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## [Oil palm plantations in Chiapas, Mexico: Women fight against territorial control and violence](#)

Oil palm plantations have become one of the main drivers of deforestation in southeast Mexico. This monoculture is being imposed as a form of territorial control, disrupting and taking advantage of existing social organization, and causing violence—especially for women and the territories they defend (1).

According to data from 2019, the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico has more than 43 percent of the country's oil palm plantations (2). In the Coastal Region alone, in southern Chiapas, there are 27,500 hectares planted. These plantations connect northern Chiapas with a “corridor” of palm plantations, which includes territories in Guatemala and Honduras. This corridor was consolidated through the ‘Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project,’ which promotes the ‘Mesoamerican Biofuels Program.’ This program, in turn, seeks to reorganize the territory to benefit business interests and local elites. Meanwhile, the Coastal Region has become a large extractive area, with mining projects, dams, mega-infrastructure projects, gas pipelines and monoculture plantations; additionally there is greater military control in this area, due to migration to northern countries. It is no coincidence that the largest palm plantations are located here, given that it is the most water-rich region of Mexico.

There are eleven plants in Chiapas that process crude palm oil, which is later refined into vegetable oil in refineries located in Veracruz and Jalisco. Each of these plants encourages the expansion of palm planting. The oil palm plantations are also related to another megaproject in Palenque in northern Chiapas which supports further extraction: ‘The Mayan Train.’ This is the most visible component of the ‘South-Southeast Territorial Reorganization Project,’ which is also connected to the ‘Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project.’ The train will serve as an extractive route for basic raw materials, including oil palm.

Faced with this situation, women have been powerfully organizing in the region, and denouncing the tactics of coercion and deception used by the State and companies to get peasants to accept this monoculture on their land. They mention the following impacts: that the area they have for gardens and backyard farms is increasingly smaller and contaminated by agrochemicals; that the earth is eroding, making production hard; and that animals do not have water or grass. In order to feed their families, they increasingly depend on the purchase of industrialized and processed products, and even the purchase of basic grains such as corn and beans. For the women this has also meant the dispossession of their ancestral practices of caring for and preserving the territories, as well as the loss of their knowledge, history, culture, and ways of organizing, working, celebrating and eating.

Most of the women are opposed to renting their land to grow this monoculture; but since they do not own the land, their interests are not taken into account. In this way, their struggle for land is also related to their struggle to be able to participate in and decide what happens in their communities—about what to plant, when and how. It is a struggle for their voices to be heard on equal terms as men's.

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Meanwhile, under the guise of protection and controlling organized crime, the government has sent in the National Guard, thus militarizing these territories. As a result, the persecution, harassment, control, and the physical, sexual and emotional violence against women—including feminicides—have increased with total impunity. This is also exacerbated by organized crime rings, which seek to control the region.

But the women have not stopped fighting. They are organizing, sharing information and training together in networks and collectives, to strengthen their collective voice and struggle.

WRM spoke with **Guadalupe Núñez Salazar, coordinator of the Network of Women from La Costa in Rebellion**. This is a group of about 80 women—belonging to several communities in the coastal municipalities of Chiapas—who are defending their lands and territories.

**WRM: Could you tell us how you remember these lands before palm came to the region?**

Before the palm trees were planted, this territory was full of fruit trees. There were mighty rivers, and there was a great diversity of vegetation and animals. I remember this place before palm very well. The women had a variety of crops, and they could consume and produce different foods. We could calmly bathe in the rivers, and there were a lot of fish during high fishing season. The water was pure and you didn't have to boil it or add anything to it in order to drink it—like we have to do now. In those days, you could feel that people were closer to the land and its riches, and there was a lot to eat, including animals from the forest. A lot of birds would come during certain seasons. They were very wet lands—they always have been—but we knew how to manage that to take advantage of them.

**WRM: When and how did the plantations arrive in your territories?**

Oil palm arrived in the 1990s through the governments.

In 1998 there were big floods that caused huge losses for peasant families. A large part of the region had been severely flooded. It's important to remember that Hurricane Mitch also occurred that year, and several provinces were buried—taking with them crops, animals and trees that people had planted to survive.

It was then that the governor at the time insisted that oil palm should be grown to help dry out the land and prevent flooding.

In 2007 the government started in with stronger propaganda to get people to plant palm trees on their lands. Government representatives would approach the ejidatarios who had land—most of whom were men—to promote this monoculture as a way to do business. And they kept up the discourse that palm would help prevent floods like the ones that occurred in 1998.

The palm boom in the region was also boosted by the promotion of credits to implement plantations that lasted up to five years.

It is important to remember that, due to the style of land ownership in Mexico, it is not possible for the government or a company to buy large tracts of land. Land is communally owned, organized in ejidos, but every ejidatario has an individual plot and can make individual decisions about its use. So what they do is take over lands by claiming that the companies are going to buy the palm fruits. This is also related to the use and control of water, since the plantations (and by extension, the companies) end up using the water from peasant lands. So instead of buying the land and the water,

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the companies rent it, so to speak. And this is when the radical change in the vegetation and diversity in the territories of this region begins.

So, with their interests united, the companies and the government began to work together to promote palm. At first they gave away seedlings to people who accepted their contracts, but later the plants cost 30 or 50 pesos each, and the companies themselves sold them. They promised the peasants that their lives would improve, that they would have more income....they sold the idea that the peasants would no longer be poor.

