

Chapter Title: The Oil Palm's New Frontiers

Book Title: Oil Palm

Book Subtitle: A Global History

Book Author(s): JONATHAN E. ROBINS

Published by: University of North Carolina Press. (2021)

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469662916_robins.14

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“Slaves of Our Own Native Land”

In the 1970s, the World Bank and other development organizations pitched oil palm as a perfect crop for developing the tropics: it produced much needed food and promised to be an endless source of cash as the global market for palm oil grew. But oil palm didn't inevitably bring wealth and prosperity. People in the Philippines sent an urgent letter to the Commonwealth (formerly Colonial) Development Corporation in 1982, pleading with the agency to halt its funding of a new plantation. The authors claimed they had been tricked into signing away their land with “sugar-coated promises,” accusing the plantation management of trying “to make us slaves of our own native land.” The plantation's security forces answered their protests with beatings, rapes, and murders.¹

The plantation in question was NGPI, a CDC-financed partnership between Guthrie and the Philippine government in Mindanao.² NGPI's managers had hired a paramilitary group called the Lost Command for security. Led by Col. Carlos Lademora, the Lost Command was supposed to be fighting the communist New People's Army, but his men spent their time terrorizing and extorting civilians.³ Earlier, protests by farmers had scared off other plantation companies seeking land in the region. NGPI used Lademora's men to acquire land titles. “The arms they carry along bring out the message very clearly to the farmer,” wrote a local priest.⁴ Having sold their land at gunpoint, farmers found jobs on the new plantation “a precarious thing.”⁵ Chief Datu Lumintap, head of a displaced indigenous community, asked: “Where do we go? Surely the British will not welcome us in England, wherever that is.”⁶

As the story began to attract media attention in Britain, a CDC spokesman dismissed the complaints as “the sort of grievances you get in most places.” The CDC had “an excellent record in projects of this kind” and could “make a genuine contribution” in Mindanao.⁷ But NGPI's manager, Bruce Clew, candidly told British officials “that the acquisition of land from otherwise reluctant peasant farmers, squatters and minority tribesmen would



FIGURE 10.1

A figure with a Union Jack superimposed attacks another figure with a bayonet in this poster (ca. 1984) urging readers to “Stop this plantation!” Text below the image warns that huge tracts of land in the Philippines were being seized for cash-crop export production financed by the CDC. “That’s why the Third World starves,” the poster declares, adding: “Your taxes are paying for it.” OD 71/106, TNA. Reproduced courtesy Campaign for Human Rights in the Philippines UK.

have been impossible without Lademora’s help.” When asked why he had hired such vicious thugs, Clew responded: “They exist.”⁸ Clew saw the approximately 2,000 families displaced by the plantation as squatters with no legal claim.⁹ In the eyes of one official, he was “an old-fashioned planter” who showed “considerable contempt for the inefficiencies of the small Filipino farmer.” “I cannot say even now that I like some of his methods,” the official remarked.¹⁰

British humanitarian activists received the same harrowing letters describing evictions, murder, torture, and exposure to toxic chemicals.¹¹ Together with environmentalist allies, they argued that the CDC—a government-backed investment body—was funding the exploitation of Filipinos and their forests to feed Northern consumers (figure 10.1). They were wrong about the ultimate purpose of the oil: it was all slated for domestic consumption. But their campaign added palm oil to a growing list of commodities seen in Britain and throughout Northern countries as threats to both the environment and human rights.¹²

The CDC dismissed the Lost Command as an “extraneous matter,” but to soothe anger over the plantation’s land grab, they offered what had become the CDC’s hallmark: a Nucleus Estate-Smallholder (NES) project. Having pioneered the concept, the CDC boasted it knew “how to co-operate with rural people and help them out of poverty.”¹³ Flying British MPs over the area, CDC manager Derek Nesbit contrasted the orderly plantation with the scars of forest fallow cultivation. The visitors asked why the CDC hadn’t stopped this “slash and burn” agriculture. Nesbit replied: “they just might if influential organisations who knew nothing about the subjects stopped interfering with their plans.”¹⁴ In a later report, the CDC asserted that planting oil palm repaired “previously degraded land,” claiming that “ecologically, the effect of a perennial tree crop like oil palm is similar to that of reforestation.”¹⁵

When local activists pushed the CDC to abandon the plantation and develop the whole area for smallholders, the CDC retorted that without the plantation, there would be no smallholder oil palm industry. Indeed, they insisted that “more enlightened policies” toward smallholders relied on the success of a plantation.¹⁶ Father Ton Zwart, a leader in the local opposition, noted that the NES scheme would chain smallholders to the company and a single commodity that they couldn’t eat, process, or sell themselves. “CDC may well be the best corporation of its kind,” he stated, “but it is the kind which is the problem.”¹⁷ Under “a general atmosphere of fear,” the priest and nearly 700 others signed letters opposing the NES plan.¹⁸

In private, CDC and Philippine officials agreed that Lademora and the Lost Command were “a great embarrassment.”¹⁹ They pressed NGPI to hire a new security force, and NPGI also agreed to pay people more for their land. Clew forced plantation workers to choose between the money and their jobs, however. Lademora’s men lingered around the plantation, too. Workers reported intimidation, unfair wages, and unsafe working conditions, particularly for those spraying chemicals.²⁰ One man was murdered and several others tortured in 1983, likely at the hands of the Lost Command. One British official accused Clew of being in “basic sympathy with Col. Lademora.”²¹

