Regional perspectives on plantations

An Overview on Western and Central Africa






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Oil palm and rubber plantations in Western and Central Africa: An Overview

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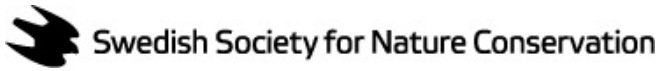

Oil palm and rubber plantations in Western and Central Africa: An Overview

Oil palm and rubber plantations occupy extensive areas in many countries in tropical Africa. In spite of their social and environmental impacts, until now they have received scant attention both at the national and international level. WRM began to include the issue of oil palm plantations in its monthly bulletin in 1999[1]. Since then, 13 articles were published in relation to such plantations in Africa. In 2001, a WRM book focused on oil palm included one case study on Cameroon[2]. In September 2006 a second book on oil palm was published, which provided an overview of the issue of plantations in Africa, Asia and Latin America[3]. In 2007, a research was carried out in Cameroon (see paragraph below) focusing on a large oil palm plantation.

In the case of rubber plantations, although a few articles (mostly on Liberia) were published in the WRM bulletin since 1999[4], it was only in 2007 when WRM started to look more closely into this issue and carried out a field trip to plantations in Cameroon, where research (on rubber and oil palm plantations) was being carried out by two Swiss researchers linked to WRM and working in collaboration with local NGO Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement [5]. A research report –including both types of plantations- was produced by Julien-François Gerber and published by WRM in December 2008[6]. In November 2008, WRM organized, in collaboration with the local NGO Environmental Rights Action (Friends of the Earth-Nigeria) a workshop in Iguobazuwa, Edo state, Nigeria, with the aim of identifying the differentiated impacts of rubber plantations on women.

Oil palm and rubber plantations are very similar in many respects, but there is something that clearly differentiates them: oil palm is a native species in many West African countries –and part of the culture of local peoples- while rubber is clearly an alien species brought in by the Colonial powers.

The fact that oil palm is a native species makes it difficult to obtain precise figures on the area occupied by industrial plantations, which are the ones that result in negative social and environmental impacts. In Nigeria, for example, palm oil is produced from a total area of three million hectares of land, of which some 370,000 hectares are industrial plantations.

Additionally, the fact that these palms are native makes it more difficult for local people to understand why this species –when planted on an industrial scale- can result in negative impacts.

To add a further problem, reliable up-to-date data of the oil palm plantation area in the different countries is difficult to obtain. The following figures are anyway useful to have an idea about where the

[1] WRM bulletin's are available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/136/viewpoint.html
[2] "The Bitter Fruit of Oil Palm", available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/material/oilpalm.html
[3] "Oil Palm. From Cosmetics to Biodiesel - Colonization Lives On", available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/material/BookOilPalm2.html
[4] Articles on Liberia available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Liberia.html
[5] "Cameroon: The tough reality in oil palm plantations", at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/116/Cameroon2.html
[6] "Résistances contre deux géants industriels en forêt tropicale. Populations locales versus plantations commerciales d'hévéas et de palmiers à huile dans le Sud-Cameroun" by Julien-François Gerber. Will soon be available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/index.html

main plantations have been established: Nigeria (370,000 hectares), Guinea (310,000), Ghana (304,000), Democratic Republic of Congo (220,000), Côte d'Ivoire (160,000), Cameroon (80,000), Sierra Leone (29,000), Republic of Congo and smaller areas in Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda.

The expansion of oil palm plantations has been boosted by the agrofuel rush and the following cases are some recent examples:

- Benin: The government aims to find 300,000-400,000 hectares of land in the humid Southern areas for oil palm plantations. This zone hosts 50% of the country's population on only 7.7% of the national territory.[7]

- Congo DR: In October 2007, the Chinese company ZTE International, signed a billion-dollar contract to establish more than 3 million hectares of oil palm plantations in the country[8].

- Republic of Congo: In May 2008, the Italian energy company Eni announced a $3 billion investment in palm oil as well as fossil fuels, including tar sands[9].

