



## The drive for accumulation

*Environmental contestation and agrarian support to Mexico's oil palm expansion*

Antonio Castellanos-Navarrete and Kees Jansen

LDPI  
Working  
Paper

43



# **The drive for accumulation: environmental contestation and agrarian support to Mexico's oil palm expansion**

By Antonio Castellanos-Navarrete and Kees Jansen

*Published by:*

**The Land Deal Politics Initiative**

[www.iss.nl/ldpi](http://www.iss.nl/ldpi)

[landpolitics@gmail.com](mailto:landpolitics@gmail.com)

*in collaboration with:*

**Institute for Development Studies (IDS)**

University of Sussex

Library Road

Brighton, BN1 9RE

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 1273 606261

Fax: +44 1273 621202

E-mail: [ids@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ids@ids.ac.uk)

Website: [www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)

**Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS)**

**International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)**

P.O. Box 29776

2502 LT The Hague

The Netherlands

Tel: +31 70 426 0664

Fax: +31 70 426 0799

E-mail: [iss.icas@gmail.com](mailto:iss.icas@gmail.com)

Website: [www.iss.nl/icas](http://www.iss.nl/icas)

**The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS)**

School of Government, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17

Bellville 7535, Cape Town

South Africa

Tel: +27 21 959 3733

Fax: +27 21 959 3732

E-mail: [info@plaas.org.za](mailto:info@plaas.org.za)

Website: [www.plaas.org.za](http://www.plaas.org.za)

**The Polson Institute for Global Development**

Department of Development Sociology

Cornell University

133 Warren Hall

Ithaca NY 14853

United States of America

Tel: +1 607 255-3163

Fax: +1 607 254-2896

E-mail: [ta12@cornell.edu](mailto:ta12@cornell.edu)

Website: [polson.cals.cornell.edu](http://polson.cals.cornell.edu)

©July 2013 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher and the author.

Published with support from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Atlantic Philanthropies, Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Ford Foundation and Miserior.

## Abstract

Oil palm expansion has been related to rural dispossession, environmental degradation and rural resistance. In this paper we explore the politics and impact of farmer-based oil palm expansion in Chiapas, Mexico. In relation to the debate on the greening of the agrarian question, we engage with the theses of 'environmentalism of the poor' and 'green grabbing' and point at the problematic centrality of the concept of 'enclosure' in these theories. We argue that in absence of enclosure, poor peasants and farmers may strive for further market integration. Peasant engagement with capital accumulation in Mexico undermined green efforts to curb oil palm production. In this context, environmental movements were unsuccessful in contesting the state's oil palm programme. Our analysis suggests that a green agrarian question solely focusing on enclosure is unable to explain agrarian and environmental processes.

**Keywords:** biofuels; environmentalism; green grabbing; labour; political ecology; social movements.

## About the Authors

**Antonio Castellanos-Navarrete** is a researcher at the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (KTI) Group at Wageningen University (The Netherlands). He has explored environmental issues pertaining to rural development in relation to land management from both social and natural sciences. His most recent research focuses on the green agrarian question in relation to the Mesoamerican oil palm expansion. **Kees Jansen** is Associate Professor at KTI. He works on political ecology and agricultural and food technology in relation to international development (mainly in Latin America).

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Abril Aidee Ruiz Medina for her skillful assistance during this research. This article greatly benefited from comments made by Wendy Woldford. We thank her for her thorough review. We also would like to thank farmers, their organisations, civil society and government officials for their support during fieldwork. Finally we thank the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) and the Mexican Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT, by its Spanish acronym) for providing the necessary funding to carry out this research.

## Table of Contents

<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 The study region and methods.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 Biofuels in Chiapas: a contradictory state project .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4 The fruits of labour: farmers and rural workers in Chiapas.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5 Popular responses to oil palm: rural politics and environmentalisms.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6 Green narratives amidst agrarian change.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>7 Conclusions: The green agrarian question in absence of enclosure .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>17</b>

## 1 Introduction

Large land acquisitions and high-input production models have generated much concern over the expansion of plantation crops for biofuel. Both the 2000s commodity boom<sup>1</sup> and the emergent biofuel market led to rapid oil palm expansions throughout the tropical and subtropical belts. The growth of large scale oil palm plantations has resulted in major economic gains, particularly for investors, but has also led to extensive deforestation (Obidzinski et al. 2012), land conflicts (Hall 2011) and resistance in rural areas (Gerber 2011). However, how to evaluate the expansion of oil palm when the producers are almost exclusively family farmers, such as in this case study of oil palm expansion in Chiapas, Mexico? In the literature there is little analysis of impacts and political responses by locals when peasants themselves are involved in oil palm expansions.

In southern Mexico, the Chiapas government has supported a large number of smallholder farmers and rainforest settlers, including indigenous people, with oil palm cultivation as part of its promotion of biofuels. This state programme triggered environmental opposition but also achieved wide acceptance or rural people. This large rural support for the Chiapas biofuel programme might seem striking in a region known for its peasant uprisings against the government (García de Leon 1997), particularly by the *Zapatistas* in the late '90s (Harvey 1998). The rapid oil palm planting by family farmers despite environmental critiques also contradicts conceptions of harmonious relations between environmental and agrarian actors (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). This paper aims to describe the biofuel project in Chiapas, and to analyse the local politics associated with oil palm expansion, as well as possible contradictions between environmental and agrarian demands.

We explore contrasting views about agrarian and environmental change related to oil palm expansion to contribute to the 'green agrarian question' debate (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010; Gerber and Veuthey 2010). While the agrarian question focused on how capitalism is a process of structuring relationships between agrarian classes, with the state and with other economic sectors (Lenin 1967; Brenner 1986; Kautsky 1988), the green agrarian question also considers impacts on nature and the limits and possibilities resulting from properties of nature and technology in a particular time and place (Jansen 1998). Within the current debate, resource grabbing or 'enclosure' are often deemed to be the main mechanisms behind accumulation. Resources commonly grabbed span from land to common rainforest areas, genes or public water. Under these circumstances, political responses have been mainly conceptualised in terms of resistance.

Enclosure refers here to the exclusion of people from access to means of production. Enclosure is closely related to the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession', to indicate that enclosure is not just 'primitive' or initial accumulation, as suggested by Marx, but a key mechanism in contemporary capitalism (Harvey 2005a). Accumulation by dispossession is seen as a recurrent process through which capitalists are able to open up new frontiers for profit making. For example, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, public knowledge infrastructure for integrated pest management in Kazakhstan was dismantled and replaced with pesticide based pest control favouring private sector pest management (Toleubayev et al. 2010). Currently we observe a theoretical emphasis on enclosure/accumulation by dispossession in the discussion on the greening of the agrarian question. This emphasis also shapes the analysis on relations between capitalism and the environment.

We identify two predominant arguments put forward about the relationships between capital and environmentalism. One research strand focuses on how rural people resist enclosure (e.g. Guha

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on averages for oil palm prices for the year 2000 and 2011, oil palm prices have increased by 412% (IndexMundi, 2012). Profit gains were less as input costs increased too (e.g. a 416% increase for nitrogen fertiliser).

1993; Swyngedouw 2005). Enclosure of the commons by investors, often aided by the state, significantly impacts the poor, whose livelihoods depend on access to productive resources. Thus, enclosure, in occasions, leads to popular protests often framed in environmental terms and sometimes in coalition with environmental organisations (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). This is exemplified by rural mobilisations against large-scale dam projects in India. The second perspective refers to enclosure as 'green grabbing' (Fairhead et al. 2012): investors, corporations or the state transform use values of nature into new exchange values (e.g. carbon markets) or appropriate resources on environmental grounds (e.g. claiming 'marginal' land for more sustainable biofuel production) (e.g. McAfee 1999; Kelly 2011; Osborne 2011). The two positions consider a different role for environmentalists. The first thesis refers to the 'environmentalisms of the poor' (Martinez-Alier 2002), while the second thesis usually emphasises top-down environmental impositions with green discourses as a 'Foucauldian' tool for disciplining and governing (Luke 1997; Agrawal 2005).

We will argue here that none of these theses held true in the process of oil palm expansion in Chiapas and that we need to develop an alternative or complementary view on the greening of the agrarian question in absence of enclosure. In absence of land grabbing, farmers and their organisations might opt for support rather than resistance if conditions are good enough to improve their livelihoods, even if costly for the environment. This implies that environmentalism is contingently related to capitalism: the poor, the marginalised or the exploited both destroy and defend the environment; the capitalists can benefit from destructing it or protecting it.

## 2 The study region and methods

This study examines two cases of recent agrarian change involving rapid oil palm expansion in Chiapas: the southern Lacandon rainforest and coastal Soconusco (Figure 1). The southern Lacandon is a region with shrinking tall and medium evergreen rainforests neighbouring the *Montes Azules* Biosphere Reserve and constituted by Marqués de Comillas and Benemérito de las Américas municipalities. Coastal Chiapas or the Soconusco stretches from Mapastepec to Suchiate municipalities<sup>2</sup> and is home to mangroves and herbaceous marshes protected since 1995 through the *Encrucijada* Biosphere Reserve. These two regions have been colonisation frontiers but with completely different purposes. The Soconusco was opened to investments by national and foreign capital in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in an attempt to create large-scale modern capitalist agriculture (García de León 1997). In the southern Lacandon rainforest, instead, the state-led land redistribution to landless families in the early 1970s sought to ease agrarian tensions elsewhere (De Vos 2002).