When someone cut down fifty-two hectares of oil palms and plastered towns with antigovernment posters, the Lost Command answered with violent reprisals.²² As many as twelve farmers were shot and killed in an area slated for plantation development.²³ The CDC insisted that the victims were New People’s Army (NPA) guerillas, and that its model of “enlightened development” was exactly what Mindanao needed to fix a “progressively

deteriorating situation.”²⁴ Neither the Lost Command nor NGPI’s new guards could keep the NPA away, however: NPA fighters seized weapons and burned down several structures in a daring December 1984 raid on the plantation.²⁵ Clew—who survived a brush with “people’s justice” in an impromptu trial—claimed that the raid was “a catharsis in the NPA’s attitude to the plantation.” The CDC suspected he had simply paid the NPA off, as he had done with Lademora’s men.²⁶ By this point, the CDC decided to withdraw from Mindanao: it refused to pull existing loans for NGPI, but it canceled the NES extension, pending “a change in the political scene.”²⁷ Government troops swept in following the December raid. Their presence brought no peace: paramilitaries killed at least five men in 1985, including Rogelio Noble, a labor organizer and father of seven who was shot in front of his family for planning a strike.²⁸ The CDC washed its hands of the bloody affair, acquitting itself and Guthrie—which soon sold the plantation—of any wrongdoing in a 1987 report.²⁹

Not all parts of the oil palm frontier were this contested or bloody. Oil palm cropland grew to cover a vast area in the postcolonial era: from 3.6 million hectares in 1961 to 10.3 million in 2000, topping 20 million hectares by 2018.³⁰ This new oil palm belt was geographically and politically diverse, but the NGPI episode highlighted key elements of the oil palm’s new history across the tropics. Organizations and ideas inherited from the colonial era shaped the future for plantations and smallholders alike. Former colonial officials often staffed international development agencies, and they deployed old ideas like NES projects as panaceas for development problems. Britain’s CDC held stakes in at least thirteen oil palm projects by 2000, and the scientific and managerial influence of France’s IRHO spread just as far.³¹ Colonial-era companies like Guthrie, SOCFIN, Unilever, and Harrisons & Crosfield could be found nearly everywhere oil palms sprouted, though they were joined by upstart competitors.

The Mindanao case also showed the importance of local conditions in shaping outcomes. Although the politics of the Cold War overshadowed new oil palm projects up to 1990, local needs—notably domestic demand for fats—took precedence over global imperatives in project planning. National governments, rather than international lenders or multinational firms, made key decisions about how, where, and at what cost oil palms would grow. And while smallholders and plantations pressed deeper into tropical forests and peatlands in many parts of the globe, in other places, they successfully repurposed old banana plantations, cattle pastures, and rubber plots to make room for oil palm. The histories of rural spaces, the

strength of local and national institutions, and the presence or absence of state (or private) violence were key factors in determining whether new oil palm landscapes looked like NGPI in Mindanao, or were more positive stories, like the smallholder oil palm booms in Costa Rica or Thailand.

Part I: Old and New Frontiers in Asia

Plantations and Smallholders in Malaysia

Experts and industry insiders often point to Malaysia's postcolonial experience with oil palm as a model for economic development. Competent technocrats oversaw agricultural and then industrial development, funded by palm oil exports. Private-sector plantations led a shift to *tenera* palms that—combined with new agronomic practices—quadrupled palm oil yields between 1950 and 1990.³² Planters and government agencies collaborated to study and introduce the African oil palm weevil in 1981, ending nearly a century of reliance on hand-pollination and the mediocre performance of indigenous insects (most importantly, *Thrips hawaiiensis*).³³ Instead of nationalizing foreign-owned plantations, Malaysia's government oversaw their gradual sale to *bumiputera* (“sons of the land”) owners.³⁴

Malaysia's political elites simultaneously backed the smallholder-settler model for oil palm, hoping “that Malay small-scale agriculture could replace foreign plantations as a dynamo for export growth.”³⁵ The NES experiment at Kulai had proven the viability of the model, and officials were eager to replicate it across Malaysia. Farmers were eager, too, applying to join new settlements and writing for help switching from rubber or coconuts to oil palm.³⁶ Agencies like FELDA sought out “the best land for the best people,” putting what they viewed as “waste” land to good use.³⁷ FELDA dropped the nucleus estate from its projects early on, however. It took space away from potential settlers, and settlers proved more reliable in delivering fruit than the NES model assumed. They had nowhere else to sell their fruit, and they faced eviction if they failed to meet standards.³⁸

By 1961, FELDA realized that unleashing machete-wielding settlers on the jungle was slow and expensive. From then on, contractors cleared trees, planted crops, and built houses for settlers. Instead of earning land with their sweat, settlers had the cost of development added to their debts, to be repaid out of future earnings.³⁹ The size of settler allotments shrank to four hectares. Separate *dusun* plots for fruit trees vanished, covered in more oil palms. Even rubber settlers had to put in oil palms on their *dusun* land, wherever a nearby factory could handle the fruit.⁴⁰ Most significantly,

FELDA converted land titles into shares, lumping land into eighty-hectare units worked by teams.

Critics warned that FELDA treated smallholders “as if they were the indentured labour on a commercial estate.”⁴¹ One settler who built an unauthorized addition on his FELDA-issued home had to tear it down to maintain uniformity.⁴² Settlers themselves complained about managerial discipline, and they vociferously opposed the switch from landholding to shareholding. Some said: “[Prime Minister] Tun Razak promised us land, not a piece of paper.”⁴³ But discontent with the new system didn’t stop FELDA from planning more settlements into the 1970s.

