



GRAIN

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Sustainable Monoculture? No, thanks!

Debunking agribusiness greenwash

"Sustainable development" has always been a chameleon-like concept, easily used to mystify environmental destruction. Agribusiness has a particularly talent for such greenwashing. Its latest trick is to present industrial monocultures as sustainable. Today such corporate-backed projects are popping up across the world, ranging from "sustainable palm oil plantations" to "sustainable salmon farms". This is only to be expected from agribusiness. But what is more disturbing however is that NGOs and farmers' groups are also participating in these corporate projects.

This *Against the grain* takes a critical look at some of these projects and the new disguises, new players and new language that they utilise for the same old purpose of turning our food and biodiversity into global commodities.

Sustainable Oil Palm?

Oil palm is the most productive and versatile of all oil crops. A hectare of it can produce five tonnes of crude palm oil (CPO), which is widely used in food manufacturing and in pharmaceutical, chemical and cosmetic industries. At US\$ 43 per barrel, it is the cheapest vegetable oil in the international market.

With rising demand for palm oil, the area of land devoted to oil palm plantations has increased dramatically over recent years. The area under oil palm plantations has increased by over 40% since the early 1990s, most of which has been in Malaysia and Indonesia, the world's biggest producers of palm oil.¹ The Indonesian government has plans to build the world's largest oil palm plantation covering about three million hectares in Borneo and has recently signed an \$8 billion financing deal with the China Development Bank to develop another oil palm plantation half the size of the Netherlands.

The notion of “sustainability”

The concept of sustainability first appeared in the 1987 Brundtland Report. It offered a watered-down vision of “sustainable development” that merely tinkered with the dominant economic growth model. The proposal recognised that this model of predatory development was leading the planet to a breakdown but left its fundamentals intact and safe from debate. The report also sidestepped major socio-economic problems, like the growth of global poverty and the expanding gap between rich and poor.

At the Earth Summit, theologian Leonardo Boff stated that what we needed was not sustainable development but sustainable societies. Ever since, different sectors of society have appropriated the term “sustainability” in their own way. One of the environmental movements more notable attempts to define the term grew out of the “Sustainable Southern Cone” process in South America.² It defined four necessary dimensions to sustainability:

- The **ecological dimension** implies preserving and enhancing the diversity and complexity of ecosystems, their productivity, natural cycles and biodiversity. The ecological crisis is not an abstract problem of interest only to the middle class of Northern countries, who have already met their basic needs and can afford to worry about their natural surroundings. The ecological crisis is directly linked to the physical and cultural survival of the planet’s excluded communities and social groups.
- The **social dimension** refers to equitable access to environmental goods, both intra- and inter-generationally, as well as between genders and among cultures. The social dimension of sustainability allows us to appreciate the importance of the fair distribution of environmental goods in a world of increasing inequity.
- The **economic dimension** requires a new definition for economic activity, based on material and immaterial needs, interpreted not only as shortages but also as potentials. New economic activities must rely on diversified, local production, adapted to ecosystems in order to use them sustainably.
- The **political dimension** refers to the direct participation of persons in decision-making, in defining their collective future and in managing environmental goods through decentralised, democratic governmental structures. It means giving new significance to politics and generating new practices based on the direct participation and actions by people in the quest for alternatives, which must necessarily grow out of horizontal relations, rather than from top-down, centralised, power-concentrating arrangements. Sustainability will only be possible if it returns decision-making powers to the people.

Far from these ideals, however, and in clear opposition to the environmental movement, major corporations also started to stake their own claims to “sustainability”, through initiatives such as the Business Council for Sustainable Development. Today's "sustainable" monoculture projects are its direct descendants.