In the southern Lacandon region many peasants from central and southern Mexico arrived with government support in the 1970s. Remaining lands were occupied in the 1980s by Chiapas landless indigenous peasants. Land grants ranged from 50 hectares in the *new population centres* to 20 hectares in *ejidos* (social property) per person. These relatively large holdings probably prevented later participation in the 1994 EZLN<sup>3</sup> uprising. Initial stratification, in some cases resulting from borderland smuggling (e.g. cattle or drugs), made a small group of settlers particularly wealthy, some accessing now 150 to 200 hectares. These larger farmers specialised in cattle, often reaching shared cattle arrangements<sup>4</sup> with farmers lacking capital. Poor farmers, often indigenous, instead kept few cattle and cultivated a minor proportion of their land, sometimes as little as two hectares out of their

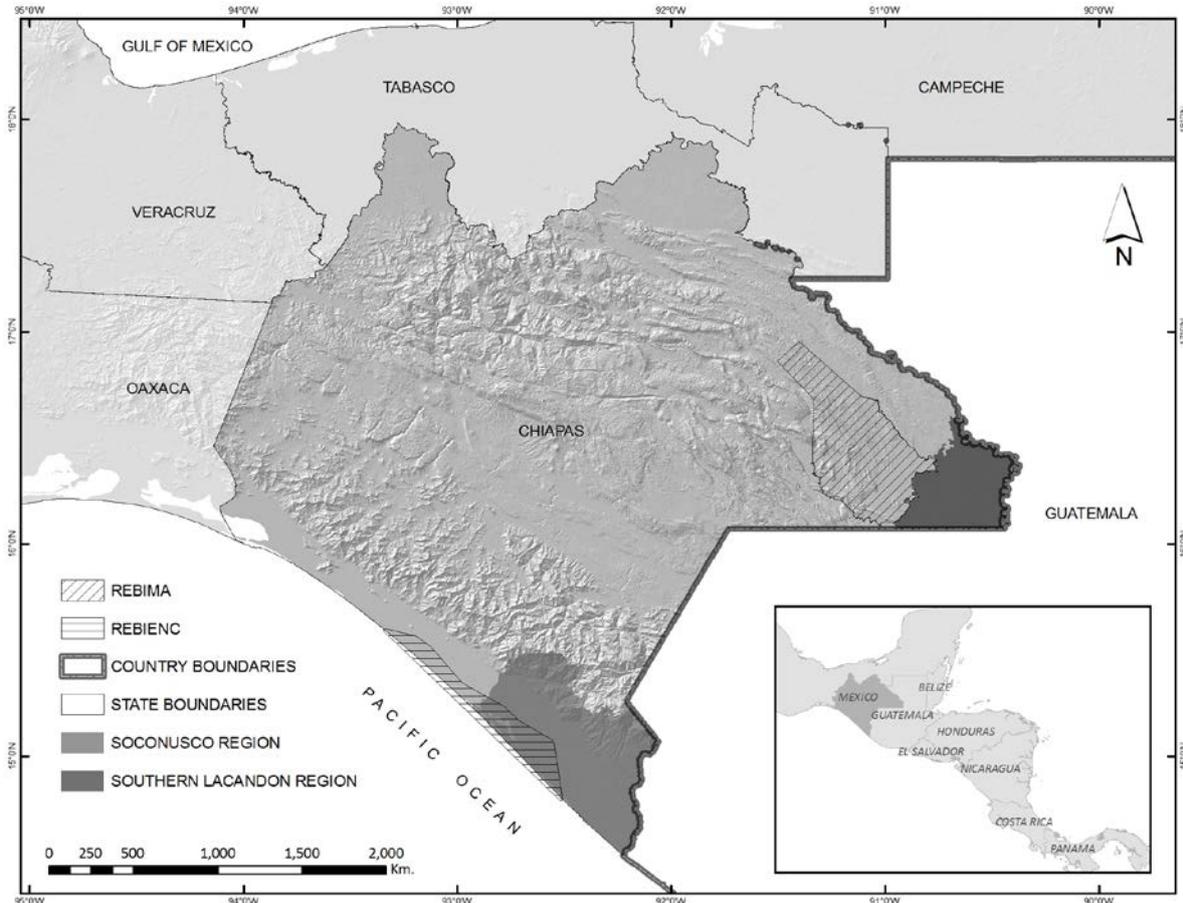
---

<sup>2</sup> Oil palm can be found from Arriaga to Suchiate municipalities. For this study we focused on the Soconusco region with particular emphasis on Huixtla and Villa Comaltitlán municipalities.

<sup>3</sup> The Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN, by its Spanish acronym). Unlike inhabitants of the *Cañadas* region in Chiapas, settlers in the southern Lacandon region counted on significant state support since their arrival.

<sup>4</sup> Shared cattle arrangements refer to the fact wealthy farmers without enough land provide cattle to capital constrained farmers. These farmers fatten the cattle for wealthy producers to sell receiving in exchange part of the profit.

20 or even 50 hectares, with some food and cash crops. When oil palm was introduced it attracted both middle farmers, who cultivated this ‘luxury crop’ in relatively large plots (i.e. 12 hectares on average), and smallholders, who planted the crop in smaller plots (i.e. eight hectares on average).<sup>5</sup> All farmers sold cattle to invest in oil palm with government subsidies and family labour investments being more important for poorer peasants.



**Figure 1.** Selected study regions in Chiapas constituted by Soconusco and the southern Lacandon region. REBIMA stands for the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve and REBIENC for the *La Encrucijada* Biosphere Reserve.

The point of departure for oil palm expansion was different in Soconusco. Wealthy families or entrepreneurs established *fincas* or large properties in both the *Sierra Madre*, where they cultivated coffee, and the coastal plains, where they produced bananas or held large cattle herds. Railways connected this region to distant markets favouring widespread cash crop cultivation. Landless peasants did however successfully struggle for land throughout the 20th century (Reyes Maros 2002). The Mexican government compensated landowners for their land losses. Population growth and land subdivision left peasants with small plots while the number of *avencidados* (*ejido* members with no land) increased. *Avencidados*, the most destitute social group in both regions, have been totally dependent on rural jobs and renting land. The first oil palm plantations in Soconusco were already established around 1952 by Johann Bernstoff, a German coffee landowner (interview, 24 May 13, Finca La Lima). First, farmers there planted oil palm in 1987 with state support. However, the crop expanded especially throughout the 2000s, with the Chiapas government intermittently prioritising this crop in the region. A final boost occurred for oil palm expansion since 2007. Poor

<sup>5</sup> Data derived from an oil palm survey carried out for 215 oil palm growers in both regions between August 2012 and July 2013.

peasants planted oil palm in medium to small size plots (i.e. four hectares on average). Access to capital was for many the major obstacle to enter the oil palm industry.

The organisation of oil palm processing is also different for both regions. In the Lacandon region, two private sector companies compete for oil palm fresh bunches produced by family farmers. A Mexican company ensures their supply through a commercial agreement with the only local producer organisation, an agreement eased by government intervention, and uses a network of collection sites. Its foreign competitor focuses on single medium and a few large producers (up to 300 ha) and provides better prices, technical assistance and farm-gate collection. Processing mills for both companies were located in Palenque, about 240 km away from the region. In the Soconusco region processing relies on three types of schemes. First, the Bernstoff family established a small processing plant in 1957 to be followed by a second one in 1991. These plants have been mostly supplied by their own plantations. Second, the private sector established two much bigger processing facilities in 1996 and 1997 which are mostly supplied by family farmers, with a few purchased and leased large *fincas*. And third, two cooperatives established their own processing mills supplied by their members. The first cooperative was set up in 1986 and the second one in 2012.

This study is based on fieldwork carried out in three periods (October to December 2011, March to November 2012, and May to July 2013) in both study regions as well as in major cities including the state capital – Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Data were derived from 60 in-depth interviews with several actors including private sector managers, technicians, producers, workers and environmental organisations. Interviews focused on questions over the biofuel chain, land use changes, production, farmer incorporation (state programmes, innovation and credit), the organisation of labour, ensuing conflicts from oil palm expansion and actors' views on environmental issues, agrarian change and oil palm politics following a political ecology approach. This information was complemented through participant observation during key periods, as well as collection of relevant documents and statistical data.

### 3 Biofuels in Chiapas: a contradictory state project

The recent introduction and expansion of oil palm in Chiapas can only be explained by the strong intervention role of the state. This section raises questions about the state's promotion of oil palm as biofuel, the role of environmental discourses and the adaptations of the initial plans when economic prospects changed. The promotion of oil palm is a recent phenomenon. In April 2007, Colombia, the only country with significant biofuel production within the Mesoamerica Project, proposed to foster biofuel production within such shared framework. This proposal led to the Mesoamerican Biofuel Programme (MBP) which aimed at setting up both biodiesel processing plants and a research network. With funding from the Inter-American Development Bank and recipient countries, Colombia established biodiesel processing plants in El Salvador, Honduras and Chiapas in Mexico. The state-owned MBP biodiesel processing plant in Chiapas was officially opened in November 2010.<sup>6</sup> The Mexican government also invested heavily in oil palm promotion: from 2007 to 2012, over 80 official press releases were issued by the Chiapas government on both oil palm and biofuels. Government bulletins on oil palm as biofuel were picked up as news in local media and ensured a constant flux of newspaper reports praising green plantations and the new green economy. This media coverage, along with heavy public advertising in all formats, constructed Chiapas as an environmental forefront with special emphasis on oil palm as biodiesel.