- Cote d'Ivoire: In February 2008, the palm oil company PALM-CI began destroying a 6,000 hectare centre of biodiversity to convert it to oil palm plantations. They built drainage systems at the periphery and, with the intention of clearcutting the forest once the rainy season was over. Following local and international protests, the company agreed to suspend operations in the area pending an Environmental Impact Assessment, but the threat to the forest remains.

- West Africa: in November 2007, Singapore-based Wilmar International and Olam International formed a 50:50 joint venture, Nauvu, which acquired shares in Palm-CI, in the West African agribusiness firm SIFCA and in a new refining business set up by SIFCA and Unilever. Wilmar International has become the world's largest palm oil trader, and has been looking at expanding into new regions. Their plans are ambitious: Palm-CI, the largest palm oil and palm oil mill owner in Cote d'Ivoire, plans to more than treble their production by 2020. Wilmar, Olam and SIFCA seek to expand palm oil, sugar and rubber production, not just in Cote d'Ivoire but across the region, including in Guinea, Liberia and Nigeria. An initial trial for producing palm oil biodiesel in Cote d'Ivoire has been held [10].

- In Liberia, the UK-based company Equatorial Biofuels/ Equatorial Palm Oil has bought up Liberia Forest Products. In 2007, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the government to invest in existing and new palm oil plantations. They plan to take over 10,200 hectares of existing oil palm plantations and to convert a further 78,548 hectares to oil palms[11].

In the case of rubber plantations, Africa produces some 5% of global natural rubber production, with the main producing countries being

[7] "Benin: Large scale oil palm plantations for agrofuel", at http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/120/Benin.html
[8] "Congo, D.R: The oil palm invasion has started", at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/127/CongoDR.html
[9] (http://www.forbes.com/markets/feeds/afx/2008/05/19/afx5025358.html).
[10] "West Africa: Wilmar and Olam International ambitious expansion plans for palm oil", at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/132/West_Africa.html
[11] www.investegate.co.uk/Article.aspx?id=20080522103036058 5V

Nigeria (300,000 hectares), Liberia (100,000) and Cote d'Ivoire (70,000)[12].

One major actor in Africa appears to be the French corporation Michelin, with rubber plantations in Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin. In the case of the Bridgestone/Firestone corporation, its conflictive plantations seem to be established only in Liberia. The Singaporian Golden Millennium Group (GMG) owns 18,000 hectares of plantations in Cameroon.

An overview of opposition to plantations

Until now there has been –with some few exceptions- little organized opposition to both types of plantations in spite of the severe problems that these plantations entail at the local level. Given that everything appears to indicate that rubber and oil palm plantations are likely to expand in Africa, it is important to try to identify some of the reasons explaining such situation.

The first issue to bear in mind is that the establishment of industrial plantations is preceded by deforestation and the appropriation of land that previously provided for the livelihoods of local peoples. Those most affected are the indigenous forest-dependent peoples -who lose all their means of livelihoods- but all other local communities are also affected through the loss of land and access to forest resources.

The above process –which in the case of forest-dependent peoples can be defined as the starting point of genocide- is made possible because most governments don't recognize traditional peoples' rights to forests and hand out large concessions to companies for the establishment of plantations.

To make matters worse, in some cases local village elites having strong links with the national government or the army turn over village community land to agribusinesses for growing palm oil, rubber and banana.

Those conditions may to a large extent explain why resistance from affected communities is not expressed in open opposition movements. However -as explained by Gerber (WRM, 2008) in his research on Cameroon- there are many forms of "anonymous", spontaneous and individual forms of resistance carried out by people living in the vicinity of these plantations.

On the same issue, the lead researcher for the Institute of Cultural Affairs Cameroon in the region, Phil René Oyono mentioned a case of local resistance in SW Cameroon, that led to the constitution of a pressure group within the community called the Bakweri Land Claim Movement. The movement claims that the land expropriated from local population by the colonial and the postcolonial state and afterwards given to the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) must be given back to the Bakweri community, and this in the perspective of the privatisation of the CDC. The CDC holds 18,000 hectares of rubber plantations and 16,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in the country[13].

