



CERTIFICATION SCHEMES ON “SUSTAINABILITY”

30 YEARS OF DECEIT AND VIOLENCE

A compilation of articles from
the WRM Bulletin



Certification schemes on “sustainability”: 30 years of deceit and violence

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This compilation is also available in Spanish, French and Portuguese.

World Rainforest Movement (WRM)

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INTRODUCTION

The shelves in supermarkets and stores are full of certified products. The packaging displays different labels indicating products were made with “sustainable” paper or wood, food or cosmetic products made with “sustainable” palm oil, “responsible” soybeans and so on and so forth. Even when it comes to buying an airplane ticket, consumers can pay a little more to ensure that their carbon emissions are (supposedly) “neutralized”, so as to guarantee that much touted “sustainability”.

But why is there this need for so many labels and forms of certification? What is actually being certified? And who is benefitting from this? After 30 years of certification schemes with environmental and social bias, what is clear is that the only “sustainability” that they guarantee is that of corporations’ lucrative business.

The first environmental certification mechanism for a specific product (wood) and its production chain emerged in the early 1990s, with the creation of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Although its origin is connected with civil society pressure on corporations, FSC has been fully incorporated into the production logic of logging companies operating in forests, of giant paper and pulp corporations using tree monoculture plantations, as well as of producers and distributors of consumer goods.

Over time, having shown that it did not constitute any threat – on the contrary: an opportunity – to the accumulation strategy of the corporations involved, other sectors started creating similar mechanisms. Hence, starting in the 2000s, initiatives and so-called roundtables for “sustainable” or “responsible” production of palm oil, soybeans, cocoa, sugarcane, among others, proliferated.

All these initiatives have various aspects in common:

- They are schemes that present themselves as non-profit associations including many apparently diverse actors and interests (companies, NGOs, governments etc.) However, in practice, the business sector participants and their allies, like the big conservationist NGOs, dominate these initiatives and impose their interests in a highly unequal power relation between the members.

- They are mechanisms that establish operational guidelines and directives for companies to adhere to on a voluntary bases, leaving no possibility of legal consequences when rules are broken – rules formulated and judged by the companies themselves, it should be noted.
- They are initiatives submitted to the logic of the market and its expansion, that is to say, certification labels have become important both to obtain funding for companies' expansion projects and to win over consumers, mainly urban consumers and those from the global North.
- They are mechanisms headquartered in countries of the North, and with management boards mainly composed of men and white people, leaving the rural communities of the South that have to face the certified plantations, to play the role of mere receivers of determinations imposed from outside about the use of the space where they live. And if they want to question the actions of any of the certified companies, they must submit to the protocol created by the certification system itself on how to proceed.
- They are mechanisms used by companies as defence mechanisms whenever they are faced with criticism over the impacts of their activities: “Our products are certified...”, “The project has certification...”, as if this guaranteed that there is no cause for concern.

One way or another, such certification mechanisms have not stopped the destructive expansion of industrial tree plantations, oil palms, soy, etc. Also, they have not been able to resolve the conflicts generated with traditional communities and Indigenous Peoples. Nor do they have the potential to do so, since they are designed to allow the continuity and expansion of corporate accumulation patterns that are intrinsically dependent on a predatory dynamic. In fact, the main common denominator of such certification schemes is that they guarantee a green label to the companies involved, thus contributing to their primary objective, i.e., the maximization of profit.

In other words, these destructive corporations need certification labels to obtain some legitimacy in the eyes of consumers and investors, bearing in mind the vast number of reports, news and studies showing their harmful effects, such as: land grabbing; problematic or inexistent community consultation processes; contamination by agro-chemicals;

soil degradation; precarious and humiliating jobs; sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women, among many other impacts related to extensive monoculture plantations. Certifiers have hence become a key element through which companies seek to legitimize their territorial and economic expansion in the global South, deceiving consumers with the “sustainability” discourse. This permits one to affirm without reservation that certification itself has become an underlying cause of deforestation.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the idea of certification has been taking on new shapes. With the creation of offset mechanisms for carbon emissions and biodiversity loss, new commodities have emerged already linked to certification mechanisms. In this new market, carbon credits and biodiversity credits – issued by certification schemes – represent a supposed guarantee that greenhouse gas emissions or the destruction of biodiversity are being duly offset elsewhere. Differently from wood, paper, palm oil or soybeans, where the certification is “added” to the product by means of a label, in the carbon or biodiversity markets it is the certification itself that makes it feasible for the product to be consumed. In other words, the commodity in itself is supposedly a guarantee – though a virtual guarantee, obtained through dubious methodologies and permeated by openly suspect interests.

