
Mexico: Who benefits from oil palm in Chiapas?

Corporate interests in oil palm, (see WRM Bulletin 47) have found in Mexico, and more precisely in Chiapas, an ideal spot for their business, basically due to the climatic diversity of the zone, the availability of cheap labour (more so because of its condition as frontier state with Central America, where undocumented workers abound), and the possibility of easy access to peasant community land. The peasants, pushed and pressed by the powerful market forces expressed in agrarian policies, become salary earners on their own land, which is no longer the base of their food security.

Up to the present Chiapas has been an eminently agricultural region and one of the states to be most affected by the crisis in rural areas due to the drop in the price of coffee, maize, sorghum, pineapple, beans, etc., generating a constant migration of peasants to the north of the country, the United States and Canada. This was one of the arguments used to promote the plantation of oil palm, which in Chiapas started in 1982-88 during the government of General Absalón Castellanos Domínguez, in the municipalities of Villacomaltitlán, Escuintla, Acapetahua, Mazatán, Acacoyagua, Tapachula. In the nineties, it spread to other regions and municipalities, such as Salto de Agua, Playas de Catazajá, Chilón, Tumbalá and Palenque. The argument used to convince peasants to leave their traditional crops was: "it is no longer worthwhile to plant maize and beans because the prices are not good, now the alternative is the oil palm."

In 1997, in the Chiapas Coast alone, 3,000 hectares of oil palm had been sown to supply the oil extracting plants located in Villacomaltitlán and Acapetahua. In the year 2000, the Statistical Agenda of the Treasury Secretariat in the State of Chiapas identified 7,816 hectares sown in Tapachula alone, of which 2,748 were under production.

But the oil palm market has started to founder. Other products such as sorghum, sunflower, peanut, maize, soy bean, etc., that also produce oil have entered into competition with palm oil. Furthermore, the policy of transnational companies is to promote mass plantation all over the world in order to lower prices. With this they oblige other companies to lower their prices.

In 2000, the Acapetahua farmers claimed that "as the government is the main promoter," it should guarantee prices. Furthermore, during the government of Julio César Ruiz Ferro and Roberto Albores Guillén, in the northern region of Chiapas, at Palenque, Salto de Agua and Playas de Catazajá, the peasant groups who benefited from the projects associated with oil palm plantation were usually linked to the official Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional - PRI). In spite of this they also became part of the crisis, as they were unprepared to control, not only the pests affecting their plantations, but also the proliferation of rats that in most cases ate the plants.

Agro-industrial activities, in their usual model of large-scale monocultures, with the obligation of using agro-chemical products (pesticides, fertilisers, etc.) and precarious working conditions, do not improve the peasants' living conditions, nor are they a sustainable option, for taking them out of their poverty. How could they while they raze resources and traditional knowledge, while they destroy their very base (their environment), and while they divest the peasants of their food sovereignty, their future?

Article based on information from: “El cultivo de la palma africana en Chiapas”, Chiapas al Día, No. 293, CIEPAC, June 2002.