[12] http://unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/rubber/crop.htm

[13] http://www.cdc-cameroon.com/

Once plantations are established, some local people may be hired as workers –with the exception of "pymies" that are excluded- though in many cases workers are brought in from outside the region. Working conditions are usually harsh and in many cases can be described as near slavery. Such situation is made possible through government support to plantation companies, that put in place preventive and repressive mechanisms to avoid organized resistance by local communities and workers.

This also may help to understand why there are few cases of organized workers' struggles for improving working conditions –with Liberia being the most well know exception.

An additional problem is the relatively few number of NGOs involved in forest and forest-related issues in the region and the large number of environmental problems they are acting upon. Existing organizations are therefore forced to focus on some of the problems they consider most important, such as oil exploitation (in the case of Nigeria), industrial logging (e.g. Cameroon), mining (Ghana), etc. A similar situation occurs with international NGOs, that tend to select issues included on their agendas (forest biodiversity, indigenous peoples, illegal logging, governance, etc.), which usually don't include this type of plantations.

As a result, most NGOs –local and international- have either involved themselves only marginally in the issue of plantations or have not addressed it at all.

Two additional problems need to be mentioned: the relatively low level of networking within the region and the language barrier (French/English at NGO level and the large number of local languages).

On the positive side, many local NGOs have are strong links with national and international organizations from other parts of the world, which in many cases can help in strengthening local struggles by raising the issues at the international level or in the –mostly Northern- countries whose governments or corporations are responsible for destructive processes in Africa.

Another positive aspect is that the social and environmental impacts of oil palm plantations are now very well documented –particularly in Asia- and to a lesser extent in Africa. However, it is at the same time true that more evidence and research is needed within African countries in order to raise the issue at the national level as well as for encouraging local organizations to engage in this issue.

It is important to emphasize that in November 2007 a large number of African NGOs launched "An African Call for a Moratorium on Agrofuel Developments", calling for a moratorium on new agrofuel developments on their continent. Although broader than oil palm , this call is obviously strongly focused on plantations of this crop[14].

In the case of rubber plantations, much more needs to be done regarding research on their social and environmental impacts –both in Asia and Africa- in order to provide more evidence on the impacts of

[14] http://www.africanbiodiversity.org/media/1210585794.pdf?PHPSESSID=0c91fabd2a80b164ffb52f594d4da9c5

these plantations. However, the evidence available should be at least sufficient for encouraging people to engage in this issue.

Annex 1: Oil Palm: The Expansion of Another Destructive Monoculture *(Introduction of the WRM book "Oil Palm: From Cosmetics to Biodiesel, Colonization lives on")*

Over the past few decades, oil palm plantations have rapidly spread across the South. They are causing increasingly serious problems for local peoples and their environment, including social conflict and human rights violations. In spite of this, a number of actors – national and international – continue actively to promote this crop, against a background of growing opposition at the local level.

Basic Facts

The African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) is native to West Africa, where it is used in a wide variety of ways by the local population. It is a source of foodstuffs and medicines, its sap is used to make palm wine, and its fibers are also used for various purposes. However, the large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations being promoted today are geared towards two main objectives. Their primary purpose until now has been the extraction of palm oil (from the flesh of the oil palm fruit) and palm kernel oil (from its kernel or seed) for the production of edible and industrial oils. More recently, a second major objective has emerged: the production of biodiesel from crude palm oil.

Oil palm plantations start to produce fruit after four to five years – composed of specially selected and cloned varieties – and reach the highest rate of productivity when the trees are 20 to 25 years old. The fruit bunches, each weighing between 15 and 25 kgs, are made up of between 1000 and 4000 oval-shaped fruits, measuring some three to five centimeters long.

Once harvested, the fleshy part of the fruit is converted into oil through a series of processes, while the palm kernel oil is extracted from the nut itself. The processing of the crude oil gives rise to three different products: 1) Food products (cooking oil, margarine, sweets); 2) manufactured goods (cosmetics, soaps, detergents, candles, lubricants) and 3) fuel (biodiesel).

