
Cameroon: Oil palm, people and the environment

Oil palm plantations in Cameroon cover more than 80,000 hectares divided in three different sectors: 1) large scale industrial plantations, with some 58,000 hectares; 2) Village plantations comprising 12,000 hectares and 3) "Informal" plantations covering some 10,000 hectares.

Village plantations were promoted by the state for the supply of the large state-owned plantation and processing companies. The former are plantations which are contractually obliged to deliver, at market prices, their entire production to the processing plants of the --now privatised-- agroindustries: SOCAPALM, CAMDEV or PAMOL. The "market price" is obviously established by these enterprises, which at the local level constitute absolute monopolies.

The above situation has recently led to an increasing gap between small producers and large estates. The "informal" plantations have increased and deliveries of palm fruit to large processing plants have progressively diminished. Villagers prefer to either process their harvest themselves or sell to smaller processing units, from whom they usually obtain a higher price and cash payments. Until the early 1990's, the price established by the companies was considered to be too low, which led to diverting small-scale production to other buyers. Once it became evident that the agroindustries' own production was insufficient to cover their processing needs, they were forced to increase the price offered to outgrowers (from 26-31 francs CFA to 40-50 francs), in order to ensure raw material supply to the processing plants.

It is thus obvious that the complementarity between village plantations and the agroindustries has not been successful and that their relationship has been more based on competition than on complementarity. The sole fact that village planters refuse to even communicate their exact plantation areas to the companies is self-explanatory of this relationship.

Additionally, it is important to stress that the establishment of large-scale plantations has often been preceded by the expropriation of land of the neighbouring villages, without adequate compensation. According to the Cameroonian law, peasants do not own the land by customary right, and thus expropriation does not require compensation on the part of the State. This land property formula was already used in the times of colonization for expropriating the land of peasants and then transferring it, without cost, to new settlers, who could then grow their crops. After national independence, this practice continued in force, now for the benefit of local élites.

The establishment of large private palm plantations --normally located in the surroundings of villages-- requires considerable extensions of land, and several cases have already been reported of conflict arising with local communities living in the area from the modality and conditions of land acquisition by outsiders, who, with the support of the government, obtain lands over which they had no previous customary right. However, by cultivating an evergreen plant, like oil palm, they are entitled to permanent customary rights, which guarantee their rights in detriment of the local population.

In addition, oil palm plantations have resulted in a number of environmental impacts, among which

deforestation, biodiversity loss and pollution due to extensive use of agrochemicals. All those impacts result in loss of livelihoods for local people and the deterioration of the environment in which they live.

It is important to highlight that no food crops are allowed within plantations, even at the early establishment phase of plantations, where local people could be allowed to cultivate food crops until palms start interlocking canopies. The socio-economic and environmental impacts of these plantations on adjoining towns and villages need to be investigated to reflect issues related to:

- Availability of local food staples (food more expensive in Limbe), forest foods supportive system (non timber forest products are expensive and need to be imported from other parts of the country), availability of local craft items and alternative income opportunities (income of plantation workers is very low).
- Impacts associated to deforestation, as various hazardous floods are now common in the zone (Limbe and Ekondo-Titi cases in 2001 and 1998 respectively).
- Impacts of pollution from agrochemicals, as there are claims that chemicals banned in industrialized countries are still being used by these corporations on the grounds of reduced cost, lack of supervision by the State.
- Impacts on human health, as plantations are located close to human habitations, and aircraft sprays drift to towns from sister banana plantations.
- Impacts associated to pest infestation and infectious diseases due to plantations.
- The enclavement of towns as there are no opportunities for expansion and hill settlement has become a common phenomenon, with implications for upstream and downstream conflicts emanating.
- Impacts on soil chemical/physical/biological properties from palm oil production effluents discharged into open land during processing, which render the land useless for any agricultural purposes. In spite of the existence of opportunities for converting the effluents into useful products, they continue being discharged untreated into the environment.

With the above impact assessment carried out, alternative positions to monocultural plantations can be suggested to reflect more environmentally-friendly approaches to land use patterns in the sub-region.