

November 12, 2018. Open Statement:

RSPO: 14 years of failure to eliminate violence and destruction from the industrial palm oil sector



During its 14 years of existence, RSPO – the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil – has failed to live up to its claim of “transforming” the industrial palm oil production sector into a so-called “sustainable” one. In reality, the RSPO has been used by the palm oil industry to greenwash corporate destruction and human rights abuses, while it continues to expand business, forest destruction and profits.

RSPO presents itself to the public with the slogan “transforming the markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm”. Palm oil has become the cheapest vegetable oil available on the global market, making it a popular choice among the group that dominates RSPO membership, big palm oil buyers. They will do everything to secure a steady flow of cheap palm oil. They also know that the key to the corporate success story of producing “cheap” palm oil is a particular model of industrial production, with ever-increasing efficiency and productivity which in turn is achieved by: (1) planting on a large-scale and in monoculture, frequently through conversion of tropical biodiverse forests; (2) using “high yielding” seedlings that demand large amounts of agrottoxics and abundant water; (3) squeezing cheap labour out of the smallest possible work force, employed in precarious conditions so that company costs are cut to a minimum; (4) making significant up-front money from the tropical timber extracted from concessions, which is then used to finance plantation development or increase corporate profits; (5) grabbing land violently from local communities or by means of other arrangements with governments (including favourable tax regimes) to access land at the lowest possible cost.

Those living on the fertile land that the corporations choose to apply their industrial palm oil production model, pay a very high price. Violence is intrinsic to this model:

– violence and repression when communities resist the corporate take-over of their land because they know that once their land is turned into monoculture oil palm plantations, their livelihoods will be destroyed, their land and forests invaded. In countless cases, deforestation caused by the expansion of this industry, has displaced communities or destroyed community livelihoods where companies violate customary rights and take control of community land;

- sexual violence and harassment against women in and around the plantations which often stays invisible because women find themselves without possibilities to demand that the perpetrators be prosecuted;
- child labour and precarious working conditions that go hand-in-hand with violation of workers' rights; working conditions can even be so bad as to amount to contemporary forms of slavery. This exploitative model of work grants companies more economic profits while allowing palm oil to remain a cheap product. That is why, neither them or their shareholders do anything to stop it
- exposure of workers, entire communities and forests, rivers, water springs, agricultural land and soils to the excessive application of agrotoxics;
- depriving communities surrounded by industrial oil palm plantations of their food sovereignty when industrial oil palm plantations occupy land that communities need to grow food crops.

RSPO's proclaimed vision of transforming the industrial oil palm sector is doomed to fail because the Roundtable's certification principles promote this structural violent and destructive model. The RSPO also fails to address the industry's reliance on exclusive control of large and contingent areas of fertile land, as well as the industry's growth paradigm which demands a continued expansion of corporate control over community land and violent land grabs. None of RPSO's eight certification principles suggests transforming this industry reliance on exclusive control over vast areas of land or the growth paradigm inherent to the model.

Industrial use of vegetable oils has doubled in the past 15 years, with palm oil being the cheapest. This massive increase of palm oil use in part explains the current expansion of industrial oil palm plantations, especially in Africa and Latin America, from the year 2000 onward, in addition to the existing vast plantations areas in Malaysia and Indonesia that also continue expanding.

On the ground, countless examples show that industrial oil palm plantations continue to be synonymous to violence and destruction for communities and forests. Communities' experiences in the new industrial oil palm plantation frontiers, such as Gabon, Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Peru, Honduras, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, are similar to past and ongoing community experiences in Indonesia and Malaysia.

RSPO creates a smokescreen that makes this violence invisible for consumers and financiers. Governments often fail to take regulatory action to stop the expansion of plantations and increasing demand of palm oil; they rely on RSPO to deliver an apparently sustainable flow of palm oil. For example, in its public propaganda, RSPO claims it supports more than 100,000 small holders. But the profit from palm oil production is still disproportionately appropriated by the oil palm companies: in 2016, 88% of all certified palm oil came from corporate plantations and 99,6% of the production is corporate-controlled.