The most emblematic project was the gargantuan Jengka Triangle scheme, which broke ground in Pahang in 1965. The World Bank-funded project was projected to host 100,000 settlers by 1985, and both Bank and U.S. officials saw it as a key step in demonstrating the success of capitalist development in a corner of the world where the Cold War was heating up.⁴⁴ While officials depicted the region as an uninhabited stretch of swamp and forest, at least 110 indigenous families used the area, and seventy-five people were displaced early in the project. They weren’t offered—and probably didn’t want—a place in the settlements.⁴⁵

The forest was no match for contractors armed with chainsaws, bulldozers, and herbicides. “The jungle is falling like grass in Jengka these days,” wrote one journalist. Workers “[pushed] back the forest almost magically—picking up fruit and orchids as they go, and sending wild animals scuttling.” Tun Razak declared, “The forest must make way for development. The people’s hunger for land must be satisfied.”⁴⁶ He wasn’t shy about linking economic development with politics, promising voters in Kelantan their own “massive land development scheme on the scale of the Jengka Triangle” if they voted for his party in 1969.⁴⁷

According to the Bank, the environmental impact of Jengka Triangle was “less severe” than expected. FELDA controlled soil erosion with cover crops and contouring. New effluent treatment systems kept palm oil mill waste out of waterways. Still, it was clear that cutting down 100,000 hectares of forest “had a considerable effect in terms of reduction of wildlife population.” At least twenty-four elephants, forty forest oxen, and five Sumatran rhinos lost their homes. The elephants didn’t take the invasion passively: one herd returned to feast on 79,000 young palms before it was relocated at great expense.⁴⁸

By the 1980s, the trees had matured, and settler incomes were reaching three times the rural poverty level. The plantations and oil mills were fi-

nancially sound.⁴⁹ But critics noted that FELDA had “helped the favored few” rather than the neediest families. Moreover, the project was fantastically expensive. At \$15,000 U.S. dollars per family, it was the most expensive rain-fed agricultural project the Bank had ever financed.⁵⁰ Bank officials weren’t optimistic, noting that settlers’ children were unlikely to live under FELDA discipline.⁵¹ A later study concluded that the Jengka Triangle would “export thousands of youths to the major urban centres.”⁵² Women shared wealth only in the context of marriage: men had to be married to get into settlements, and titles remained in men’s names. Women gathered loose fruit that fell from harvested bunches but had to negotiate with their husbands to see any income from their efforts.⁵³ As settlers got richer, they started new businesses and hired migrant workers to tend the palms, a typical outcome in Malaysia’s smallholder projects.⁵⁴

World Bank and Malaysian officials often pointed to FELDA’s work in West Malaysia as an exemplar for the world. Yet the model was never successfully replicated elsewhere, even in East Malaysia.⁵⁵ FELDA wasn’t sanguine about exporting its model to Sabah or Sarawak: its experience in West Malaysia involved “settling a group of people whose ethnic traits and attitudes toward work are known and well understood.” FELDA worried that “We have not understood the prospective settlers [in East Malaysia] well enough.”⁵⁶

The oil palm era began in East Malaysia during the last days of British rule, with a CDC project at Mostyn in Sabah. As the project matured, it was supposed to add smallholders before selling off the plantation “to the Sabah public.”⁵⁷ Harrisons & Crosfield partnered with CDC on the project, though it only put up £50,000 next to the CDC’s £1.5 million. Unilever soon opened its own plantations in Sabah.⁵⁸ Sabah farmers weren’t enthusiastic about oil palm, however. Smallholders around Mostyn chased a cocoa boom instead; one man recalled that “Every coffee shop . . . spoke [of] nothing else except the planting of cocoa and its lucrative returns.”⁵⁹

Sarawak’s first big oil palm project was another CDC-backed NES scheme, launched in 1968.⁶⁰ British officials agreed to finance it explicitly because of the benefits it promised to smallholders, yet the Sarawak government soon abandoned the settler component.⁶¹ By the time CDC sold its stake in 1990, the project was simply a giant plantation in the hands of private owners, Sarawak Oil Palms Bhd. FELDA’s own foray into Sarawak in the 1980s through a subsidiary company didn’t even make a pretense of including smallholders, and it met strong resistance from Dayak landowners.⁶² FELDA’s “Sahabat” complex, launched in 1980 on a thinly populated peninsula in eastern Sabah, did include smallholders, and it was backed by \$70 million from the World Bank.⁶³

But the 100,000-hectare project was mainly an exercise in converting forest to plantation; only five of the thirteen planned villages were ever settled.⁶⁴ Most of the plantation was worked by migrant laborers.⁶⁵ The smallholder-focused “development era” that began with Kulai proved short-lived.

Part of the problem with the NES model in East Malaysia was resettlement: communities were not as pressed for land as their compatriots in West Malaysia, and West Malaysians showed little interest in migrating east.⁶⁶ Sabah and Sarawak smallholders did take up oil palm in the 1970s and 1980s, though, especially when the prospects for cocoa soured with falling world prices and the arrival of the damaging cocoa pod borer. Many participated in “in situ” development projects, where state agencies worked with private firms to incorporate entire villages into new plantations, turning farmers into either smallholders or shareholders in the venture. These projects had the advantage of working within customary land tenure systems (or at least official interpretations of them), but respect for customary land often proved to be a cover for selling off huge tracts of forest for the benefit of private firms.⁶⁷ Oil palm often followed on the heels of logging, and elites in Sabah and Sarawak amassed great fortunes through logging concessions.⁶⁸

While the Cold War inspired the United States, World Bank, and other actors to support the Malaysian palm oil boom, its success hinged on factors particular to Malaysia. Politicians giving out smallholder plots through NES projects were more interested in winning votes than in fighting the distant threat of a communist insurgency, and smallholders were often enthusiastic participants in projects that turned them into small-scale oil palm capitalists. Along with big plantation companies, state-backed smallholders pushed the oil palm frontier in Malaysia far beyond what private firms had accomplished up to Malaysia’s independence in 1957.

