
Colombia: Palm-Producing Company Poligrow Plans to Grab more Land under the “Small Producers” Scheme

Violence, massacre and forced displacement in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia have served to advance the industrial cultivation of oil palm. Palm-producing company Poligrow has an undeniable role in land-grabbing and intimidation in the municipality of Mapiripán. Even so, it plans to expand its operations.

Oil palm monoculture, together with the oil industry and other extractive activities, continues to advance onto indigenous and peasant territories in the *Altillanura* [high plains], a subregion of the Orinoquía region of Colombia. This territory has historically been marked by violence and the forced displacement of the population. In their wake, these large-scale developments leave a trail of impacts on the communities: land dispossession, pollution, water scarcity, restrictions on movement and restrictions on the traditional use of forests and savannahs.

Despite the fact that communities have repeatedly denounced these injustices, the Colombian government continues to promote the palm industry, in collusion with companies, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and international cooperation agencies.

One example of this is the August 2020 announcement about a project that promotes allegedly strategic alliances between the Italian-Spanish multinational company, Poligrow, and peasants or “small producers” in the municipality of Mapiripán, in the department of Meta (1). This company, which began operating in Colombia in 2008, has been the target of serious and numerous complaints of land-grabbing (2), involvement with both paramilitary groups and forced dispossession, and contamination (3).

Peasants from Mapiripán with whom WRM communicated said they had expressed their refusal to work with Poligrow. They prefer to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

Meanwhile, indigenous Jiw and Sikuani communities are in a serious situation of vulnerability, having already been displaced from the neighbouring department of Guaviare due to the armed conflict. They are now suffering from water scarcity and pollution as a result of palm cultivation and oil processing. Additionally, the company imposes restrictions on their movement within, and use of, the territory (4).

Industrial palm cultivation in Mapiripán began more than a decade ago with the arrival of Poligrow. To date, the company has occupied about 7,000 hectares for monoculture, and it plans to expand to 15,000 hectares. In 2014, it built an oil extraction plant capable of processing 15 tons of fresh fruit bunches per hour; it plans to expand this plant as its cultivated area increases.

Denounced by civil society organizations and even by the State for appropriating more land than allowed by law (5), Poligrow has been trying to increase its planted area for at least seven years—through contracts with peasants and “small producers,” to get them to grow palm on their land (6).

In this context, on August 14, 2020, “Mapiripán, a peaceful territory with sustainable development” was unveiled. This is a joint project of the Colombian government and the FAO, and is funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, which will contribute 2.4 million euros (approximately US \$2.8 million). Some objectives of the project include: “to improve the quality of life and food security of the residents of Mapiripán” (7).

However, it is hard to imagine how this project could bring about an improvement for the population—given that the only production shown over and over again in the project presentation video is Poligrow’s palm monoculture (8). There is ample evidence of the negative impacts of industrial palm plantations on the life of local communities, in both Mapiripán and other municipalities of the region.

While details of the initiative are, as yet, unknown, Poligrow representative Carlo Vigna revealed that: “We will guarantee purchasing and technical assistance for all small producers who will be involved in the oil palm project for the lifespan of the project—that is, 30 years” (9).

These kinds of contracts with “small producers” are not new in the oil palm industry, and the results for peasants—in Latin American countries, as well as in Africa and Asia—have been quite unfavourable, and in some cases even ruinous (10).

Among many other factors, this is due to the fact that the peasantry lose their food sovereignty, given that their ability to produce crops for their own consumption is affected. They also incur debts with companies who provide inputs, and they are no longer able to decide who they can sell their production to. In short, they lose their autonomy and can even lose their land; because very often, it is the peasant families who must bear the risks in the event of failed production, fire, pests or inability to pay off debts incurred with the company.

And this expansion tactic that palm companies use particularly impacts women, who have to increase their workload when they lose their subsistence crops, and who have to deal with soil and water contamination. Consequently they must do more care-taking work within their families and communities.

Palm in the Colombian Altillanura

Colombia is the largest producer of palm oil in Latin America, and the fourth largest worldwide. Successive governments for more than 50 years have actively promoted palm monoculture through policies of violence and dispossession. Palm oil is used both for the domestic market and for export, in the food industry, cosmetics industry, and more recently for the production of agrofuels.

Palm is grown and processed in different parts of the country: In the centre and north in at least six departments; to the southwest in Cauca and Nariño; and to the east in the Orinoquía region, in the departments of Arauca, Casanare and Cúcuta; and in the *Altillanura* subregion, which includes the departments of Meta and Vichada.

Since 2002, the Colombian government has been pushing for the *Altillanura* to become “a great agricultural pantry,” that is, a region that produces raw materials or commodities for export.

