
RSPO: fake promises promoting further oil palm plantations expansion

Industrial oil palm plantations have been expanding in many countries in the global South, increasingly in Africa and Latin America, invading territories of rural populations, indigenous peoples and traditional communities in order to produce palm oil for export or agrofuel for foreign markets.

While the main benefits accrue to oil palm processing mills, private and state banks and investment funds, and national and transnational palm oil corporations, for hundreds of thousands of people the expansion or large scale oil palm plantations imply the destruction of their local economies as well as the natural conditions these economies depend on.

When communities fight back, trying to kick out companies from their territories, they often face police repression, they witness state institutions siding with the companies and undermining community demands and they often suffer human rights violations.

Oil palm corporations have been aware of the fact that their activities cause negative impacts. The exposure and reporting on these impacts by social movements, NGOs and the press has tainted their image, sometimes even put at risk their business expansion plans in certain regions and countries. No surprise then to see corporations 'fighting back' as well, their struggle being against the bad publicity that could negatively affect their sales and profits. The 'sustainable development' concept from the end of the 1980s opened a door for a continuation of the logic of increased production and profits, but with the appearance of more social and environmental 'corporate responsibility'. Inspired by this sustainability discourse, plantation companies effectively started to engage with voluntary certification schemes, one of the new 'sustainability' tools. This tool enabled them to present destructive activities as 'sustainable', as a 'green' innovation of their same production processes and products for consumer markets that, over the course of the past two decades, have come to request more from corporations than just 'business-as-usual'.

RSPO, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, was announced in 2004 as a certification scheme for industrial oil palm plantations. For the RSPO 'sustainability' means that plantations should be "economically viable", "environmentally appropriate" and "socially beneficial".

RSPO, which has certified 1.45 million hectares and is increasing its visibility for the consuming public, has been strongly criticized by many communities, social movements and NGOs from the very beginning. The main criticism has been the false promise of 'sustainability' that this certification scheme provides for products from industrial oil palm plantations. By their very nature of being large scale and being grown as monoculture, requiring significant use of water, agrottoxins, chemical fertilizers and fossil energy, these operations simply cannot transform into a land use that would justify the label 'sustainable'. They occupy huge areas where many people lived before or could be living with more dignity than in overpopulated urbanized areas. Criticism also points out that excessive consumption of products based on palm oil by a minority of the world's population remains largely unchallenged with certification. Yet it is this excessive consumption and the transnational company's need to keep expanding to increase corporate profits that are pushing the continuous

expansion of industrial oil palm plantations.

RSPO aims to “improve” company activities, to make them more “socially and environmentally responsible”, maybe to increase benefit leaking to communities but not to halt plantation expansion or to tackle excessive consumption. All in all, RSPO grants a “green label” to industrial oil palm plantations and strengthens its image as a “sustainable” activity and thus facilitating further expansion while weakening communities’ defence of their livelihoods and lands.

This bulletin is focused on the fake promises of the RSPO certification scheme, and with oil palm expanding fast in the global South, we need to keep on showing what is hidden behind it.