion of oil palm plantations that have been sweeping across communal lands and forests.

One of the oil palm companies is PT. Perkebunan Nusantara XIII (Persero), also known by the abbreviation PTPN XIII, a state-owned corporation that has been operating in Sanggau since 1984. The company is engaged in the agroindustry business and its main commodities are oil palm and rubber.

PTPN XIII encroached on the Dayak Parindu's "tembawang" (agroforestry) – the communal area where the community had been working the land according to their customs and had guaranteed their livelihood producing many kinds of useful plants, such as fruit trees. But the community's plans and priorities are destroyed in seconds when an oil palm plantation is set up.

For almost 20 years PTPN operated in this region without the concession required for any company to cultivate land owned by the state for commercial purposes – called a Land Use Rights (HGU) concession and granted for a maximum term of 25-35 years.

At the beginning the company did not involve the community in the oil palm plantation and the workforce demand was fulfilled with migrants from Java. This led to complaints from the local community. So, in 1997, the company started applying the so-called plasma plantation model (Pir-Bun), under which the community formally gave 7.5 hectares of their land to the company and would receive 2 hectares of oil palm plantation in return. From then on the community would have to pay the credits to the bank.

Field findings in Sanggau showed that people were enticed to take part in the oil palm plasma programme under the promise that they would improve their welfare. However, members of the Dayak Parindu community expressed that they now realize they were deceived by PTPN XIII and that they have never enjoyed the prosperity promised by the company. In fact, the outcome is that the community lost most of their land.

When tens of hectares of the customary community lands in West Kalimantan were handed over to the government to be given to plantation companies in the form of leaseholds, the status of the lands legally changed to state lands. The consequence is that the customary community does not have rights and authority over the lands anymore, even when the term of the plantation leasehold expires.

The practices of acquisition of community lands for the benefit of the plantation business sparked protests that in West Sumatra were expressed in land occupation/reclaiming. Reclaiming has thus become a form of social movement in response to the attempt of various economic and political power groups to strip local communities of their rights to work and live on their ancestral land.

This article is based on the report "HGU & HAM: Land Use Rights and Human Rights", National Human Rights Commission and Sawit Watch, 2011,

http://wrm.org.uy/plantations/LandUseRight_HumanRight_SW.pdf

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- Support the struggle against the Belo Monte dam, a struggle that has not ended

In the city of Altamira, Pará, Brazil, this June 13-17 – on the eve of the Rio+20 conference – the Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre (Xingu Alive Forever Movement) will be hosting an event called Xingu+23. The name refers to the 23 years that have passed since 1989, the year of a historic meeting in Altamira that led to the successful halting of plans to build a hydroelectric dam on the Xingu River at the time. Although construction of the Belo Monte dam on the Xingu River has already begun, despite numerous irregularities, illegalities and protests, representatives of riverine communities, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, farmers, urban dwellers and other defenders of the Xingu plan to meet for four days in one of the communities most seriously impacted by the dam. They will organize festive activities, discussions and protests to join forces once again against this mega project, which will lead to the destruction of 50,000 hectares of Amazon rainforest, the violation of rights and the expulsion of thousands of people.

For more information on the event, visit: <http://www.xinguvivo.org.br/x23>

To make a donation, click here: <http://www.vakinha.com.br/VaquinhaP.aspx?e=140562>

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- June 5: Global Day of Action on the road to Rio+20

WRM joins in the call for a global mobilization on June 5, World Environment Day, to expose and denounce the structural causes of the crises facing the planet and the false solutions that the creators of these crises are seeking to impose as a means of refounding the capitalist system. This mobilization will also serve to present and promote the real solutions proposed by the peoples to eradicate social, economic and environmental injustice.

This worldwide mobilization will be followed by two others in the framework of the People's Summit at Rio+20: the global day of action against the G 20 (focusing on "green growth") and the People's Summit March on June 20, to be held in Rio de Janeiro and cities around the world.

For more information visit: <http://cupuladospovos.org.br/en/>

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- Food sovereignty: social movements got FAO to debate it

Up to now, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has focused on the pursuit of "food security" and consequently on actions to generate enough food for the entire planet.

However, for several social movements this definition has served well agribusiness

and does not consider the issue of who produces the food, how it is produced and for what.

Following the La Via Campesina's initiative, social movements from around the world have proposed instead the concept of "food sovereignty" as "a necessary precondition of genuine food security and as a real solution to food, climate and fundamental human rights crises."

Food sovereignty has become an umbrella platform of social struggles and now, social movements have conquered a "historic achievement": FAO agreed to begin discussions about food "sovereignty". Movements from around the world submitted a consensus declaration days before the FAO's Thirty-Second Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Buenos Aires in March 26-30.