“National and foreign businessmen have gotten involved with this development logic, and have tried to make the *Altillanura* look like the Brazilian Cerrado [savannah], serving as an agricultural enclave with large-scale, highly mechanized and vertically integrated crops.” So highlights a report produced

by a dozen social, legal and human rights organizations that denounce the serious impacts of the “development plan” for the Orinoquía region (11). “This strategy ignores the region’s inhabitants, since the emphasis for the extractive projects and raw material production is on meeting international demand; it is not actually about improving the needs of inhabitants in this area,” they point out. According to the same report, almost 45% of the population does not have their basic needs covered, and in Vichada it is almost 67%.

This new onslaught on the territory and its population adds to the history of extreme violence that this region has suffered. In 1997, Mapiripán was the site of one of the worst massacres in Colombia, when paramilitaries murdered 49 people. The disregard for memory, and the lack of real effort on the part of the political and economic powers to repair these communities, was evident in the project presentation made by the government, the FAO and Poligrow. “As Colombians, we are all particularly sensitive when it comes to Mapiripán. We remember the pain that this community has had in the past. We want to leave it behind, we want a new generation, we want the children who are being born now to think that this is a horror story and that it never happened,” said Emilio Archila, Presidential Advisor for Stabilization and Consolidation.

Land Dispossession

The violence, massacre and forced displacement that have taken place in recent decades in the course of the armed conflict in Colombia have served to advance extractive projects, including industrial cultivation of oil palm.

During the conflict, thousands of political leaders were murdered and disappeared, and countless massacres were perpetrated. Colombian organizations say that paramilitaries committed these massacres in complicity with the armed forces, which led to forced displacement, dispossession and abandonment of territories—as one of the objectives of the paramilitary strategy was territorial control in order to give way to business projects (12).

In these processes, the responsibility of companies like Poligrow is undeniable. “There is a pattern of illegal business practices, with companies taking advantage of abandoned properties after threats, murders, massacres and recurring violations of human rights. This is exemplified in situations resulting from the armed conflict in various regions of Colombia. The law has corroborated this pattern, showing that companies such as Cementos Argos S.A., the Carmen de Bolívar Agribusiness Corporation, San Simón S.A., Poligrow and a group of mining companies—among others—benefitted from the displacement and dispossession of peasant communities (...) in order to directly take ownership of lands, refusing to investigate the contexts of the regions where they operate with due diligence.” So states a report by the “José Alvear Restrepo” Lawyers’ Collective, which was presented before the Truth Commission of Colombia in May 2020 (13).

In the specific case of oil palm, a recent study published in the Journal of Rural Studies explain that “large-scale dispossession occurred during Colombia’s civil war, when millions of peasants were displaced from their lands, or forced to sell them below their true value. Participants in earlier land reforms were supposedly protected from land grabbing. So oil palm plantations looking to expand were able to secure control, not of the land directly but of its produce, by establishing ‘alliances’ or ‘supply partners’ with smallholder groups and processing their harvest at company plants. However, questions remain about whether current alliance members were legitimate participants in the land reform, and about the level of protection that legitimate participants actually received. In the more remote parts of the Eastern Savannahs (*Altillanura*) which were largely “alliance”-free, coercion was enough for powerful actors to ‘grab’ control of the land and sometimes plant it with oil palm, as in the

case of the Poligrow Plantation” (14).

Meanwhile it is important to note that, in many cases, land grabbing would not have been possible without the participation and collaboration of public officials, who are willing to make various kinds of manoeuvres to “legalize” dispossession.

In this context, the situation of vulnerability and danger in which thousands of displaced people find themselves when they try to return to their territories is highly worrisome. By way of example, local organizations point out that since 2011, in the department of Meta alone, there have been at least 5,000 applications from conflict victims seeking restitution of their lands. And in one of its municipalities, Mapiripán, most people have not been able to return. “Police forces report that conditions aren’t safe enough for people to return; meanwhile it is safe to restore land,” they affirm. “The result of this equation is a strategy of formalization and legal security of land ownership that favours private investors” (15).

According to the Colombian organization, Justicia y Paz, “in the municipality [of Mapiripán] paramilitary structures are still present, and because of their presence, silence, fear and injustice are latent among the population. Paramilitary control and state abandonment have allowed the Poligrow company to develop a palm project in the region, appropriate fallow lands, and in some cases obtain territories through the use of threats.”

Affected Communities

The Colombian high plains are a region of flatlands (also known as the eastern plains), with savannahs, gallery forests and *morichales*. The latter are swamps formed by groups of moriche palm trees, where small waterways originate and then flow into rivers. These are the main sources of water for the communities.

Oil palm monocultures is the second most water-consuming crop in the country. It is also sprayed with pesticides, which along with other wastes from this activity, are dumped in the ground and waterways, contaminating them (16).

Indigenous Jiw peoples face health problems from consuming contaminated water from the Yamu “tap” (a water course), whose headwaters are found on one of the company’s plantations. This was exposed by the Inter-Church *Justice and Peace Commission*, which is supporting the communities’ claims (17). The Commission also denounces Poligrow for restricting community members’ movement through their territory and for restricting them from hunting, gathering, fishing, and using wood.

