Mekong: Rubber Fever Strikes Again

The industrial production of natural rubber has always been synonymous with destruction and exploitation. About 70% is used to manufacture tires. As the use of cars, trucks and airplanes increases, the use of rubber will also increase. And this does not come without controversy.

What is referred to as “rubber fever” began in the mid-nineteenth century, when Charles Goodyear discovered uses for latex from rubber trees. With mass production of motor cars a few decades later, and the invention of tires in 1888, the “need” for natural rubber became urgent. Synthetic rubber, on the other hand—which is made through chemical reactions with hydrocarbon products—is trying to compete with natural rubber but failing to replace it.

The rubber tree comes from the Amazon. Many opportunists rushed to these forests in search of fortune, imposing **sub-human harvesting practices and slave labor. In a few years, thousands of indigenous people were killed, raped or tortured** (1). Others went after rubber in West Africa, where colonizers—led by one of the most infamous monarchs, King Leopold II of Belgium—propagated *Hevea brasiliensis* seeds. Once again, thousands of people were killed, enslaved and tortured. **In 1912, the seeds were taken to Asia, where they were propagated on large plantations to lower the costs of production.**

To this day, the industrial production of natural rubber is still largely **synonymous with destruction and exploitation**. Large-scale plantations are responsible for deforestation, destruction of biodiversity, soil erosion, contamination due to the use of chemicals, and abuse and dispossession of local communities. Furthermore, industrial rubber plantations **significantly increase sexual violence and abuse against women and girls in affected communities** (2). Currently, 97% of global production of natural rubber comes from Asia.

According to a report by the organization, FERN, **there are some 13 million hectares of natural rubber plantations worldwide, and this number is on the rise** (3). It is estimated that the annual consumption of rubber by 2025 will increase by more than 40% as compared to 2010. This could lead to an expansion of 8.5 million hectares of plantations.

The primary buyers of natural rubber are **China, the European Union (mainly Germany, France, Spain and Italy) and the United States.** About 70% of natural rubber goes toward the production of tires, in particular for heavy loads. With the growing using of cars, trucks and airplanes, the use of rubber will also increase. And this does not come without controversy.

“White Gold” in the Mekong

The Mekong region—which comprises Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar—is facing deforestation that is increasing at a staggering pace, largely because of rubber plantations. **These five countries produce over 50% of natural rubber worldwide.** Among other reasons, this is due to their proximity to China—the world's leading consumer of rubber—as well as to the expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, which have displaced rubber to the Mekong.

In the early 1950s, the Chinese government decided that it should produce its own natural rubber, so it invested heavily in researching whether rubber could be grown in areas previously considered to be unsuitable. Subsequently, **state plantations were successfully established in "non traditional" areas, which greatly facilitated the expansion of this crop.** At the same time, the rise in palm oil prices drove an expansion of oil palm plantations in areas where rubber had previously been grown. Unlike rubber, oil palms are restricted to the humid tropics. In many parts of Peninsular Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, **rubber trees continue to be replaced by oil palm, and rubber is being displaced further north** (4).

Today, commercial rubber production in this region takes place under three kinds of systems: land concessions to state or private companies, independent production by small-scale farmers, or cultivation through contracts between companies and small-scale farmers. **Small-scale farmers predominate in rubber production in Thailand, and to a lesser extent in Myanmar.** This is for several reasons, including current agrarian reform policies that subsidize this crop, and the lack of state capacity to control large concessions. Meanwhile, **in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, government policies have promoted and imposed large commercial concessions, affecting small-scale farmers' control and tenure of lands**.

Companies from China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand are investing heavily in **rubber plantations in non-traditional areas in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar**. These plantations are managed through concessions or by contract with small-scale producers. In the case of concessions, companies control both the land and the production of rubber, **turning farmers into landless workers**—most of whom also face very precarious working conditions (5).

In the case of harvest by contract, small-scale famers still own their land, though they must comply with the conditions of the contract. **The abandonment of traditional agricultural practices** in favor of monoculture, essentially, has serious consequences for families' food and nutritional sovereignty. Worse yet, diverse materials, foods and medicines—as well as non-timber forest products—become inaccessible, since rubber plantations do not provide them.

Myanmar

Rubber has been grown in Myanmar since the early 1900s, particularly in Mon state. Such "traditional" areas of rubber cultivation are mostly farmed by small-scale farmers seeking other forms of income. However, as the NGO Global Witness shows, **two new patterns of expansion have emerged in Myanmar** (6).

First, the government has been **promoting new non-traditional areas for this crop** over the last decade, which has led to an expansion of plantations in the northern part of the country. The official policy has gone from relying on small-scale farmers to meet national agricultural production quotas, to using private companies to reach national objectives. Second, **large-scale plantations are getting closer and closer to small parcels,** which reduces peasants' access to forests and their livelihoods, further undermining their food sovereignty.

In both cases, concessions are assigned in areas that the government defines as "unproductive land," mostly in the highlands. But far from being unproductive, these lands are often used and farmed by local communities.