By the mid-1980s, Malaysia was the world’s leading exporter of palm oil, set on a trajectory that doubled Malaysia’s palm oil output between 1980 and 1990 and nearly doubled it again by 2000. Yet this incredible growth was soon eclipsed by an even bigger boom in Malaysia’s neighbor to the south, Indonesia.

Indonesia: Transmigration and the Forest Frontier

Indonesia followed Malaysia down the road of state-led smallholder development. While Indonesian politicians insist on the novelty of their smallholder model, it was in fact another iteration of the colonial-era NES concept.⁶⁹ In terms of size, Indonesia’s oil palm project has been a smash-

ing success: beginning at 100,000 hectares in 1970, Indonesia's oil palm coverage grew to 1 million hectares in the early 1990s and to 10 million hectares by 2015. There may well be more oil palms in Indonesian monocultures today than in all of Africa's remaining "wild" palm groves.⁷⁰

Perhaps 40 percent of Indonesia's oil palms are held by smallholders in one form or another, and much of the rest grew out of "nucleus" plantations.⁷¹ The NES choice, researchers Rob Cramb and John McCarthy argue, wasn't born out of idealism or faith in peasant agriculture. Rather, it reflected a convergence of factors: "the interests of a developmental state with limited resources, plantation companies needing access to land, smallholders wanting to improve their livelihoods, but lacking finance and technology, and donor agencies promoting broad-based economic growth."⁷² Those donors played an important role. The World Bank invested more than half a billion dollars in Indonesia's oil palm industry, helping resettle tens of thousands of people to grow oil palm, in addition to other projects focused on rubber, cocoa, and rice. That's more than the Bank spent on *all* of its oil palm projects in Africa, Latin America, and the rest of Asia combined.⁷³

Indonesia's two key resources, according to a Bank report, were "Javanese labor and unexploited land in the other islands."⁷⁴ After independence, the government began a "transmigration" program settling Javanese farmers in Sumatra, Kalimantan (Borneo), and other islands.⁷⁵ Suharto put Indonesia on the "right" side of the Cold War in the aftermath of a 1965 coup, and the Bank rushed in with money for ambitious new projects, including oil palm plantations. Existing plantations seized from colonial companies in Sumatra were the first targets, but Bank officials urged Indonesian officials to follow the Malaysian model and use NES oil palm settlements for new transmigration schemes in Sumatra and Kalimantan.⁷⁶ From the Indonesian point of view, smallholder participation justified expropriation of land by state companies. It also ensured that Bank financing continued to flow. By the late 1980s, though, Indonesia increasingly entrusted new settlements to private companies, creating "large-scale conglomerates controlled by Suharto's political, military and corporate allies."⁷⁷

The Suharto regime (1966–98) promoted oil palm with two goals. First, it wanted to keep food—especially cooking oil—cheap for Indonesian consumers.⁷⁸ Second, it aimed to transform "waste" lands into productive assets. Anticipating criticism from environmental activists, Indonesian officials—and some Bank officials—argued that plantations weren't actually bad for the environment. They claimed that "slash and burn cultivation practiced by indigenous people was far more destructive" than forest clearance for

oil palm monoculture, echoing colonial sentiments.⁷⁹ Planners expected Javanese migrants to bring permanent agriculture and the tools of the Green Revolution to outlying islands.⁸⁰ And as one scientist noted, “the settlers themselves are no lovers of forest. Forest is alien to most Javanese and is perceived as a source of spirits, ghosts, and pests. As a result, they are quite happy to see it felled.”⁸¹

Transmigration and plantation expansion created conflicts everywhere they went.⁸² The Dutch never produced a countrywide register of land in the colonial era, and the Indonesian government found that “empty” land usually had occupants. Sometimes companies and officials struck deals with locals to sell land or to include them as smallholders. Some farmers found that their farms and trees were added to NES projects “without their consent and without compensation.”⁸³ Sometimes developers—backed by the army—just took the land. The state-backed business sector that emerged in the 1970s–80s became, as anthropologist Anna Tsing describes it, “a predator . . . born from the mix of nepotism, international finance, and military muscle, and feeding on cheap resources ripped illegally from rural communities.”⁸⁴ With a total price tag of more than \$7 billion, transmigration projects offered endless opportunities for graft. Foreign lenders marveled at how money “vanished into thin air.”⁸⁵

Suharto’s regime stifled most opposition to transmigration and plantation development, but it could not stop all protests. In one incident in Sumatra, the army killed more than 100 transmigrants in clashes over land: the migrants wanted fertile hillsides, rather than the valley they had been assigned. Only a few days earlier, settlers in another project chased off plantation workers with swords and spears.⁸⁶

Forest communities often felt the worst effects of oil palm expansion. Like their counterparts in Malaysia, Indonesia’s forest peoples usually lacked formal title to land.⁸⁷ In the 1980s, some officials—including the Minister of Transmigration—took explicitly chauvinistic stances, promising that “The different ethnic groups will in the long run disappear because of integration,” resulting in “one kind of man.”⁸⁸ Indonesia officially recognized customary law (*adat*), but *adat* law was no guarantee that people could actually protect their land against powerful officials, businessmen, or elites in their own community.⁸⁹

One Bank-funded oil palm project in Sumatra targeted lands of the Orang Rimba people. Though they “had asked to be left alone” in 1984, the government seized their forests for an oil palm NES project.⁹⁰ When Orang Rimba representatives protested, they were told “to go complain to Su-

harto.”⁹¹ Despite having newly adopted rules on the protection of indigenous peoples, the Bank ignored Orang Rimba complaints.⁹² The Bank suggested resettling them in a nearby forest reserve (now Bukit Duabelas National Park), but even this was under threat by the 1990s as loggers and hunters preyed on its resources. One study predicted that the Orang Rimba would soon “resemble their counterparts in Peninsular Malaysia . . . surrounded on all sides by oil palm” without room to forage and practice forest fallow agriculture.⁹³

