

Cultural and socioeconomic aspects of oil palm in Tshopo and Mongala, DR Congo

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Maintenance of oil palms. Photo: Tropenbos DR Congo



“I planted oil palm to prepare for my retirement. Now I live decently, earning money while my rice and cassava are growing.”

Introduction

Oil palm in DR Congo, after decades of being abandoned, is now seeing new investments in the provinces of Tshopo and Mongala. There, small-scale plantations of oil palm and wild trees have provided opportunities to improving local livelihoods. Oil palms also play major social-cultural roles in the region, through their part in family life, marriage and festivities. Besides the use of palm oil, the trees and land around them provide families and communities with multiple other products. These include palm wine, edible beetle larvae, vegetables from intercropping, craft items woven from palm fronds, and home-produced secondary products from palm oil, including soap, body lotion and food for livestock and poultry. In addition, the manufacture and sale of palm oil products significantly improves women’s control of household income. Although new investments may bring interesting opportunities for multiple

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stakeholders, including smallholders, there are also signs that this development is leading to land grabbing and human rights abuses. This article looks at experiences from the region and reflects on the past and potential future relationships between local people and oil palm.

Development of the palm oil sector over time

Under colonial rule, the country developed large oil palm plantations (Vanderweyen et al. 1953). In 1957, what was then the Belgian Congo exported 150,000 tonnes of palm oil, making it the largest exporter in Africa and second in the world after the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia (Nicolai 2013). But since independence in 1960, thousands of hectares of oil palm groves were abandoned, linked to the zairianisation (nationalization) of the economy under Mobutu Sese Seko's rule during the early 1970s. Consequently, exports declined, collapsing to zero by 2000. Today, DR Congo imports 50,000–60,000 tonnes of vegetable oil per year, mainly rapeseed oil from Malaysia and the EU (AGRER-EARTH GEDIF 2006).

But recently, there have been new investments in palm oil development in DR Congo in the provinces of Tshopo and Mongala. In 2009, two agri-food companies, Feronia Inc. and EWG, took over 141,447 ha of plantations and processing mills in the former Equateur Province and Oriental Province. These companies are investing in rejuvenating plantations and modernizing palm oil processing to increase palm oil yield. All palm oil production passes through Kinshasa, where it is refined into consumer products such as oil, margarine, soap and beauty lotion. Feronia invested US\$170 million, much more than the initially planned US\$50 million. At the same time, the company focused on local processing to improve the oil extraction efficiency.

However, this economic success conceals prolonged and continuous violation of human rights in industrial plantations in these regions. Some large-scale companies are known to have stripped local populations of their land since 1911 without any compensation (WRM 2017), even when these companies were supported by a development aid fund (WRM 2018). Even in more recent years, peasants were reported to have been expelled from their land (ACP 2016), and forbidden to market palm oil and derivative products on the pretext of the risk of theft. Other human rights abuses have also been reported in recent years, including murder committed by guards or police on behalf of the corporations (Radio Okapi 2013, 2014). In the face of increased palm oil demands, Feronia signed a document with customary chiefs in January 2018, but local communities members and civil society actors say that this is not well respected. According to local civil society organizations leaders interviewed for this article, the chiefs also say that they never agreed to this, but were forced to sign it by the provincial governor. Additionally, civil society organizations and human rights activists repeatedly voiced concern about employees who are not regularly paid, despite regularly claiming their payment. Some staff managers of the industry indeed recognized that salary payment was delayed. Moreover, industrial processing excludes female labour, although women play a major role in the artisanal chain of palm oil.

Given the growing local and global demand, the local oil palm industry may see profits in the future, despite threats to the environment. The industrial renewal of oil palm is undoubtedly a great opportunity for the national economy. But this must not come at the expense of the inclusiveness of marginalized social groups, and in no case should there be any threat to the rights of smallholder farmers, for whom oil palm is still a major source of income and for whom access to land is a matter of life and death (RAIO-RDC et al. 2016). Unfortunately, potential profits seem to make companies greedy for land, and recent palm oil developments have been associated with negative impacts on smallholders. How can the negative effects of oil palm for smallholders and the environment be mitigated?

Gender roles in the informal sector

There is a clear division when it comes to gender and labour within the palm oil sector. In the informal smallholder setting, women and children tend to plant and manage on-farm oil palm trees and plantations, whereas industrial harvesting tends to be men's work and only men are hired. However, in industrial plantations, women and children often collect fruits and carry them to local presses for extraction for family use. Women collect wood, break and cook nuts, and run the press, although sometimes the male head of household or paid relatives help. Women also market oil palm products, which gives them control over household income; they give part of this to the husband for his needs. The production and marketing of palm wine are exclusively reserved for men. The use of oil palm wood is shared by men and women. The collection of beetle larvae is a men's activity, whereas commercialization of larvae is entrusted to women. The distribution of income from oil palm is generally advantageous for women, notwithstanding the hard work involved.

Oil palm and future well-being

Production in Tshopo and Mongala provinces is characterized by the juxtaposition of two operating systems: agroindustry, represented by Feronia Inc. and EBG; and the informal artisanal sector. Oil palm is known to generate many positive social, cultural and economic benefits for various stakeholders in the province. Unfortunately, local civil society organizations leaders interviewed for this article

Oil palm – a part of life...

