
Mexico: Oil palm and the different meanings of Chiapas

Chiapas means much for many people all over the world. It is a synonym of Zapatistas and of Subcomandante Marcos, and these, in turn, of struggle for liberation and against injustice. However, for national and transnational corporations, Chiapas is still merely a synonym of cheap land, cheap labour, abundant resources and profit opportunities.

It is not surprising then that both the government and the company owners are promoting a number of projects that would harm the rich cultural and biological diversity of Chiapas. Among these is the promotion of oil palm monocultures by the government, opening the door to foreign investors, especially from Malaysia, who dominate the international palm oil market.

Oil palm still occupies relatively small areas (some 3,000 hectares), located in the municipalities of Acapetahua, Acacoyagua, Mazatán, Mapastepec and Villa Comaltitlán, which supply the oil extracting plants installed in Villa Comaltitlán and Acapetahua. However, the impacts are beginning to be perceived.

In the year 2000, the oil palm producers of Acapetahua already felt that they were "at the mercy of the voracity of buyers, the owners of the extracting plants, who pay the price they choose per ton". According to the producers, the government --who was responsible for the introduction of the farming programme of this crop-- should be responsible for regulating a guarantee price for the product. However, as the government did not take on that role, the producers, confronted with the prices established by the industrial monopoly were on the verge of bankruptcy. Since then, prices have dropped even more.

Why is there so much interest in oil palm production in Chiapas? The answer is simple: because it yields high profits, does not need much labour, requires few inputs, and it is low-risk capital for companies. In general terms, peasants provide land and labour; they do not own the production process, but just the fruit extraction. Cultivation of this crop also takes advantage of the cheap labour offered by migrants in the border region. It is the case of the day labourers of the Guatemalan border: those who are lucky earn 32 pesos a day (3.5 dollars), not including food, and even children are often hired. In addition, in some cases, the Guatemalan authorities have had to act to require the payment of unpaid wages to Guatemalan workers. This means that the workers are literally being exploited.

From the environmental perspective, the impacts can already be perceived. In fact, large scale monocultures imply the destruction of great extensions of forests of the region and their rich biodiversity. If government plans of allotting thousands of hectares to cultivation of this crop are carried out, it would also imply the occupation of great extensions of land belonging to indigenous and farmer communities of Chiapas. The oil palm production potential of Chiapas is estimated at 940,000 hectares in the Northern, Forest and Coastal zones. But since these areas are not empty, the promotion of this and other crops (such as eucalyptus), will result in the appropriation of vast areas currently used by local peoples.

It is thus clear that the promotion of this crop is not aimed at improving the life quality of local

peoples, because among all the possible alternatives, it is one of the worst in terms of wages and employment generation. Furthermore, it endangers the survival of forests and of resources of the local people, through the occupation of huge extensions of land by palm monocultures. The local people have already begun to perceive it, which explains the increasing opposition of the Chiapaneca people, who are not willing to change their natural resources for false promises.

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