

Oil palm in Africa

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Palm oil demand is particularly strong in Africa, where people used to eat both refined and “red” oil palm. Population is increasing dramatically: 4 billion people are expected in 2100 of which 750 million in Nigeria. Undernourishment is concerning 20% of the population. As African oils and fats balance is in deficit, 4 million tons of palm oil are already imported per year.

Oil palm appears as a major solution to feed African people (best yield of energy per ha, high nutrition value of red oil palm) and to employ people (biggest quantity of labor work per ton of oil).

Despite the lack of accurate data from smallholder sector, Oil palm area is estimated at 4,5 million ha of which 2/3 in Nigeria. More than 80% of oil palm area is controlled by smallholders, including family farms. They produce oil palm bunches in traditional “wild groves” (dura palm trees widely spaced within agroforestry or annual crops systems) and in small-scale oil palm plantations (tenera and open pollinated progenies: unselected planting material), properly spaced but often poorly maintained (pruning, weeding, fertilizing). Most of smallholders are facing high cost of inputs, poor access to loans, advice, planting material, fertilizer, working tools. Smallholders bunches are processed both in industrial mills and in artisanal small-scale mills (manual or motorized), producing artisanal red oil used for human alimentation and soap industry, but not refinable. Small scale process allow oil palm development far away from industrial mills and thus can be considered as socially and economically sustainable even with its poor oil extraction rate.

Agro-industrial interests in Africa are growing since the 2000s. They are meeting government strategy: large-scale investments are setting up in many countries, often including smallholders’ development schemes and sustainability procedures. 800.000 ha of concessions for oil palm were recently acquired in Central Africa by international and local companies. In Liberia, 700.000 ha were awarded or reassigned between 2008-2010, all of which now owned by Southeast Asian companies. Ivory Coast is setting up a new development plan of 200.000 ha for the next ten years, 57% by agro-industry and 43% by smallholders. Nigeria is facing a huge challenge to reduce yield gap with all its “wild groves” area.

Initiative towards more sustainable and inclusive oil palm production are taken, reviewing land tenure to enhance land availability for agriculture, taking into account customary rights and historical occupation of land. New agronomical managements adapted for industrial plantations and for smallholdings, associated with improved planting material give part of the solution.