Agriculture is the principal activity for more than 80% of the rural population in DR Congo. They grow food crops and plantation crops such as coffee and cacao that provide nutrition, construction materials, medicines and other products. Oil palm, which is native to tropical Africa, is also very culturally and economically important: 80% of production is used for local consumption and supporting local livelihoods; and 20% is used for manufacturing industrial derivatives such as soaps, cosmetics, inks, resins and chemicals such as fatty esters and methyl esters for domestic use. Local production still does not meet all the national demand.

Crude palm oil is processed and used with other vegetable oils for cooking (as margarine, vegetable fat and frying oil). Palm products are also used by various local industries for making soap, cosmetics, and sawn timber for furniture, rustic construction and public works such as bridges and buildings. Infants, young brides and breastfeeding mothers use skin lotions based on palm oil. Palm wine is a popular drink. Larvae collected from oil palm trees are in high demand as a food. Palm heart, the core of young stems (locally called macaroni) is very popular. In order to produce oil palm wine and larvae, the plant must be killed. To meet the growing demand in Congolese cities for wine, larvae and palm hearts, young plants are often harvested completely.

Oil palm shells, which make up some 8–10% of the total weight of fresh fruit bunches, are used as fuel, with other residues used as feed for livestock, poultry and fish farming. Palm oil is mixed with extracts from other plants and used in traditional medicines to treat cramp, blocked sinuses, wet coughs, colds and other ailments such as sinusitis. The bicarbonate from burnt palm nut shells is used when cooking cassava leaves, and also has therapeutic virtues. Palm branches are used for ornamentation and various cultural rites in birth, initiation, marriage and death ceremonies. In fact, oil palm products accompany every rural Congolese person from birth until death.



Artisanal extraction of palm oil in the province of Thsopo. Photo: Patrick Matata, Tropenbos DR Congo

reported many negative environmental impacts (RAIO RDC 2016), such as deforestation and devastating effects on forest ecosystems, including environmental pollution from untreated waste, and loss of habitat and biodiversity. Local presses are the main producers of two types of oil palm in Tshopo, one from the nut, and one from the kernel. Although artisanal production is increasingly important, it still does not meet all industry and households needs.

Revival of the oil palm industry must increase local well-being by placing people at the heart of economic activities, and must not debase or enslave local populations. In DR Congo, industrial plantations are indispensable for production, but are often linked to the impoverishment and exclusion of smallholders, who are also forced to sell their labour. Local people living in and around industrial concessions currently face restrictions on where they are allowed to exploit wild trees and their own plantations to produce oil, wine and other products.

Buying back the local production of fresh fruit bunches instead of restricting smallholders would encourage growth and improve relations between companies and farmers while integrating them into a more inclusive value chain to guarantee improved profits for all. Such collaboration between artisanal and industrial exploitation is thus considered inevitable, even imperative, in meeting the goals of well-being and inclusiveness. To achieve this, an inclusive development policy is the only viable option in the long term. With harvests of oil palm almost weekly from the third year after planting, oil palm is a tree of the future for smallholders and industry, with added value, especially for those preparing to retire, guaranteeing an income where before there was none.



Heaps of fresh palm nuts spread out for sale at a local market in Kisangani, DR Congo. Photo: Dieubéni Bofoe

Co-management

Managing areas of industrial concessions not planted with oil palm can contribute to improved relationships between local people and companies, who can together define the use of space and the responsibility of each stakeholder. Since 1911, indigenous peoples have lost land that was taken by companies that considered it vacant, and did not receive any compensation. Thus, to be truly inclusive, co-management must be accompanied by substantial compensation for indigenous people who have been waiting for more than a century for such justice.

Smallholders are the main suppliers of domestic palm oil. Therefore, their views must be taken into account in the development of all relevant agricultural policies for the whole country. Given the importance of oil palm products in everyday life in DR Congo, policies must support the sustainable development of local and valuable products such as palm wine and beetle larvae. Bars serving palm wine are places of conviviality, debate and socialization (Nkoko Lipambala 2008). Trees that are taller than 12 metres are difficult regarding harvesting of the fruit, and in such cases, the tree is destructively harvested for producing wine and larvae. And the production of oil palm crafts items should be promoted to encourage sustainable livelihoods for forest-dependent populations.

More research on sustainable production of palm oil is needed, to meet a threefold challenge faced in DR Congo. There is a need to meet the growing global demand for vegetable oil, a need to produce more per hectare whilst respecting biodiversity and the environment, and a need to integrate impacts of an emerging biofuels sector. Among the noted solutions, is the ecological intensification of existing plantations, spatial management for reasoned site selection, and adding value to quality oil.

Conclusion

The oil palm industry in DR Congo is being reborn after years of decay. This was sparked by an increasing national demand for palm oil, mostly due to demographic growth. The rebirth was also by the use of palm oil in diverse industries, and by the increased demand for other products derived from the crop. Long-abandoned industrial plantations have been rejuvenated, small family farms have multiplied, and old and obsolete industrial mills are being modernized to meet the growing needs of the national market.

In addition to the palm oil industry, this article demonstrates that for many households, oil palm plays a more important role in the lives of local people in DR Congo. For smallholders, oil palm is part of a broader strategy to reduce poverty, while at the same time representing enormous potential and investment opportunities. Many smallholders are able to generate regular revenue by growing palm oil. And with a daily consumption of 0.4–0.7 litres per family, palm oil is, for the vast majority of households in Tshopo and Mongala, the only vegetable oil.

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