
Indonesia: Harsh conditions for women workers in oil palm plantations

Indonesia is the world's second largest palm oil producer; together with Malaysia they account for about 80 percent of global palm-oil production. With actually around 6 million hectares of land planted with oil palm, Indonesia plans a significant expansion which is set to cover up to 20 million hectares by 2020.

Oil palm expansion has implied and implies the occupation of customary lands by companies to first “clear the land” (meaning deforestation) and then develop an oil palm plantation. Land occupation means in turn the displacement of local communities from their land thus triggering off several conflicts –about 400 in the whole of the country according to Indonesian NGO Sawit Watch.

For rural communities, land is the base of their livelihoods. According to WorldWatch Institute, a “2006 study of the area found that small farming systems provided livelihoods for 260 times as many people per hectare of land as oil palm plantations did” (1).

However, oil palm companies arrive protected by legal concessions and with false promises of jobs for local communities. Rural people who have been deprived of their land and livelihood are often forced to migrate, to end up in urban slums or to hire their labour force in the very plantations that displaced them. Once there, they have to face poverty, unsafe working conditions, frequent violation of their rights, insufficient pay and intimidation by employers.

Oxfam International has denounced that “In Indonesia, although the right to form a union is recognised by law, the International Trade Union Confederation notes that in practice trade-union rights are seriously weakened by intimidation and lengthy mediation processes which force unions to resort to wildcat strikes. In this context Musim Mas, an Indonesian palm-oil company, last year [2006] fired over 700 union members in retaliation for a strike, forcibly evicting the workers and 1,000 family members from their homes, and expelling their children from school.” (2) (and see also WRM Bulletin N° 109).

Work in oil palm plantations is hard for both men and women, though different. It is quite frequent that women help their husbands in the plantations meet demanding production quotas, usually doing unpaid work. Apart from that, women have to take care of the children, elaborate the food and collect firewood and water, which now are rather far due to destruction of the forest by the oil palm plantations. In case women work on a hired basis, they often receive lower wages than men. Discrimination is set on the grounds that their work is easier than that of men.

According to an article by Rainforest Action Network, “Women are often assigned tasks that seem less onerous, but which are actually more dangerous and physically demanding than that of their male counterparts. In Indonesia, women are often designated to spray pesticides because it is less physically taxing than other plantation work. Unfortunately, they are rarely given proper protective gear like gloves and masks. When they return home, they have to prepare food for their families, often with pesticide residue still on their skin and clothes.” (3)

Paraquat and Glyphosate (Roundup) are the most common herbicides used in oil palm plantations. In addition to concerns about the effects on health from direct exposure to the toxics, the publication Down To Earth (DTE) revealed that herbicides can be washed by heavy rainfall "into streams and rivers which provide the only source of water for all household needs - including drinking - for villages around the plantations. Furthermore, the herbicides do not bind to sandy soils" (4)

DTE puts flesh and bones to statistics bringing the case of Mardiana, better known as Etek, who works for PT Agro Masang Perkasa in Agam district, West Sumatra. "She has been working there since 1994 and will continue to do so as there are no other jobs she could do to sustain herself and her family" explains a brief report based on an interview with Etek on June 2008 in Bogor. (5)

She cannot see out of her right eye since weedkiller accidentally got into it three years ago. "Before, whenever anything got in my eye, I rubbed it. This is what it's like now - like the eye of a salted fish," she says.

Etek works on the plantation, mainly spraying herbicides between the rows of oil palms. There are only three groups of sprayers. Each group has one person in charge and consists of nine or ten people. In one day, each person must cover nine rows or around two hectares.

For every two litres of Roundup mixed with 16 litres of water, the workers can cover two hectares of plantation. Usually they work in pairs and each earn Rp30,000 (US\$ 3.25) for the two hectares. At harvest time, Etek also gets Rp400 (around 4 cents) per bunch of palm fruits, the same amount whether the bunch is big or small. As a sprayer, she also gets Rp8,000 (US\$ 0.86) to buy milk. Initially the company provides safety mask and spray equipment, but it does not provide replacements when these wear out or break. The cost of a new sprayer, or what the workers call a kep, is Rp200,000 (US\$ 22) each, and can be paid for by installments over four months.

Although they don't get enough training about the dangers of toxic chemicals, Etek and her friends know not to speak while spraying, until they get to the water tank, where they refill their sprayers. They know that there's the possibility of toxic chemicals entering the body through the mouth.

Whether the final product from this –and other- oil palm plantation is biodiesel, cosmetics or palm oil, its content label should include the percentage of health lost by Etek and all the other plantation workers. For social accountability, at least.

Sources:

- (1) <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5821>
- (2) <http://www.oxfam.org.nz/imgs/pdf/biofuels%20briefing%20note.pdf>
- (3) http://ran.org/campaigns/rainforest_agribusiness/resources/fact_sheets/hostile_harvest_us_agribusinesses_and_labor_rights_abuses/
- (4) <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/>
- (5) <http://dte.gn.apc.org/78.pdf>