---

<sup>6</sup>The capacity of this plant was later upgraded from the initial 8,000 to 30,000 litres/day through national and Chiapas financing. Another state-owned plant in Chiapas' capital producing a small 8,000 litres/day complemented processing capacity (Gobierno del Estado 2010a).

The formal Chiapas state discourse was heavily environmental: oil palm expansion was supposed to serve green ends and it was coupled with sustainability thinking through two distinct state projects. Firstly, oil palm became a source for 'clean' fuel with biofuels from the MBP biodiesel plant as a key political flagship. The biodiesel it produced provided fuel to public buses in two major cities, eagerly used as an iconic example in public advertising. Secondly, oil palm expansion was promoted as part of the so-called 'productive reconversion' effort, a label derived from the National Development Strategy (Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 2007) which explicitly aimed at deterring deforestation over rainforest frontiers by combining payments for environmental services (PES), reforestation and commercial tree plantations. The assumption underlying the National Development Plan was clearly stated by the Chiapas governor in 2012: "poverty also has lots to do with environmental deterioration" (public speech, 25 September 2012, San Cristóbal de Las Casas). Increased market involvement by rural people and natural resource valuation were the proposed solutions to halt deforestation. This was a neoliberal recipe well in agreement with recent global policy measures (e.g. the REDD<sup>+</sup> mechanism) and some green economy postulates fighting climate change. In this context, the oil palm expansion project was shaped by neoliberal ideology and focused on achieving greater integration of farmers into markets. In Chiapas, the 'productive reconversion' strategy was proposed for all regions, with rainforests or not. Both state projects served to present oil palm as the remedy for exhausted soils, denuded landscapes or climate change. The image of a 'beckoning future' (Jansen and Gupta 2009) of a green, small farmer friendly and economically dynamic oil palm/biofuel production was tarnished by the harsh realities of commodity production. While palm oil was considered as a possible feedstock in 2007, by 2011 this option was unfeasible. Global biofuel production relies on both 'market-driven' ethanol and 'policy-dependent' biodiesel (Doering III and Tynner 2009; Lamers et al. 2011). Low maize prices in the US, and especially cheap sugar in Brazil, favoured a rapid ethanol production expansion which in 2009 amounted to 73% of all biofuels produced (Lamers et al. 2011). Sugar processing plants in Brazil can flexibly produce both sugar and ethanol and shift the ratio between these end products according to market prices (Novo et al. 2010). Costly food oils necessary for biodiesel production can hardly compete with cheap maize or sugar, thus, biodiesel processing is in many cases only possible when favourable policies exist. In 2003, EU mandatory biodiesel quotas on fuel combined with subsidies and tax exemptions in Germany made it possible to use rapeseed as a feedstock. Later, the withdrawal of German subsidies in 2007 incentivised biodiesel imports over costly local rapeseed. Palm oil then appeared as the ideal biodiesel source, being the cheapest food oil, but instead, heavily subsidised soybean took the lead limiting feedstock palm oil imports into the EU to 11% (Lamers et al. 2011). At the end of the 2000s, rising oil palm prices made palm oil biodiesel production uncertain, being often unprofitable (Sheng Goh and Teong Lee 2010; Mekhilef et al. 2011). Mexico was not an exception.

Initial plans considered biodiesel processing relying on crude palm oil from any of the eight processing mills in Chiapas. However, high palm oil prices during 2011 discouraged Chiapas state purchases (interview with processing mill manager, 28 November 2011, Cantón Santa Elena) and resulted in a shift to *Jatropha curcas* and other non-edible oils as feedstock (informal conversation with MBP plant manager, 11 November 2011, Puerto Chiapas). There were no policies to counter this withdrawal from palm oil. The success of biofuel production normally relies on state subsidies for biodiesel processing or the implementation of mandatory quotas<sup>7</sup> for the fuel industry. In Mexico, none of these conditions were present (SAGARPA 2009), suffocating incipient biodiesel investments. By 2012, the only two existing private biodiesel processing plants in Mexico, located in the centre and north of the country, were already abandoned (interview with processing mill manager, 9 November 2011, Acapetahua; Torres 2011). Existing state incentives focused instead on increasing oil

---

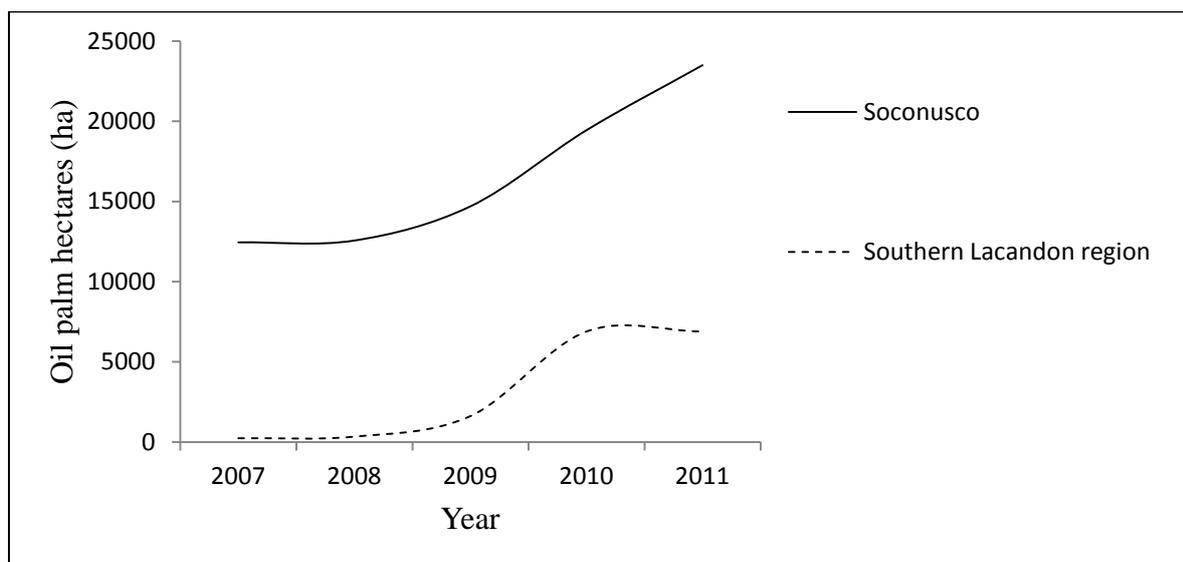
<sup>7</sup> Mandatory quotas refer to the state-imposed obligation on the fuel industry to blend some percentage of their fuel with biofuels. In Mexico, biofuel quotas were only established for ethanol in three major urban regions.

palm cultivation. In the 1990s the Secretary of Agriculture (SAGARPA, by its Spanish acronym) agreed with the food industry that oil palm fruit bunches in Mexico would be bought from farmers by processing plants with a 12.5% rate above international prices to favour oil palm cultivation (interview with processing mill manager, 21 October 2011, Palenque).

As a result, oil palm has not been used on a large scale for biofuel production, although cultivation has expanded because of state support. Despite the little role played by oil palm in biodiesel processing, oil palm cultivation did not disappear in environmental narratives offered by the government. But it can be argued that narratives provided on different occasions became inconsistent or even contradictory. In some occasions, government communications emphasised palm oil as a green fuel, and even as a non-food (Gobierno del Estado 2010a). In others, government officials insisted upon palm oil for food purposes (Gobierno del Estado 2010b). These contradictions reflected the changing political and economic conditions that gave rise to and shaped the state programme for oil palm expansion.

#### 4 The fruits of labour: farmers and rural workers in Chiapas

The Chiapas government initiated a massive oil palm planting campaign in 2007, combining heavy advertising with the introduction of improved varieties and free distribution of seedlings to anyone interested. Varieties originating from Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia were released at regional nurseries. The Institute for Productive Reconversion and Bioenergetics (IRBIO, by its Spanish acronym) handed over to farmers a one-time 1,000 pesos<sup>8</sup> land-clearing subsidy per hectare along with the plant material. This institute implemented the 'productive reconversion' strategy and it mostly focused on tree crop planting throughout Chiapas. Farmers received about four million oil palm plants in only four years (interview with IRBIO staff, 4 November 2012, Tuxtla Gutiérrez). This resulted in a rapid pace of oil palm expansion (Figure 2). Oil palm cultivation was concentrated in the northern and southern Lacandon rainforest lowlands, and in coastal Soconusco. While in many countries oil palm expansion has been controlled by landed elites (e.g. Marin et al. 2011) or transnationals (Borras Jr et al. 2010), oil palm expansion in Chiapas was driven by poor and middle-income farmers. Government subsidies provided much needed capital for oil palm cultivation, providing the conditions for farmers to integrate further into the market. Capital-hungry peasants and farmers entering oil palm production had to accept the conditions implied in credit requests to obtain state support.



<sup>8</sup> Equivalent to US\$97 in June 2008.

