
Industrial oil palm plantations: A model that violates forest-dependent peoples and their territories

To mark the International Day of the Struggle against Monoculture Tree Plantations on September 21, WRM, together with organizations and networks from around the world, this year issued a declaration condemning the expansion of the industrial oil palm plantation model. The expansion of this model is leading to a growing number of economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts. Once again, aspiring to break the circle of silence around the violations faced by the communities whose territories are invaded and surrounded by these monocultures, we shout loud and clear: Plantations are not forests!

Industrial oil palm plantations have been the type of monoculture that has been expanding fastest in the last few decades. In the period 1990-2010 these plantations expanded globally about threefold, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. And over the past 15 years, a series of free trade agreements favored the latest expansion wave of industrial oil palm plantations, not only in Indonesia and Malaysia but also in countries in Africa and Latin America. Another trend that pushes expansion comes especially from Europe with the increasing demand for agrofuels.

Palm oil companies are making (non-binding) so-called "zero-deforestation" pledges as part of their "corporate responsibility" policies. However, reports from the ground already show that even *after* companies have made these pledges, the evidence about environmental and social violations of these same companies continues. But most disturbing is the fact that the objective of these commitments is not to halt industrial oil palm expansion, but is instead an attempt to "green" the sector. By retaining a logic of unlimited expansion, these "commitments" are actually a threat to more communities losing their land and livelihoods.

Moreover, the growing interest of corporations in forests, and especially trees, is explained because these have become even more important under "green capitalism". Forests' capacity to store carbon and biodiversity is used as a source for generating carbon and biodiversity credits, which can be then sold to polluting countries and companies to either "compensate" for the destruction generated elsewhere or to make profits on financial markets.

REDD+ and REDD+-like policies, which promote financing forest conservation through the sale of carbon and biodiversity credits, can channel this money to oil palm companies for conservation of forest areas with a so-called "high carbon value" that oil palm companies have been identifying on their land concessions. This way, oil palm companies can "green" their activities. But conserving areas with "high carbon value" does not change the harmful impacts of a sector that requires significant use of water, agrotoxins, chemical fertilizers and fossil energy, and that occupies vast territories which numerous communities used to live in or depend upon for their livelihoods. Rather than presenting any real solution to climate change, the oil palm industry contributes to climate destruction. And those who will be most affected by such policies are the forest dependent peoples and peasant communities, who will see their access to their lands and forests increasingly restricted by oil palm plantations expansion. For them, not only a "high carbon value" forest is important, but all

of the areas that they need to maintain their livelihoods and cultures.

In addition, governments of palm oil producing countries, together with the industry's transnational companies have been active in appealing for the re-categorization of oil palm plantations as 'forests' instead of agricultural crops! This absurdity is made possible because according to the prevailing FAO definition, a forest is basically any area with tree cover. The aim of the re-categorization is to guarantee access to the "opportunity" represented by a potential REDD+ agreement under the UN climate negotiations in Paris by the end of this year. With such an agreement, palm oil companies would be able to sell carbon credits in the future, using the deceitful argument of promoting "zero net deforestation" or "reforestation".

The emphasis on deforestation tends to take attention away from the wider range of impacts caused by industrial oil palm plantations, such as:

- **Destruction of local livelihoods and displacement.** The regions where oil palm plantations are being promoted are home for peasants and indigenous peoples and are areas of tropical forests that they depend on for economic, social, spiritual and cultural reasons. Industrial oil palm plantations therefore cause the loss of land and thus the livelihoods of communities, especially for women, because of their specific relation with the forest, resulting in displacement of these communities.
- **Destructive logging and human rights violations.** In many cases, these plantations are also a result of devastating logging in the past that paved the way for oil palm plantations coming in. Moreover, land clearing through burning for developing oil palm plantations in Indonesia has been continuing for more than a decade, resulting in an almost annual haze across Southeast Asia. This practice not only harms the environment, but also the health of millions of citizens.
- **Privileged land access for corporations, not communities.** Introducing the model of industrial oil palm cultivation through land concessions guarantees privileged access to agricultural lands for long periods to corporations, increasing their power and influence. Thus, the struggles of communities in defence of their collective rights over these territories, and for a diversified, agro-ecological agriculture tend to become increasingly harder.
- **Miserable working conditions.** Jobs turn out to be few and labor conditions are often akin to slavery, and child labor as well as drug abuse among workers and prostitution have been documented in numerous instances. Workers are also especially affected by the obligation to apply agrotoxins in monoculture plantations, including products forbidden in many countries. Many become ill for the rest of their lives, without being able to count on any compensation.
- **Increasing criminalization of social movements and local opposition.** A very concerning aspect is also that communities and supporting organizations as well as workers in oil palm

plantations have to deal worldwide with an increasing trend of human rights violations including criminalization. Also in other countries people were killed, arrested and/or persecuted, just because of their struggle to defend the collective rights of communities over their territories and their opposition against the invasion of their territories by industrial oil palm companies. Meanwhile, companies can count on all sorts of protection from security forces of the state.

Since 2006, September 21st has been established as the International Day of Struggle against Tree Monocultures, aiming to increase the visibility of the growing number of peoples and communities, often the most marginalized ones, including the women and youth, who are struggling in different places and countries against industrial oil palm and other monocultures of eucalyptus, pine, acacia and rubber plantations. Large-scale industrial tree monocultures are not acceptable, neither for local communities nor for a world facing a severe crisis with manifold symptoms, including climate change, economic and environmental deterioration and increasing militarization and human rights violations.

For these reasons, this bulletin focuses on denouncing oil palm plantations' expansion and some of its consequences for forest dependent peoples and their territories. The West Papua article brings attention to a remote region where the expansion of these plantations is benefiting large business conglomerates at the expense of indigenous and traditional populations. Furthermore, the Liberian government's push to facilitate logging concessions for large-scale oil palm cultivation is another important warning, especially in a context plagued by illegal logging and corruption. From Brazil, a report from the field reveals how the mining company VALE is establishing oil palm plantations in the Amazon state of Pará, as a way to meet the agrofuel industry's demand for trains to carry its minerals, but above all to strengthen an alleged "green" image. This bulletin also includes an article on the role of banks and investors who speculate on these plantations, helping to strengthen and expand oil palm corporations and generating huge profits for their portfolios. Finally, the bulletin also includes an article that reminds us that tens of millions of people in Africa not only depend on this tree for their livelihoods and cultures, but also preserve and value it as a source of life. Happy reading!

[See the International Declaration for the 21 September here](#)