

Under the palm trees, the rage

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Without us even realizing it, Palm Oil has invaded our dinner tables, our bathrooms, even our “petrol” tanks. In Sumatra, Indonesia, trade of this 'green gold' leaves a noxious trail: corruption, human exploitation and disappearance of gigantic reservoirs of carbon - the last marshy forests of the island. A race against time has now begun to save Tripa, an ancient massif of peat swamp forest, 62,000 hectares in size, and home to one of the World's last orangutan populations.



Despite grim expectations, the shock is still brutal. After an interminable voyage through plantations of oil palms and poor indigenous villages, the sensory impact on arrival makes one's blood run cold. On the left, a luxuriant forest, from which emerges a chorus of cluckings, squawkings and cooings. On the right, forty naked and devastated hectares, where tree stumps entangle with branch debris dried by the tropical sun: a true vegetal battle field, only disturbed by the din of an army of grasshoppers. Here and there, planted in rows, some young shoots catch a glimpse of the destiny of this freshly planted ground: a monoculture of Oil Palms. Perfectly rectilinear, the border between the tropical primary forest and the agro-forest exploitation seems to be traced by the rule of an insane geometrician.

Suddenly, from some distance, an interminable cracking recalls the drama in progress. A tree, colossal according to the deafening noise of its fall, collapses under the buzz of chain saws. For the tigers, orangutans and toucans of the neighbourhood, the signal is clear: biodiversity here, is not welcome any more. Thoughtful, Susilo, our Indonesian guide and biologist, sifts a handful of blackened earth collected from one of the drains criss-crossing the young plantation: “Of the thousands of years to create this peat and its carbon. Barely a few months, so that it dries and releases its CO₂ into the atmosphere. Lamentable...”

A lucrative yet destructive monoculture

Welcome to Aceh, the northwestern tip of the island of Sumatra. Significant in size - twice that of Belgium - this province is the theatre of a Shakespearian tragedy, whose final act - after making fortunes for agro-food multinationals and intermediaries - is played at the dinner tables and bathrooms across Europe and Asia. The leading role is taken by Palm Oil, the second vegetable fat marketed globally, after soya. Seldom

explicitly mentioned on the labels (if not under the misleading term “vegetable oil”), Palm Oil does not have its equal to accompany our daily life. You can find it in chips, margarines, ice creams, biscuits, pastries and spreads. It’s also there in shampoos, lipsticks, detergents, inks and, soon, in the tanks of European and Asian cars. In Singapore, the world temple to the trade of this green gold, one of the world’s largest biodiesel refineries is in construction. In Rotterdam, another factory will soon feed the European market at a rate of 800,000 tonnes per annum. This success seems inescapable.



The figures can make you feel giddy. In nearly twenty-five years, the worldwide production of Palm Oil has almost sextupled, primarily in Malaysia and Indonesia. The demand of the worldwide market could still triple between 2008 and 2050 due to demographic explosion and improvement in standards of living in the emerging economies. China, quadrupled its consumption in ten years. Encouraged by the World Bank and the IMF, the Indonesian government, in the search of foreign exchange, unreservedly launched into this lucrative monoculture, with a view primarily towards export. In 2006, the sale of Palm Oil generated a gold mine of more than 6 billion dollars, equating to more than 40% of the nation’s total export income.

A captivating rate of deforestation

In terms of social and environmental impacts, the price to be paid is colossal. After Malaysia - almost saturated with plantations - Indonesia seems ready to sacrifice also, the majority of its primary forests. The rate of deforestation for all causes, according to Greenpeace, is incredible: the equivalent of 300 to 360 football fields per hour. In fifty years, the country lost 72% of its ancient forest. According to the University of Princeton, at least 56% of new Oil Palm plantations are carried out to the detriment of forest zones. Because of forest fires (often intentional) and release of enormous quantities of CO2 during work on ground in peat zones, Indonesia can be regarded as the third largest Green House Gas emitting country in the world after China and the United States!