**Figure 2.** Oil palm hectares for both Soconusco and southern Lacandon regions between the years 2007 and 2011. Source: SIAP-SAGARPA 2012.

The Humid Tropic programme, created by the Secretary of Agriculture in 2009, fostered agro-industrial crops. This programme, with a special focus on Mexican humid tropic lands, granted farmers subsidies of about 20–30% of their credit requests. Credit receiving farmers were obliged to employ SAGARPA-approved rural agencies for the necessary paperwork, to establish agreements with certified finance suppliers and to pay credit interests in the order of 12–13%. Farmers who built their own trust to ensure credit repayment were favoured over others. Market integration was not only deepened through financial mechanisms but also via the innovation processes at play.

The Humid Tropics programme came along with a detailed standard technology package (Sandoval Esquivel, n.d.) based on a high-input agriculture model emphasising herbicide use and inorganic fertilisers. Technical assistance followed this approach.<sup>9</sup> Such a technology package fit well with the processing mills' credit schemes that provided farmers with inorganic fertilisers. We consider that inputs contributed somewhat less to farmers' integration into markets than credits for two reasons. First, most farmers do not follow fertilisation recommendations. Farmers in Soconusco had access to high quality soils which reduced fertiliser needs. In the southern Lacandon region, farmers often applied few inputs to avoid indebtedness, especially during the initial 2.5 unproductive years. And second, further integration was sometimes deterred by the private sector itself. For instance, processing mills sometimes limited credit supply for individuals, especially during initial years (interview with farmer, 22 October 2012, Boca de Chajul), or adapted credit offers to seasonal yield variations (interview with processing mill manager, 9 November 2011, Barrio Nuevo). Processing mills avoided to lead producers into indebtedness as they were unable to recover costs if farmers bailed out (mills were not allowed to gain control over *ejido* land).

This raises questions about the limits to enclosure and the relationship between land concentration through enclosure and oil palm expansion observed elsewhere (e.g. McCarthy 2010; Alonso-Fradejas 2012). In Chiapas, oil palm-driven enclosure or land disputes have been rare. In the southern Lacandon region, rural lands were mostly held as *ejido*,<sup>10</sup> a social tenure regime created as a result of the 1910 revolution. Tenure changed in 1992 into a semi-social form (Assies 2007), in which common land subdivisions and land transactions were permitted. Nevertheless, the *ejido* assembly, a form of collective decision-making in place, prevented land grabbing in this area of Mexico. Most communities permitted selling to "*peasants, like us*" (e.g. interview with *ejido* authorities, 29 August 2012, López Mateos), but not to investors.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Lacandon region with 97% as *ejido* land (INEGI 2007), Soconusco had lands held as private property besides *ejidos*. For both Huixtla and Villa Comaltitlán municipalities at the Chiapas coast, private property averaged 39% versus 61% under *ejido* tenure (INEGI 2007). Despite the presence of private land, processing mills willing to ensure their oil palm fruit supply through plantations had few opportunities to expand. Banana companies

---

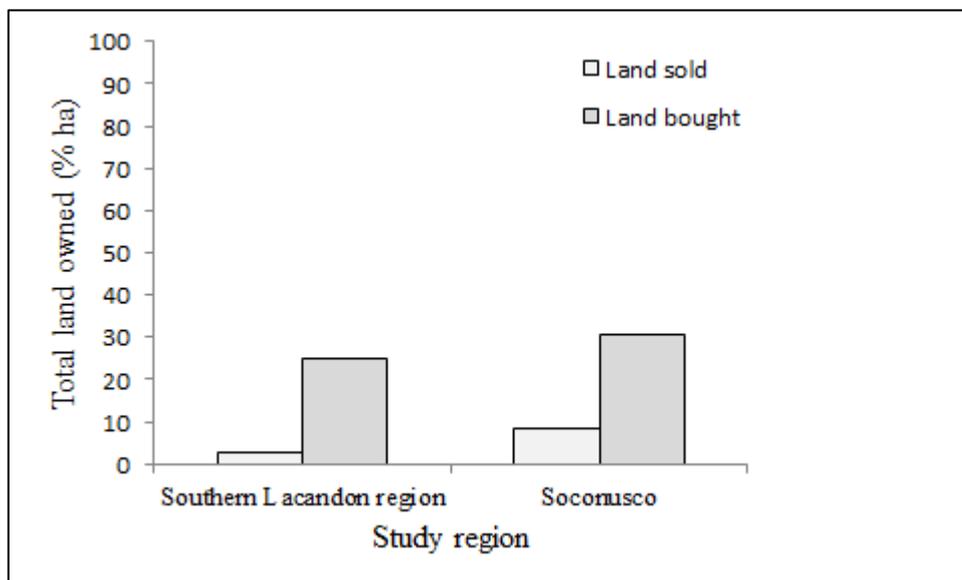
<sup>9</sup> There were exceptions. Innovation within the Humid Tropics programme was carried out by 'Agencies for Innovation Management', or AGIs by its Spanish acronym. An AGI in Soconusco promoted organic farming practices to reduce fertiliser costs. Although the innovation system was largely top-down, officials occasionally turned a blind eye, thus providing the necessary flexibility.

<sup>10</sup> *Ejidos* are the most widespread tenure form in Mexico and a collective semi-social property form in which farmers are granted parcels and usufruct rights to common lands with limited capacities to sell and rent. Decisions on land use and other issues are partly dependent on the collective *ejido* assembly.

<sup>11</sup> The importance of these agreements is well reflected by the drastic land tenure changes verified in some *ejidos* lacking them. An extreme exception is provided by Rio Salinas, an small *ejido* fraught with conflict in the southern Lacandon region, where an investor bought about one third of all community lands (informal conversation with plantation manager, 24 August 2012). Agreements were also lacking in large *ejidos* where land transactions are considered a private affair, such as in Benemerito de Las Américas or Zamora Pico de Oro.

and the sugarcane mill present already occupied most private property before the coastal oil palm planting boom started in the early 2000s. Furthermore, not all landowners have interest in selling or even leasing land. “How can I let another guy cultivate my land?” asked a large landowner in disbelief when asked about land leases (interview, 12 November 2011, Tapachula). To date, private sector mills only have access to very few *ranchos*. At the time of writing, oil palm had not led to drastic modifications in land access.

If enclosure is not the prime mechanism of expansion of oil palm, one could ask the question to what extent land use for oil palm is related to social differentiation. Although wealthy cattle families had accumulated large land tracts in the southern Lacandon region, land was still an abundant and cheap resource in 2012. Wealth was more reflected in how much land a family was able to cultivate than by the amount owned, with poor families cropping sometimes as little as three hectares out of their 20 hectares. In this context, middle-income farmers cultivating oil palm were more focused on raising capital for this expensive crop than on expanding at the expense of their poor neighbours. Similarly, poor farmers who entered oil palm cultivation focused on coping with increased labour demands. The need for capital, in particular to cover labour costs, was large because local leaders who promoted oil palm in the region required association members to plant a minimum of five hectares<sup>12</sup> which led to the exclusion of the most capital- and labour-constrained households. Leaders requested five hectares to ensure oil palm expansion was successful (see next section). Interestingly, oil palm growers in this region bought on average more land that they sold pointing to an incipient land-based social differentiation process (Figure 3). In coastal Soconusco, oil palm cultivation was mostly undertaken by poor *ejido* farmers sometimes cropping as little as one hectare of oil palm. The region was characterised by a dynamic land market in which oil palm cultivation was related to land purchases but without accumulating much land. Some even avoided distress sales by leasing out their productive oil palm plots to others who would harvest them. Owners thus retained long-term access to their land.



**Figure 3.** Land sold and bought by oil palm growers expressed as % of total hectares owned per region. Data correspond to land transactions since oil palm planting, but not all are related to oil palm.

In terms of social differentiation, the arrival of oil palm had a more direct impact on labour relations than on land distribution. In the southern Lacandon region, both smallholders and middle-income

<sup>12</sup> While most farmers planted the required minimum of five hectares, floods or pests resulted sometimes in planted areas below five hectares.

farmers shifted from cattle to oil palm as degraded rainforest soils impeded cattle fattening in their middle size farms. Since the market favoured cattle heads over cattle kilos, only cattle farming with large herds and minimal investments was a profitable business. Farmers who shifted from cattle to oil palm suddenly found themselves needing large amounts of labour. This labour was provided by poor Mexican indigenous peasants but especially by poor Guatemalans from across the border. While Guatemalans had already been employed for maize production, even for relatively poor indigenous families, oil palm created an unprecedented labour demand. Even poor farmers started employing daily labourers at times to support them in oil palm production. A poor peasant from La Nueva Unión unequivocally stated: *“the change is that we work for ourselves now. My body never had rest before. But now with things changing I am happy with my work. When you work for someone else you have to come at the time he wants. Now if the sun is hot you can go and it is ok: we are our own bosses. I notice a lot of change. A hard life passed me. I feel it is a bit better now”* (interview with peasant, 1 September 2012). Unlike the southern Lacandon region, peasants in Soconusco employed others in schemes more complicated than daily payments.