Oil Palm Plantations around the World

Oil palm plantations are established primarily in tropical regions, where they covered a total of 6.5 million hectares in 1997 and produced 17.5 million tons of palm oil and 2.1 million tons of palm kernel oil. By 2005, the area occupied by oil palm plantations had grown to 12 million hectares and palm oil production had reached 30 million tons. In other words, in less than 10 years, both the area occupied by plantations and oil production had almost doubled.

In Asia, the two largest producers of palm oil are Malaysia, with a total of four million hectares of plantations in 2005, and Indonesia, with 5.3 million hectares in 2005.[15] The two countries combined account for 85% of the palm oil produced worldwide.

Nevertheless, other countries are joining them in the large-scale production of palm oil, most notably Papua New Guinea and Thailand. When the WRM published the book "The Bitter Fruit of Oil Palm" in 2001, there were 200,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in Thailand. By 2005, that

[15] Source: GAPKI quoted in Dow Jones 30/Jul/03, in: http://dte.gn.apc.org/63OP1.HTM

figure had grown to 280,000 hectares.[16] For its part, in 2005 Papua New Guinea had a total of 88,000 hectares of oil palm plantations[17] and was the world's third-largest exporter of palm oil. There are also ambitious plans to promote the cultivation of this crop in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and India, which has been a net importer of palm oil until now.

In Africa, it is difficult to obtain precise figures on the area occupied by industrial plantations, since the oil palm is native to many West African countries. In Nigeria, for example, palm oil is produced on a total area of three million hectares of land, of which some 370,000 hectares[18] are industrial plantations. In Ghana, the area planted with oil palm grew from 125,000 hectares to 304,000 hectares in 2002,[19] while there are 160,000 hectares of plantations in Côte d'Ivoire.[20] There are also significant areas of oil palm plantations in Congo, Guinea (310,000 hectares), the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) (220,000 hectares), Cameroon (80,000 hectares), and Sierra Leone (29,000 hectares) along with smaller areas in Benin, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda.

In Latin America, the land area devoted to oil palm plantations in Ecuador grew from 153,623 hectares in 2000 to 207,285 hectares in 2005,[21] while the area planted in Colombia almost doubled from 145,027 hectares in 1998 to 275,317 hectares in 2005.[22] The industrial cultivation of this crop continues to expand in numerous countries like Honduras, which had 33,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in 1998[23] and 71,000 hectares in 2004;[24] Costa Rica, with 29,000 hectares in 1998 and 41,000 hectares in 2003;[25] and Venezuela, with 3,410 hectares in 1988 and 50,000 hectares in 2003.[26] These countries are joined by Brazil, which had 34,000 hectares of plantations in 1998 and 51,000 hectares in 2003,[27] and others like Peru (21,200 hectares in 2005[28]), Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Mexico (with over 40,000 hectares in 2003[29]). Meanwhile, while countries like Panama, Suriname and Guyana currently have relatively small areas of land devoted to oil palm plantations, there are now various projects underway to expand the cultivation of this crop.

Social and Environmental Impacts

As the areas under plantations increase, so do the negative impacts on the environment and on local societies. This is because, as is the case with monoculture plantations of pine and eucalyptus, the problem is not the tree itself but the plantation model under which it is grown.

Yet the promoters of this model insist on presenting palm plantations as a solution to unemployment problems and even try to demonstrate environmental benefits. The Colombian oil palm producers' federation puts it thus: "oil palm plantations are forests which protect our ecosystems". At

16 Source: *Oil World Monthly*, april 2006; *Oil Annual* 2005.
17 Source: *Oil World Monthly*, april 2006; *Oil Annual* 2005.
18 Source: *Oil World Monthly*, april 2006; *Oil Annual* 2005.
19 See: http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/a0013e/a0013e06.htm
20 Source: *Oil World Monthly*, april 2006; *Oil Annual* 2005.
21 See: http://www.sica.gov.ec/cadenas/aceites/cuadros/sup.prod.rend.htm
22 See: http://www.fedepalma.org/eco_mercado_nal.shtm

