
Certification promotes land concentration, violence and destruction

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The RSPO was created 14 years ago, and the FSC 25 years ago. Both of these certification schemes for tree plantations initially generated many expectations, promising a true transformation: they would mitigate the negative impacts of large-scale tree plantations, in such a way that the plantations could generate a positive balance for local communities, the local economy and the environment. Yet after all these years, we can definitely conclude that what the RSPO and FSC also have in common is that they will not meet those expectations.

In an open letter to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) for its 16th conference in November 2018 (the letter [can be signed here](#)), a group of organizations warns that the promised transformation did not take place, but rather the complete opposite. The letter states that "The RSPO promise of "transformation" has turned into a powerful greenwashing tool for corporations in the palm oil industry. RSPO grants this industry, which remains responsible for violent land grabbing, environmental destruction, pollution through excessive use of agrotoxics and destruction of peasant and indigenous livelihoods, a "sustainable" image."

Almost all of the articles in this edition of the WRM bulletin discuss industrial tree plantations, which include oil palm plantations; some even look at the certification seals mentioned above, and how they actually benefit companies to the detriment of communities.

The article on Brazil, for example, shows how large companies in the Amazon use and abuse the RSPO and FSC seals (Forest Stewardship Council) in order to legitimize their illegal practices. It is a recurring practice for large landowners in Brazil to produce false land titles, which is known as grilagem, or land grabbing. The RSPO and FSC developed principles that mandate that forest management occur on lands whose titles have been obtained legally, in order for it to be certified as responsible. Yet in the case of the certified company Agropalma, which grows oil palm, the RSPO lend credibility to land documentation which for years has been the subject of investigations—and legal actions brought against the company by Brazilian authorities.

In the case of FSC-certified logging company, Jari Florestal (also in Brazil), the seal also lent credibility to illegal documentation, and has ignored legal actions underway since 2005. Even though from the moment it granted the seal to the company, the certifier proposed a process to resolve serious land conflicts with local communities, these conflicts have still not been resolved. What is worse is that during all the years in which it enjoyed the seal (from 2004 to 2017), the company obtained advantages on international markets compared to non-certified wood, with which it further profited. This is, in fact, the resulting benefit of the FSC.

In another article we show how in Gabon, the RSPO-certified company, OLAM, deprived an entire community of one of the most essential rights: access to drinking water. It should also be mentioned that the company recently tried, without success, to control and interfere in a gathering of communities who wanted to have a collaborators-only meeting to discuss the problems they face due to OLAM's plantations. The communities want to discuss and freely exchange about these problems, and indeed they have every right to do so. At the gathering, they analyzed how—by creating committees to discuss supposed benefits that it would implement in each community—OLAM is actually trying to prevent collective dialogue among communities about what worries them most: the unbridled expansion of oil palm plantations onto the forests and lands they depend on. This process of expansion is generating a series of negative impacts that jeopardize the physical and cultural survival of these communities.

What is happening in Gabon is also happening in other countries, as other articles in this bulletin show. However, neither the RSPO nor the FSC does nothing to stop the expansion of plantations, which its members foment on a daily basis. On the contrary, it is colluding with them.

What can be done beyond certification? Communities chart paths of hope and devise resistance strategies. In the article on Nigeria, we read that there is a strong culture of native oil palm in the country, which significantly contributes to the construction of cultural identity and the economic well-being of thousands of rural communities. However, these communities are also suffering from the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations. This is promoted, for example, by OKOMU, which is owned by the Socfin Group—a member of the RSPO. In an interview, one of the women from the communities facing the company talks about the great violence that the communities suffer, in particular women. But not only that. She also insists on telling how the community resistance began, when 15 years ago, in a seemingly totally desperate situation, someone said, "We are going to fight this battle for future generations."

Indeed, what is at stake is the future. With the expansion of supposedly "sustainable" plantations that the RSPO and FSC promote in several countries and continents, the freedom of thousands of communities to use their territories, as well as their capacity to maintain and strengthen their livelihoods, is seriously threatened. To reverse this, it is vital to weaken certification seals like the FSC and RSPO. Those who have influence over the seals—for example, the industries that buy palm oil and end consumers of products with certified ingredients—should refuse to keep buying them.

In the meantime, communities' resistance will continue, and it will doubtless grow as plantations advance upon more lands and forests. Our role is to do everything possible to make the cry of these communities ever stronger.