Guatemala and Colombia: Women facing oil palm plantations

Contamination of water sources, deplorable working conditions, and sexual blackmail in exchange for work, are some of the kinds of violence against women living in and around oil palm plantations in Guatemala and Colombia.

Oil palm plantations destroy not only the biodiversity of tropical forests, but also peoples and villages who have lived in traditional economies until the arrival of this agribusiness. In many cases, it is women who most vigorously defend their territories.

Guatemala: Exploitative work in exchange for sex

Just 15 years ago, the Petén region in northern Guatemala was rainforest. Then came the HAME Group, owned by landowner Hugo Alberto Molina; and Petén became the spearhead of the expansion of oil palm plantations in this Mayan country. The company became infamous when, in 2015, it became known that it was directly responsible for the ecocide of the La Pasión River in Sayaxhcé municipality. Some 150 kilometers of the La Pasión River were contaminated by malathion (a pesticide used to kill flies in the palm fruits), leading to massive fish kills. Despite proven irregularities, the company continues to operate without any kind of monitoring.

In the community of San Juan de Acul, **most people bath with, cook with, and even drink this water, even though they know it is contaminated.** There is no need for studies; their bodies let them know through fever, vomiting, itching and skin and stomach diseases. But there is no other water source, and t**he State even denied the community the tanks they requested to collect rainwater.** And rains are increasingly scarce, also due to climate change, which the monoculture plantation model accelerates.

In addition to ruining the water, the river ecological disaster eliminated the community's main source of food: fish. “Before, we would get 50 pounds of fish in two days [about 22.5 kilos]; today, if we're lucky we get ten or fifteen, and sometimes not even that,” tells one fisherwoman; and she says: **“We cannot live without water; there is nothing without water.”**

The only alternative to hunger is that which caused it: palm. Stripped of their lands and of the possibility of fishing, residents of San Juan de Acul are forced to accept conditions on the plantations that recall times of slavery. Says one peasant woman from San Juan de Acul: “They work long hours for little money, without fixed schedules, and they have to buy the equipment themselves. But there is nowhere else to work. If there were another source of income available, they wouldn't take advantage of our need, but we have to eat.” They work intense, nine- or ten-hour work days at about 8 US dollars per day, which is below the rural minimum wage.

Women face the worst of it. They work on the plantations but in the worst-paid jobs. Often, **plantation foremen blackmail them, offering them work in exchange for sex; if they do not agree to sleep with them, the foremen do not employ them.** This is what women from several communities in Petén share first-hand, as well as women from the South Coast, where sugarcane

monoculture is dispossessing indigenous and peasant communities. Additionally, these same foremen often treat women with greater contempt than they treat their male counterparts. As one female worker summarizes, **“they constantly insult and threaten us.”**

And after oil palm?

“There are very few remaining forests, not enough to purify the air. During the last downpour, the water was black; I had to throw out half a bucket,” says a peasant woman from Sayaxché. And the rains are scarce. And the land is dying: **“They are killing the land.** That root is like a bundle that doesn't let anything grow above it.” That is why they are afraid of what will happen when the plantations leave: **“After 25 years of palm, these lands are not going to be worth anything.”**

In fact, a study carried out in the Polochic Valley by researcher Sara Mingorria, from ICTA (Autonomous University of Barcelona), shows that—due to the large amount of nutrients required—**palm monoculture eliminates the organic layer of the soil and leads to infertility.** It takes 25 years for the area in which oil palm was planted to become fertile again, because “the soil is so weakened that, no matter how much it is fertilized, components are lost and disappear,” says Mingorria. The researcher adds that these plantations are often called “green deserts” because **“this kind of tree does not allow other vegetation to grow around it”** (1).

When the life cycle of palm ends, companies look for other territories where their investments will be profitable, leaving behind desertified lands, contaminated rivers and dispossessed villages—all of this for the sake of profit of a commodity that is trading up in financial markets (2). That is, if it is not stopped by indigenous and peasant communities' dogged resistance, and especially women's resistance. “**Women are more reluctant to sell the land, and they are the main defenders of the territory: where women are at the forefront of resistance to palm, those resistance movements are more successful”,** summarizes a member of a community organization, who has chosen to remain anonymous, like most of the interviewees for this report. Because in countries like Guatemala and Colombia, women who defend their territories and ways of life run the risk of paying with their own lives.

Colombia: The weight of water on women's heads

In the rural areas of Maríalabaja—just 60 kilometers from the touristy city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia—Afro-descendant, indigenous and peasant communities remember the recent history of paramilitary terror that, from 1998 to 2002, displaced a third of the municipality's 50,000 inhabitants. In Montes de María, paramilitaries perpetrated massacres such as the El Salado Massacre, where, in February 2000, at least 60 people were killed. Terrorized, people fled in masses, leaving their lands and homes behind; **when they returned, that whole territory—in which until then, rice monoculture and traditional peasant agriculture had coexisted—had been planted with oil palm.** And thus began the struggle for survival of Afro-descendant communities in Maríalabaja.

“This was a land of abundance. Every day truckloads of yams, cassava, beans and fruits would leave for Cartagena, even for Medellín. Now there is nothing left, because the land was planted with palm, and there are pests, and the climate has changed and it doesn't rain anymore when it should rain,” laments Catalina (fictitious name). For her and for many others in her community, palm brought disaster upon Maríalabaja. It ended the abundance of food, and most of all, it contaminated the water from the dam—which is the only water that the village has access to: “**The water is contaminated by the agrochemicals used on palm; that's why all the women have vaginal infections; there are many skin diseases, especially amongst the children, as well as kidney diseases”**. Simply

bathing, one feels the itchiness. And the task of getting water to drink—which is increasingly difficult to do—falls literally on the heads of women, who must carry heavy buckets of water that they collect from areas of the dam where the water is less murky.

Little older than thirty years old, and with two children, Catalina has become one of the most respected role models in this Afro-descendent peasant community. Her house is a meeting place where neighbors go, seeking help in filling out forms to ask for government assistance or request compensations—given that the Colombian government has recognized this village as a victim of the internal conflict that has bled the country for 60 years. Nonetheless, “nothing comes our way, just crumbs and harmful actions.” By harmful actions, she explains **that the assistance they receive only reaches a few people, which divides the community**; or that certain programs introduce cement and brick houses in villages where, until now, constructions have mainly been built out of native materials, such as mud and trees. The traditional homes are not only more ecological, they are climatically cooler.

Catalina rejects the idea of progress that devalues their ancestral ways of life: “We had well-being, in the sense that we lived well. We didn't have technology, but we lived peacefully.” She defends the dignity of working the land to produce traditional regional foods, and not to export palm. And she wonders: **“What would happen if we peasants stopped producing food?”**

*Most of the names of workers and activists have been modified in order to protect their identity.

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Carro de Combate *Collective has researched the impacts of oil palm in depth in countries such as Colombia, Indonesia, Cameroon, Guatemala and Ecuador. This research was funded through crowdfunding and with the collaboration of the organization, Entrepuelbos:* http://carrodecombate.com/

(1) Las plantaciones de palma aceitera provocan la infertilidad de los suelos tropicales, 2017, Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ICTA-UAB), http://www.uab.cat/web/sala-de-prensa/detalle-noticia/las-plantaciones-de-palma-aceitera-provocan-la-infertilidad-de-los-suelos-tropicales-1345667994339.html?noticiaid=1345727879056

(2) Aceite de palma: una industria modelada por los mercados financieros, 2017, Carro de Combate, https://www.carrodecombate.com/2017/03/01/aceite-de-palma-una-industria-modelada-por-los-mercados-financieros/