23 Source: Oil World Annual 99 / 2.000 / 01 / 02/ 03, in: http://www.ancupa.com/
24 See: http://www.minminas.gov.co/minminas/sectores.nsf/2a84e89f4d73f130052567be0052c75a/8d566806de23cd580525705f00432e6d/$FILE/Perspectivas%20bioetanol_Cepal.pdf#search=%22estad%C3%ADsticas%2C%20%C3%A1rea%20plantada%20de%20palma%20aceitera%20en%20el%20mundo%22
25 Source: Oil World Annual 99 / 2.000 / 01 / 02/ 03, in: http://www.ancupa.com/
26 See: http://www2.bvs.org.ve/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0002-192X2003000400006&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=es
27 Source: Oil World Annual 99 / 2.000 / 01 / 02/ 03, in: http://www.ancupa.com/
28 See: http://www.proamazonia.gob.pe/eventos/expo_palma.ppt
29 See: http://www.equilibrium.com.pe/Palmasset03.pdf#search=%22costa%20rica%20palma%20aceitera%20area%20plantada%22

the same time, a director of the International Finance Corporation (the branch of the World Bank which grants loans to the private sector), stated that the establishment of IFC-financed oil palm plantations in Ivory Coast "would lead to more employment and higher living standards [and] promote exports that will earn foreign currency, while supporting agricultural production with maximum sensitivity to the environment" (*Africa News Online*). A Malaysian minister went so far as to declare that palm plantations are in fact "better than the developed nations' pine trees in terms of absorbing carbon gases" (Lohmann 1999). A promoter of oil palm in Peru (Sáenz Vértiz 2005[30]) states that the 21,200 planted hectares of palm in that country generate 4.200 direct and 21,000 indirect employments!

However, as will be shown in more detail in this book, the cultivation of this palm is bringing with it a series of negative impacts affecting people and the environment wherever it is established.

One of the principal impacts is the appropriation of large areas of land which have hitherto been in the hands of indigenous or peasant populations and have provided for their livelihoods. This dispossession commonly generates resistance from local people, which is in turn confronted by repression by state forces as well as that of the oil palm companies themselves. The violation of land rights is thus typically followed by other human rights violations, including even the right to life.

Against the background of a world increasingly concerned about the loss of tropical rainforests, it is worth noting that almost all these industrial monoculture oil palm plantations are established in forest areas. Large oil palm plantation companies, which found it convenient to "clear" forest areas for plantations by setting them on fire, were responsible for the gigantic forest fires in Indonesia which shocked the world in 1997. Behind nearly every industrial oil palm plantation lies some such process of deforestation, even if it is usually not so extreme.

The tropical forests which are eliminated to make way for these plantations are the habitat for an enormously diverse range of species. Studies in Malaysia and Indonesia have shown that between 80 per cent and 100 per cent of the species of fauna inhabiting tropical rainforests cannot survive in oil palm monocultures (Wakker 2000). Those few species that do manage to adapt often become "pests" since, having lost their normal food supply, they begin to make a meal of the young palm plants, causing serious harm to the plantations. This in turn necessitates the application of pest "control" methods which include chemical pesticides, causing further damage to biodiversity as well as to fresh water supplies and the health of local populations.

In addition, these monoculture plantations provoke erosive processes, because their establishment involves the clearing of land formerly covered by forests, which leaves the soil totally exposed to heavy tropical rains. These erosive processes affect local rivers and streams as a result of contamination and sedimentation, with negative impacts on both the aquatic species that live in them and the local populations who depend on them as a source of water and food.

At the same time, processing plants have serious effects on water quality because of the large amounts of waste that they discharge: for every ton of palm oil, some 2.5 tons of effluents are produced. This frequently leads to the contamination of rivers and streams because legal requirements for waste treatment are ignored.

[30] See: http://www.proamazonia.gob.pe/eventos/expo_palma.ppt

Despite all this, proponents insist on presenting oil palm plantations as the solution to all the social ills of the region in which they wish to establish them, declaring that they will generate employment, wealth, infrastructure, educational opportunities etc., in an effort to gain the support of local people.

