

WHY INDUSTRIAL MONOCULTURE PLANTATIONS ARE A FALSE SOLUTION

Let's start with the rather puzzling two-word combination:

FALSE SOLUTIONS

- False solutions are ideas or measures that are promoted to address deforestation and biodiversity collapse, but in fact do not – and in the mean time deceive people while perpetuating the problems, even make things worse or block the real solutions.
- False solutions are often corporate-led voluntary interventions that do not challenge the status quo, market interest or power.

Industrial monoculture plantations are a popular false solution from companies and governments, that promote this production model for development and food security. But plantations are not development, they are harmful to climate, biodiversity and human rights and often fail to contribute to food sovereignty.

Industrial monoculture tree plantations are not forests, as hardly anything lives there. Industrial soy and oil palm plantations do not bring local development and are the main driver of deforestation in many regions. Financiers, governments and companies promote their industrial plantation models as sustainable and necessary to 'feed the world'. But in reality these production systems are exploitative and harmful.

7 reasons why industrial monoculture plantations are a false solution (and 2 real solutions)

Plantations burn

1

Plantations contribute to the trend of increasing tree cover loss due to fires. World Resources Institute analysis shows how fires destroy at least twice as much tree cover compared to two decades ago. Greece, Spain and Portugal are facing record-breaking fires over the past years. This is a result of climate change, heatwaves and drought as well as large plantations with highly flammable non-native species, like Eucalyptus. In Indonesia pulp & paper and palm oil plantations are hotspots for peat and forest fires and related haze. Those are devastating for peoples health, livelihoods and the environment.

Plantations cause deforestation and nature destruction

2

A 2024 study in Nature confirms that around "90% of global forest cover changes between 2000 and 2018 were attributable to agricultural expansion, making food production the leading direct driver of deforestation." Specifically foreign direct investments, mostly related to industrial food systems, drive this expansion. In Indonesia, Nusantara Atlas documents a new wave of expansion of industrial pulpwood plantations since 2018 with massive forest loss in Kalimantan, Sumatra and Papua.

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Plantations are not forests

3

Forests are a community of trees that provide habitats to a large diversity of other life forms. In a forest ecosystem, from the fungi in the forest soil to the emergent canopy trees, there is resilience in this diversity. Industrial tree plantations conversely consist of rows of planted trees, usually of non - native species that do not provide these crucial habitats for other species. Plantations have short rotations and high input of energy, water and chemicals. It is a hostile environment for many species due to pollution, erosion, fires, pests and diseases. These impacts do not stop at the border of the plantations and impact the surroundings, that also suffer from damaged watersheds and invasive species that reduce native biodiversity. When forests and nature are changed into tree plantations, this is not positive 'reforestation', but should be labeled as extremely damaging land use change.

When land is lost

4

Billions of people have been managing their land to sustain their livelihoods for generations, producing food, feed and fuel, but oftentimes do not have formal landrights. This makes them vulnerable to landgrabbing. Landgrabbing happens when corporations do not recognize legitimate customary land rights or deceive people into signing away their rights. This happens structurally when industrial plantations are expanded. Welt Hunger Hilfe writes that "about 33 million people around the world have lost their livelihoods through systematic violation of land rights by large foreign investors and influential national actors." In Indonesia for example, between 2015 and 2023, there were 2,939 land conflicts identified by the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (KPA), on 6.3 million hectares of land. Those indigenous and community lands have been granted by the government to plantation companies or for infrastructure projects.

Plantations will lift us out of poverty

5

Investments and tax facilities for corporations and rich people are supposed to 'trickle down' to the poorer groups in society according to its promoters. This is a belief, but is not backed by evidence. It does not promote self-reliance and self-determination. Instead, people depend on badly payed, often seasonal jobs in plantations. Combined with loss of land, this severely impacts food sovereignty and reduces opportunities for communities to chose their own development path. Over the last two decades income inequality has increased within most countries, another sign that investing in industrial monoculture plantations to lift local economies out of poverty is a false solution.

We are 'externalities'

6

Also, products like palm oil are incredibly cheap. This is because they are industrialized, crop varieties are developed for higher yields, byproducts can be marketed, the market is competitive and governments back up the industry with all kinds of trade and tax support. Financiers contribute to the expansion of this highly profitable industry. The costs of the harmful systems however, are passed on to 'externalities' like people and the environment. Alternative food systems do not stand a chance to become the norm if government and financial actors do not change.

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We feed the rich, not the world

7

The 'We feed the world' narrative has roots in post-World War II geopolitics. It is used to defend against criticism on agri-business and reflects the interests of agri-business. The government-financier-private sector complex keeps insisting that without a high-tech, chemically intensive industrial food system, people would not survive. However, currently the volume of our food production is not an issue, but what is produced and for whom is. The industrial food system mostly provides for animal-based products and processed foods for which urbanisation and higher incomes drive demand, but in turn cause obesity and malnutrition. This system places the burden onto the environment, society and healthcare.

An example is the production of oil crops that takes almost 40% of agriculture land used for crop production, and this is expected to increase. The boom of vegetable oils is driven by finance as this is a highly profitable sector, backed up by government policies and regulations. While peasants, family farmers, indigenous peoples, fisherfolks and forest communities are still the main food producers, their needs are mostly ignored by decision makers.

Further Reading:

- **Nature Scientific Reports:** doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-65397-3
- **World Rainforest Movement:** www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/large-scale-tree-plantations
- **Ekonomi Nusantara:** www.walhi.or.id/nusantara-economy-ecosystem-indonesia-advancing-together
- **FoEI Food Sovereignty:** www.foei.org/what-we-do/food-sovereignty
- **GRAIN:** grain.org/en/article/6171-booklet-12-tactics-palm-oil-companies-use-to-grab-community-land

Real solutions please! If not industrial monoculture plantations then what?

Real solutions to nature destruction and human rights violations means getting away from a consumption and production system based on over-consumption and industrial monoculture plantations. Real solutions are practiced by people every day.

Governments need to create the enabling conditions to:

- 1. Reduce consumption** of products from industrial monoculture plantations like soy, palm oil, paper and timber in order to stop the harmful expansion and impacts of those sectors. Healthy and deforestation-free food with less meat and more plant-based protein needs to become the norm. Ban the use of food in our fuel and stop burning trees in energy plants.
- 2. Change the industrial plantation model.** Governments should shift financial flows and promote a different economy structured on community based area management and forest restoration that respects principles of agro-ecology. A vibrant vision and practice is the Ekonomi Nusantara spearheaded by Friends of the Earth Indonesia. Direct funding to indigenous and local communities as well as policies for the promotion of smallholder products should drive these local economies and food sovereignty.