This cheap oil carries hidden costs. For the most part, palm oil is sourced from industrial monoculture oil palm plantations that are notorious for pesticide use and poor working conditions. Plus, new oil palm plantations are generally grown in tropical forests. In Malaysia alone, oil palm plantations were responsible for 87% of the deforestation from 1985-2000.³ The conversion of forests to monoculture plantations leads to an irreplaceable loss of biodiversity and, in Malaysia, several species of mammals, reptiles and birds have been completely lost to oil palm development. But the forest clearing has not only infringed on the habitat of the animal kingdom. Since the expansion of oil palm plantations typically encroaches upon native customary lands, indigenous

communities are regularly displaced and robbed of their forest-based livelihoods, further compromising their identity and survival as peoples.

Faced with mounting international criticism, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established to supposedly set a new 'sustainable' course for the industry.⁴ Its objective is to define a set of principles and criteria that address the social and environmental issues associated with palm oil. But local groups and coalitions are doubtful, especially with the involvement of NGOs who, they believe, are simply greenwashing foreign industries.

Greening the industry or industrialising greenery?

The Roundtable's history dates back to 2001 when the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) assigned a Dutch consultant to look into the possibilities of an informal co-operation among oil palm industry players to respond to civil society concerns about oil palm plantations. The first meeting brought together Aarhus United UK Ltd, Golden Hope Plantations Berhad, Migros, Malaysian Palm Oil Association, Sainsbury's, Unilever and WWF in 2002.⁵ Since then more organisations have joined and, in November 2005, the Roundtable, now composed of over a hundred members, had its third meeting where it presented the RSPO Principles & Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production. Some elements of the Principles & Criteria include certification, consultation with local communities and regard for the environment.

The thinking behind this Roundtable is to bring stakeholders together – growers, millers, manufacturers, financiers, and representatives of social and environmental NGOs – to generate demand for 'sustainable palm oil'. By reorienting the demand side, the proponents claim that the supply side will change for the better.

But for all the talk of sustainability, there is no way for the RSPO to skirt its inherent contradiction. The problem with industrial palm oil production is that it depends on large scale oil palm plantations that can hardly be considered sustainable. An oil palm plantation is an intensive monoculture enterprise that relies heavily on inputs like fertilisers and pesticides. It requires vast tracks of land that it tends to take from natural and primeval forest. And because it rapidly drains soil fertility, it has to constantly expand or shift to other areas. Oil palm plantations are so damaging that they are often abandoned after just 25 years.

This constant expansion of oil palm plantations is at the core of the conflicts between the industry and local communities. In the Malaysian State of Sarawak, for instance, the majority of the 130 on-going land dispute cases involve the conversion of native customary land by Malaysian oil palm companies.⁶ But the bottom line for the RSPO's member companies is that they will not agree to any measure that jeopardises their supply of oil palm. It's no surprise then that the RSPO's Principles and Criteria make no mention of stopping the expansion of oil palm plantations or reducing the global consumption of palm oil. The RSPO is simply not going to stand in the way of the continued expansion of oil palm plantations, even if this makes a mockery of its intentions to promote "sustainable" palm oil.

The real priority for the RSPO is the sustainability of the palm oil supply not sustainable oil palm production. It's happy to sit back and issue broad Principles and Criteria or advocate for 'better management practices', but when it comes to actually making oil palm farming sustainable, the RSPO leaves it to the producers to figure out how to turn water into wine.

Dangerous liaisons

So why are some NGOs signing up for membership to the RSPO? Some NGOs in Indonesia see engagement as a strategy to influence the Indonesian government's pro-investor stance. There are also some who believe that NGOs can act as the voice of the community and the bridge to the oil palm industry. One NGO says that some local communities are now in a better position to be heard by the oil palm industry because of the participation of NGOs in the RSPO. Some NGOs hope to make gains with specific issues, such as improved working conditions for plantation workers.

But others, especially indigenous communities, see this as a dangerous liaison. They make the point that there are too few groups to be representing the interests of so many affected people. While each member gets one vote, providing they pay the annual US\$ 2,600 membership fee, of the 103 RSPO members, there is not a single member representing local communities or indigenous peoples. There are 11 NGOs, but pretty much all of the other 92 members represent various sectors of the industry.