This compilation of articles from the WRM Bulletin aims to underscore the damaging role played by companies and organizations involved in certification schemes. WRM considers it important to highlight that after three decades with ever more environmental certification labels on the market, it is urgent to put an end to this greenwashing. Ultimately, instead of combating environmental devastation and the social ills linked to corporations’ and other players’ operations, these labels cover up and sustain their destructive logic.

SECTION 1 On the certification labels: essence, impacts and threats

Responsible, sustainable, renewable and certified: An economy that destroys the planet?

From [WRM Bulletin 256](#), July 2021

Certification schemes seeking to legitimize activities that harm the environment and its people, with terms like “sustainable,” are a survival strategy for capitalism. In the framework of the so-called “energy transition”, even the mining industry seeks to validate its relentless growth. A real transition must be just and with systemic changes, not based on more green lies.

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Why the RSPO facilitates land grabs for palm oil

From [WRM Bulletin 219](#), November 2015

What is the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)? What does the current land grab for large-scale industrial oil palm monoculture mean for communities affected by this and for the companies that promote it, and what is the role of RSPO? Has the RSPO been a solution for communities? Has it helped to make palm oil sustainable?

*This article is based on a conversation between Winnie Overbeek, the international coordinator of the World Rainforest Movement, and GRAIN on September 2014, which was published by GRAIN at “Planet palm oil”.

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Greenwashing continues: FSC certifies industrial tree plantations as forests and RSPO oil palm plantations as sustainable

From [WRM Bulletin 233](#), September 2017

For over 20 years now, certification schemes such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) have helped plantation companies secure their profits and protect their reputation. How do

they do that when the harmful impacts of large-scale industrial eucalyptus, pine, acacia and oil palm plantations are so evident across the world?

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RSPO: outsourcing environmental regulation to oil palm businesses and industry

From [WRM Bulletin 253](#), January 2021

Can the inclusion of gender-specific policies in the operations of oil palm companies and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification scheme do more than cover up the violence and structural patriarchy and racism inherent in the plantation model? How, in such context, do these gender policies unfold?

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"Gender" in the palm oil industry and its RSPO label

From [WRM Bulletin 254](#), March 2021

Can the inclusion of gender-specific policies in the operations of oil palm companies and the RSPO certification scheme do more than cover up the violence and structural patriarchy and racism inherent in the plantation model? How, in such context, do these gender policies unfold?

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FSC: Certifying accumulation markets

From [WRM Bulletin 213](#), May 2015

For a long time, the certification of projects that are destructive to forests and their webs of life, including the communities living in and depending on forests, have been incessantly denounced. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification not only legitimates industrial logging in tropical forests and vast areas of monoculture plantations, but has also been associated with carbon markets, by certifying trees planted for “carbon capture”. Without addressing the underlying causes of deforestation, FSC encourages increased consumption of timber and wood products – provided they have their label.

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Two bright shining lies teaming up: Certification roundtables and REDD+

From [WRM Bulletin 219](#), November 2015

Certification has been described as the brightest of bright shining lies of the sustainability movement. And in recent years, certification roundtables have teamed up with another bright shining lie - REDD+. REDD+ is not designed to reduce emissions, at least not the emissions caused by those responsible for large-scale deforestation. Instead, REDD+ blames forest loss on peasant farmers and forest peoples while the corporations and government policies responsible for large-scale deforestation continue unabated, with the deforestation they cause often greenwashed by the twin labels of commodity certification standards and REDD+.

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"Forest-Smart Mining": The World Bank's Strategy to Greenwash Destruction from Mining in Forests

From [WRM Bulletin 246](#), November 2019

An oxymoron describes "a statement that seems to say two opposite things." The World Bank has a lot of experience with oxymoronic initiatives. With a report titled "Making Mining Forest-Smart" and the launch of a "Climate-Smart Mining Facility" in 2019, it is adding two more to its collection.

