
[Why the RSPO facilitates land grabs for palm oil](#)

***This article is based on a conversation between Winnie Overbeek, the international coordinator of the World Rainforest Movement, and GRAIN on September 2014, which was published by GRAIN at ["Planet palm oil"](#). The information has been updated for this article.*

GRAIN (1): What is the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)?

Winnie: The RSPO is an initiative that was founded in 2001. It is a partnership between the palm oil industry and a few NGOs - the WWF is a very important one. In my view, you can see it as a response of the palm oil industry to the conflicts and the environmental problems, especially deforestation, caused by the very fast expansion of the industry, mainly in Indonesia and Malaysia, over the past 20 years.

The RSPO now has over 750 members and only 13 of them are NGOs, so the remaining 740 members are companies somehow related to the oil palm sector. You have palm growers, you have the palm oil processors and traders, you have the consumers' goods manufacturers, and some banks and investors. And in a process that is very similar to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification system, the RSPO delivers certificates to palm oil producers, based on a set of principles and criteria approved by RSPO members. The RSPO states on its website that it has already certified about 2.56 million hectares - this figure of October 2015 - of oil palm plantations as 'sustainable'. They call it "sustainable oil palm production", which is supposed to rest on legal, economically viable, environmentally appropriate and socially beneficial management practices.

GRAIN: (2) What does the current land grab for large-scale industrial oil palm monoculture mean for communities affected by this and for the companies that promote it, and what is the role of RSPO?

Winnie: Local communities can only lose from the current wave of land grabs for palm oil. They lose access to vital lands and water resources, now and for future generations. And they have to face all of the impacts that come with vast monoculture plantations within their territories – pollution from pesticides, soil erosion, deforestation, and labour migration. Experience also shows that the employment generated by the plantations often goes to outsiders, and that most of the jobs are seasonal, poorly paid, and dangerous. Certification schemes, such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), do not question this, they rather play a role of facilitating the continued expansion calling it 'sustainable'.

Furthermore, the large-scale industrial plantation expansion threatens local palm oil production in Africa and some places in Latin America, based on people's control over lands and the production process – most often in the hands of women - , involving for example in Africa millions in more than 20 countries where oil palm is a native species and part of people's culture. Based on oil palm a number of products for the local markets are produced and sold. These plantations most often are not extensive monocultures that depend on chemical inputs, and most often offer very good quality palm oil for cooking and other products for local use.

There is no demand justification for the expansion of oil palm plantations. The growing global market for palm oil is not about resolving world hunger. It is mainly a product of new biofuel mandates and the substitution of cheap imported palm oil for locally produced oils and fats (whether animal or vegetable) in the production of processed foods by global corporations. People do not need more oil palm plantations; corporations do.

GRAIN (3): In your experience of working with community organizations, has the RSPO been a solution for communities? Has it helped to make palm oil sustainable?

Winnie: It is true that the RSPO, according to some of the organisations we work with, has resulted in some benefits, and it is important also - I imagine it is for any certification scheme - that they can show some positive results. So, for example, they have been able to slow down deforestation a bit, or at least to make companies slow down their expansion rate. But it is also true that for those communities that have filed complaints to the RSPO, in Indonesia for example (the country with the most problems between communities and oil palm companies), none of these complaints have come to a satisfactory conclusion for the communities. And this is very worrisome, because the complaint mechanism is the last option to correct problems not solved in the certification procedure. If the complaints mechanism of the RSPO doesn't even function, what can we think of the whole certification process?

It's not easy for communities to access this complaint mechanism in the first place, and this has to do with the second point I want to make, which is the fact that the RSPO has been set up without any community participation. The RSPO has produced a number of procedures, of principles and criteria, and these are often very difficult for communities to understand. The language that they write these procedures in, even the complaint mechanism, is different from the language of the communities. I mean that they are written in a very technical way, not in a way that facilitates access by communities. It is written in the language of companies, consultants, scientists, and it is also the language of the NGOs that are participants, which are most often constituted of specialised workers with university degrees. They can easily understand the documentation. It is much more difficult for communities. This is a big advantage for the companies that are seeking a certification, and often a source of frustration for communities.

One example is how, within the certification process, they define forests that should not be planted with oil palm. They call them high conservation value forests (HCV), and they are determined by the identification of areas by consultants that are hired by the company - not by the communities. Most often, communities do not understand this concept because for them, their whole territory, often made up of different forested areas that they use for many different things, like agroforestry, is important. All these different forested areas are very important for communities, and not just one single part of this area, like the RSPO proposes.

Another problematic aspect with the RSPO is that it's not an effective instrument to solve the increasing land grabbing problems in the global South, the planting of more monocultures for exports. It does not question the palm oil industry's logic of expanding plantations and markets. If this is not taken into account, how can there be talk of "sustainable" palm oil at the global level?

At the local level, there are two characteristics of plantations that are also not being questioned by the RSPO: their large scale and their monoculture production. These are two aspects that always have a lot of social, environmental, economic and cultural impacts. They require lots of pesticides and water, and they occupy a lot of territory that multiple people are living on - because they are most often settled on fertile land - so it is very problematic to call plantations that are large scale and

monoculture "sustainable", and for us it's impossible. So when the RSPO puts a label on such projects, declaring them "sustainable", they give a false promise to consumers that the palm oil they consume is coming from a sustainable plantation, that it's benefiting people and benefiting the world. That is simply not true.

A final important problem with the RSPO is that it is a mechanism, like other new trends like REDD+ , that is dividing us as a civil society formed by communities, social movements, and NGOs. Certification is being used as a tool to assist certain communities at certain times, while in other countries - or even in the same country - the same tool is being used to silence or overpower people and control their territory.

These mechanisms, like certification schemes or REDD+ projects, need therefore to be seen, to be understood in a broader context. We should reflect on our commitment to solidarity with those who are being abused by certification schemes and REDD+ projects. This is still, I think, not happening enough, and is very worrying. So now, for example, it's also a trend that mechanisms like RSPO and REDD+ are coming more together. The high conservation value forest areas I talked about earlier, that RSPO wants to protect, are now also being called "high carbon forests". This means that, eventually, a company certified by the RSPO could also sell carbon credits from its area, even as studies show that agrofuels produced from large scale, monoculture production can result in even more CO₂ emissions than using fossil fuels for energy generation.

Overall I think the limitations and the problems of the RSPO in the long term are much bigger and more significant than its benefits for communities, and I would say that the contrary is true for companies: They get much more benefit from the RSPO than what it costs them to put in. At the end of the day, companies get stronger with mechanisms like the RSPO and the struggle of communities to resist against land grabbing, to defend their territories, gets more difficult.