MONOCULTURE TREE PLANTATIONS - Land grabbing for oil palm in the Philippines

The indigenous network ALDAW in the Philippines(Ancestral Land/Domain Watch) is deeply concerned about the findings of a recent study it carried out in Southern Palawan. The research shows that oil palm development is impoverishing local indigenous communities while destroying biologically diverse environments. The ALDAW case study ***"The Palawan Oil Palm Geotagged Report 2013. The Environmental and Social Impact of Oil Palm Expansion on Palawan Unesco Man & Biosphere Reserve (The Philippines)"***, can be accessed at http://www.regenwald.org/files/pdf/The-Palawan-Geotagged-Oil-Palm-Report-Part-1.pdf and

http://www.regenwald.org/files/pdf/The-Palawan-Oil-Palm-Geotagged-Report-Part-2.pdf

Below a summary of the report's findings that are most relevant to the land grab dimension of oil palm expansion.

The ongoing expansion of industrial oil palm plantations

From the time of former dictator Ferdinando Marcos to the actual presidency of PresidentBenigno Aquino III, a rhetorical discourse on the potential benefits of oil palm (e.g.poverty eradication and increased economic independence from imported oil) has set thetrend.

Plantation schemes have been implemented mainly through the initiatives of private investors(owners and heads of palm oil mills/processors and oil palm growers/planters) and withsupport from government bodies such as the Department of Agrarian Reform(DAR), the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI),and also of the local government units (LGUs).

From the 2009 data provided by the Philippine Palm OilDevelopment Council (PPODC), a total of 46,608 ha have already been planted with oilpalm. It reflects a 160% increase in a span of only four years.

In the Philippines, oil palm companies have difficulty inacquiring large tracts of land for conversion into plantations. In fact, as a result of theComprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL), approved on June 10, 1988, land wasdistributed to a myriad of farmers – either individually or forming cooperatives or associations - for the purpose of enhancing social justice, and accessto land sought to promote the quality of life of landless farmers. This, in turn, shouldhave boasted agricultural production both on private and public land.

The land-grabbing dimension of the palm oil industry

Today, in those areas where tracts of land are owned individually through a Certificate of Land Ownership Award(CLO), oil palm companies are trying to bring fragmented lands and individual farmerstogether into oil palm cooperatives with which the companies themselves enter intodifferent types of agreements.

The Philippine Oil Palm Development Plan also states that the area potentially availablefor oil palm development nationwide include about 304,000 ha of idle andunderdeveloped lands. However, most of the socalled ‘idle’ and ‘underdeveloped land’ include areas that are utilized by the rural andindigenous populations for different purposes (gathering of NTFPs, medicinal plants, swidden cultivation, etc.). These areas also incorporate rivers providing drinking water to rural households.

In addition to the alarmingexpansion of nickel mining inthe province of Palawan, indigenous peoples andlowland farmers are now beingconfronted with the threats posedby oil palm development.

In Palawan, at least 15,000 ha out of the targeted 20,000 ha for oil palm development are being developed by three companies: the Agusan Plantations Group, the Palawan Palm and Vegetable Oil Mills Inc. (PPVOMI) (60 percent Singaporean and 40 percent Filipino-owned) and its sister company Agumil Philippines Inc. (AGPI).

There is a scarcity of public records showing the processes and procedures leading to the issuance of land conversion permits and environmental clearances to oil palm companies in Palawan. The ALDAW field assessment has revealed that land acquisition procedures and land clearing by oil palm companies have disadvantaged and marginalized lowland indigenous communities, while massively contributing to the loss of biodiversity.

A majority of members of indigenous communities who have ‘rented’ portions of their land to the oil palm companies, have no clear understanding of the nature of such ‘agreements’ nor do they possess written contracts countersigned by the companies. Not only indigenous peoples’ rights but also those of the contract growers, seem to have been violated to various degrees. Farmers’ ability to cope with food shortage and harvest failure is put at risk, since they are not allowed to intercrop other edible plants inside the plantations without the permission of the company; furthermore wet-rice intercropping is not allowed.

Growers that are growing oil palm or AGPI are particularly vulnerable since the management of their land under an oil palm regime may be handed over to AGPI, if the company is not satisfied about the way in which the land is being managed. AGPI also applies management fees to growers for covering various costs, such as the so called ‘project restoration’.

More detailed investigation needs to be carried out on the ambiguous nature of ‘rent agreements’ and ‘land leases’ leading to the conversion of indigenous ancestral land into oilpalm plantations. The length of such leases is about 20-25 years (which is equivalent to the productive lifespan of oil palm). Other hidden disadvantages include that at the end of the lease, the traditional indigenous occupants and local farmers might be left with old and dying palm trees on their fields. The latter, after years of intense fertilizers and pesticides uses, will be rendered without much use for growing food crops. Highly depleted soils will be unsuited for traditional farming activities and any attempt to bring the nutrients back will require very costly interventions which the government is unlikely to support.

In the Municipality of Espanola several indigenous families have sold their land for a very low price, in the light of quick economic gains. This, in turn, has forced other families to sell their land when they found themselves surrounded by oil palm plantations.

Evidence from other provinces indicates that portions of existing oil palm plantations are overlapping with the ancestral domain of indigenous peoples (e.g. in Bukidnon, Sultan Kudarat, Augusan, Cotabato). If a company intends to carry out its activities in such areas, it should first obtain

community consent through proper Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) processes.

As the ALDAW team has found out, oil palm companies have resorted to illegal strategies to gain access to land. In several cases, according to indigenous informants, the community received only partial or false information about the company's plans and real targets. Lacking this information, several communities did not initially oppose oil palm plantations. For instance an indigenous representative from Maasin (Brooke's Point) told ALDAW that, according to his own understanding, the company was only going to use a limited area of land for building a nursery. He was then surprised to discover that, aside from the nursery, a much bigger area was going to be used for oil palm plantations. Indeed, the land converted into oil palm is part of the ancestral territory of the lowland Palawan communities of Maasin.

In order to expand their oil palm plantations, companies have often succeeded in entering forest land covered by tenure arrangements such as Community Based Forest Management Agreements (CBFMA), risking that CBFM applications could be withdrawn if the prevalent economic activity of the area becomes agriculture rather than forestry, leavingits holders with no tenure over forestland and with no resource-use privileges.

Also, oil palm plantations have expanded in areas used by indigenous peoples for the cultivation of local varieties of upland rice, root crops and fruit trees. This has greatly affected the diversity of traditional cultivation while making local communities even more dependent on purchased food.

Oil palm plantations have also expanded to those areas lying between the lowland rice fields and the upland forest. This area coincides exactly with the land that indigenous communities traditionally use for their swidden agriculture and to which they apply fallow periods between 4 to 7 years or more. During the fallow period, which is essential for the land to restore part of its nutrients, the area may appear to the eyes of non-experts as unused and unproductive land. In reality this is the land that indigenous farmers will use again after the fallow period is completed or when the soil has reached the minimal nutrient requirements for being cultivated again. Currently, the expansion of oil palm plantations into indigenous fallow land (benglay) is reducing the number of rotational areas needed by indigenous peoples to ensure the sustainability of their swidden cycle thus leading to irreversible genetic erosion, as well as to the disintegration of indigenous identity and worldviews.

Oil palm plantations in Palawan are already competing and taking over cultivated areas and peoples´ territories, which have been sustaining local self-sufficiency. In short, a type of intensive agriculture (oil palm monocultures) benefitting better-off farmers, companies and entrepreneurs is taking over traditional farming land which have for generations ensured the livelihood of small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples.