
Mesoamerican Meeting of Communities Against Oil Palm

One of the main causes of deforestation in Mesoamerica is the expansion of oil palm monoculture. An exchange of experiences brought together representatives from indigenous and peasant communities to analyze and discuss the consequences of this monoculture in communities and territories, as well as to coordinate their resistance.

Oil palm is advancing upon Mesoamerica, the territory spanning Southern Mexico to Panama. This agribusiness industry is placing indigenous, peasant and Afro-descendent territories in dispute, leaving a toll of dispossession, violence, contamination, poverty and loss of food sovereignty in communities. Even though community resistance has managed to halt the advance of oil palm in some regions, its expansion continues to threaten the lives of peoples and communities.

In the process of oil palm expansion, which is backed by local and national governments, companies have made a number of promises (1) that never materialize, and which organized communities have loudly denounced (2). In response, companies create marketing strategies to hide their impacts in the territories and to present a green image to consumers of palm oil.

This is how “contracts,” or agreements with small producers, “corporate social responsibility” policies, and the promotion of “green seals” and “certificates”—such as those endorsed by the RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil)—came into being. They are new strategies to cover up the usual impacts.

Meanwhile, climate change is seen as a new opportunity for expansion. The use of industrial palm oil, originally intended for the cosmetics industry and for the production of ultra-processed foods, has also come to be promoted as an agrofuel and as a raw material in energy production; and plantations have come to be promoted as carbon sinks and reforestation projects. All of this is reflected in the increase in the area of territories under palm monoculture; meanwhile the true causes of climate change—such as the use of fossil fuels—are not addressed.

This is the reality for many peoples and communities in Mesoamerica. There are more than 190,000 hectares of oil palm planted in Honduras, distributed throughout the departments of Cortés, Yoro, Atlántida and Colón. In Guatemala, the 171,000 hectares of oil palm are found mostly in the areas of Petén, Ixcán, Escuintla and Huehuetenango. And in Mexico there are more than 90,000 hectares, located mainly in the states of Chiapas, Tabasco and Campeche.

The diversion, contamination and reduction of water sources; the reproduction of animals that put people’s health at risk (such as poisonous snakes); deforestation and the destruction of living spaces; and the militarization of territories with a strong presence of paramilitary groups under the cloak of private security or the presence of drug traffickers—are part of the constant violence and imposition that communities suffer when oil palm is installed in their territories. All of this—particularly in places where organized communities are resisting this invasion—has led to violence and systematic intimidation of people who are defending life, who face everything from criminalization to disappearance to murder.

For this reason, communities and organizations from Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico came together in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico in early October 2021, to share their experiences with the advance of industrial oil palm monoculture and its impacts. The goal was also to develop a diagnostic of the region and outline common strategies to help them combat these monocultures.

>From this meeting, the Mesoamerican Network Against Oil Palm was created. In the following Declaration they summarize part of the complaints and reflections that were shared during the gathering:

Declaration of the Mesoamerican Network Against Oil Palm

“From October 4-7, 2021, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, various organizations, networks, members and representatives of groups from Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Uruguay and Ecuador came together, in order share experiences around oil palm plantations, and to analyze, study and discuss the consequences of this monoculture in our territories.

Oil palm has arrived in our territories under an accelerated, aggressive and predatory extractive model. Palm monoculture causes the disappearance of water sources, diverts rivers, and causes the disappearance of native peoples’ sacred places linked to water. It impacts the worldviews of native peoples. Palm monoculture violates labor rights and leads to slave labor. It destroys the social fabric. It is based on companies’ appropriation of territories through violence, deception, lies, false promises, and the criminalization of social protest, all in complicity with political power.

Palm plantations cause a breakdown in communities’ food sovereignty; they destroy soils and accelerate deforestation; they cause poverty, dependence, droughts, fires, dispossession, displacement and serious health problems among populations; they destroy the landscape and accelerate climate change. Palm plantations are accompanied by violence, militarization and the criminalization of communities who are demanding basic rights. The effects of this model have a direct impact on women, who additionally face physical and sexual violence.

For all of these reasons, the movements and organizations present resolve to halt this Extractive Model, generate local alternatives, and unveil the false discourse that oil palm plantations are sustainable, that they bring development, that they reforest and combat climate change; instead, we raise awareness that palm monocultures are not forests, but rather megaprojects of death that are destroying the planet.

- We denounce the contamination and loss of water sources, in particular the effects on the Tulijá River in Mexico.

- We demand justice for the communities of the Guapinol River, and for the murders perpetrated in the Bajo Aguán in Honduras.

- We denounce the contamination of the La Pasión River by the REPSA [palm] company in Guatemala.

- We reject the persecution of social protest and of communities defending their rights—communities in which people have been murdered, persecuted, criminalized and taken to court by the palm agribusiness model; and we stand in solidarity with defenders of the Barranquilla de San Javier Commune, who have been taken to court by the Energy & Palma/La Fabril company in Ecuador.

Plantations are not forests!

For territories free of oil palm monocultures.”

A cry for life

We cannot fail to highlight that, where industrial oil palm monocultures are installed, women are affected—either as plantation workers or as inhabitants of surrounding communities. One of the Honduran participants at the recent meeting in Chiapas wrote a poem in which she reflects feelings and experiences shared by the women present at the gathering.

“They offered you a false future, an economy that doesn’t exist, they got you excited for a better life, they made you believe that a forest full of life and oxygen was bad, they sold you a tale that only exists in their evil mind. You did not realize this and you gave everything away in exchange for a future that does not exist. They lied to you, they destroyed you little by little.

Time has passed, and today, those of us who grew up in your mistake are aware of what you did, of that future that they sold you, that I didn’t see and which doesn’t exist. I reproach you but do not blame you, that is why I tell you that I, us women, all of us going to fight to destroy this system, just as they did to you. We are going to get back what belongs to us.

The forests that they took away from us will be ours again, we will once again see those crops that fill us with life, we will once again see those women strong and full of courage, giving life to our communities; we will see the beautiful smile of the girls and boys who are slaves to no one, who are free.

Saying NO to oil palm, NO to violence, NO to taking our lives—and they kill us not just with bullets, but also by taking away our lands and territories.

Because this is not afforestation, it is deforestation.

Because this is not work, it is slavery.

This is not life, it is death.

Today we raise our voices, united and empowered, and we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!”

(By Flor Contreras Ulloa – [see the video here](#)) (3)

>From different parts of Mesoamerica and Latin America in general, the resistance is growing, organized communities are connecting, so that their “ENOUGH!” is heard throughout the world, so that it reaches communities in Africa and Asia that are also affected by this monoculture. And also, so that it is heard by those who consume industrial palm oil, so that people understand that this destructive model of industrial plantations will never be sustainable or green.

(1) [12 Replies to 12 Lies about Oil Palm monocultures plantations](#)

(2) [Oil Palm Plantations](#) (information and accounts on impacts and resistance)

(3) [Un grito por la vida](#) (“A cry for life”)