Reasons for Plantation Expansion

Despite their negative impacts, oil palm cultivation continues to expand across more and more countries. The reason for this expansion is, in the first place, that oil palm can be very lucrative for both foreign and domestic investors. Profits are assured by cheap labour, low-priced land, a lack of effective environmental controls, easy availability of finance and other support, and a short growth cycle. In addition, the market is expanding, particularly in the North. Palm oil is the world's best-selling vegetable oil, representing 56 per cent of the total global trade in edible oils. It is much more important than soya, which represents 23 per cent of the world market (FAS Online 2005).

In addition, the fact that oil palm is a crop usually aimed at export markets makes it attractive to governments overwhelmed by external debt and seeking new sources of foreign exchange. External agencies (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Development Programme) also support oil palm, as do international banks which finance and profit from it. According to one study (Wakker 2000), the main Dutch banks (ABN-AMRO Bank, ING Bank, Rabobank and MeesPierson) all maintain close financial links with large oil palm enterprises in Indonesia.

Other, less visible proponents include the overseas conglomerates which benefit from the international palm oil trade. There is nothing new in their method and it has been so repeatedly used, that by now it should be obvious: massive promotion of a crop in order to reduce world prices and stimulate consumption, thus entrenching a commodity in society in a way which ensures profits from marketing and reprocessing. A recent report on palm oil markets from ARAB (a Malaysian-based research and consulting institution) notes that "palm oil prices are generally lower than that of soybean oil" – which "is the dominant oil and serves as the price leader for trade in vegetable oils".

The report also explains why palm oil is cheap: "the existence of the discount for oil palm arises from the large increases in the supply of palm oil in the last two decades and the need for the trader to offer a discount in order to compete with soybean oil in existing and new markets." The reason for the increase in the supply of palm oil is quite simple: oil palm "is now being planted on a widespread basis in the tropics."

The peoples of the South have suffered from such strategies before, as in the cases of coffee, cocoa, bananas, sugar cane and many other crops. As the prices of such commodities drop, many producers are ruined... At the same time, trade in the industrialized nations benefits and consumption increases.

A more recent reason: the biodiesel business

The traditional uses for palm oil have recently been joined by its use as a biofuel in the form of biodiesel. This has served to even further spur the expansion of oil palm plantations, although now under an "environmentally friendly" guise.

It is true that the burning of fossil fuels is one of the main causes of climate change, and so their replacement with other energy sources would appear to be part of the solution to the problem. Among these new sources, one of the most heavily promoted is palm oil, which is already being used to produce biodiesel.

Nevertheless, this is in fact one of the worst options possible. On the one hand, because of the current levels of fuel consumption by the industrialized countries, the promotion of biofuels (from sources ranging from oil palm to sugar cane to eucalyptus trees) will signify the replacement of crops for food production by crops intended for energy production. In the case of oil palm plantations, this will involve millions of hectares of land in tropical countries, since these trees can only be grown in tropical areas. These regions are already facing food shortages, which means that this "solution" for the countries of the North will imply even more hunger in the countries of the South.

On the other hand, expanding oil palm plantations does not even make sense from a climate-change perspective. The tropical regions suited to the establishment of plantations are typically home to rainforest ecosystems, which constitute enormous carbon reservoirs. The occupation of these areas by oil palm growers entails the destruction of natural forests (usually by burning them down), which results in the emission of huge amounts of greenhouse gases that further aggravate climate change.

In reality, the pseudo-environmental discourse used to promote biofuels is an attempt to hide the real problem: the rising price of fossil fuels and the search for cheaper alternatives. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe – who is not particularly known for his environmental concerns – clearly explained why he looks on "the cultivation of oil palm with great enthusiasm" when he said: "In a country with a decline in petroleum, biodiesel becomes a necessary alternative." The same reasoning is applicable in many regions, particularly Europe, which wants to break its dependence on imported petroleum and consumes a great deal more of it than Colombia does.

In this regard, oil palm is one of the favorite candidates as an alternative fuel source, given its high per-hectare yield and low production costs. For these reasons, there are hopes that it can successfully compete with petroleum. But the truth of the matter is that these "low" costs are in fact extremely high at the local level, given that they are based on the expulsion of the rural population, the exploitation of workers, the repression of local communities, corrupt practices in land acquisition, and environmental destruction.

Attempting to improve the image of the palm oil industry

The situation we have described above is commonplace in the countries that produce palm oil and has been denounced at the national and international level for many years. These denunciations have sparked concern among the large corporations and investors involved in the sector, because they have raised questions among consumers that could eventually lead to the loss of markets.

As a result, big business has spearheaded a process known as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which recently approved a series of Principles and Criteria to ensure the supposedly "sustainable" production of this crop.

The RSPO was created in 2003 and involves seven sectors: 1) oil palm growers, 2) palm oil processors and/or traders, 3) consumer goods

manufacturers, 4) retailers, 5) banks and investors, 6) environmental/nature conservation NGO, and 7) social/developmental NGO.

Its ordinary and affiliate members include some very well-known names that are typically associated with negative social and environmental impacts: Cargill, Unilever, Cognis, the International Finance Corporation, British Petroleum, Syngenta and Bayer.

The RSPO has generated rifts among NGO, because while some view it as an opportunity to achieve social and environmental improvements in the sector, others believe that participation in this process merely serves to endorse an essentially destructive industry.

The need to step up the struggle

Regardless of the good intentions of the NGO representatives – and even those from other sectors – who are participating in the RSPO process, the question remains whether industrial monoculture oil palm plantations can be socially and environmentally sustainable.

It is obvious that the majority of the members and affiliate members of the RSPO do not question the expansion of oil palm monocultures. On the contrary, they are actively seeking to boost both production and consumption. While it is true that many aspects of the production process can be improved, it is equally true that the model as a whole – even with these improvements – continues to be unsustainable.

Basically, the industrial production of palm oil is intrinsically tied to large-scale monocultures which require the use of large quantities of externally supplied inputs such as fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, with the consequent impacts on the health of workers and local residents and the pollution of the environment.

At the same time, palm oil production requires large areas of land in areas originally covered by tropical rainforests, whose replacement with monoculture oil palm plantations leads to serious social and environmental impacts.

The scenario most likely to result from the RSPO process is that in the future there will be two production sectors supplying different markets. On the one hand, there will be a group of certified companies who will attempt to a greater or lesser extent to fulfill the principles and criteria adopted by the RSPO, while on the other hand, there will be a second group of uncertified companies. The first will cater to markets like the European market, where consumers demand compliance with certain social and environmental standards, while the second will supply all the other markets.

As in the case of large-scale monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations – for which certification principles and criteria have also been established – the final result will be that the cultivation of oil palm will continue to expand and the accumulated impacts of both “sustainable” and other plantations will continue to have serious impacts on people and their environment.

Regardless of the intentions of the different sectors involved in the production, processing and marketing of palm oil, it is important to stress that the process they have initiated did not emerge out of the blue, but was in fact the result of the many local resistance struggles and national and international campaigns waged to denounce the current situation.

Therefore, rather than supporting or opposing the RSPO process, what is most important now is to step up these struggles and campaigns to curb the further advance of this essentially destructive industry. The key challenge today is not that of improving large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations, but rather halting their expansion, which makes it essential to change the conditions that make them possible today.

The numerous cases documented in this book demonstrate that large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations, far from serving to improve the living conditions of local populations, actually result in even greater social injustice and environmental destruction.

Annex 2: Cameroon: Impacts of rubber plantations

We recently visited a rubber plantation in Kribi, Cameroon and talked with the workers and local population. The only difference with the normal monotony of any plantation comprised of parallel lines of thousands of identical trees is the array of small pots hanging on the tree trunks into which the latex is gathered. Along the paths there are other, larger pots where the latex is poured to take it to the processing plant. Added to this is the penetrating and disagreeable smell of rubber. .

