
Papua New Guinea: Women against further expansion of oil palm

Oil palm production is increasing in Papua New Guinea, a country where 97% of the land is communally owned and most of its 5 million population still lives in the rural area and rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. The palm oil produced is mostly exported to the EU with the UK, Italy and the Netherlands being the main markets.

A hidden large-scale scheme

“The more smallholders, the more profits the companies get. It's cheap labour for the companies”.
(Woman from Kokoda village)

Almost all oil palm in PNG is grown under the so-called Nucleus Estate Smallholder Scheme, whereby a central company –holding a large plantation- contracts small farmers to supply it with additional oil palm fruit. Promoted by International Financial Institutions as a way for “alleviating” poverty in the country and allowing farmers to gain access to the cash economy, this scheme is allowing the agribusiness sector to increase corporate business while reducing investments and costs for the companies. Corporations don't need to buy more land to make way for plantations, they have cheap labor from the small landowners, no workers unions, and their responsibility over the ecological impacts of plantations is faded away.

Communities have been encouraged to plant oil palm “blocks” on their lands with loan facilities to buy seedlings, fertilizers and agrotoxics offered by the government. While the average land tenure is around 4 to 6 hectares of land, the blocks occupy two hectares in size. The smallholder-schemes promoted in PNG are part of a large scale plantation where their blocks are part of a complex formed of many thousands of hectares. Today it is estimated that the country has more than 100,000 hectares of oil palm plantations.

Loss of food sovereignty

Not only forest and agricultural land must be cleared to make space for oil palm but also the land allocated to the oil palm blocks can no longer be used for food production, for making their “gardens” -as local people call them in Papua New Guinea.

“Therefore, we have limited land for gardening and no more forest for hunting wild animals. The land we have is being used over and over again and its ability to support food production is decreasing. In ten years time, we will face food shortage. Actually we are experiencing it right [now] but it will be worse in ten years. Because the forests are gone we lack protein in our diets”. (Woman from Kokoda Village)

Dependence on one crop may end up creating economic problems. For example, the recent sharp fall in commodity prices (including palm oil) has put at stake future incomes from the oil palm fruit.

Land disputes

Women from different provinces have expressed concern about increasing population and future land shortages due to oil palm expansion. Land which has never been a problem before -as the population density was quite low- is now becoming a very scarce resource. This is clearly reflected in increasing intra and inter-clan land disputes. According to the President of the Women's Council at Kokoda, land disputes are a major issue now, and more than 50% of court cases are related to land.

"Much of land has been stolen by the State and we are almost landless in own land that is rightfully ours by history, culture and tradition. The land which the company has taken is our birthright inheritance reaped from us." (Woman from Kokoda Village)

Health

The use of agrotoxics in the plantations is contaminating rivers, streams, as well as soils and the air, affecting people's health.

"Health is a very big concern in our place right now. When sun heats the chemicals sprayed in the company estates and even VOPs,[Village Oil Palm] we breathe in the chemical. I'm pretty sure we are inhaling dangerous substances and definitely are dying every minute. Some pregnant mothers have babies who develop asthma within first one or two months after birth. During my time there was never such a thing. The chemicals are killing us; we will all die sooner."(Woman from Saga Village)

Hard work needed during the harvest and transport of the fruit is also affecting women:

"I am not harvesting my oil palm now because of the hardship that I have faced as my estate is about 12 kilometers from the loading area. It is very hard work transporting bunches to the river bank, then ferrying them to the other side of the river on rubber tubes. After about 6 years now I am giving up. Most of the time we get sick, sustain big cuts and bruises and generally we are losing our health status because of all the hard work we do even in bad weather." (Woman from Botue Village)

How oil palm plantations affect women

Women explain how oil palm reinforces male control over women:

- Men usually have more control over the income from oil palm production than women. This is mainly because oil palm companies usually talk to men instead of women. It is also because the highest paying jobs on an oil palm plantation go to men (i.e. chopping the large bunches of fruits from the trees).
- Conversion of traditional farmlands to oil palm plantations restricts women's access to garden

land making it harder for them to provide food for their families. Gardens are important both for feeding the family, and selling garden food at local markets. Women usually have control of income earned from the markets, unlike oil palm income which men often control. They also lose an important moment for socializing.

- Often, women only get a tiny amount of the money their husbands earn from oil palm, even though they have contributed to the production of palm fruits. Many say that the money they get from their husbands is only enough to buy store food for the family for a couple of days after pay day.
- Families now have to rely on store food since there is less land for gardens and subsistence farming.
- Domestic violence has become common around payday- men often spend the money carelessly on gambling and beer while women struggle for cash to buy essential household items.

Unfulfilled promises

Promoted as the new panacea for Papua New Guineans, that would bring about many improvements, oil palm plantations have not lived up to expectations.

At the workshop, women complained that:

“The only sign of spin offs in the village are trade stores that were built from our own money earned from oil palm. But the trade stores are operating on ad hoc basis (seasonal), the stores are fully stocked during bigger harvests (and high prices) and at times (during low prices) there will be no stock.

That is as far as spin off services go. Other spin off services like schools, health and transport in our village is virtually nil. Many times our children stay back at home and do miss out on school because the village is flooding and they cannot cross it. Because of that we built our own elementary school using corrugated iron and timber so that our children will easily receive education but the school inspector said that we do not have enough children. Currently we have less than 30 children and we need more than that to qualify for elementary school status. So now our children have to attend Mamba Estate elementary and go to Kokoda for their primary schooling which is quite a distance for a 5-7 year old child.”

Among the resolutions of the workshop conducted in PNG, the women “united in one voice” and called for the recognition of their rights in all decision making processes and demanded a stop to any further oil palm development.