
Cameroon: State mechanisms for the promotion of oil palm plantations

One of the main characteristics of Cameroon's economic policies since independence is their institutional promotion of large-scale industrial plantations. Between 1971 and 1981, the state allocated to them no less than 60% of the public funds reserved for agricultural development. The most important feature of these large-scale plantations was – and still is – their domination by only a few agro-industrial firms, highly protected, oligopolistic, and dependant on capital-intensive technologies. The establishment and the expansion of these plantations involved big investments (loans) and created a strong dependency on foreign capital as well as on foreign technologies and management.

The recent most important initiative promoting oil palm plantations is the 2001 “oil palm project” of the Ministry of Agriculture. Considered as a “national priority”, this project was launched within the framework of a “volontarist modernisation of the agriculture”. It aims at promoting the development of the agro-industrial sector as well as the “village plantation” sector – which is mainly a way of subcontracting in favour of the agro-industries and which embodies the “new era” of oil palm extension in the country. The objective is to increase the plantation area by at least 5000 ha per year in order to produce 250,000 tons of palm oil by 2010.

However, a few other initiatives were already in place during the 90s: The state promoted the development of so-called village plantations through three main projects. The “Pépipalm” project – financed by the European Union and coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture – aims at technically supervising and financially supporting a network of private nurseries of selected oil palm seedlings. The project implemented a system of monitoring and regular controls. Globally, these nurseries sold to small planters about 45,000 plants in 2000, 73,000 in 2001 and about 130,000 in 2002. Another project is the “South West Development Authority” (SOWEDA) which promotes different actions in rural technical education and in the supervision of village plantations. Also, the “Project of Rural Development Centres” (PPDR), created in 1993, focused its attention on the promotion of contractual village plantations.

At the international level, the main programme promoting oil palm plantations is a result of the initiative “heavily indebted poor countries” – launched in 1996 by the G7 and managed by international financial institutions. In order to be eligible for this category, a given country has to meet several strict conditions and notably has to produce a “document on poverty alleviation strategy” which must show how resources obtained through debt alleviation will be used. In Cameroon, this document includes a specific section devoted to the oil palm sector. Its goal is to increase the oil palm production and productivity in order to cover national needs (in deficit) and to improve international competitiveness. The development strategy is based on: (1) the development of the agro-industrial sector (through privatisation, increase in production, and implementation of new contractual relations with village planters); (2) the development of the village sector (use of improved seedlings, technical education, increase in productivity); and (3) the implementation of an improved research framework, mainly through the state-owned Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (IRAD) which is particularly active in the production and selection of oil palm seeds. The World Bank and the FAO are key actors in the promotion of this programme, while France

provides with financial and technical support, notably through the CIRAD (Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement). The funding of the programme has already reached about 6 million euros and at least 8,000 ha of selected oil palms had already been planted in 2004.

This brief review of the main programmes promoting oil palm plantations in Cameroon shows that the role of the state – as well as the role of international actors – were and continue to be important, even during the age of so-called non-interventionist neo-liberalism.

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