The urgent need for action against the spread of oil palm plantations

Oil palm plantations currently extend over millions of hectares of forest lands throughout the tropics. Further plantations are either being implemented or promoted in almost every Southern country where soil, water and solar energy fill the requirements of this palm. From Mexico to Brazil, from West to East Africa and from Asia and Southeast Asia to Oceania, governments are being urged to create conditions for the expansion of this crop.

This is completely at odds with governments' commitments regarding tropical forest conservation. It is a proven fact that most industrial oil palm plantations result in deforestation, having even worse impacts than the destructive industrial logging still in force in most of those countries. These plantations are usually preceded by logging, which "clears" the land to make them possible. The plantation then impedes the regrowth of the forest by the widespread use of herbicides. The forest thus disappears entirely from extensive areas, with serious impacts on local flora, fauna, soil and water resources. And that is usually the "best case" scenario. In other cases, the entire forest --and not only the plantation area-- is set on fire, as was patent in Indonesia with the 1997/98 forest fires, which were the result of "clearing" activities carried out mostly by plantation companies.

The social impacts of these plantations are also evident, but are simply ignored. Plantations are not implemented in uninhabited areas and for the local people the most serious impact is the appropriation of their land by the plantation companies. In most tropical countries, local people do not have former ownership of the land they traditionally own. Plantation companies are awarded concessions or land titles to that land and receive government support to repress whatever opposition they may face from local communities. Additionally, the environmental impacts described in the previous paragraph are also social, given that local people obtain a large number of products and services from the forest environment which disappears as a result of the plantation.

From a macroeconomic viewpoint, Southern governments appear to have learned nothing from previous experiences with "miracle" crops. The falling prices of coffee, cacao, banana and many other crops have a simple explanation: the widespread promotion of a certain crop in as many countries as possible. The result is oversupply and competition between and within countries for market access. The burden is then carried by local producers and local workers --whose incomes get increasingly lower-- or by local tax-payers when production is supported with government subsidies. But the end result is extremely favourable for the major processing and trading companies, which are able to access abundant and cheap raw material, thus ensuring high profits.

As with any other crop, the problem is not the palm itself but the industrial model in which it is being implemented. There are numerous examples --particularly in Africa-- to show that this palm can be grown and harvested in an environmentally-friendly manner and that it can serve to fulfil the needs of the local populations in a sustainable and equitable manner. However, it is usually the industrial and not the small-scale diversified model which is being promoted. Even worse, the palm oil industry aims at developing genetically modified oil palms, which will increase the current problems and create new and yet unknown ones.

In spite of the threat posed to forests and forest peoples by oil palm monoculture expansion, national and international NGOs don't appear to be --with few exceptions-- sufficiently involved in this problem. We therefore hope that this bulletin will encourage more NGOs to get involved in much needed research and campaigning activities to support local people struggling at the ground level to defend their rights and forests against the plantation invasion.