
[Philippines: Indigenous organizations challenge oil palm companies in Palawan](#)

Few places in Southeast Asia can match the distinction of Palawan, in the Philippines. This is home to seven protected areas, a declared “Game Refuge and Bird Sanctuary” since 1967 and a “Mangrove Reserve” since 1981. UNESCO declared the whole Province a ‘Man and Biosphere Reserve’ in 1990.

Today, in addition to the adverse impact of nickel mining, the local indigenous peoples and lowland farmers are being confronted with the threats posed by oil palm development. The bulk of oil palm operations are being carried out by the Palawan Palm & Vegetable Oil Mills Inc. (PPVOMI) and its sister company Agumil Philippines Inc. As of now, about 15,000 hectares of land are being converted into oil palm plantations. Agumil Philippines Inc. is 75% Filipino and 25% Malaysian-owned. Its sister company, PPVOMI is 60% Singaporean and 40% Filipino-owned. The companies began official operation in January 2006.

According to the Provincial government, oil palm monocultures will eradicate poverty and reduce economic dependence from imported edible oils. But, from the perspective of the local indigenous peoples, oil palm expansion is a tragedy since it destroys their ancestral lands and forest products, thus impoverishing them to an unprecedented level.

Recently, indigenous Palawans have decided to take this matter in their own hands by building solidarity linkages with oil palm affected communities in Mindanao. An important meeting between Higaonon and Palawan oil palm affected communities took place in Malaybaly (Province of Bukidnon, Mindanao) on 21/22 June 2013. This was facilitated by the national network ALDAW (Ancestral Land/Domain Watch) and the Father Vincent Cullen Tulugan Learning and Development Centre (FVCTLDC). The meeting resulted in a Joint Palawan/Mindanao Resolution against oil palm development.

The so called “Malabalay Resolution” was supported by more than 100,000 signatures collected through the help of German-based NGO Rainforest Rescue and was presented to government authorities. As a result an inter-agency meeting was held on 7 August in Palawan, at the office of the Governor. The meeting was attended by all concerned government agencies at the provincial level, as well by NGOs and Indigenous Peoples/farmers delegations.

Towards the end of the meeting, when one of the moderators openly asked whether participants were in favor of a moratorium on oil palm expansion, the majority said YES. The exception to this majority were of course the Oil Palm companies’ representatives and the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development which, in the past, has taken the side of large enterprises, including mining corporations.

A subsequent oil palm inter-agency meeting took place in Palawan on 28 August at the Governor’s

office with participation of representatives of Indigenous Peoples' organizations – including ALDAW and NATRIPAL/ United Tribes of Palawan and also of local NGOs.

ALDAW and NATRIPAL presented their findings showing that oil palm development in Palawan has taken place with no monitoring on the part of concerned authorities. As a result, in the absence of existing maps, it is impossible for the government to systematically determine the ownership, elevation, land classification, etc. of the area in which oil palms are being planted.

ALDAW presentation also pointed out that a Multi-stakeholder Monitoring Team (MMT) should have been established for the Palawan oil palm plantations. But until now, after more than 7 years of operation, the indigenous organizations and NGOs have no clue on the composition of the MMT and of the results (if any) of the inspections it has carried out in each oil palm impacted municipality. As well, no information has ever been provided to members of civil society about the results (if any) of the MMT monitoring activities on the impact on air and water of the palm oil processing plant and on the management and disposal of industrial/plantations' waste by PPVOMI-Agumil.

With specific reference to the impact of oil palm development on biodiversity ALDAW also pointed out that Palawan has one of the last remaining contiguous areas of forest in the Philippines. Oil palm plantations are breaking the contiguity between different and interrelated ecosystems, such as hilly forest, lowland forest, shrub and grassland, wetlands, etc. thus having an impact on animal species that move and thrive in different ecological niches, as well as on the integrity of each specific niche.

Another important point that was brought forwards relates to the procedures which have led to the issuance of Environmental Clearance Certificates (ECCs) by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to Agumil and PPVOMI. ALDAW clarified that Environmental Compliance Certificates (ECCs) are documents proving that a developer has met environmental standards and stipulates the conditions that it must abide by. Instead, ECCs have been issued by DENR despite the fact that the proper procedures were not observed and without any technical report by Agumil and PPVOMI showing that environmental standards would be met. More importantly, ALDAW pointed out that Agumil and PPVOMI had never received from DENR a 'Permit to Cut Trees' and thus they have violated Revised Forestry Code P.D.705 of 1987, and existing environmental legislation.

The Agumil's claim according to which oil palm development is contributing to eradicate poverty was challenged by ALDAW with some hard-facts. The Municipality of Sofronio Española, in fact, has the highest percentage of land (over 45%) covered by oil palm plantations and produces most of the bulk of production for the oil palm mill. And yet, Española is a 4th class municipality. According to the 2008 Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) survey, Española comes bottom in terms of the Human Development Index for Palawan. It is also one of the 100 poorest municipalities in the country. A 2007 Social Watch report cites a poverty rate of 58% for Española in 2006. Sofronio Española has also one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the province (22.98%) according to the provincial nutrition action officer.

During the meeting a clear stand was taken by the Provincial Environmental and Natural Resources Office (PENRO) official against Agumil. PENRO's Mr. Leonard Caluya told Agumil representatives "we will compute the damage caused by your company to the forest and this will be part of the legal complaint against you. You know our policy, and you know your limitations. We (DENR) have never allowed you to cut trees". He reminded the company that there is a national moratorium on cutting trees within residual forest and timberland and that his office (PENRO/DENR) "will continue to perform its mandate with the support of NGOs partners". According to Caluya, it is likely that that Agumil, as a form of punishment, will be asked by DENR to eradicate the oil palms illegally planted on timber land and to substitute them with native tree species.

The good news is that as an outcome of ongoing pressure generated by ALDAW on the provincial government authorities, different agencies are now mobilizing themselves to carry out their own field assessments on the impact of oil palm development.

Towards the end of the meeting, powerful and uncompromising statements were made by both indigenous and NGOs representatives. Datu Sangkula from the Non-Timber Forest Exchange Programme confronted the Agumil and warned them that “the long hand of the law will reach them either administratively or criminally” and he also reminded them “violations of the IPRA law (Indigenous Peoples Right Act) have criminal liability and the company will be challenged on this”.

At the end of the meeting both NGOs and IPs representatives confirmed their call for a moratorium on oil palm expansion, at least until reliable scientific data becomes available on the real benefits gained from oil palm development in comparison to its unintended costs such as increased carbon dioxide (from cleared plantation areas), loss of traditional access to land and resources, reduced land productivity, loss of traditional livelihood, etc.

ALDAW also pointed out very loudly that a serious review of existing and proposed oil palm plantations is urgently needed, in order to assess their present ecological status and the overlapping between them and those areas that are still conserved and managed by indigenous people as well with the ECAN (Environmental Critical Area Network) land categories within the SEP law. Unless such review is carried out, there is a high risk that the environmental and ecological sustainability of the Province, its agricultural productivity, and people’s food security, will be severely compromised.

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