The plantations we visited belong to the Société des Hévéas du Cameroun (HEVECAM), a company set up in 1975, with plantations covering a total of 42,000 hectares in a region that was previously covered by dense tropical forests, hosting some of the most varied biodiversity in the world. Today one can still see the enormous stumps of native trees between the rubber trees and even large tree trunks rotting in the middle of the plantation. That is to say, this plantation was the direct cause of the total destruction of the forests previously growing there. .

This is well-known by the Indigenous Bagyeli People ("pygmies") who have been the worst affected. The Bagyeli are nomad hunters and gatherers who used to find in their ancient forest all they needed for their welfare. According to the group of Bagyeli we interviewed, they used to live decently on their territory that covered what is now the HEVECAM plantation, in addition to other adjacent areas. The forest no longer exists and the Bagyeli are considered to be intruders on their own territory, now controlled by the company. Although they are "allowed to enter" the plantation, the same cannot be said for the children as they might "damage the rubber trees".

The possibility of obtaining food and income by hunting is very remote. To the disappearance of fauna due to the effects of the plantation is added the presence of hunters with fire-arms – usually HEVECAM workers – who advantageously compete with the traditional arms of the Bagyeli. The possibility of getting a job on the plantation is also unlikely. The company hires them sometimes for weeding, but pays them very badly. The result is that now here is a demoralized, poor, underfed, exploited and oppressed human group, cornered by the plantation and with nowhere to go.

However, the Bagyeli are not the only ones to have been adversely affected. We also interviewed the inhabitants of the village of Afan Oveng near the HEVECAM plantation, where two years ago a company truck had an accident and the contents of latex and ammonia it was transporting ended up in the river running through the village.

As a result animals died, people were sick and the fish died. They sent letter after letter to the responsible authorities and to the company and so far the only “compensation” they have received have been some tankers with water, not even fit for human consumption.

However for these people the problem is not limited to an accident, but goes much further and implies that their traditional rights over the forest have never been recognized. For example, the place were the company hospital is located used to be land belonging to these people. They insist that “the forest belongs to us” and denounce that the “forest that still is left is being destroyed by HEVECAM”.

In fact, the company continues its “savage” felling of the forest, apparently in connivance with the mayor of Kribi, who owns the saw-mill where the timber is processed. The local community receives no benefit, but is left with the damage implied by the disappearance of the forest and of the products obtained from it.

Company workers – brought from other regions of the country – would then seem to be the only ones to benefit from these plantations. However, this is not the case either “HEVECAM is slavery”, affirmed a person who had worked 7 years for the company. He spoke of very low wages, very hard work, respiratory diseases, blindness, tuberculosis, death, arbitrary redundancy and the impossibility of trade union organization.

We visited one of the villages built by the company and talked with various workers. There they told us that they had continuous problems with drinking water; that the latrines were overflowing, that this led to abundance of mosquitoes and subsequently to diarrhoea, cholera and malaria. They are crowded in these dwellings and it is not easy to find a two-roomed house. Consequently, most of the families must live in a single room. As the houses belong to the company, if the workers are fired, or even if they retire, they automatically find themselves homeless.

They also told us about the transportation system for the company workers, done in hired vehicles that are obliged to comply with a set timetable to cover the 40 km from the village to the plantation, resulting in frequent accidents. They told us about the application of weed-killers and fertilizers with no gloves or protective equipment. They explained that there are people who have gone blind because in that climate the eye protection equipment provided by the company cannot be used and it has done nothing to find a solution to the problem.

If the above would seem to confirm that effectively “HEVECAM is slavery”, this conviction was further strengthened when the workers told us that when the company was privatized in 1996 (the International GMC Group of Singapore is the present owner), they learnt about it when different cars from those used by the previous managers appeared. “They bought us in the same way as they bought the rubber trees.” Just like in times of slavery.

Ricardo Carrere, based on information gathered during a visit carried out to the region in December 2006 with researchers Sandra Veuthey and Julien-Francois Gerber. The author thanks the Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) for its support which made this visit possible.