These situations are not new. In June 2016, the Colombian environmental agency, Comarcarena (Corporation for the Sustainable Development of the La Macarena Special Management Area) ordered Poligrow to suspend its operations due to environmental violations, and it initiated a sanctioning process. In particular, it ordered Poligrow to stop: dumping industrial wastewater in local forests and *morichales*, impeding the natural flow of water through a cement dam it built without permission, disposing *raquis* (wastes) from the palm crops directly on the ground, using water from the Macondo river for industrial use, and dumping leachate from the company’s composting area (18).

At this point, it is unacceptable for both the Colombian government and the FAO to promote the expansion of palm monocultures—and especially in the case of Poligrow, considering the company’s

track record of contamination and rights violations. What is even more disturbing is that they promote this in the name of peace and supposed progress for the communities, and through schemes that are presented as “alliances” with peasants and “small producers”—which ultimately only benefit the companies, as experience shows.

It is not surprising then that Poligrow displays ISO 9001 and Rainforest Alliance certifications on its website, and that it is accepted as a member of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), from which it expects to get certification in 2020 (19).

Poligrow is presented as the first company in Colombia to have the Rainforest Alliance’s Sustainable Agriculture Network certification (SAN). This is despite the fact that communities still in the territory have denounced the intensification of threats in recent years, as well as the degradation and contamination of their territory and in particular their water sources.

Once again, it has been exposed that the RSPO and other certifiers—as well as national governments and institutions like the FAO—systematically ignore the claims and real needs of local communities, even in contexts of extreme violence, criminalization and vulnerability. And all of this is to favor the expansion of the palm industry, which monopolizes land, violates rights and lives, and severely affects the food sovereignty of communities.

WRM International Secretariat

- (1) [FAO Colombia: Agencia Italiana de Cooperación dona 8.846 millones para reactivar la economía y fortalecer tejido social en el municipio PDET de Mapiripán, Meta.](#)
- (2) See: [Nueve malas prácticas empresariales que profundizaron la guerra](#), El Espectador, May 2020 and [El rol de las empresas en el conflicto armado y la violencia sociopolítica](#), "José Alvear Restrepo" Lawyers' Collective, 2020; [La maraña de tierras y empresas de Poligrow](#) and [El negocio 'baldío' de Poligrow](#), La Silla Vacía 2013 and 2015; [Despojar y Desplazar, estrategia para el desarrollo de la Orinoquía](#), Mesa Copartes Misereor - Llanos Orientales 2017, p.41. And [Poligrow's response](#), 2018.
- (3) [Continúa grave afectación ambiental por parte de la empresa palmera Poligrow](#). Justicia y Paz, February 2018.
- (4) [Deterioro de salud en la comunidad Jiw de Mapiripán por desabastecimiento de agua potable](#), Justicia y Paz, 2020. [Indígenas Sikuani se oponen a ocupamiento de predios por empresa Poligrow](#), Contagio Radio, 2018
- (5) Idem 2.
- (6) Proyecto agronómico de Poligrow. Excerpted from www.poligrow.com, August 14, 2020
- (7) Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. [“Estrategia de desarrollo territorial sostenible para la reactivación económica y la integración social en el municipio de Mapiripán”](#)
- (8) [Video de la presentación realizada el 14 de agosto de 2020 a través de la página de Facebook de Renovación Territorial Colombia.](#)
- (9) Idem 8.
- (10) [Glass, Verena. “Expansão do dendê na Amazônia brasileira: elementos para uma análise dos impactos sobre a agricultura familiar no nordeste do Pará”.](#) Reporter Brasil, 2013.
- (11) [Despojar y Desplazar, estrategia para el desarrollo de la Orinoquía](#), Mesa Copartes Misereor - Llanos Orientales, 2017.
- (12) Idem 11.
- (13) [El rol de las empresas en el conflicto armado y la violencia sociopolítica](#), "José Alvear Restrepo" Lawyers' Collective, 2020
- (14) Potter, Lesley. [Colombia's oil palm development in times of war and 'peace': Myths, enablers and the disparate realities of land control.](#) *Journal of Rural Studies*. Volume 78, August 2020, Pages

491-502.

(15) Idem 11.

(16) [Colombia: escasez de agua por palma y petróleo en Puerto Gaitán](#), Mongabay, October 2019.

(17) [Deterioro de salud en la comunidad Jiw de Mapiripán por desabastecimiento de agua potable](#), Justicia y Paz, 2020

(18) Environmental Investigation Agency. [Poligrow Colombia Ltda., Ordered to Suspend Operations due to Presumed Environmental Infractions](#). 2016.

(19) [Poligrow on the RSPO website](#); <https://www.rspo.org/members/308/Poligrow-Colombia-Ltda>