Indonesia’s plans for oil palm, rubber, and rice projects in Irian Jaya (the western half of Papua) in the 1980s inspired some of the fiercest resistance. Building on criticism of Bank-funded settlements in the Brazilian Amazon, international NGOs publicized the links between plantation and NES development with environmental degradation and the displacement—often backed by violence—of forest peoples.⁹⁴ While Papua’s forests lacked charismatic megafauna, forests in Sumatra and Kalimantan were home to species like the orangutan, Sumatran tiger, and Sumatran rhino. The voracious rate of forest clearance in Indonesia—perhaps 1 million hectares annually since the 1960s—threatened the survival of these iconic species along with hundreds of human communities.⁹⁵ As NGOs realized, defending indigenous rights was a way of defending ecosystems, and vice versa.

Yet international activists tended to remain stuck in what one critic called an “orang-utan phase.”⁹⁶ Asia’s great ape became a symbol of tropical biodiversity under threat, but the emphasis on orangutans often obscured the stakes for people—as forest dwellers, settlers, workers, and consumers of palm oil. The orangutan-centric strategy provoked outrage in the North, but little tangible action. International pressure and domestic reform did little to protect either the environment or indigenous peoples from the oil palm industry’s growth, which accelerated at an unprecedented pace into the 1990s and 2000s.

Papua New Guinea

The young oil palm industry in Papua New Guinea (PNG) attracted much less attention from environmentalists; today it’s often promoted as a case study in best practices for both environmental and labor issues. PNG was an Australian colony until 1975. The World Bank saw Malaysia’s NES projects as a perfect model for this rural and underdeveloped country, so long as oil palm projects were “established under the commercial management of experienced private enterprise.”⁹⁷ Harrisons & Crosfield (H&C) signed a

partnership with Australia for the first NES project at Cape Hoskins on the island of New Britain in 1967.

Getting people to Hoskins was a daunting affair, involving the resettlement of thousands of people with little or no experience growing cash crops. Oil palm was an alien plant for everyone.⁹⁸ A sociologist studying the early settlers noted their high expectations for the crop and warned that they would be disappointed.⁹⁹ According to an H&C employee, there had been no serious thinking about how settlement would play out, and the settlers were a highly diverse set of migrants from Papua rather than the relatively homogenous groups selected for settlement in Malaysia or Indonesia. Among other early blunders, H&C's staff accidentally set the Dagi River ablaze several times with leaking mill effluent and chemicals.¹⁰⁰

Rumors and conspiracy theories swirled among the settlers, and the first years were full of brawls. Clan justice required men to avenge attacks on their comrades, inspiring cycles of retaliation.¹⁰¹ In 1971, Highlanders from Papua got into a fight with a Tolai supervisor, Peter Tavip, and killed him with an axe. When a detachment of Australian police arrived, 300 men stepped forward to confess to the crime, foiling the investigation. No one was surprised when a Highlander turned up dead, likely the victim of a revenge killing.¹⁰² Other killings followed, and police and settlers traded arrows and gunfire at one point.¹⁰³ Settlers also feuded with local Nakanai families, who had sold land for the project. A militant cargo cult formed among the Nakanai, and in 1993, one Nakanai group stormed palm small-holdings and evicted settlers.¹⁰⁴

Subsequent NES projects funded by the World Bank, CDC, and other lenders in Papua also led to conflicts between settlers and locals.¹⁰⁵ Cultural tensions sparked many fights, but the deeper issue was land. Under PNG law, land held in customary tenure is inalienable and can only be leased, in exchange for gifts. In swidden agriculture, the stakes of land gifts were low: most plots were used for a few years at most. Oil palms were effectively permanent, sparking demands for the return of land or higher rents.

None of these problems meant that Hoskins, Popondetta, and other NES sites were failures. New H&C management at Hoskins salvaged the operation, helped by high prices for palm oil in the 1970s.¹⁰⁶ Across PNG, the oil palm projects gave settlers cash incomes and generated export revenue for PNG's government. Settlers weren't trapped in an endless cycle of ethnic hatred and violence, either. They came to joke about one another's "ethnocentrism," and Hoskins settlers pushed the management to adopt a 1977 ordinance granting powers to expel troublemakers. Today, children in eth-

nically mixed community schools identified as members of the “*wel pam* (oil palm) tribe.”¹⁰⁷

Settlers also experimented with oil palm agronomy, testing different methods rather than trusting the company’s advice.¹⁰⁸ Families adapted to the individualistic nature of the NES system, segregating oil palm work and earnings from the customary sharing of food and labor.¹⁰⁹ Company managers eventually abandoned settlements and shifted to a model akin to the “in situ” smallholder projects in Sabah and Sarawak.¹¹⁰ New Britain Palm Oil Ltd., the Hoskins plantation company, developed a particularly innovative way of addressing gender inequities in its “Mama Lus Frut” system. The company only paid male household heads for fruit, but men didn’t want to spend time picking up fruit fallen from bunches. Their wives had no legal claim to fruit earnings, but they could withhold their labor. “Why should we help the men buy beer?” asked one woman.¹¹¹ Armed with a company-issued “Mama card,” women began to sell loose fruit directly to the mill. The money went into their own bank accounts. Men started paying women with extra fruit in exchange for weeding and other work: fruit was easier for men to part with than cash, which men faced great social pressures to spend. Although the PNG experience with oil palm was far from perfect, it showed that the NES model could be adapted to work in cultural and political contexts that were radically different from those for the pilot at Kulai.

