

Managing the Soy Boom? A nice try or dangerous greenwashing?

Wednesday, 02 November 2005

Last Updated Tuesday, 12 February 2008

[download and read report from peasants organisations about WWF-initiative]

In June 2004 the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) released a report about the soy production called: 'Managing the Soy Boom: Two scenarios of soy production expansion in South America. The reports' main conclusion is that the expanding soybean cultivation is threatening to destroy nearly 22 million hectares of forests and savanna in South America by 2020. The report warns that the demand for soy is expected to increase by 60% in the next 20 years, which could lead to the loss of approximately 16 million hectares of savannas and 6 million hectares of tropical forests in the region. Soy exports from South America are boosted by a high demand in the European Union and China, where the crop is mainly used to feed pigs, chickens and cattle.

In the study, the author presents a 'better policies scenario' estimating that the expansion of the deforestation would be greatly reduced - to approximately 3.7 million hectares - if soy producers would begin with a better utilisation of the soil and forage resources, for example by integrating soy farming with cattle ranching. Additionally, the report also stresses that for such a scenario to happen and work, soy producers, investors, buyers, and regulators will have to support, adopt, and promote more sustainable practices, including encouraging local governments to effectively enforce environmental and land-use laws and regulations. The WWF has taken this draft scenario as the best achievable reality and is organising a 'Round Table on Sustainable Soy' (RSS) to promote the sustainable cultivation of soy. These new guidelines were discussed at an international conference held in March 2005 in Iguazu in Brazil.

Opposition amongst Grassroots and Peasant groups in Latin America

In South America the plan for the Business Round Table on Sustainable Soy (RSS) had awakened opposition and mistrust amongst farmers and grassroots groups. Their main argument is that the proposal doesn't question the current agro-industrial system that is solely focused on export production; an agriculture made for the needs of the international market, to pay the external debt. It is increasing the GDP but does not develop any sustainable improvement for the people, the opposite.

According to many peasants and environmentalist groups, the WWF and their followers, are ignoring the war that is going on in the countryside of South America because of the soy business. Farmers and indigenous communities are suffering violence and repression because of the economical power of the soy business.

To get attention for their situation and opinion local grassroots groups and peasant movements organised a gathering parallel to the Business Roundtable of WWF in Iguazu, Brazil. [link to the report]

From Sustainable to Responsible

This counter conference together with criticism from several other directions had some impact. Also some organisations participating in the RSS became more critical on the goals and process of the round table. First this resulted in a change of the name; the word 'sustainable' for the process was unacceptable. It was replaced by responsible. But there were more problems within the organising committee (OC) of the round table. Fetraf-Sul, the only organisation that was representing small farmers and did join the process, stepped out of the OC in the summer of 2005. They didn't had feeling they could influence the agenda. the International Development organisation Cordaid stayed solidair with Fetraf and left the OC as well. Although the two didn't step out of the round table, the rest of the OC is desperately looking for another organisation representing small soy farmers to join. A Continuation without any small farmers will loose any legitimation.

A dangerous greenwash project or a nice try?

The WWF proposal focuses solely on the single issue of stopping the deforestation (and 'desavannation') and preserving the biodiversity of the threatened ecosystems. By considering the proposed measures companies can call their soy 'sustainable' or 'responsible', which ignores many of the problems mentioned above.

Raul Montenegro, winner of the Environmental Award Global 500 Price of the UN and head of FUNAM Argentina ('Environment Defense Foundation'), comments on this: "To make the soy sustainable in the current reality of the Third World, that is completely different than the reality of the nice conference halls in Holland, can be considered more than a utopia as a complicity". "The soy does not only destroy native habitats, it destroys the health and the indigenous territories, it kills the diversity of the agricultural productivity of a country, it causes sickness and kills the population with its intensive use of agrochemicals and puts into practice a perverse form of neocolonialism".

WWF hopes to save some forest and savanna. We would like to do this as well, but we think the WWF project does more harm than good. The WWF should take all the other factors into account and it should admit that their scenario

doesn't make the growing of soy sustainable.

Meanwhile it is easy for the agro-business to show their business is 'responsible' or even 'sustainable' and to greenwash their image by referring to the misleading title. In general, and apart from the title, the project legitimates the continuation and even increase of soy production. It is legitimising the way the agro-business is acting in the 'Soy-republic' of Latin America. Maybe WWF can slow down the the clearcut of some nature, but meanwhile the projects supports business and other groups pushing for more free-trade and neo-liberal politics, which will lead to more exploitation of people and nature.

Lets make clear to the WWF, the other NGOs and companies involved and the general public, that we need a real change of food production and economy to save the left-over nature in the world and to create a sustainable and social society.

In the end the WWF, peasants in Latin America and we, consumers in the west have to work together to safe the environment and to build a sustainable society without hunger and poverty.