Harvests in Soconusco were carried out by one or two bunch cutters who were followed by one or two workers who transported fruit bunches to collection points and hand-picked loose fruits from the ground. Each operation was paid differently. While some farmers employed two or three people, others hired a bunch cutter who would bring his own work gang. The cutter negotiated payments with both the farmer and his own helpers. Some farmers also pressured labour by not providing workers with necessary tools (e.g. the relatively expensive Malay knife); they have to acquire these themselves. Farmers also made low or incomplete payments to Guatemalans in the Lacandon region as they had less bargaining power and there were fewer employment opportunities. In short, farmers, including those with a recent semi-proletarian background, responded to economic pressure derived from market integration by reproducing capitalist exploitative relations with their workers.

## 5 Popular responses to oil palm: rural politics and environmentalisms

Accounts of rural resistance in Mesoamerica have necessarily focused on struggles for autonomy (Nash 1994) by independent organisations (Harvey 1998) since the 1994 EZLN uprising. These studies have sometimes tackled tensions and conflicts with pro-government factions (Leyva Solano and Burguete 2007). Thus, scholars have directed much attention to those resisting government interventions. Instead, in this section we will show how the analysis of how farmers negotiate, push for and consent to state interventions are also important to understanding agrarian change, in this case the success of the oil palm project in Chiapas. We argue that oil palm interventions by the state were a new and a weaker form of old clientelist politics. In the new form the formerly dominant National Peasant Confederation (CNC, by its Spanish acronym) had lost its central position in the rural political landscape. The CNC dominated rural politics at the time the single official party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), exerted political control through affiliated or closely related mass organisations. This was typically expressed by a community leader: *“[CNC] was the organisation allied with the PRI. It was like a power formula to win presidential and municipal elections, all those big slices”* (interview, 8 May 2013, Xochicalco Nuevo). The CNC concentrated political power by channelling most of the government support to rural areas and presenting peasant demands, in a context of clientelist relations. Since the 1970s, changing state policies and mobilisations by independent organisations gradually displaced the CNC for alternative and multiple channels (Harvey 1990), including cooperatives and other economic organisations, sometimes state designed.

In this context oil palm organisations rapidly sprouted up after the state’s oil palm programme started. Oil palm growers organised in cooperatives, which, in the southern Lacandon case, were also grouped in a second-level organisation or *Unión de Organizaciones*. Peasants knew economic

organisations were routinely privileged by the government in ways similar to old clientelist relations. Most support to rural producers was channelled through these organisations. While any producer was theoretically eligible for oil palm seedlings, in practice farmers had to join organisations to access them. *"In the Soconusco area we have about 35 cooperatives which form the Soconusco Regional Committee. When we have the palm, we already know how big the cake is, how much each organisation gets. [...] There is lots of demand, and if you are not organised, the truth is that it is very hard"*, a private sector manager explained (interview, 9 November 2011, Villa Comaltitlán). Such emphasis on organisations favoured the incorporation of middle-income and even poor peasants, sometimes to the detriment of the wealthy.

The wealthy realise that state support has targeted other agrarian classes. In Soconusco, cattle ranchers were caught by surprise as smallholders were quick to push for oil palm expansion. A talkative *ranchero*, president of a cattle association, commented sarcastically: *"we will just be left to witness the passing of the winners"* (interview, 27 November 2011, Villa Comaltitlán). He referred to the increasing number of palm growers favoured by most government subsidies, in stark contrast to their now decaying cattle association. He described a gloomy situation: associations closing down, stricter enforcement of existing cattle regulations while cattle were constantly smuggled from Guatemala and cattle ranchers dropping cattle. Wealthy cattle owners were late to be incorporated into oil palm production. The wealthy, indeed, were not always favoured by the government. *"I am not bitter with the government anymore"*, said Fernando, a northern blue-eyed farmer established in Tapachula. Fernando with some other large-scale producers established 840 hectares of oil palm in 1992. They did it after the Chiapas governor at the time *"insisted and insisted"*. *"They offered us credit but it was never given, they offered us a processing mill, and it was never built"*, added Fernando in disbelief (interview, 12 November 2011, Tapachula). They all suffered losses with two farmers even going bankrupt. While some profited, state support for oil palm in Chiapas was not specifically intended to benefit the rich, although they were not at a great disadvantage as they could invest with their resources. But due to the state's programme, oil palm cultivation was pioneered by smallholders in the coastal seasonally flooded soils where few opportunities existed before (see next section). Emphasis on organised farmers and peasants ensured widespread oil palm cultivation. As a consequence, class tensions were rare since rich landowners had the capacity to shift with relative ease to oil palm, even if late.

The particular modernisation trajectory of many farmers had a double rationality: from a technical and management perspective scale was important as a measure of success in government evaluations which were eminently quantitative; from a political perspective reaching more farmers was important to gain popular support during election times. Scale was in fact a recurrent topic in negotiations between organisations and the technical agency. *"We wanted to establish 1,000 hectares and then IRBIO's director said that we should reach 2,000 hectares. At the end IRBIO said 1,000 hectares was ok, but they left us a nursery for about 5,000 hectares. He got me into a hell of a mess"*, reckoned the organisation leader in the southern Lacandon region (interview, 18 October 2011, Zamora). Negotiations over hectares between Chiapas state and rural organisations characterise not only oil palm but also other 'biofuel' crops, in particular *Jatropha*. The indigenous leader of a *Jatropha* producer organisation described to us how their first area proposal was rejected and doubled by government officials. He then consulted participating rural communities which resulted in further raising the number of hectares.

The oil palm programme, and biofuel interventions in general, also aimed at building a political constituency. Organisation leaders are desired allies for the state, given their influence over social masses, for political ends or at least for rapid programme implementation. The government often turns leaders into state supporters through special concessions to them and their organisations. *"The government craves you when you are organised because you are united"*, explained a local leader in Soconusco (Interview, 8 November 11, La Alianza). In a context of multiple organisations and

competing political parties, this strategy is however far less efficient than in the past. As a leader from the southern Lacandon region put it: *“In the first election I said I had 800 [supporters], but in reality they were a maximum of 400, 250 for sure. Leaders from productive organisations sell votes, but nowadays people do not follow them much. People know already that the vote is free and secret. They take whatever is handed to them and they vote for another candidate”* (informal conversation with a leader from the southern Lacandon region, 7 March 2013, Huixtla). The government in Chiapas was less able to reap the benefits from supporting organisations in the new political context. These new corporative forms have more costs than in the past. An IRBIO official stated cautiously: *“They [the peasants] are more organised, but they demand more”* (interview, 4 November 2011, Tuxtla Gutiérrez). The fast build-up of organisational capacity in southern Lacandon allowed farmers to negotiate better terms with both the government and the banks. Leaders could avoid that their members had to provide collateral for credit. They managed to build a trust for credit warranties fed by public and even private sector monies. Organisations are indeed not passive in the political game. Another excellent example concerns a more political organisation managing state projects in the northern Lacandon region during election times. *“We do not support any party, it depends on how good the rooster [candidate] is”*, explained one of its local leaders, *“But when there is an assembly we decide what is good for us”*. He then explained how a candidate for governor offered them four undersecretaries at the Chiapas agriculture secretary. *‘We would give the money to [the organisation] so that support would reach people. But not like the PRI that gives nothing. We would deliver to gain social capital. I explained this to the organisation leaders, and I told them we could get them our people for deputies, municipal presidents and even senators’*, proudly concluded the leader (interview, 1 November 2012, Ocosingo). Who is manipulating who, as Scott (1987) questioned, is not a simple matter to decide. While co-optation is part of political practices, the rank-and-file are able to exert pressure. Some oil palm organisations are certainly hierarchical, oblivious to democratic workings and lacking cohesion. Leaders also reproduce relations of domination. But leaders’ political power ultimately rests on their members. Farmers continually charge leaders with corruption, though members accept that leaders make a living as ‘managers’. They do that as long as the leaders bring projects to them. Otherwise, leaders lose their support. In other words, rank-and-file consent to concession of power to others, including the Chiapas administration, but expressed social limits to abuse (Scott 1987). Consent does come along with social pressure.

The political dynamics also explain different forms of using environmental jargon. In both study regions, oil palm was adopted by many middle-income and poor farmers amidst heavy environmental criticism by both wealthy cattle ranchers and non-participating poor peasants. Oil palm, they said, degraded lands and dried rivers. One dramatic claim in the criticism was that the roots of the palm stretch for several hundred metres or even kilometres. This claim sometimes generated tensions between neighbours as some worried their land would be degraded by adjacent palm plots. This kind of environmentalism came from several sources: internet sites, particularly through alternative media, critiques by conservationists, often biologists working for state funded projects, as well as Catholic Church activism, including sermons in the church. The Catholic Church also organised meetings in some indigenous communities. Their critiques, which were mostly environmental, discouraged quite a number of farmers already planning to plant oil palm. Criticism in particular addressed land and water as two essential aspects of livelihood making.<sup>13</sup> Such critiques were however used for multiple purposes. For instance, the *ejido* assembly in López Mateos in the southern Lacandon region banned the sale of land for oil palm production for environmental reasons. But it did not ban land sales for cattle pastures, even if the land was forested. This banning seemed motivated by economic concerns since accumulation in this *ejido* depended strongly on cattle production. While our data do not allow us to draw conclusions about the motives underlying the use

---

<sup>13</sup> Martínez-Alier (2002) and Guha (1993) have shown how changes endangering both livelihoods and resources often fuel resistance.

of environmental criticism, it seems to reveal a locally shared unease about the economic changes brought by oil palm. Hence, different local interpretations of oil palm-induced changes exist, relating to how production relations are being understood. On the one hand, in some communities in the southern Lacandon region farmers appealed to the collective assembly to prevent oil palm planting, using environmentalist claims. On the other hand, oil palm growers elsewhere often reasserted their right to use their land the way they wished in combination with environmentalist claims. Such statements were strengthened with assertions that the economic benefits spilled out to the whole community in the form of trade and work.

