
Malaysia: Exporting social and environmental impacts of oil palm monocultures

Malaysia is the world's number one producer and exporter of palm oil. However, the development of this sector has not only not benefited the local people but, on the contrary, has resulted in serious adverse effects, particularly in the state of Sarawak. This crop, which generates huge profits for a few large companies linked to the government and local elites, leads to serious negative social and environmental impacts that affect the majority of the population, giving rise to social conflicts that nearly always resulting in human rights violations.

Logging companies have been destroying forests through large-scale unsustainable logging, causing irreparable damages. However, their activity has only been the prologue for something even worse. When wood resources began to decrease and world demand for palm oil increased, many logging companies opted to redirect their activities to oil palm plantation. For local peoples, this means the final appropriation of their traditional territories by the companies. As a local person said: "Logging companies destroy our forest and leave. Plantation companies destroy our forest and stay!"

Most of these plantations are being implemented in indigenous traditional territories, thus depriving local peoples of their livelihood and vital resources. In Sarawak, the government has granted licenses to oil palm companies in lands used by the local peoples to cultivate their basic food, such as rice, fruit trees, vegetables, pepper, etc. Moreover, the destruction of forests determines the disappearance of a wide range of products, traditionally used by local communities. Deprived of their resources, local peoples are gradually forced to hand over all their rights to their lands, and to turn into salaried workers of the companies, in seasonal, low-paid jobs and under bad working conditions.

The increasing occupation of lands by oil palm plantation companies has unleashed an unequal fight, in which local communities resist against forest destruction, the deprivation of their lands and the disregard for their traditional rights. They then become victims of repression and harassment from the government, which protects the interests of the companies.

Oil palm companies and the government are thus responsible for promoting deforestation and for violating the human rights of the local peoples that fight for forest conservation. It is important to highlight this situation, given that many of those companies are expanding their activities to other tropical countries, where they will surely repeat the same behaviour pattern. Malaysian government and corporate representatives have visited a number of countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, India, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Nigeria, Guyana, Honduras and others, promoting this palm monoculture system. Of course they never mention the serious adverse social and environmental impacts this system is generating in their own country. And that is precisely what people must know, and they should ask themselves: ¿What can we expect of companies that, in their own country, act against local communities and the environment? ¿Will they behave better in foreign countries? Very unlikely. The same as at home, they will probably act in the name of "development", but their profitability will be obtained at the expense of the destruction of the environment and the use of cheap labour. That is the hypothesis which local people of the countries where these companies intend to expand their activity should adopt, until those same companies modify their behaviour in

their own country.