There is also a more fundamental concern with the RSPO. Some groups see it as a way for the industry to undermine opposition to the expansion of oil palm production. In Papua New Guinea, where a preferential trade agreement with the European Union is attracting interest in oil palm development from foreign investors, a coalition of local groups and communities has called on the RSPO to keep out of the country. The coalition issued a statement when representatives of the RSPO visited the country in 2005.⁷ It criticised the RSPO for diverting public attention from the social and environmental damage caused by oil palm and for undermining local people and organisations. In their experience, and that of other groups in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, oil palm “inevitably causes social disharmony and environmental pollution, and deprives local people of the right to use their land for their own economic and social development”.

Sustainable soybeans, Responsible Soybeans– More Soybeans

“Soybean expansion in Latin America represents a recent and powerful threat to biodiversity in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia. GM soybeans are much more environmentally damaging than other crops, partly because of their unsustainable production requirements, and partly because their export focus requires massive transportation infrastructure projects, which open up vast tracts of land to other environmentally unsound economic and extractive activities. The production of herbicide-resistant soybean leads to environmental problems such as deforestation, soil degradation, pesticide and genetic contamination. Socio-economic consequences include severe concentration of land and income, the expulsion of rural populations to the Amazonian frontier and to urban areas, compounding the concentration of the poor in cities. Soybean expansion also diverts government funds otherwise usable in education, health, and alternative, far more sustainable agroecological methods.”⁸

On 17-18 March 2005, the Conference of the Sustainable Soybean Forum held its first meeting in Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil, bringing together a range of NGOs and corporations. As with the RSPO, which it was modelled upon, the leading players were the WWF and companies like Unilever. Also present on the organising committee were Brazil's André Maggi Group, the Swiss COOP supermarket chain, the Dutch development agency Cordaid and the Federation of Small Farmers' Associations from Southern Brazil (Fetraf-Sul/CUT).

The initiative was immediately met with widespread criticism from civil-society and peasant organisations. They organised a parallel counter-event to expose the project's underlying agenda, under a slogan of “No Sustainable Soy”.⁹ A statement from the NGOs at the counter-event

denounced “the false concept of sustainable soya monocrops, officially promoted at the First Round Table Conference on Sustainable Soy in the interests of the North and of agribusiness, with the scandalous support of some large, supposedly environmentalist, national and international NGOs. Sustainability and monoculture are fundamentally irreconcilable, as are the interests of peasant societies and agribusiness.”

Participating peasants issued their own statement denouncing agribusiness for the commodification of life and land and governments for their failure to pursue agrarian reform. They pledged to “defend the cultures, territories and traditional economies of indigenous peoples and peasants, while building unity with the struggles of urban social movements.”

This popular resistance forced the industry to pull the plug on the “Sustainable Soy” project within a few months and even shut down the project's website. Yet, shortly afterwards, the project was resuscitated under a new name, “Responsible Soy”, and a second conference is set for August 2006 in Asunción, Paraguay.¹⁰

Meanwhile, other NGO-corporate initiatives remain active. The “Articulação Soja” (Soybean Web) in central Brazil promotes soybean “production with lower social and environmental impacts” and puts forth “criteria for the social responsibility of companies that purchase soybeans.” Cargill and The Nature Conservancy, a US-based NGO, also have their own “responsible sourcing’ demonstration project for soy that seeks to be a catalyst for protecting valuable environmental resources in and around the Santarém region.” The final objective of this project is “to define and develop acceptable strategies for helping all farmers in the region come into full compliance with Brazilian environmental laws”. The Cargill initiative was broadly rejected by the Brazilian Forum of NGOs and Social Movements which met during the March 2006 COP8 meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Curitiba Brazil.

