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"Solidarity in a competing world — fair use of resources"

The Socio-Ecological Impacts of Palm Oil Production in Rural Communities. A Regional MFA Study in the Micro-Region Tomé-Açu in Pará, Brazil

Charlotte Kottusch

Alpen-Adria-Universität, Inst. of Social Ecology, Austria

Abstract

Pará is the largest palm oil producing state in Brazil, providing roughly 90 % of the palm oil produced nationally. In 2010, Lula da Silva, the former president of Brazil, initiated the PPSPO (Programa de Produção Sustenstável de Palma de Óleo), a government programme intended to foster a socially and environmentally sustainable production of palm oil by restricting the plantations to deforested and degraded areas in the Amazon, and by including small scale family farmers into the market.

In this work, the socio-environmental impacts of palm oil expansion in the micro-region Tomé-Açu are explored. Combining data driven analysis (regional material flow analysis (rMFA) and land use data) with qualitative work during research in the field, the study examines changes in the agricultural production in the region between 1990 and 2014, which produces 70 % of the palm oil in Pará.

Palm oil expansion influences land use interests as well as rural communities and their agricultural production patterns. One notable change is the increase of fallow land. A crucial fact is that this land type is regarded as degraded and thus suitable for palm oil plantations. A related development is a significant rise of land prices. Put together, these developments make it much more profitable to let these lands lie fallow and eventually sell them to palm oil companies than to use them for extensive cattle ranching. A second observable change is a decrease in production of certain local staples, especially cassava. Being a very price volatile crop, cassava production appeared less attractive compared to new employment opportunities or contract farming in the palm oil sector, pulling workforce out of small scale cassava production and thus leading to less production and higher prices of this important staple.

In summary, palm oil production pushes economic development in the region but leads to new risks in the competition for land and workforce resources. By describing and analysing these developments, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of socio-ecological impacts connected to palm oil production in Brazil that tries to cope with the challenge of producing palm oil in ecologically and socially sustainable ways.

Keywords: Brazil, cassava production, land use change, palm oil, regional material flow analysis, rural communities

Contact Address: Charlotte Kottusch, Alpen-Adria-Universität, Inst. of Social Ecology, Vienna, Austria, e-mail: Charlotte.kottusch@posteo.de