



Agribusiness Impacts on Indigenous Communities

Indigenous peoples around the world have sought recognition of their identities, their ways of life, and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources; yet, throughout history, their rights have been violated. Indigenous peoples are arguably among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people in the world today. **-UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

“Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.”

- United Nations Special Rapporteur
J. Martínez Cobo

The survival of Indigenous communities from the Amazon to the heart of Borneo is being threatened by the expansion of U.S. agribusinesses into the world’s rainforests.

An estimated 5,000 distinct Indigenous societies inhabit the earth.¹ Because Indigenous communities have traditionally maintained reciprocal relationships with their natural environments, most of the world’s remaining natural resources (timber, oil, gas, minerals, water and plant material) are located in Indigenous territories. For example, the 21 percent of the Brazilian Amazon that is in the hands of Indigenous people overlaps with 68 percent of the protected areas.

As agribusiness corporations push to expand production of commodity crops like soy and palm oil into the last pristine ecosystems, they are displacing communities from their traditional territories, poisoning the water and land

with toxic chemicals, and threatening the culture and survival of Indigenous peoples.

Displacement

Forced displacement is a serious issue for communities worldwide who live in areas proposed for agricultural expansion. The issue is particularly threatening for Indigenous peoples, who are rarely granted official land rights to their native territories by national governments. Indigenous peoples face racial discrimination that impedes their rights to self-determination and sovereignty. Agricultural expansion threatens not only their homes, but their sacred sites and the lands they have traditionally used for subsistence.

The U.S. and Europe’s rapidly increasing demand for industrial biofuels, or agrofuels, is driving the expansion of soy and palm oil plantations into pristine areas. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, describes an emerging refugee crisis that has resulted from the expansion of agrofuel plantations: “Indigenous people are being pushed off their lands to make way for an expansion of biofuel crops

around the world, threatening to destroy their cultures by forcing them into big cities.” The clearing of forests to make room for these new crops is jeopardizing the survival of the 60 million Indigenous people who depend on these forests.

Kalimantan Border Oil Palm Mega-project

Indonesia plans to develop 850 kilometers of land along the Indonesia-Malaysia border in Borneo as part of the Kalimantan Border Oil Palm Mega-project. The UN has identified 1.4 million Indigenous people who would be displaced, and up to 5 million who could be adversely affected by the proposed mega-project and other large-scale investments in biofuel expansion. A recent report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination states:

“Experience with existing and extensive oil palm plantations in other parts of Indonesia conclusively demonstrates that Indigenous peoples’ property and other rights are disregarded, their right to consent is not respected, some are displaced, and they are left with no alternative but to become de facto bonded labourers gathering oil palm fruit for the companies that manage the plantations.”

Massive expansion of palm oil plantations, coupled with the ongoing impacts of existing plantations and the presence of racially discriminatory laws for which there are no means of domestic recourse, is a situation that requires “immediate attention to prevent or limit the scale or number of serious violations of the Convention.” The report goes on to claim a strong likelihood of significant displacement of Indigenous persons “resulting from a pattern of racial discrimination or encroachment on the lands of minority communities,” and a substantial threat of immediate and irreparable harm to Indigenous peoples in the affected area.²

Toxic Contamination and Indigenous Health

Pesticides and herbicides used in the production of monocrop industrial soy and oil palm plantations leach into the water and soil, contaminating the resources of nearby communities. In soy plantations in Brazil and oil palm plantations in Papua New Guinea, the herbicide Paraquat is often used to kill weeds and other plants. Paraquat is banned in many countries due to its toxicity and is classified as a “Restricted Use Pesticide” in the U.S., requiring special license to purchase and apply the chemical. Roundup, a glyphosate-based herbicide manufactured by Monsanto, is also widely used – particularly with the advance of genetically modified soy in the Amazon. In the U.S., Roundup is applied directly to the root of the plant to avoid toxic exposure. In the Amazon and other areas where Roundup Ready soy is planted, Roundup is sprayed aerially. Drift from this spray is extremely damaging to all life forms, including people. The pollution of water sources is a grave concern for Indigenous people since they depend on clean, healthy water for their daily survival and don’t have the luxury of water purification facilities. The Indigenous people of the Xingu River Basin in central Brazil have seen a dramatic decrease in fish stocks as the headwaters of the Xingu River have been turned into a waste drain for the soy plantations that surround their territory.

Additionally, the infrastructure built to service these plantations – which includes dams, industrial waterways, railroads and highways – is of particular concern to uncontacted peoples (Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation) due to its devastating cultural

repercussions and the introduction of diseases to people who, having never contracted foreign illnesses, do not have the necessary antibodies to fight off infection.

Xingu Indigenous Reserve

In the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso lies a 10,000 square mile area of near-pristine rainforest that houses the Xingu Indigenous Reserve. Home to 14 Indigenous nations totaling more than 4,000 people, the Reserve is rapidly being enveloped by industrial soy plantations. These plantations and nearby cattle ranches dump topsoil and toxic chemicals such as Roundup into the headwaters of the Xingu River, which affects the health of both the community and the surrounding ecosystem. Leticia Yawanawa, an Indigenous organizer with the Committee for the Rights Women and Children in Brazil says, "The plantations surround the source of the Xingu River. The river is huge, filled with fish, but now because of the plantations, the fish are dying, and the people who live along the river are all impacted because they eat the fish and get sick, and there are not enough fish anymore. The kids, especially, get sick, with diarrhea, fever, and some even die. The women and men of the community are struggling for them to leave and stop planting soy."³

GMOs, Bio-Piracy and Indigenous Agriculture

Industrial monoculture plantations often utilize genetically modified crops, which pose a serious threat to native seed stocks that have been cultivated for their genetic diversity over millennia. In addition, corporations are teaming up with researchers to patent native seed stocks for their own profit, depriving Indigenous peoples of their intellectual property rights to traditionally cultivated seed strains.⁴

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

"No communities or peoples on this earth have been more negatively impacted by the current global economic system than the world's remaining 350 million Indigenous peoples. And no people are so strenuously and, lately, successfully resisting these invasions and inroads."

- Jerry Mander, International Forum on Globalization

On Sept. 13, 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, marking a major victory for Indigenous people who crafted the Declaration and have worked 22 years for its adoption.

Included in the Declaration are articles which uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples to their traditional lands and territories and to determine what projects take place on these lands. States are required to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous stakeholders prior to the approval of any development projects affecting their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied lands, territories, resources, waters and coastal areas.

The Declaration will serve as an internationally recognized and ratified tool for upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples worldwide in the struggle for self-determination and control over their lands and lives.

¹ *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Economic Globalization: A Special Report of the International Forum on Globalization Committee on Indigenous Peoples. 2004).*

² *Request for Consideration of the Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Kalimantan, Indonesia, under the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's Urgent Action and Early Warning Procedures Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Seventy-First Session, June 25, 2007*

³ Interview with Leticia Yawanawa 8/13/07, Rio Branco, Brazil

⁴ http://www.ipcb.org/issues/agriculture/htmls/2003/ien_food_sec.html