Industrial monocultures are not sustainable

Sustainability is meaningless unless it is rooted in a basic respect for the lives of communities and their surroundings. Industrial, commodity-producing monocultures are entirely devoid of such respect. Thus we see that sustainable monoculture projects are always conceived and defined by those who hold the economic power. They are therefore always geared towards export-oriented agribusiness commodity production, which inevitably displaces local food production with industrial or feed crops that have little to do with community needs. In this manner the projects contribute to tearing the social fabric of solidarity, exchange and self-regulation at the core of local food systems, leaving people to depend on the “market” for their food supply. In these industrial agriculture projects there is no room for peasants and their food and agricultural systems.

Monocultures also, by definition, defy diversity—another critical element to sustainability. No matter how hard they try to regulate or “enhance” themselves, they will always have irreparable impacts on peoples, ecosystems and the soil. Globally, this narrowing down of the planet’s food supply to a few monocultures, relying on an extremely narrow genetic base of genetically modified and patented seeds, raises dire and unpredictable risks for the global food system, especially for the world's poor.

In the “alliances” between corporations, NGOs and farmers to advance these sustainable monoculture projects such fundamental issues are set aside. There are no ecosystemic visions, merely fragmented outlooks. Nor is there a genuine interest to go deeper. The affected communities that could speak to their fundamental problems are generally not properly informed, consulted or

involved in the projects. Instead, the projects typically try to win over local organisations with trinkets and coloured beads. When money comes into play, of course, the “consensus” that is realised only benefits the few. The loose objective of sustainability thus becomes little more than an exercise in enhancing the social image of the industry.

Local organisations are speaking out against these attempts to use “sustainability” as a smokescreen for agribusiness' continued exploitation, plunder and destruction of their lands. They have made it clear that unless the starting point of a project is the full and active participation of local communities, in a manner that respects their own forms of organisation, it is absurd to imagine a "sustainable" outcome. Only full and profound democracy based on each community's own rules will ever produce authentic sustainability. In these times of global action we must not forget that agriculture is created in each community and local space. It is there, in the distinctiveness of the land and in the souls of men and women peasants who still communicate with the land, that the answers we seek will also be found.

Websites on “sustainable” monoculture

- WWF website describing both the *Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil* and the *Round Table on Responsible Soy*, "Our solutions: Forest Conversion Initiative", <http://texcomps.notlong.com>
- Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil website: <http://www.sustainable-palmoil.org>
- Round Table on Responsible Soy website: <http://www.responsiblesoy.org>
- “Articulação Soja” (Soybean Web) <http://www.cebrac.org.br/forumnovo/>
- Cargill and The Nature Conservancy, *Responsible Sourcing in the Amazon: A partnership between Cargill and The Nature Conservancy*, Pilot Project Status Report, February 2006 <http://sawdahua.notlong.com> (PDF)

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 - ² Programa Argentina Sustentable, http://www.pas.org.ar/que_es_AS.htm
 - ³ Friends of the Earth, *Palm Oil, the survival of the orang-utan and UK company law reform*, May 2006, www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/palm_oil_company_law.pdf
 - ⁴ The Ram's Horn, Energy and Oil Palm, *The Ram's Horn*, Number 235, January 2006: <http://www.ramshorn.ca/archive2006/235.html#meltdown>
 - ⁵ RSPO, *History of RSPO*, May 2005, <http://www.sustainable-palmoil.org/background.htm>
 - ⁶ Hillary Chiew, *Disappearing haven*, Malaysian Star, 27 December 2005. <http://apanquer.notlong.com>
 - ⁷ Various organisations, *Palm Oil Not welcome in PNG*, Joint Media Release, 18 April 2005, <http://malrouai.notlong.com>
 - ⁸ Altieri M and Pengue W, GM Soybean: Latin America's New Coloniser, *Seedling*, January 2006: <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=421>
 - ⁹ Biodiversidad, ¡No a la "soja sustentable"!, *Revista Biodiversidad*, July 2005, <http://www.grain.org/biodiversidad/?id=290>
 - ¹⁰ Round Table on Responsible Soy website <http://www.responsiblesoy.org>

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