
Papua New Guinea: Life can be hard for women in oil palm plantations

Large scale oil palm plantations have proved to be a very bad development for local people in PNG, and especially women for whom they have meant dramatic changes in their lives, work, safety and health (see WRM Bulletin N° 120).

The promised “development” –namely water supply, electricity, “improved” housing- offered to the communities in exchange for their land never come true. And the income results meager. According to chronicles from campaigner Andrea Babon, an oil palm grower said last year that they were initially promised around 200 Australian dollars (AU\$) per ton of oil palm fruit they harvested. However, the international price of oil palm dropped and they just received AU\$50 per ton.

Babon explained that “Oil palm fruit is harvested by the growers and collected by the oil palm company every fortnight.” It may take an entire family (including children as young as five) two days working from sunrise to sunset to harvest 1.7 tonnes of fruit, for which the payment was approximately AU\$85 less costs deducted by the oil palm company for materials like fertiliser and loan repayments that can eat up as much as 70% of the payment. That’s a lot of hard and heavy work for as little as \$25.50 a fortnight.”

More problems add to the scanty payment, especially for women when it comes to the income distribution within the family. Women only get a tiny amount of the money earned by their husbands even though they have contributed to the production of palm fruits. They usually have less control of the money than men because oil palm companies deal with men as they get the highest paying jobs for chopping the large bunches of fruits from the trees.

Also, this loss of the social participation of women has meant a dramatic change in societies which used to be matriarchal. A report from the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) quotes a New Ireland landowner woman saying: “Our society is a matriarchal society [where a woman is the head of a family or tribe]. But consultation with women is not happening. Men are making all the decisions, but the land is ours. Land in other parts of the world is very expensive. We are like cows. They take milk from us and then they go. It is time we made a stand.”

There are also areas with matrilineal system, which in PNG means that the land is handed down from mother to daughter instead of from father to son. Even when women are the rightful landowners, as long as oil palm companies only talk to men it’s them who sign away the women’s land for rent without the latter’s consent.

A report of ACF revealed that “in Mosa Local Level Government area (LLG) in West New Britain Province, women experience the most significant aspect of poverty when they say that they feel ‘boxed in’ by resettling in an oil palm block and now have nowhere to go but to keep on picking the fruit. They are unable to even afford the cost of travel to go home.” Here a monthly income from a 4 hectare oil palm block is around PGK1,800. With two to three generations of household family members living off this income, it is not enough to provide for all their basic needs. With promises of development, people were lured to the area resulting in significant over-crowding of the blocks. Some

families can not even afford basic items such as soap and medicines and are cash-strapped to pay for school fees and uniforms.”

When traditional farmlands are converted to oil palm plantations women's access to garden land is sometimes restricted. This implies that women are deprived of a source of food for their families. With less land for gardens and subsistence farming what follows is that families have to rely on store food, for which more money is needed.

Restriction to garden also deprives women of the income they can earn from selling garden food at local markets, which they usually control, not only restricting their freedom but also influencing the household income, since it is recognized that women tend more to spend their money in the family than men.

Based on that notion the Oil Palm Industry Corporation (OPIC) introduced the Mama Lus Frut Scheme (MLFS) at Hoskins in WNB in 1997. It's a system which reduces women to pick up the leftovers. According to ACF's report, the scheme “was originally developed because too much fruit was being left on the ground and wasted. Under the scheme, women were given their own harvest nets and payment system (called a ‘mama card’). They were asked to pick up the loose fruit to sell to the company. This scheme has been promoted by supporters of oil palm, including the Australian aid agency (AusAID) as a good step to help women in PNG.

“Men were convinced to accept the MLFS because OPIC told the men that if the women earned an income, the whole family would benefit. At the beginning, this seemed like a good idea. However, this might also have encouraged some men to give all the responsibility for the welfare of the family to women, so that they could spend their own pay cheques only on themselves.”

Ignored, restricted, with burdensome work, tiny income and even threatened by domestic violence from men subject to tough work and loss of traditional livelihood and values, life can be hard for women in oil palm plantations.

Article based on: “The Impact of Oil Palm on Women and Families”, Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), sent by Lee Tan, Asia-Pacific Program Coordinator, Australian Conservation Foundation, Email: L.Tan@acfonline.org.au, <http://www.acfonline.org.au/>; “Papua New Guinea Case Study - Asian Development Bank Technical Assistance Loan to Papua New Guinea for Nucleus-Agro Enterprises”, Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights (CELCOR/FoE PNG) and Friends of the Earth Australia (FoE Australia), Written by Lee Tan, sent by the author; “Anatomy of a Campaign”, by Andrea Babon, http://www.acfonline.org.au/uploads/res_Habitat_AP_3.pdf