RSPO also claims that the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is key among its own Principles and Criteria. The right to FPIC implies, among others, that if a community denies the establishment of this monoculture in its territory, operations cannot be carried out. Reality shows us, however, that despite this, many projects go ahead. Concessions are often guaranteed long before the company reaches out to the affected communities. Under these circumstances, to say that FPIC is central to RSPO is bluntly false and disrespectful.

RSPO also argues that where conflicts with the plantation companies arise, communities can always use its complaint mechanism. However, the mechanism is complex and it rarely solves the problems that communities face and want to resolve. This becomes particularly apparent in relation to land legacy conflicts where the mechanism is biased against communities. It allows companies to continue exploiting community land until courts have come to a decision. This approach encourages companies to sit out such conflicts and count on court proceedings dragging on, often over decades.

Another argument used by RSPO is that industrial oil palm plantations have lifted millions of people out of poverty. That claim is certainly questionable, even more so considering that there is also an important number of people who have been displaced over the past decades to make space for plantations. Indigenous communities have in fact lost their fertile land, forests and rivers to oil palm plantations, adversely affecting their food, culture and local economies.

The RSPO promise of “transformation” has turned into a powerful greenwashing tool for corporations in the palm oil industry. RSPO grants this industry, which remains responsible for violent land grabbing, environmental destruction, pollution through excessive use of agrotoxics and destruction of peasant and indigenous livelihoods, a “sustainable” image. What’s more, RSPO membership seems to suffice for investors and companies to be able to claim that they are “responsible” actors. This greenwash is particularly stunning, since being a member does not guarantee much change on the ground. Only recently, a company became RSPO member after it was found to deforest over 27.000 hectares of rainforest in Papua, Indonesia.

Certification is structurally dependent on the very same policies and regulation that have given rise to the host of environmental devastation and community land rights violations associated with oil palm plantations. These systemic governance issues are part of the destructive economic model, and embedded in state power. For this reason, voluntary certification schemes cannot provide adequate protection for forests, community rights, food sovereignty and guarantee sustainability. Governments and financiers need to take responsibility to stop the destructive palm oil expansion that violates the rights of local communities and Indigenous Peoples.

As immediate steps, governments need to:

- put in place a moratorium on palm oil plantations expansion and use that as a breathing space to fix the policy frameworks;
- drastically reduce demand for palm oil: stop using food for fuel;
- strengthen and respect the rights of local communities and Indigenous Peoples to amongst others, self-determination and territorial control;
- promote agro-ecology and community control of their forests, which strengthens local incomes, livelihoods and food sovereignty, instead of advancing industrial agro-businesses

Signatures:

Aalamaram-NGO

Acción Ecológica, Ecuador

ActionAid, France

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Asociación Conservacionista YISKI, Costa Rica
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Association CongoActif, Paris
Association Les Gens du Partage, Carrières-sous-Poissy
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CADDE
CAE, Ecuador
Campaign to STOP GE Trees
CAP, Center for Advocacy Practices
Centar za životnu sredinu/ Friends of the Earth Bosnia and Herzegovina
CESTA - FOE El Salvador
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Climate Change Kenya
Coalición de Tendencia Clasista. (CTC-VZLA)
Colectivo de Investigación y Acompañamiento Comunitario
Collectif pour la défense des terres malgaches - TANY, Madagascar
Community Forest Watch, Nigeria
Consumers Association of Penang
Corporate Europe Observatory
Cuttington University
Down to Earth Consult
El Campello
Environmental Resources Management and Social Issue Centre (ERMSIC), Cameroon
Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria
FASE ES , Brazil
Fédération romande des consommateurs
FENEV, (Femmes Environnement nature Entrepreneuriat Vert).
Focus on the Global South
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