In the latter cases organisations tended to imitate to some extent government narratives on the beneficial environmental effects of oil palm. In Chiapas, state officials often point to the degradation of soils due to shifting cultivation. Long standing environmental concerns over fire use and slash-and-burn helped frame this new permanent crop as 'sustainable'. This was also achieved by appealing selectively to science. Concepts such as 'soil cover' and 'degraded lands', typically for the burned rainforest for maize cultivation, were then used to depict oil palm as a natural habitat. These concepts were drawn haphazardly from research on deforestation, soil fertility and soil erosion. Much in the vein of the national development plan, oil palm then provided farmers with a marketable crop protective of their fragile lands. Interestingly, many farmers used many of these concepts themselves in daily conversations. During our fieldwork many farmers referred to oil palm as 'reforestation', to how oil palm 'kicks out oxygen' or 'captures water'. This was particularly the case for the southern Lacandon region, historically subjected to intensive environmental pressure<sup>14</sup> by government agencies. Some oil palm growers expressed concerns about environmental degradation and changes brought by agriculture into the region. Other oil palm growers, however, in using environmentalist narratives seemed more concerned about protecting their moral standing against environmental criticisms. And finally, some seemed to imitate official discourses on the beneficial environmental impact of biofuel crops for political convenience. For instance, in Tulijá, an indigenous community in northeast Chiapas, the governor received a signed community agreement in which peasants promised to change their land use from maize to oil palm. '*We are convinced of taking care of nature, as our forefathers did*', argued the *ejido* or community leader (Gobierno del Estado 2009). Environmental discourses were indeed strongly shaped by political practices.

Economic prospects, rural politics and the relationship with the government explain the significant rural support for oil palm expansion. While changes disquieted some who resisted planting oil palm referring to specific environmental narratives that blame oil palm for degradation, tension did not break out into conflict or open resistance. Not only did the southern Lacandon region remain free from oil palm-related conflicts, these also did not occur in coastal Chiapas despite its history of class tensions and conflicts (García de León 1997). Rural people can neither be perceived as easily dominated, ruled by an inescapable environmentality, nor as actors defending their sustainable livelihood vis-à-vis the state. Instead of resistance, we found pragmatic adherence to oil palm-induced modernisation justified by a green narrative. We found environmental discourses to be dominant, as being shared by all actors, but they accommodated different purposes, concerns and political practices. Thus, environmentalism supports a hegemonic social concern that cuts through different ideologies and social groups. This brings us to the question how local forms of environmentalism were adapted from more global narratives and emerged in relation to its specific political context.

---

<sup>14</sup> Environmental pressure for this region dates back to the period immediately after the opening of the agricultural frontier. For instance, in 1989, the Chiapas governor, Patrocinio, established a deforestation ban (interview with leader, 30 August 2012, Reforma Agraria). Also state interventions in this region often prioritised productive activities considered compatible with rainforest conservation (e.g. cocoa production).

## 6 Green narratives amidst agrarian change

Environmentalists attempt to shape resource use, either by contesting existing perceptions of nature or by pushing towards the banning or changing of certain practices and adopting new ones. This section explores the discursive interventions of environmental organisations in Chiapas and the interventions by environmentalists within the state, and how these interventions interacted with the objectives of rural organisations. The two most outspoken, though small, environmental organisations were *Maderas del Pueblo* and *Otros Mundos*.<sup>15</sup> Both *Maderas* and *Otros Mundos* shared a common anti-capitalist stance in which peasant dependence over markets and transnational companies results in impoverishment, environmental degradation and dispossession. They both contested the way the Chiapas government conceived nature, albeit in different languages. *Otros Mundos* draw critiques from scientific narratives (e.g. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, water pollution, etc.) to distance oil palm from nature (Castro-Soto 2009). *Maderas* resorted more often to political economy.

In 2009, *Maderas del Pueblo* published a leaflet which in plain language pointed at the dangers of enrolling into oil palm production (García et al. 2009). The leaflet text is quite subtle in the first part where it describes the situation of local people, but shallow in describing the wider context. The first part of the leaflet portrays a conversation between a coastal young farmer who is enthusiastic for oil palm as well as a curious indigenous woman and an old sceptic man. The text starts by pitting maize against oil palm production. The young farmer rapidly dismisses maize, arguing that palm oil is such a '*negociazo*' (sweet deal). He represents material gain, depicted as a concern for many young people. This is carefully balanced against utterances of the old farmer who conceives of modernity and development as destructive for nature and profitable only for the rich. To temper the youngster's excitement, the old man recalls the coffee crisis. The leaflet captures quite well the tensions and conflicts brought by oil palm modernisation programmes. Herbicides are presented as both destructive as well as labour-saving. It pits traditional agriculture, including indigenous, against modernity and its problems. From the more subtle identification of tensions and contradictions local people have to face in times of agrarian change, it moves to a more simplifying language in the second part of the text, which formulates a number of rhetorical questions that equate oil palm with deforestation, poverty, human right abuses and land grabbing. These questions originate from a previous long report on biofuels that expresses *Maderas's* ideology (Arellano Nucamendi and García 2009). This 2009 report conceptualises oil palm expansion as yet another capitalist project leading to land privatisation, pollution and poverty. It emphasises how traditional knowledge could pose a barrier to such developments. The report insists on self-sufficient communities and refers to concepts as food sovereignty that are being discussed in the international arena by transnational agrarian organisations such as *Via Campesina*. The overall picture imagines rural people as mere victims of an external world. How does this relate to farmers' views and activities?

A closer look at why farmers do what they do shows that the ideological gap between rural people and green activists is often wide. Oil palm is changing the livelihood opportunities of poor farmers. Emilio, an indigenous peasant in La Nueva Unión, explained the change: "*I want clothes, shoes and education for my children. And where do we get this from? Maize and beans do not have a price. To eat yes, but in the economy it does not work. Therefore we planted rubber and oil palm, to change. And yes, we feel the change [...] When I only had maize and beans, sometimes the beans did not yield and I did not have food. And I had nothing to buy food*" (interview, 5 September 2012, La Nueva Unión). Peasants feel the change when they plant oil palm. In coastal Chiapas farmers enter the mangroves protected by the *Encrucijada* Biosphere Reserve not as the ultimate resort for survival but

---

<sup>15</sup> Both *Otros Mundos Chiapas* and *Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste* are two small, Chiapas NGOs relying on European funding. While *Otros Mundos* is part of Friends of the Earth, *Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste* is the result of the division of a larger organisation as a result of conflicts during work in Chimalapas.

because it offers them the best soils: *'Supposedly there is the mangrove, and in the middle there is the island; in between we plant. The advantage is that the soil is black and it holds the moisture for at least three months after the raining stops'* (interview with smallholder farmer, 9 November 2011, Palmarcito). Illegal planting in both buffer and nucleus regions amounted to 261 hectares (interview former official, 9 November 2011, Acapetahua). Oil palm in fact has opened up new opportunities for farmers enduring seasonal floods as the crop thrives in humid soils. Interviews showed that oil palm farmers looked forward to better integration into the commodity chain, although many oil palm farmers were well aware that oil processors profited most from oil palm expansion. Oil palm producer organisations formulated their long-term goal as entering the food oil business as both producers and processors. The example was set by two cooperatives in Soconusco who built mills, one with large public support. Farmers' demands were more mundane than resisting capitalism: technical support, subsidies, better prices and better commercial agreements. The environmental organisations found it difficult to work with farmers incorporated into the state's modernisation programme. In Soconusco, an organisation focused on agroforestry and organic production concluded it was better to work with *'old-fashioned'* farmers, not participating in oil palm expansion. The economic support they could provide could not compete with government programmes (interview, 11 November 2011, Tapachula). A troubled environmentalist from *Otros Mundos* pointed at the dominance of the government's environmental productivist discourse, recalling a meeting with agrarian organisations in the Lacandon heartlands: *"the people at the meeting were against mining, they had the discourse well learnt, and when we spoke about palm it ended up that some organisations copied the governor's discourse, the productive reconversion, the green alternative... [...]. I think it is a lack of information. Also, in many cases it is about patronage relationships with the government in which the leader of the organisation goes to CDI<sup>16</sup> or another position at the government. Finally, they receive lots of projects, and well, you don't bite the hand that feeds you"* (interview, 3 October 2011, San Cristóbal de Las Casas). The political system in place left the environmental organisations with little room for manoeuvre. Without rural allies, these organisations did not succeed in advancing their claims and views. The demands of the environmental organisations had little to do with the demands and strategies pursued by many peasants and farmers' organisations. However, the ideological gap between farmer organisations and most environmentalists does not necessarily preclude alliances (see, for example, Conklin and Graham 1995; Doane 2008). Environmentalists within the government were better able to advance environmental concerns.