In the north of Sumatra, the expansion of Oil Palm plantations poses problems more acute than everywhere else. According to PanEco, a Swiss NGO well established in the country, the 62,000 hectare Tripa massif - one of Aceh Province’s three remaining zones

of peat swamp forest - could be wiped out in less than five years, if the forest companies implement the “*conversion*” (land use change) authorizations, granted in the 90’s by the Jakarta authorities. “According to scientific estimates, a layer of peat 120mm deep can release 50 tonnes of CO₂ per hectare,” explains Denis Ruyschaert, a Belgian national working for PanEco. “However, the actual thickness of peat within Tripa can be up to several metres, so the carbon sink here oscillates between 50 and 100 million tonnes CO₂ per hectare”. The ultimate irony: once drained and dried, this vast coastal forest will most likely be invaded by sea salt, which will compromise the following plantations of Oil Palms. The second aberration: if the European Union follows through with its agro-fuel proposals (20% by 2020, including 10% in public transport), it could, in the name of climate change mitigation, actually contribute directly to global warming here in Sumatra, far from European glances and National limits for Green House Gas emissions. In spite of this, emerging economies will not be outdone!

Retracing the origin of oil

Like the *Grand Place* in Brussels or the *Acropolis* in Athens, the Tripa massif, an integral part of the “Leuser Ecosystem” (unique as it is sufficiently large to sustain populations of rhino, elephant, orangutans and tiger), belongs to UNESCO’s World Heritage List. Theoretically, a provincial tree-felling moratorium has been in force since 2007. In reality, this is little respected. The exploitation has even intensified, facilitated by the end of the civil war that devastated the province for thirty years and by the surge of rebuilding following the 2004 tsunami. Last January, during a visit to the Tripa massif, some loggers were at work in the concession allotted to the Kallista Alam Company. However, the main target of Environmental and Indigenous Human Rights NGO’s remains Astro Agra Lestari (AAL), a subsidiary company of the group Astra International, distributor of Toyota vehicles in Indonesia, and Palm Oil supplier to the agro-alimentary giant Unilever, in Europe particularly (1).



" Last December, during the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland, AAL (who refused to engage in dialogue with us) suspended their work of heavy machines in Tripa forest?", commented Regina Frey, Swiss national and Founder/ President of PanEco. "However, since then, the heavy equipment (logging, road making) is again on the ground, which does not forecast anything good." Initially, Unilever, which market the familiar brand names Dove, Knorr, Persil, Omo, Sunsilk and Carte d’Or, ceased trading with AAL’s Palm Oil branch. Then, as highlighted by a Swiss television team, the world’s primary Palm Oil consumer, claimed it could not recall the origin of its

raw material. A hard blow for the group's image who, however, had the virtue to announce for the first time, that it would no longer use non-certified palm-oil, as from 2015 (). Since then, Unilever have been emulated by Body Shop and Sainsbury's (UK) and Albert Heijin (NL).

David and Goliath

Although the exploitation of Oil Palms is not the only act by multinational corporations, this activity nevertheless poses a series of acute local social rights problems. In the reports of local and international (e.g. Oxfam) NGOs, the testimonies of indigenous people deprived of access to their land, for lack of proof of property rights, is innumerable. In his office in the City of Bandah Aceh, 40% of which was raised to the ground by the tsunami, Teuku Bahri, of NGO "Eye on Aceh", recounts: "The concessions for forestry development are delivered by the central authorities in Jakarta. Provided with title documents often obtained by corruption, representatives of the large companies suddenly materialize in farming and fishing villages. How can these isolated communities defend themselves, with little access to education and being so poorly prepared for such events?" Union activity is rare in this province. "To belong to a Union, it is necessary to have a contract. However, the majority of the villagers who work in the plantations – those who have not "transmigrated", originating in Java and uprooted! - are employed by the day, for wages of 2 to 3 Euros per day. No contract? No social protection!" Hardly astonishing then, that Palm Oil is such a cheap raw material. Sitting under a corrugated iron roof, in the small village of Sukakamo, a stone's throw from one of AAL's concessions, Saripudin, 22 years, baseball hat tilted to one side, recognizes AAL brought some benefit to his village: the construction of a road through the forest and some short-term part-time jobs. "But I lost my land", he becomes impassioned at once. "What will my children do, when there are no more forests here?" At his side, Abdel, a sinuous and powerful man, extols: "When they first arrived, AAL had promised a free zone of 1.5 km each side of the river. However, in reality they barely granted a meter to us for right-of-way and do not remove the wood debris that accumulates in the water. Under these conditions, it is impossible to raise our nets and to unload our boats".