Vietnam

Rubber plantations in Vietnam have been the site of some of the **worst abuses of indigenous peoples in the country at the hands of the French colony**. The climate in the highlands of

southern Vietnam offers ideal conditions for rubber trees. Therefore, the colonial government made vast areas of forests “available” to European companies for plantations; meanwhile, it established the necessary infrastructure and provided financial support. **Forced labor was the norm, along with torture, rape and marginalization**. Nonetheless, colonial plantations also became places of radicalization and rebellion, which became apparent in the subsequent wars with France and the United States. Afterwards, the new government chose to operate the industry in line with colonial structures, giving **preference to large foreign companies**. Beginning in 1943, large estates began to take up more and more land for rubber production, reaching 82% by 1970 (7).

While French companies’ plantations disappeared in favor of state enterprises after 1975, **conflicts continue between large plantations and family or community cultivation.** A report by the Vietnamese government estimated that over 10,000 children were involved in rubber production, 22% of whom were between five and 11 years old. **Serious reports of trafficking and slavery abound** (8). Meanwhile, Vietnamese companies **are increasingly looking toward Laos and Cambodia** to set up their plantations (9). In a trend reminiscent of colonialism, these corporations frequently **force communities to relocate**, often in an illegal and violent manner (10).

Cambodia

A 2019 study from the University of Copenhagen shows that 23.5% of the forest cover in Cambodia—more than 2.2 million hectares—was destroyed between 2001 and 2015 (11). **Almost a quarter of the deforested area, including “protected” areas, was used for rubber plantations.** Two thirds of these areas are foreign-owned, mainly by Vietnamese and Chinese companies—which usually also control their processing plants.

The study also reveals a strong **correlation between the deforestation rate and the price of rubber**, and warns that if policies that promote the development of commercial rubber plantations are not stopped, forest area will continue to decrease in the country. Such policies include what is called the “Development Triangle of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam,” which is focused on promoting regional “growth,”—wherein the rubber industry occupies a prominent place.

In 2014, a complaint was filed at the International Criminal Court against the Cambodian government for its crimes against humanity. These crimes were associated with a massive wave of land grabbing that led to the **displacement of 770,000 Cambodians.** In most of these cases, communities and indigenous peoples were violently stripped of their lands and forests to make way for large-scale commercial agricultural projects, in particular for rubber trees (12).

Laos

Since the 1990s, communities in the highlands of northern Laos have been **pushed to leave behind subsistence agriculture to work on rubber plantations**—thus reducing their areas for rice cultivation. In a direct attack on their food sovereignty, the rapid loss of forests has also endangered several varieties of rice (13).

As in Cambodia, virtually all large-scale rubber plantations replaced forests. Until 2007, a land titling program **granted land concessions to companies mainly from Vietnam and China.** Approximately 75% of the investment in rubber in Laos comes from foreign companies. Affected families face food and water scarcity and receive little or no compensation. Indigenous peoples and communities who oppose the plantations face violence, arrests and imprisonment.

Certification to Ensure Expansion?

The growing expansion of rubber plantations has led to a slew of serious environmental and social impacts. This has propelled the creation of certification schemes that claim to want to make rubber production more “sustainable.” But is that possible?

One of the initiatives being strongly promoted is the **Global Platform on Sustainable Natural Rubber** (GPSNR), which claims to bring together the different actors involved to address existing abuses in the rubber production chain. The Platform was launched in March 2019 with members ranging from the **automotive industry** (such as BMW, Ford Motor, General Motors), **tire producers** (Such as Bridgestone Corporation, Goodyear, Michelin), **rubber tree plantation companies** (such as the Socfin Group), as well as **international conservation NGOs** (such as BirdLife International, Conservation International, Mighty Earth, Rainforest Alliance and WWF, among others).

These “negotiating tables” or platforms, however, hide a clear **inequality in terms of political and economic power.** Worse yet, they hide the true objective of bringing together corporate actors who profit from the expansion of rubber and conservation NGOs: to **facilitate the expansion of industrial rubber plantations under seals that hide the devastation that this causes**. This has already been made clear with other certification schemes for large-scale monoculture tree plantations (14).

The fact is that **many of the underlying factors that gave rise to the various “rubber fevers” throughout history in different parts of the Global South still exist**. The growing consumption of cars, trucks and airplanes—particularly those that facilitate the global trade of millions of goods transported every day—is an indicator that the expansion of industrial rubber plantations will continue to threaten forests and communities’ territories.

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(3) FERN, Rubber. Agricultural commodity consumption in the EU, 2018
(4) Fox J., Castella J.C., 2013. Expansion of rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) in Mainland Southeast Asia: What are the prospects for smallholders? Journal of Peasant Studies 40(1), 155-170
(5) Idem and CAB Reviews, Environmental and socio-economic impacts of rubber cultivation in the Mekong region: Challenges for sustainable land use, 2015
(6) Global Witness, What future for rubber production in Myanmar? 2014
(7) Saigoneer, The Harrowing History of Vietnam’s Rubber Plantations, 2019
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(9) Land grabs and labour: Vietnamese workers on rubber plantations in southern Laos, Singapore Journal of Tropical geography, 2018
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(12) International Land Coalition, Unprecedented Case Filed at International Criminal Court Proposes Land Grabbing in Cambodia as a Crime Against Humanity, 2014
(13) Luangmany, D. and Kaneko, S., Expansion of Rubber Tree Plantation in Northern Laos: Economic and Environmental Consequences, 2013
(14) See WRM’s page about certification of industrial plantations