'Environmentalists within the government' were in particular the active officials in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor – Mexico (CBMM)<sup>17</sup> belonging to the federal government. Their intervention was uneven. While Soconusco and the southern Lacandon region are both priority regions for the Secretary of the Environment (SEMARNAT, by its Spanish acronym), in practice CBMM and other environmentalists have focused their attention on the Lacandon rainforest. Large rainforest areas are still present as the area has only been colonised recently, in a time that environmental concerns had entered public policy debates. Continuous media attention, but also agro-ecological discourses emerging after the EZLN uprising, has constituted the region as the last Mexican paradise to be preserved. This environmental concern for the Lacandon region contrasts with the scarce attention devoted to Chiapas coastal wetlands.<sup>18</sup> It is in this context that CBMM, present in both regions,

---

<sup>16</sup> National Commission for Indigenous Rights, or CDI by its Spanish acronym.

<sup>17</sup> While CBMM emerged as part of the Puebla-Panama plan, it was later incorporated as the General Coordination for Corridors and Biological Resources (CGCRB, in its Spanish acronym) within the National Commission for Biodiversity Knowledge and Use (CONABIO, by its Spanish acronym).

<sup>18</sup> When biologists working for the *Encrucijada* Biosphere Reserve filed claims against oil palm invasions, government officials did follow up, but very slowly. This contrasts with rapid responses to a large deforestation clearing detected through remote sensing in the southern Lacandon region. Technicians attributed this to oil

concentrated most of its efforts in the southern Lacandon region where opportunities for environmental conservation were greater.

CBMM, originally a product of conservationists' efforts, was instrumental in making the shift from an exclusive focus on protected areas for nature conservation to a landscape connectivity approach that considers the multiple land uses present, including agriculture. While the emphasis on agricultural production was at odds with the views of some important conservationists, CBMM staff justified their position: *"The question is to recognise that there are needs in the territory. This is, for instance, the case with cattle. We as conservationists cannot deny these needs. It happened with cattle, there was neither support nor ordering. But everybody went for it, as it was the only thing that left [money]"* (interview, 4 October 2011, San Cristóbal de Las Casas). CBMM explicitly attempted to modify resource use in agriculture, considering agro-ecology the key tool. They did this by winning the 'technical agent' position for both agriculture and forestry secretaries (SAGARPA and CONAFOR, respectively) and thus becoming responsible for the distribution of significant resources. They then requested groups interested in SAGARPA support to sign agreements for zero deforestation, reduced burning and reduced agrochemical usage. This inevitably created tensions, particularly regarding the reduction of agrochemical inputs, which many farmers considered unfeasible (interviews with farmers, July-August 2012, southern Lacandon region). Oil palm growers were however untouched as they got state support directly from SAGARPA. In this context, CBMM staff was unable to shape resource use within oil palm production but could exert some sort of control over the oil palm expansion at the political level. The CBMM mandate for biodiversity conservation granted them some power over other institutions active in the region. For instance, SAGARPA required the environmental approval by either SEMARNAT or CBMM for the Humid Tropic Programme, with both agencies ignoring the request. This granted CBMM what its staff called 'a little power'. *'If CONABIO [i.e. CBMM] says that they [farmers] are deforesting, that oil palm is destroying biodiversity, SAGARPA has a problem'* (interview, 22 August 2012, San Cristóbal de Las Casas). Such soft power helped environmentalists to put some pressure on agencies pushing for oil palm expansion at both federal and Chiapas administrative levels. Environmentalists within the state were in this indirect way able to push for concrete changes.<sup>19</sup>

In short, environmentalists within the state were found to be important but not in the sense predicted by the green grabbing thesis (i.e. founding environmental governance on neoliberal market mechanisms). They intervened in ways that sometimes went against accumulation, for instance, when pushing for agro-ecological practices or indirectly constraining support to oil palm planting. On the other hand, they recognised that they had to adapt to on-going accumulation processes in the region driving farmers' decisions on land use change. More radical green organisations, such as *Maderas* and *Otros Mundos*, were unable to form coalitions at the local level.

---

palm with the subsequent pressure over both the Chiapas government and the oil palm organisation. Ironically, the conflict subsided once further inquiry showed deforestation was for cattle pastures.

<sup>19</sup> An example is a small farmer group pioneering oil palm cultivation in the region: 'There were lots of obstacles. At slash and burning time, the [Chiapas] government did not want to approve the project because the forest would be devastated', explained a leader of this oil palm organisation (interview, 18 October 2011, Playón de la Gloria). In absence of any regulation over land use in this buffer region to the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve but under environmental pressure, the organisation self-regulated land use by limiting planting to degraded pastures and secondary vegetation patches. Government agencies accepted this becoming a *de facto* rule. As a result the organisation was finally able to access Chiapas government support for oil palm.

## 7 Conclusions: The green agrarian question in absence of enclosure

In Chiapas, oil palm has transformed the agricultural landscape with few changes in land access. Farmers have joined in great numbers a state programme for oil palm expansion which deepened their integration into markets, especially through credit, but which left land ownership largely intact. There was no enclosure related to oil palm. In absence of enclosure, farmers display little resistance to oil palm-driven accumulation but instead put forward demands for better terms of participation. Small farmers consider oil palm as the road to improvement, comparing it with the meagre opportunities offered by previous production systems. While these farmers endure capitalism, they look out for the best options within it, rather than to outright reject it. While oil palm politics in Chiapas reproduce to some extent the existing political system, which combines mass organisations, clientelism and party politics, oil palm growers and their organisations cannot be dismissed as just being co-opted. Farmers are active agents who resort to multiple strategies, well beyond resistance or anti-capitalist rationality. Peasants reproduce state discourses, including environmentalist discourses, if these are compatible with their goals. But they also exert pressure. As organisations they attempt to gain some political control. As individuals they criticise leaders or, more passively, fail to show up in meetings or to respect commercial agreements whenever they consider state supports (inputs, subsidies or credit) are insufficient for their needs. Nobody pressured farmers to plant oil palm; they themselves planted and demanded inputs, they themselves founded their organisations, and they actively constructed their own pro-oil palm discourses.

The oil palm expansion is embedded in a cacophony of different environmentalist voices: farmers, environmentalists, technicians and even workers resorting to green vocabularies and for multiple reasons. The rapid oil palm expansion in Chiapas was unsuccessfully contested by environmentalists who emphasised biodiversity loss and land degradation. Environmental opposition did not built up a coherent movement, particularly after oil palm cultivation did not translate into the predicted dried rivers and degraded lands. Opposition further diluted as others, who did not share the environmental movements' ideological motivations, such as large cattle owners and some sugarcane producers at the coast, appropriated their discourses. The existence of critical green discourses cannot be automatically equated with resistance. A different environmentalist voice was the shared discourses between peasants and government officials that projected oil palm as environmentally beneficial. We found the framing of environmental concerns by farmers and organisations was strongly shaped by state politics (cf. Peluso et al. 2008). Resource redistribution from the Chiapas government to rural organisations left opposing organisations isolated. As a result critical environmental demands were advanced most strongly from within the state.

In contrast to the 'environmentalism of the poor' or the 'green grabbing' theses, we found 'environmentalists within the state' attempting to curb environmental degradation without attempting to dispossess peasants. Literature on the greening of the agrarian question has yet to analyse the role and contradictions experienced by environmentalists within the state and to recognise multiple, simultaneous and contradictory forms of steering by the state. Also, empirical evidence illustrating rural mobilisation for cheaper pesticides (Bernstein 2010), indigenous communities bidding for nuclear dumping sites (Ishiyama 2003) or radical politics arising from struggles to get timber commercialised (Harvey 2005b), suggests different possible rural engagements with capitalism and the environment. Our findings show that poor farmers both damage the environment, by deforesting mangroves in occasions, and adopting more environmentally sound practices (i.e. a producers' organisation banning deforestation). Likewise, capital accumulation is contingently related to the environment as it may spread further monocultures and reduce biodiversity as well as driving the reconversion of degraded pastures into more soil-protective tree plantations.

We think the overemphasis on enclosure limits our understanding of the ways capitalism impacts rural livelihoods and environments. Emphasis on enclosure occludes from view the material and political responses deployed by vast numbers of peasants and farmers to new economic and technical opportunities. A more serious debate is needed about how and why rural people engage with capitalism.