Part II: Latin America

New oil palm industries took root in Central and South America for many of the same reasons that Malaysia, Indonesia, and PNG embraced the tree. As in Southeast Asia, the Cold War was an important political backdrop for the oil palm story in Latin America. The cast of international institutions was similar, though they had no colonial baggage in the region. Yet national and local dynamics were especially important in determining where and how oil palm took off as a cash crop.

Colombia, the region’s biggest palm oil producer today, launched its industry with domestic capital backed up by foreign expertise. In contrast, one giant multinational firm, United Fruit Company (UFC, now Chiquita Brands), was responsible for the introduction and expansion of oil palm in Central America, particularly in Honduras and Costa Rica. Across the region, new oil palm projects created the same issues that they did in Asia: land disputes, violence, and environmental degradation. Unlike Asian cases, however, the Latin American oil palm industry took root in a region with a

long history of effective labor and peasant organization, limiting the ability of firms to impose plantations on communities—and raising the stakes of conflict in ways that sometimes resulted in horrific violence.

Central America: Costa Rica and Honduras

United Fruit Company and its rival, Standard Fruit, dominated the economies, politics, and landscapes of Central America for much of the twentieth century. Bananas made the companies rich, though the same couldn't be said for the places and people that grew those bananas. As one UFC employee put it, “the chasm between what companies like United Fruit put into an indigenous system and what they take out” was “the stuff that revolutions are made of.”¹¹² And as workers mobilized and fought for higher wages, sometimes forging alliances with peasant farmers eager to take back land from plantations and landlords, revolutions came.

Banana companies owned more than a million hectares by the 1930s, in part because bananas were profitable, but also because nature was working against them.¹¹³ Panama disease, caused by *Fusarium* fungi, forced the companies to practice a form of shifting cultivation across the region's lowland forests. When *Fusarium* ruined a tract, the companies would pick up everything—down to the railroad tracks—and move on.¹¹⁴ By the 1950s, Panama disease had practically wiped out the desirable *Gros Michel* banana, and another plague, Black Sigatoka (caused by *Mycosphaerella fijiensis*), was on the march. To fight Sigatoka, companies sprayed fields with “Bordeaux mixture.”¹¹⁵ The chemical itself (copper sulphate and slaked lime) was not highly toxic. The problem was the sheer amount used in what turned out to be a futile effort to stave off Sigatoka. Workers sprayed so much of it that they reportedly turned blue. Repeated treatments sterilized land with copper, making it useless for bananas or food crops.¹¹⁶ The combined threat of fungal disease and copper contamination meant that bananas were “a profitable but temporary crop.”¹¹⁷

One of the few crops that could tolerate elevated copper levels was the oil palm. UFC had been experimenting with oil palms since the 1920s, when it collected seeds from Africa and Sumatra. Diseases and rats damaged early test plots, and UFC showed little interest in the crop. That changed during the Second World War, when UFC responded to U.S. government calls for new sources of palm oil.¹¹⁸ By 1945, UFC was planting oil palms alongside cocoa and abaca, searching for the next big plantation crop for Central America. While *Fusarium* can attack oil palms, the company didn't see it as

a serious threat. Because Sigatoka didn't infect palms at all, abandoned banana land could be profitably repurposed. UFC could even reuse the cableways and trams that moved banana bunches for palm fruit.¹¹⁹

By the 1950s, UFC's diversification campaign was in full swing, with the wholehearted support of the U.S. government. UFC's oil palm project promised "to revolutionize the vegetable oil situation" in Central America, with palm oil selling for half the cost of lard.¹²⁰ The company had more than 17,000 acres of oil palms (almost all *Deli dura*) across the region by 1958, but it grew less convinced that oil palm was the crop of the future. UFC had twice as much land under cocoa and five times more under sugar, along with its 145,000 acres of bananas.¹²¹ As its plantations matured, the company argued that oil palm "shows lower returns both to the local economy and to the company than banana operations," defending its decision to stick with bananas as long as possible.¹²²

UFC approached Unilever about an oil palm partnership in 1960, but Unilever turned down the offer. Afterward, UFC's new plantings slowed down significantly.¹²³ The company realized that it needed new *tenera* palms and expeller mills to compete with Asian competitors in the export market, but it wasn't willing to take the risk alone. On top of this, UFC faced growing labor problems. A 1954 strike in Honduras—and the unwillingness of the government to crush it—marked the beginning of the end for the UFC plantation system in Central America.¹²⁴

In both Costa Rica and Honduras, UFC did find eager customers for its palm oil. Numar, a Costa Rican margarine firm launched by an American entrepreneur, bought all the oil UFC could make. Numar popularized margarine in the region, where most people had never heard of it or "believed it was inferior butter." Numar spent \$5,000 a month on advertising and cooking demonstrations to convince people to buy the stuff. It worked so well that UFC bought Numar in 1965.¹²⁵ Feeding the domestic market in Costa Rica and neighboring Honduras was profitable, thanks to stiff tariffs. But as historian Patricia Clare Rhoades has argued, these tariffs made UFC "a prisoner of its own protected trade." In Costa Rica, the government included margarine in a "basket" of consumer goods, setting prices and restricting UFC's ability to export palm oil.¹²⁶ UFC and its successor companies made money, but they had few incentives to invest in a big expansion until market liberalization took hold in the 1980s.

Farmers, rather than plantations, were responsible for Central America's next phase of oil palm production. Hungry for land that banana companies were hoarding, farmers demanded agrarian reforms in the 1960s and 1970s.