"Food sovereignty is the right of people to control their own seeds, land, water and food production, ensuring through local, autonomous (participatory, community and shared) and culturally appropriate production, consistent and complementary with Mother Earth, the peoples' access to sufficient, varied and nutritious food, deepening the production of each nation and people," said social movements and other groups and networks in the Third Conference's declaration.

"Food sovereignty is a principle, a vision and a legacy built by indigenous peoples, campesinos, family farmers, artisanal fisherman, women, Afro-descendants, youth, and rural workers, and a proposal for society as a whole," reads the declaration.

However, "for a profound debate to begin and for this to become policy, there is a long road ahead that cannot be isolated from a necessary rethinking of the capitalist model of production and the removal of our food from the hands of agribusiness," reminded Carlos Vicente, representative of Grain, an international organization that supports farmers and social movements. (More in <http://lapress.org/articles.asp?art=6630>)

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- Genetically engineered eucalyptus plantations: And then there were four...

Several months ago (see WRM Bulletin 172) we reported on the plans of Suzano Papel e Celulose S. A. – the world's second largest pulp producer – to invest in biomass plantations. Biomass energy is one of the market-driven false "solutions" to climate change. It promotes land grabbing and diverts attention from the need to effectively reduce carbon dioxide emissions at the source.

Now we have learned that in November 2011, FuturaGene Ltd. U.K., bought by Suzano in 2010, obtained authorization from the Brazilian National Technical Commission on Biosecurity (CTNBio) for a field trial of genetically modified eucalyptus trees. The trees have been engineered to alter their lignin and cellulose content in order to increase the yield of eucalyptus plantations for biomass production. This is the company's fourth trial in Brazil using genetic engineering despite the denunciations of the serious risks it poses for the environment and life in general (see WRM Bulletins 44, 119, 171 and various other WRM articles on this subject).

Suzano currently holds 722,000 hectares of land in Brazil, of which 324,000 hectares are planted with eucalyptus.

- No to the expansion of Veracel Celulose S.A. in Brazil!

Veracel is expanding its operations in Brazil, with the consent of the government. The decision of the Institute of the Environment and Water Resources (INEMA) to grant preauthorization for the expansion of Veracel Celulose S.A. – a joint venture between Stora Enso and Aracruz – runs counter to a 2008 Federal Court ruling that revoked the environmental licence granted to the company in 1993.

Under that historic ruling, Veracel was ordered to reforest 96,000 hectares of Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest) destroyed by its eucalyptus plantations, in addition to paying financial compensation for the environmental damages caused and a daily fine until these dispositions were fulfilled (see WRM Bulletin 132).

Veracel appealed the ruling, and this continued legal action, combined with the company's economic power in the region, have delayed a final resolution to the matter, which has yet to be reached.

An open letter drafted by numerous civil society organizations (http://wrm.org.uy/paises/Brasil/Carta_Veracel_Suzano_Fibria.html) calls on the competent authorities to revoke the preauthorization for the expansion of Veracel's pulp mill operations and monoculture eucalyptus plantations in the state of Bahia and to redirect the financing provided by the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) and other national banks towards family farming and the promotion of food sovereignty. It also calls for the demarcation and titling of the lands of indigenous, Afro-descendant and riverine traditional communities impacted by agribusiness, among other demands.

To sign on to the letter, send an email message to: cepedes@cepedes.org.br until June 5

- EJOLT releases report on CDM in Africa

EJOLT (Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade) is an ambitious collaborative project that brings together 23 environmental organizations and academic institutions to catalogue ecological distribution conflicts and produce material for use by environmental justice organizations in their struggle against environmental injustice (see www.ejolt.org).

An new EJOLT publication provides critical policy analysis and case documentation on the role of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in Africa. The CDM is a mechanism established under the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that allows polluting countries in the North to invest in projects that supposedly lead to greenhouse gas emissions reductions in the South. In practice, the CDM has benefited large corporations (in both the North and South) and the governments they influence and often control, with South Africa as a prime case in point.

The report "The CDM in Africa Cannot Deliver the Money", by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society and the Dartmouth College Climate Justice Research Project, explains why the CDM has failed.

Many sites of emissions in Africa – such as the flaring of gas from oil extraction, coal-burning electricity and deforestation, to name just a few – require urgent attention, as do the proliferation of false “solutions” to the climate crisis, including mega hydropower projects, industrial tree plantations and agrofuels. Across Africa, the CDM finances these dangerous for-profit activities, making them yet more advantageous to multinational corporations, which are mostly based in Europe, the United States or South Africa.

Once again, those who are harmed in the process are local communities, as well as workers and local environments. But various kinds of social resistance have emerged, and in some cases have met with repression or cooptation through “divide and rule” strategies.

The full report is available at: <http://climateandcapitalism.com/files/2012/04/CDM-Africa-Cannot-Deliver.pdf>

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