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SECTION 2 Certified violations: cases around the world

Are FSC and RSPO accomplices in crime? Jari Florestal and Agropalma's Unresolved Land Question in the Brazilian Amazon

From [WRM Bulletin 240](#), November 2018

For years, WRM has been warning that many certified monoculture plantations in Brazil have been established on land for which titles were obtained fraudulently. This article discusses the case of two companies that operate in the Brazilian Amazon: Agropalma and Jari Florestal.

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The Indigenous Kinggo's Struggle to Defend Papua's Customary Forest

From [WRM Bulletin 254](#), March 2021

Petrus Kinggo and other community leaders in Papua were persuaded to give up their customary forests with misleading and false promises from the Korindo Group, which cleared Kinggo's Indigenous People's forests for its oil palm plantations. Now communities are fighting against the FSC-certified Korindo plantations, despite the continuous intimidation locally and internationally.

[Read this article online](#). Also [available in Bahasa Indonesia](#).

Indonesia - Interview with Sawitwatch about the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia and the experience with the RSPO

From [WRM Bulletin 201](#), May 2014

Indonesia concentrates the biggest area of industrial oil palm plantations globally, followed by Malaysia. This extensive use of land and the continued rapid expansion have provoked numerous conflicts between communities and the companies operating these plantations.

[Read this article online](#)

Oil Palm Monoculture in Ixcán Municipality, Guatemala: A Story of Dispossession and Deception

From [WRM Bulletin 257](#), September 2021

The Palmas del Ixcán company has imposed itself on vast territories in Guatemala, through what communities call “systematic dispossession”. It has used multiple tactics to grab land and expand its plantations, including the deceptive RSPO certification process as well as the use of “independent producers.” Despite the criminalization of communities, their resistance grows ever stronger.

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Ecuador: The certification of industrial shrimp aquaculture intensifies rights violations and the destruction of mangroves

From [WRM Bulletin 254](#), March 2021

Despite the massive clearing of mangroves to make way for shrimp farms, and the oppression of fishing and gathering communities, the shrimp industry in Ecuador has access to certifications that not only facilitate its entry into foreign markets, but they also conceal a history of violence against the peoples of the mangroves.

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Envira REDD+ project in Acre, Brazil: Gold certificate from carbon certifiers for empty promises

From [WRM Bulletin 237](#), April 2018

A rubber tappers community, part of a 40,000-hectare REDD+ project, faces a difficult struggle to maintain their way of life. The project has already sold carbon credits, yet to date only provided the local community with dental kits and a visit to the dentist.

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The Katingan REDD+ Project in Indonesia: The Commodification of Nature, Labour and Communities' Reproduction

From the publication [15 Years of REDD: A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#), April 2022

“Carbon concessions” established to generate and sell carbon credits are deeply eroding communities’ structures, organization and reproduction. The Bapinang Hilir village in Indonesia is located outside the Katingan REDD+ project concession area, however, it has been identified as inside the verified project zone by the certification schemes (VCS and CCBA). How have concession owners profited from this inclusion and at what cost for the Bapinang Hilir villagers?

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The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project in Mai-Ndombe, DRC: Conflicts and a Complaint Mechanism

From the publication [15 Years of REDD: A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#), April 2022

The PIREDD/Plateaux REDD+ Project is part of one of the biggest jurisdictional REDD+ initiatives in the world. Like most REDD+ projects, it features a complaints mechanism. Communities reveal how this mechanism is deceitful in that it does not hold the project accountable towards those affected by it. The design of the complaint mechanism has systematically failed to resolve communities' complaints. But then, why does this mechanism exist?

[Read this article online](#)

SECTION 3 Declarations

RSPO: 14 years of failure to eliminate violence and destruction from the industrial palm oil sector

[Open statement by several groups](#), November 2018

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) has failed to live up to its claim of “transforming” the industrial palm oil production sector into a so-called “sustainable” one. In reality, the RSPO has been used by the palm oil industry to greenwash corporate destruction and human rights abuses, while it continues to expand business, forest destruction and profits.

Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil: 19 years is enough

[Open statement by several groups](#), November 2022

19 years of ongoing evidence prove that the RSPO has failed to uphold its own principles and criteria. At a moment when the area of land under RSPO certification is growing and when the RSPO is being promoted as a standard for sustainability within national, regional and international regulations and policies, we reiterate our denunciation of the RSPO and our commitment to actions that can truly serve the interests of communities and put an end to the colonialist model of industrial oil palm plantations.