
Ecuador: Peoples, communities and nature against oil palm

In Ecuador, the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations is the main cause of deforestation. A meeting to exchange knowledge, the first of its kind in Ecuador, brought together leaders from oil palm-affected provinces from the three regions of the country.

Full sessions of debate, reflection and resistance were held in the city of Quito, from October 9-13, 2018, within the framework of the Meeting: "Peoples, communities and nature against oil palm." This exchange of knowledges is the first of its kind in Ecuador, and it brought together leaders from oil palm-affected provinces from the three regions of the country.

The expansion of industrial oil palm plantations is the main cause of deforestation in Ecuador. There are currently over 300,000 hectares of oil palm plantations nationwide; and 577,000 tons of palm oil are produced annually, of which 61% is exported.

Our country is not oblivious to the consequences of the agro-industrial accumulation model. There are numerous cases of violence, dispossession and contamination caused by the oil palm industry, with a marked trend towards impunity. Given this reality, peasant communities defending food sovereignty are saying "Enough!" And the need to initiate a series of actions to defend the rights of humans and nature being overrun by the palm industry is emerging from different areas of civil society.

This collective effort of reflection gave birth to the NETWORK of Sovereign Peoples Against Oil Palm, from which the following declaration emerged:

"Declaration of the First Meeting: Peoples, communities and nature against oil palm

In the presence of national and international institutions and organizations, in this first meeting, the peoples and communities of Ecuador have verified countless rights violations associated with the oil palm agroindustry in Ecuador.

Palm companies impose a system based on the destruction of forests, and they place peasants, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities in precarious conditions.

The oil palm agroindustry wants fields on which to: install its large plantations based on the intensive use of agrotoxics; rob peasants of the land; and appropriate all the water sources or contaminate them through their irresponsible and hoarding use. It wants all of this to obtain raw materials for ultra-processed, low-quality food products, industrial products and agrofuels.

Taking into account the violations of the rights of nature, in this first meeting, the peoples and communities denounce what is happening in Ecuador:

- The expansion of oil palm plantations is the biggest cause of deforestation of primary forests and

jungles in Ecuador and other countries in Latin America; currently, the mega-diverse Chocó Forest is on the verge of disappearing due to this activity—which violates the rights of nature.

- Oil palm plantations have caused community division and the fragmentation of ancestral indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian and peasant territories, affecting the logics of life.
- In many cases, oil palm plantations have expanded onto territories through mechanisms that include the eviction of communities and the fraudulent purchase and sale of land—along with violence, hired killers and assassinations.
- Oil palm plantations promote the concentration of land ownership, which is linked to the hoarding of water, the use of industrial seeds, state incentives, commercialization and markets.
- This problem affects over 400,000 hectares in Ecuador, where not all areas are included in official figures.
- This expansion of palm is threatening food sovereignty and the human right to food, by reducing the area of peasants' diversified crops.
- Together with the National Finance Corporation, palm companies have promoted production chains that rob peasants of land, through the use of debt mechanisms.
- The local peasant economy is destroyed where plantations are installed, turning the population into a proletariat that becomes dependent on large capital—which seeks to exploit, and has high rates of labor exploitation.
- Oil palm goes hand in hand with the heavy use of agrotoxics to eliminate remaining native species that comprise the forests. It also involves a pollution phase when the oil is extracted, which destroys the life of rivers and other bodies of water around the plantations.
- This destruction of aquatic life in rivers and estuaries ends up harming an important source of food for communities: fishing.
- Water pollution causes serious skin diseases, cancer, spontaneous abortions and in general, increased death rates in communities that are near plantations or downstream from them.
- The increased consumption of this industrial palm oil, loaded with agrotoxins, has resulted in a dramatic increase in several diseases, primarily in the most impoverished sectors.
- The environmental destruction that oil palm generates is tied to other drivers of dispossession, such as: mining, oil, etc.
- Oil palm plantations go hand in hand with the expansion of major road infrastructure, such as the Manta-Manaos Corridor.
- The intensive use of agrotoxics, along with the impacts related to oil palm plantations, has deepened the Palm Rot crisis—thus unfolding a huge toxic spiral that threatens the health of the environment, workers and communities.
- The authorities which should be monitoring oil palm plantations, such as the Ministry of the

Environment, the MAG [Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock] or SENAGUA [National Water Secretariat], have neglected their functions, and have not responded to the problem.

- We denounce that there is no access to justice, since big business groups that grow palm bribe the judicial system.

- We denounce that the RSPO, through the certification it grants to palm oil companies, legitimizes the expansion of palm plantations, the violation of local communities' rights and the destruction of ecosystems.

- Faced with this reality, indigenous and peasant peoples who are defending our relationship with nature, have the duty and collective and historical right to recover, strengthen and maintain the care and protection of our ways of life, our knowledges and own rights, our autonomy, our traditional peasant agriculture and our food sovereignty.

Faced with this situation of rights violations, affected communities and peoples have together formed the **NETWORK of Sovereign Peoples Against Oil Palm**, and we propose solutions that should be mandatory for the State and Ecuadorian society:

- It is vital to recover and protect rivers, so that we can safely drink water; and to recover the flora and fauna on which communities depend for life, for recreation, for daily activities and for their cultural symbolism.

- Palm oil companies must assume their economic and social responsibilities for the damages caused, and undertake an integral reparations process for the population as well as nature restoration.

- The legal system must be independent of the pressures of large companies, in order to enforce the law and the rights of communities.

- It should be State policy to ensure work and access to land in Ecuador, to keep younger people from migrating to the cities due to lack of alternatives in the countryside.

- We demand that priority be given to supporting small-scale peasant agriculture, which feeds our peoples and is responsible for production for local consumption; as opposed to plantations which are focused on exportation.

- There is an opportunity to transition oil palm territories towards diversified production systems—such as organic national cacao—which have greater yields and cause less environmental destruction. This requires support for the small-scale peasantry.

- The current authorities must reverse this situation. These resolutions will be delivered to the President of the Republic, the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of the Environment, so that they take action and cease to promote oil palm.

- We demand that the Ministry of Environment carry out the necessary controls to avoid the substitution of native forests with palm, and the contamination caused by oil palm plantations and oil extractors.

- We demand that the National Finance Corporation, the National Development Bank and other credit

institutions coordinate with the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture and Fisheries, to NOT grant loans for projects that cause deforestation, social conflicts or rights violations.

As long as our rights as communities are violated, we proclaim peoples' right to resist the admission of oil palm onto communal and peasant territories.

- The organizations gathered here will be monitoring the lands under oil palm cultivation, in order to demand official statistics and a truthful count adjusted to reflect the reality.

- We commit to following up on this meeting by strengthening our organizations and networks, through the development of discussion spaces and actions against the expansion of palm cultivation; as well as the intensification of our resistance and struggles at the local, national and international levels. Today we come together to form a network of social and peasant organizations against palm cultivation.

- In regard to the facts reported here on rights violations, as well as these proposals, we will also seek international justice, and the solidarity of social organizations around the world.

Quito, October 11, 2018"

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