## References

1. Agrawal, A., 2005. *Environmentality: technologies of government and the making of subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
2. Akram-Lodhi, A.H., Kay, C., 2010. Surveying the agrarian question (part 2): current debates and beyond. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37 (2), 255-284.
3. Alonso-Fradejas, A., 2012. Land control-grabbing in Guatemala: the political economy of contemporary agrarian change. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 33(4), 509-528.
4. Arellano Nucamendi, M., García, M.A., 2009. *Agrocombustibles y palma africana: peligros sobre nuestras comunidades y sobre la Madre Tierra*. Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C.: San Cristóbal de Las Casas.
5. Assies, W., 2007. Land tenure and tenure regimes in Mexico: an overview. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8 (1), 33-63.
6. Bernstein, H., 2010. *Class dynamics of agrarian change*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing.
7. Borrás Jr, S.M., McMichael, P., Scoones, I., 2010. The politics of biofuels, land and agrarian change: editors' introduction. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37 (4), 575-592.
8. Brenner, R., 1986. The social basis of economic development. In: J. Roemer, ed. *Analytical Marxism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 23-53.
9. Castro-Soto, G., 2009. *Monocultivos desastrosos: la producción de aceite de palma en Chiapas*. Otros Mundos, A.C. (Amigos de la Tierra Chiapas): San Cristóbal de Las Casas.
10. Conklin, B.A., Graham, L.R., 1995. The shifting middle ground: Amazonian Indians and ecopolitics. *American Anthropologist*, 97 (4), 695-710.
11. De Vos, J., 2002. *Una tierra para sembrar sueños: historia reciente de la Selva Lacandona 1950-2000*. México, D.F.: CIESAS, FCE.
12. Doane, M., 2008. The political economy of the ecological native. *American Anthropologist*, 109 (3), 452-462.
13. Doering III, O.C., Tyner, W.E., 2009. US and international policies affecting liquid biofuels' expansion and profitability. *International Journal of Biotechnology*, 11 (1), 150-167.
14. Fairhead, J., Leach, M., Scoones, I., 2012. Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature? *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39 (2), 237-261.
15. García A., M.A., Arellano N., M., Hernández Gúzman, M., Vázquez Díaz, S., Morales Vázquez, C.H., 2009. *Folleto Popular*. Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C.: San Cristóbal de Las Casas.
16. García de León, A., 1997. *Resistencia y utopía: Memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la Provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia*. México, D.F.: Ediciones ERA.
17. Gerber, J.F., 2011. Conflicts over industrial tree plantations in the South: Who, how and why? *Global Environmental Change*, 21 (1), 165-176.
18. Gerber, J.F., Veuthey, S., 2010. Plantations, resistance and the greening of the agrarian question in coastal Ecuador. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 10 (4), 455-481.

19. Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 2007. Plan de Desarrollo Nacional 2007-2012: Poder Ejecutivo Federal. Presidencia de la República (Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos): México, D.F.
20. Gobierno del Estado, 2009. Mil 300 hectáreas de palma en 2009; en los últimos 10 años, 900 has, Boletín 1739, 19 de agosto del 2009. Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas: Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
21. Gobierno del Estado, 2010a. Buenas expectativas para la palma de aceite en la región del Soconusco, Boletín 1124, 28 de Abril del 2010. Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas: Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
22. Gobierno del Estado, 2010b. Chiapas: hacia la producción de más de 30.000 litros diarios de biodiesel, Boletín 0833, 24 de Marzo del 2010. Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas: Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
23. Guha, R., 1993. The malign encounter: the Chipko movement and competing visions of nature. In: T. Banuri and F. Apffel Marglin, eds. *Who Will Save the Forests? Knowledge, power and environmental destruction*. London: Zed Books, pp. 80-113.
24. Guha, R., Martinez-Alier, J., 1997. *Varieties of environmentalism: essays North and South*. London: Earthscan Publications.
25. Hall, D., 2011. Land grabs, land control, and Southeast Asian crop booms. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38 (4), 837-857.
26. Harvey, D., 2005a. *The new imperialism*. London: Oxford University Press.
27. Harvey, N., 1990. Peasant strategies and corporatism in Chiapas. In: J. Foweraker and A.L. Craig, eds. *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 183-198.
28. Harvey, N., 1998. *The Chiapas rebellion: the struggle for land and democracy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
29. Harvey, N., 2005b. Who needs Zapatismo? State interventions and local responses in Marqués de Comillas, Chiapas. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 32 (3-4), 629-650.
30. IndexMundi, 2012. Palm oil and nitrogen fertiliser prices between the year 2000 and the year 2011. Available from <http://www.indexmundi>.
31. INEGI, 2007. *Censo agrícola, ganadero y forestal 2007*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Aguascalientes.
32. Jansen, K. 1998, *Political ecology, mountain agriculture, and knowledge in Honduras*, Amsterdam: Thela Publishers.
33. Jansen, K. & Gupta, A. 2009. Anticipating the Future: 'Biotechnology for the Poor' as Unrealized Promise? *Futures*, 41 (7): 436-45.
34. Ishiyama, N., 2003. Environmental justice and American Indian tribal sovereignty: case study of a land-use conflict in Skull Valley, Utah. *Antipode*, 35 (1), 119-139.
35. Kautsky, K., 1988. *The Agrarian Question*. London: Zwan Publications. First published in 1899.
36. Kelly, A.B., 2011. Conservation practice as primitive accumulation. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38 (4), 683-701.
37. Lamers, P., Hamelinck, C., Junginger, M., Faaij, A., 2011. International bioenergy trade – A review of past developments in the liquid biofuel market. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 15 (6), 2655-2676.
38. Leyva Solano, X., and Burguete Cal y Mayor, A., 2007. *La remunicipalización de Chiapas: lo político y la política en tiempos de contrainsurgencia*. México, D.F.: CIESAS, Miguel Ángel Porrúa.
39. Lenin, V.I., 1967. *The development of capitalism in Russia*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. First published in 1899.
40. Luke, T.W., 1997. *Ecocritique: Contesting the politics of nature, economy, and culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

41. Marin, V., Lovett, J., Clancy, J., 2011. Biofuels and land appropriation in Colombia: do biofuels national policies fuel land grabs, International Conference on Global Land Grabbing 6-8 April, Sussex.
42. Martinez-Alier, J., 2002. The environmentalism of the poor: a study of ecological conflicts and valuation. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
43. McAfee, K., 1999. Selling nature to save it? Biodiversity and green developmentalism. *Environment and Planning*, 17, 133-154.
44. McCarthy, J.F., 2010. Processes of inclusion and adverse incorporation: oil palm and agrarian change in Sumatra, Indonesia. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37 (4), 821-850.
45. Mekhilef, S., Siga, S., Saidur, R., 2011. A review on palm oil biodiesel as a source of renewable fuel. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 15 (4), 1937-1949.
46. Nash, J., 2001. *Mayan visions: the quest for autonomy in an age of globalization*. New York: Routledge.
47. Novo, A., Jansen, K., Slingerland, M. & Giller, K. 2010. Biofuel, dairy production and beef in Brazil: competing claims on land use in São Paulo State. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37 (4): 769-92.
48. Obidzinski, K., Andriani, R., Komarudin, H., Andrianto, A., 2012. Environmental and social impacts of oil palm plantations and their implications for biofuel production in Indonesia. *Ecology and Society*, 17 (1), 25.
49. Osborne, T.M., 2011. Carbon forestry and agrarian change: access and land control in a Mexican rainforest. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38 (4), 879-883.
50. Peluso, N.L., Afiff, S., Rachman, N.F., 2008. Claiming the grounds for reform: agrarian and environmental movements in Indonesia. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8 (2-3), 377-407.
51. Reyes Maros, M.E., 2002. *Conflicto agrario en Chiapas: 1934-1964*. Tuxtla Gutiérrez: CONECULTA.
52. Rosset, P.M., Martínez-Torres, M.E., 2012. Rural social movements and agroecology: context, theory, and process. *Ecology and Society*, 17 (3), 17.
53. SAGARPA, 2009. Programa de producción sustentable de insumos para bioenergéticos y desarrollo científico y tecnológico. Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA): México, D.F.
54. Sandoval Esquivel, A., n.d. Programa estratégico para el desarrollo rural sustentable de la región sur-sureste de México: Trópico Húmedo 2011: Paquete tecnológico palma de aceite (*Alaëis guinnensis* Jacq.) [sic] - Establecimiento y mantenimiento. Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias (INIFAP): México, D.F.
55. Scott, J.C., 1987. *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
56. Sheng Goh, C., Teong Lee, K., 2010. Will biofuel projects in Southeast Asia become white elephants? *Energy Policy*, 38 (8), 3847-3848.
57. SIAP-SAGARPA, 2012. Oil palm surfaces for the period between 2007 and 2011. Servicio de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera (SIAP) de la Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA): México, D.F.
58. Swyngedouw, E., 2005. Dispossessing H<sub>2</sub>O: The contested terrain of water privatization. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 16 (1), 81-98.
59. Toleubayev, K., Jansen, K., Van Huis, A., 2010. Commodification of science and the production of public goods: plant protection research in Kazakhstan. *Research Policy*, 39 (3), 411-421.
60. Torres, A., 2011. Fracasa proyecto de biodiesel. *El Economista*, 18 Jul.

## LDPI Working Paper Series

A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

### The drive for accumulation: environmental contestation and agrarian support to Mexico's oil palm expansion

Oil palm expansion has been related to rural dispossession, environmental degradation and rural resistance. In this paper we explore the politics and impact of farmer-based oil palm expansion in Chiapas, Mexico. In relation to the debate on the greening of the agrarian question, we engage with the theses of 'environmentalism of the poor' and 'green grabbing' and point at the problematic centrality of the concept of 'enclosure' in these theories. We argue that in absence of enclosure, poor peasants and farmers may strive for further market integration. Peasant engagement with capital accumulation in Mexico undermined green efforts to curb oil palm production. In this context, environmental movements were unsuccessful in contesting the state's oil palm programme. Our analysis suggests that a green agrarian question solely focusing on enclosure is unable to explain agrarian and environmental processes.



landpolitics@gmail.com

www.iss.nl/ldpi