Worried about a repeat of the Cuban revolution, governments tried to find ways to give farmers land without killing off the lucrative plantation sector. With the approval and financial support of Uncle Sam, experts brought forward the ready-made NES model. The idea of coordinating smallholder cash-crop production with a larger industrial venture was not new to Latin America: banana companies often bought fruit from smallholders. An even more similar precedent was the *colono* system practiced in parts of Caribbean, in which sugar smallholders sold their highly perishable crop to crushing mills hosted by larger plantations.¹²⁷

Rather than hand over the big plantations in the 1950s and 1960s, the Honduran government encouraged farmers to colonize forests and “waste” lands. One such area was the Aguán valley, which UFC abandoned in the 1940s after Panama disease struck. With U.S. funding, the government relocated thousands of families and built a series of palm oil mills to serve smallholder cooperatives. Settlers agreed to accept low prices for their fruit in exchange for cooperative ownership of oil mills, though it took a 1980 strike before farmers finally secured control.¹²⁸

Honduran settlers found that although they owned their palms and the oil mills, companies run by a handful of powerful families monopolized downstream oil refining and manufacturing. This held prices, and farmers’ profits, down.¹²⁹ And the Aguán was far from a paradise. Settlers carved out homes in harsh conditions, struggling through a damaging 1974 hurricane and large debt repayments. Few of the cooperatives were commercial successes, plagued by debt as well as “labyrinthine webs of embezzlement and fraudulent accounting.”¹³⁰

Costa Rica saw a similar shift toward smallholders in the 1970s as peasant activists led invasions of vacant fruit company land. By 1975, twenty cooperatives with more than 1,100 members had been formed to produce palm oil, along with 350 independent farmers. Like small-scale farmers everywhere, they preferred to balance oil palm with food crops. Farmers let cattle graze under their palms and only put half of their land under oil palms, despite the exhortations of Palma Tica, UFC’s successor and the monopoly buyer of palm fruit in Costa Rica.¹³¹ Even though more people now owned land, their economic conditions didn’t always improve. Some smallholders found themselves trapped in “disguised peonage” after accepting seedlings and loans from Palma Tica. Earnings in the oil palm sector were typically lower than in the heyday of the banana boom, and fewer people found work. In Costa Rica’s Pacífico region, nearly 15,000 people

worked on UFC's banana estates in the 1950s; only 6,000 worked in oil palm by 2003.¹³²

South America: The Colombian Experience

Like the Central American states, South American oil palm ventures were motivated by food security. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization urged countries across the region to grow oil palm in the 1950s, but most governments moved slowly to promote the crop.¹³³ In Colombia, however, different strands came together to create the conditions for an oil palm boom. Despite amenable environmental conditions, *E. guineensis* didn't take root in Colombia under Spanish rule or in the post-independence period. Afro-Colombians reproduced African systems of "agroforest" cultivation in the lowlands of western Colombia—one anthropologist said he thought he "was entering a rain forest" on his first visit to their farms—but oil palms weren't included.¹³⁴ Instead, Afro-Colombians exploited native palms, including the "vegetable ivory palm" (*Phytelephas* species), harvesting nuts for the world's button-making factories and eking out a living in a nation that denied them formal ownership of land.¹³⁵

The oil palm arrived in Colombia several times in the early twentieth century. Catholic missions planted a few as ornamentals, and state research stations hosted experimental plots. In the interwar period, Florentino Claes, a Belgian scientist, provided new seeds and urged the government to take up oil palm. But the government was committed to another oil crop, the castor bean. Claes told a government minister: "the castor bean only makes shit," referring to its effect on the digestive tract. But his pitch for oil palm failed.¹³⁶ One oil palm plantation dating to the 1930s was cut down in 1955, and UFC opted to abandon its wartime oil palm experiments in favor of bananas.

A Colombian entrepreneur, Moris Gutt, was a key figure in getting the oil palm industry off the ground after 1945. Gutt's firm, GRASCO, produced soap, margarine, and chemicals. He was unhappy about his dependency on Philippine coconuts and Peruvian fish oil. Colombia imported an average of 50,000 tons of edible oil every year in the 1950s.¹³⁷ Gutt approached the government for help, and Colombia turned to the FAO. The FAO in turn sent Maurice Ferrand (a veteran of Belgian Congo's oil palm sector) to tour the country in 1958–59. Ferrand decided Colombia's Pacific coast was "of first order quality for oil palm."¹³⁸ He argued that it was "of great social and

economic interest” to include marginalized Afro-Colombian farmers in oil palm development, suggesting an NES project.¹³⁹

Meanwhile, Gutt had been connected with the IRHO, which dispatched experts of its own to identify a plantation site in the center of the country.¹⁴⁰ Gutt’s “Indupalma” at San Alberto was a straightforward plantation with no smallholder involvement. Local farmers complained about being tricked or coerced into selling their land for the project, and Gutt employed a former military commander as manager, who reportedly visited landowners “flanked by two gun-slingers.”¹⁴¹ Indupalma soon set about transforming forest and scrub into a scientific plantation. IRHO experts supplied *tenera* seeds, tackled nutrient deficiencies in the soil with fertilizers, and applied chemicals to eradicate unwanted plants and insects. *Imperata*, the invasive grass so loathed by Southeast Asian planters, proved no match for doses of 2,4,5-T (one of the active ingredients in Agent Orange). When experts saw beetles preying on young palms, they sprayed Heptachlor (now banned in most places). When caterpillars crawled into fruit bunches, the answer was aerial spraying with Carbaryl powder. Armed with science and technology, planters thought they were winning a war on nature.¹⁴²

But natural forces proved to be allies of Colombia’s nascent oil palm plantation sector. By the late 1960s, cheap Peruvian fish oil threatened to drown the Colombian market just as the country’s palms matured. Relief came in the form of *El Niño*. The 1972–73 weather event nearly wiped out Peru’s fishing industry. Fish oil disappeared from the market, leaving buyers hungry for palm oil. The Colombian government urged even more plantation development and offered subsidies for estates larger than 500 hectares.¹⁴³ Palm oil’s moment in the sun came too late for Afro-Colombian smallholders working on Ferrand’s experiment, however. Most had abandoned oil palm by 1970, finding that they could not afford to wait for the palms to mature. The smallholder share of Colombian palm oil dwindled to insignificance in the 1980s.¹⁴⁴