Preserving the carbon sinks

Here and there, in the villages, testimonies concur. The occasional schoolroom or clinic built by the agro-forestry companies does not compensate for a long series of humiliations and oppressions: access refused to sacred ground (such as cemeteries), unjust land bartering, broken promises, etc. In the event of social conflict the army and police force, easily bought, lend their support to the least scrupulous companies. "People are afraid", explains Samsuri, driving force behind one of the rare co-operatives of the area. "The simple sight of uniforms brings back memories of the civil war and breaks any embryonic protest. The villagers feel, as when colonized, submitted to forces beyond their control. The authorities of the districts were alerted but nothing changes on the ground. The problem is too great a closeness between companies like AAL and the authorities."

On December 27, 2009, Jakarta Post announced the death of two children and the destruction, by the police, of 400 houses of a village in the province neighbouring Riau (a quarter of the palm oil plantations of Indonesia), after a conflict on land rights, going back 12 years, had seriously degenerated there. One month later, the same daily newspaper were again pertinent, reporting the proceedings of a jurisdiction focused on the fight against corruption: in the south of Sumatra, persons in charge of the

administration of Agriculture and Forests had been received 5 billion rupees (320 000 Euros) to facilitate the installation of seaports in a zone of protected coastal forests.

Corruption, in Indonesia, is pervasive in Administrative consciousness, in spite of a Presidential will to bring it to an end. NGOs and the most conscientious administrations therefore fear a highly unsound implementation of recent specific UN funding (UN-REDD) (2), supposed “to reward” countries that protect their forests to keep intact the planet’s carbon sinks. Certain Indonesian leaders already dream of this celestial manna. Danger! “The REDD mechanism is promising”, explains the NGO “Yel” in Medan, a local counterpart of PanEco dealing with environmental governance and local development. “However, in this country, those who manage the received funds are often those who assign the concessions. The social and environmental damage could be considerable”. For this reason all the hopes rest today, on the fast adoption of “sustainability” criteria for Palm Oil manufacture, following the examples already in place in the timber industry, such as the FSC (see diagram/box/graphic p.). A race against time, for sure.

(1) Astra Agro Lestari is also a subsidiary company of the international group “Garden”.

(2) REDD: Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries

A practical solution: Certification - the only real alternative?

Stopping Palm Oil culture dead in its tracks?! Unthinkable, obviously! The only solution, in addition to the urgent cessation of plantations on the most fragile lands, lies in “clean” production. Through a WWF initiative, a long list of “sustainable” principles was simultaneously drawn up by producers, refiners, NGOs and palm oil users. These were subsequently incorporated into a “Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil” (RSPO) (3), formally established in 2004. Provided by Socfindo, a Belgian-Luxembourg company specializing in quality seeds, a village community near Meulaboh, on the Western coast of Sumatra, has planted this spring 17,000 palm oil seedlings intended to be cultivated profitably as well as respectful to social and environmental principles. Socfindo, curiously, remains very discrete on this initiative, which, among its modus operandi, emphasizes the fact that it creates plantations exclusively on uncultivated land (abundant in Sumatra) and not on grounds of greater ecological value. Greenpeace has sharply criticized the dynamics of RSPO, notably because the ‘sustainable measures’ are optional for the industrialists and could provide, for them, a simple ecological varnish (“green washing”). Another important limitation: the RSPO is an European inspiration and nothing indicates that it will extend to the Asian markets, famously more “aggressive” and less scrupulous. In any case, time marches on: the Oil Palm is productive from its fourth year onwards. However, if nothing changes in the short term, the forest of Tripa could disappear within five years. Urgent and most needed! : a credible, visible certification on our food and cosmetics labels!

(3) RSPO, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, <http://www.rspo.org>