But there is a falsehood here, right? It is always thought that people in the communities are poor, but we have always said that poverty isn't really about having 1000 pesos in your purse. Wealth is what the communities have. They have their land, their water, their vegetation—and that is great wealth! Sometimes we don't realize this and we sell this wealth to the government and the companies. They are taking it from us! People from the communities are used and deceived through the promise of a lot of money.

Now you see an excessive amount of oil palm in the territories, and the more palm there is, the lower the price of the fruit is.

Contracts in this region are mostly with two processing companies: PalmoSur (Palmeras Oleaginosas del Sur S.A.) and Uumbal. There is also a government-promoted cooperative to collect the fruit, which belongs to the small-scale palm producers themselves. Nonetheless, the cooperative has had to buy even the scales to weigh the fruits before they can take the fruits to the processors.

**WRM: How was the Women's Network created, and what has been its process of struggle?**

The Network of Women from La Costa in Rebellion was born out of an organization called the Autonomous Regional Council of the Coast, whose main fight is access to electricity—though always in relation to what was happening in the territories vis-à-vis the numerous environmental issues affecting the communities.

In 2016 we began to organize as women, so that those who were already part of the organization but who not very involved could become more aware of what was going on in the communities. It was important for us to raise awareness about how community lands with palm plantations were being severely affected, and how this affected not only those people with plantations but also the whole community—and in particular, women. This led us to reach out to and meet with women who had palm in their territories and were experiencing its impacts—so that we could learn more about what was happening.

Now we know that the earth is cracked, the water is yellow, the rivers are much slower, and some water wells smell like rust. We are seeing the loss of diverse and nutritious foods, and medicinal plants. About five years after palm has been planted, we can see how food is now contaminated with agrochemicals. For example, corn cobs used to be big, but now they are small and with very scattered kernels. The earth is eroded and hardened, making it extremely difficult to produce food...many plants dry up or do not bear fruit. The water situation is also worrisome; we can directly see the pollution and how the water is running out...there is no longer enough water. And when there is no water, it is women who suffer the most; it is women who have to figure out how to get it, no matter what. This sharing helped us to continue to organize and have an impact on the defense of our lands and territories.

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We started as five women in 2016, and now there are around 80 of us from 16 communities. There are about 10-15 women from each community who are watchful and having an impact on the work.

The experience in the Autonomous Council—in which there were both men and women—made us realize that it was important to create a space just for women. We had to find a space where we could talk not only about the contamination and impacts on the land and water, but also about the violations of our rights as women. The Network became a necessary space for us to be together, hug each other, feel each other, reflect together and walk together. That feeling pushed us to strengthen this Women's Network.

One of our main challenges in the process of maintaining this space was to make ourselves heard, in order to gather strength. Because if we can't speak outside of our spaces, then who is going to hear us? Therefore, the space is critical to strengthening ourselves and being able to speak with conviction. It is important to understand that many women are violated in their homes; and so together, we learn to defend ourselves and understand our rights that have been violated. Also, working in organizational processes of resistance in many cases implies confronting our male counterparts. As women together, we can see the ways to move forward, to keep fighting. Being able to hug one another and cry together helps us strengthen our collective voice.

Being a woman puts extractivism in perspective. What is being extracted? Well, our plants, our knowledge, our health. Women bear the burden of doing the marches, the blockades, the meals...and in this way, our burdens keep growing. The men go on the tours too (laughter).

Now we are trying to raise awareness so that those who have palm on their lands see how they can cut some palm trees every year in order to gradually replant our own crops.

### **WRM: What is violence like in the territories, and what is the defense against it?**

Since the National Guard arrived, we see their presence in the communities. According to them, they are here to safeguard, but what we see is an increase in homicides, feminicides, criminal activity and disappeared persons....everything. Their presence makes it so that there is a lot of control; and we believe they are here to protect the interests of the government and the companies. Because we are against palm plantations, but we are also against the mining companies, the dams and the large wind farms that the government wants to install in the region. We are taking action to say that as women, we are the ones who see the main impacts, and we are standing up to defend our lands.

In addition to being mothers, daughters and wives, we are defenders of life. The National Guard is here to stay, but that is not going to keep us from organizing to defend what is ours—that which is so valuable that they want to take it away from us. We have observed that since there have been so many soldiers in our territory, more women have been murdered, more young women have been disappeared, and there is more prostitution. Furthermore, organized crime has increased, and that worries us a lot, because we never know if we may wake up dead one day.

As women, we are part of the territory and, therefore, we are the most harmed when men sign these contracts. We are the force that is defending our food, our water, our knowledge. Through these women's spaces, we have been able to raise awareness among more women and come together to defend our land.

As women, we must organize and defend our rights and our collective ways of life that we have had since the time of our ancestors. We must understand and deeply reflect together about what

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governments and companies do against the people, in order to take action. We must also raise awareness among men, so that they understand that women need defense, information and the ability to make decisions. They must understand that they cannot go to meetings without us, that they must not sign anything without us. It is still a long process for them to understand that women are not objects, but rather the subjects of our own lives.

(1) The information in the introduction is based on research by the Mexican organization, Water and Life, which in 2022 launched the publication: Ramos, Guillen Claudia y Schenerock, Angélica, [La Palma Aceitera desde la Palabra de las Mujeres. Diagnóstico de la palma aceitera y sus efectos en los territorios de Chiapas.](#)

(2) Ramos, Guillén Claudia, [La expansión de la Palma Aceitera en el Sureste Mexicano](#), 2019.