



Press Information

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

21 November 2011

Palm Oil Need Not Harm Environment or Local Communities, says New Study

The exponential growth in the palm oil sector, which accounts for a third of the total global trade of 130 million tons of vegetable oil annually, is strongly challenged by indigenous peoples and civil society organisations. Indiscriminate land clearing and acquisition for oil palm plantations is resulting in rapid habitat loss, species extinctions and alarming greenhouse gas emissions. It has also led to the dispossession of both indigenous peoples and the rural poor who depend traditionally on forest habitats for their survival.

With the global biofuel industry set to double between 2007-2017, the choices nations make today will have far reaching social, economic and environmental consequences. This new study by Forest Peoples Programme, SawitWatch, Samdhana Institute and RECOFTC - The Center for People and Forests, documents for the first time the various ways in which oil palm plantations are expanding across South East Asia. The study complements the better known experiences in Malaysia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea – the region’s top three producers accounting for over 80% of traded palm oil - with new case studies from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

“What we have found,” notes Abetnego Tarigan, Executive Director of the Indonesian NGO SawitWatch is that “while expansion is in part being driven by rising global demand for edible oils and biofuels, as well as escalating commodity prices and surging international investment, domestic policies are also significant. Governments are promoting oil palm to meet rising domestic demand for edible oils, to reduce their countries’ dependency on imported fossil fuels and to limit their loss of foreign exchange. In doing so, they need to take responsibility for the impacts of their domestic policies.”

James Bampton, Program Coordinator for RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests, based in Bangkok notes: “Oil palm need not be bad news for local people. After all, it has been part of mixed farming systems in West Africa for thousands of years. This study shows that where the circumstances are favourable, as in Thailand where lowland farmers, have relatively secure rights, they themselves are choosing to plant oil palm as a lucrative crop.”

The study, titled *Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia: trends and implications for local communities and indigenous peoples*, edited by Marcus Colchester and Sophie Chao, shows that the consequences of oil palm expansion for local communities and indigenous peoples are extremely varied: “When we compared the national experiences with palm oil” says Marcus Colchester, Director of the Forest Peoples Programme, “We found that where farmers’ and indigenous peoples’ lands are secure and where there is rule of law, oil palm tends to develop modestly as a small-holder crop with better outcomes for local people in terms of income, equity and livelihoods. However, where land rights are insecure or law

enforcement weak, oil palm tends to expand as very large company-owned estates with serious problems for prior occupants and workers, ensuing land conflicts and human rights abuse.”

“The implications of our findings are very clear” notes Nonette Royo of the Samdhana Institute based in the Philippines: “To ensure that oil palm only develops in beneficial ways, governments need to reform their laws and then enforce them so that local peoples’ rights are first respected and then protected. Without such protections, expansion is likely to benefit investors, traders and national elites at the expense of the rural poor and vulnerable ecosystems.”

The report presents case studies from across the region to back its policy recommendations as well as an assessment of the Round Table on Sustainable Oil, the premier agency tasked with minimizing the environmental and social impacts of rising regional palm oil consumption.

To download the report visit: <http://www.forestpeoples.org/oil-palm-expansion-in-south-east-asia-trends-implications-local-communities-indigenous-peoples>

Ends.

Notice to Editors:

The 9th Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil will meet in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, on 22 - 24 November 2011.

Available for interviews during the meeting:

Norman Jiwan, SawitWatch: Tel: +6281315613536

Marcus Colchester, Forest Peoples Programme: Tel: + 44 795 294 3481

A Press Briefing will be held on 21 November in Kota Kinabalu. Contact Norman Jiwan, Tel: +6281315613536, E-Mail: norman@sawitwatch.or.id for details.

Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia: Trends and implications for local communities and indigenous peoples by Marcus Colchester and Sophie Chao (eds.) with Jonas Dallinger, H.E.P. Sokhannaro, Vo Thai Dan and Jo Villanueva:

<http://www.forestpeoples.org/oil-palm-expansion-in-south-east-asia-trends-implications-local-communities-indigenous-peoples>

Published by:

- **Forest Peoples Programme:** 1c Fosseyway Business Centre, Stratford Road, Moreton-in-Marsh, GL56 9NQ, England. Tel: + 44 1608 652893, Fax: +44 1608 652878
E-mail: marcus@forestpeoples.org, sophie@forestpeoples.org. www.forestpeoples.org
- **SawitWatch:** Taman Bogor Baru Blok C1 No 10, Kel Tegalega, Kec Bogor Tengah, Indonesia. Tel/fax: +62 251 8311841, E-mail: info@sawitwatch.or.id. www.sawitwatch.or.id
- **RECOFTC - The Center for People and Forests:** P.O.Box 1111, Kasetsart University, Bangkok 10903, Thailand. Tel: +66 (0)2 940 5700, Email: prabha.chandran@recoftc.org. www.recoftc.org
- **Samdhana Institute:** No. 25, 30th corner 12th Streets, Nazareth, Cagayan de Oro City 9000, Philippines. Tel: +639189396393, Email: nonette@samdhana.org. www.samdhana.org

With support from the **Rights and Resources Initiative:** 1238 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Suite

300, Washington, DC 20007, USA. Tel: +1 202 470 3900. Email: info@rightsandresources.org.
www.rightsandresources.org