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Guatemala: social and environmental impacts of oil palm plantations

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Oil palm plantations are making rapid inroads into this biodiversity-rich country with devastating impacts on the environment and rural communities.

In comparison, Guatemala is a relatively small country but it is very rich in biodiversity. The country is located in the Meso-American* region, the centre of origin of traditional maize and bean landraces, as well as of various species of pumpkins among others.

The fact of being located between two big oceans, the differences in altitude ranging from sea level to an altitude of 4,220 metres at the summit of the Tajumulco volcano and being part of a great continental bridge has generated great biological wealth resulting in a wide variety of ecosystems and animal and plant species, many of them used by local communities for their subsistence.

A major part of this natural wealth has quickly been lost due to changes in land use and poor land management influenced by economic and political interests.

The agro-industrial model of monoculture plantations and products that are not aimed at feeding the population but at exports has left its mark on nature

and on the human communities, causing serious negative environmental and social impacts.

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According to the National Statistics Institute, in 2003, 49 farms were devoted to oil palm production, covering a total area of 31,185 hectares and producing over seven million quintals, mainly used in the preparation of essential oils and waxes for the food and soap industry. The 2007 farm survey established that the number of farms

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The areas most affected by monoculture oil palm plantations are: the Izabal region, specifically near the Wildlife Refuge of Bocas del Polochic, which is also a Ramsar site, and the North Transversal Strip region in Ixcán and the south of Petén.

dedicated to this product had increased to 1,049 for that year and that the area under cultivation with oil palm had spread to 65,340 hectares, implying that it had doubled over the past four years.

Figures in an Action Aid report dated June 2008 show an estimated total of 83,385 hectares under plantation or in the process of plantation with oil palm for the production of biodiesel.

In spite of human rights violations and the ecological damage caused by oil palm plantations, the issue

has not yet been placed on the national public agenda or debate in Guatemala. Negative impacts presently being generated are: loss of land for agriculture, forced land purchase, displacement and forced migration towards protected areas, where these communities are pinpointed as "invaders" and accused of destroying the natural heritage. The causes and the origin of this action are never mentioned. The abusive use of water sources and competition over water between the vast tracts of oil palm and sugar cane and the rural communities are additional impacts.

In many places, forests and natural ecosystems have already been destroyed for the production of oils and sugar, transforming them into monoculture plantations. This causes considerable negative repercussions on nature, ecosystem connectivity and on people.

With agro-industrial activities and plantations our country loses much more than biodiversity. It loses the possibility of providing fairer and more decent living conditions to present and future generations.

* Includes Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama.

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