In addition to battling the environment, Indupalma fought to control the nearly 2,000 workers it needed to operate the plantation and oil mill. As workers unionized and demanded better wages, the company turned to subcontractors working without benefits. In the midst of bitter disputes, the company accused union leaders of murdering the plantation’s chief of staff in 1971. It was an early incident in what became a string of killings. One of the most dramatic episodes was the 1977 kidnapping of Indupalma’s manager in Bogotá by the M-19 movement, in solidarity with the union. The

company ultimately gave in to union demands and stopped subcontracting.¹⁴⁵ In the meantime, the company allegedly turned to paramilitaries for help, labeling union activists as guerilla sympathizers. Nearly 100 Indupalma workers and six union presidents suffered violent deaths in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴⁶

The dynamics that inspired much of the killing in Colombia—conflicts over land and labor—weren't unique to that country. Guatemala and Honduras also saw spates of deadly violence as oil palm plantations grew at the expense of smallholders. In contrast, smallholders in Costa Rica and Ecuador generally had been able to keep their land, selling fruit to mills or participating in cooperatives. Nothing in the ecology or economics of the oil palm created violence; instead the arrival of the oil palm industry exposed the tensions and injustices already present in rural communities. Whether oil palm functioned as a tool for development or for oppression hinged on local and national histories, not on global political actors and economic forces.

Part III: African “Failures” in Context

History also shadowed the oil palm's career in postcolonial Africa. In many accounts, this is a story of failure, caused by political intrigue or corruption. The continent's once-mighty exporters collapsed while dynamic competitors in Southeast Asia seized the world market. The 1980s were a “lost decade”; by the end of the century, palm oil exports from Malaysia and Indonesia were worth more than “the total value of *all* agricultural exports from *all* of sub-Saharan Africa.”¹⁴⁷

Yet writing off the African oil palm experience as an episode in “entrepreneurial failure” or “stagnation” misses the story.¹⁴⁸ Violent conflict wrecked the oil palm industry in Africa's two biggest producers, Nigeria and Congo. Big increases in populations everywhere meant that oil formerly destined for export never left the continent. Just like projects in Latin America and Asia, internationally funded projects emphasized domestic food security, reflecting a “basic needs strategy” that dominated Western aid policy in the developing world by the 1970s. Well-fed people, the theory went, were less likely to upset the international order.¹⁴⁹ Many oil palm projects for Africa designed by foreign experts were failures—some disastrously so—but there were success stories. Big plantations played a role, but smallholders proved to be dynamic entrepreneurs once conditions for oil palm production grew more favorable.¹⁵⁰

Nigeria and Congo

Nigeria's share of world palm oil exports was still more than 30 percent at independence in 1960, and it was 25 percent by the time civil war broke out in 1967. Exports fell to practically nothing in the 1970s, and the country began importing huge quantities of vegetable oil to meet domestic demand.¹⁵¹ Congo, which held another quarter of the export market in 1960, met a similar fate. As chapter 8 emphasizes, the primary reason for this collapse was political rather than economic or ecological. Nigeria's civil war ravaged the oil palm belt. Hundreds of thousands died, and many more were driven off their land. The few oil palm plantations that existed were destroyed along with their oil mills, and people cut down palms to put in badly needed food crops.¹⁵²

Congo's bitter conflict with the breakaway state of Katanga had no direct impact on the oil palm industry, but the uprising in Kwilu in 1963–68 (which cost somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 lives) was very much linked to the colonial legacies of oil palm. Fruit cutters formed a militant corps of organized radicals, aiming to topple the remnants of the colonial system and the economic inequality it entailed. The revolt, led by a former HCB trainee, spread across a broad area as migrant workers brought the movement home from labor camps.¹⁵³ The failed Kwilu rebellion and others like it didn't lead to an immediate collapse in Congo's oil palm exports, however. That came after 1973, when General Mobutu nationalized foreign plantations. Unilever and other European firms lost their estates, and even though they got some of them back by 1977, the damage was done. Years of underinvestment and decline ensued.¹⁵⁴

Congolese staff struggled to maintain what had been INEAC's research station at Yangambi, but they never got the funding to resume large-scale work on oil palms.¹⁵⁵ Officials approached the World Bank for help in the late 1970s, but their experts wrote off what was left of the elderly "grove" palms once coveted by Lever. Even doubling prices for fruit couldn't convince men to climb such tall trees. The Bank urged the government to abandon palm groves and the smallholders who worked them (and made perhaps a third of the country's palm oil). The best bet for producing oil—and paying off loans—was "rehabilitation of existing commercial oil palm estates."¹⁵⁶ Foreign lenders paid half the cost of a nearly-\$50 million project to replant plantations owned by Unilever and other firms. Unilever sold off other properties, dating to Lever's 1911 treaty, instead of replanting.¹⁵⁷ Yet the new *tenera* palms didn't produce enough to feed the country, and

by the 1990s, Congo was firmly among the ranks of exporters-turned-importers of palm oil.¹⁵⁸

Nigeria's experience with oil palm rehabilitation was somewhat better, though it still wasn't enough to stave off imports. By 1980, Nigeria imported more than 50,000 tons of palm oil, a figure that quadrupled before a 1986 import ban took effect. Imports surged again in the 1990s as firms imported crude (rather than refined) palm oil, dodging the ban.¹⁵⁹ As in Congo, the key issue was where to spend money: plantations or smallholders? As early as 1965, the CDC was separating investments in nucleus estates and smallholder schemes in Africa, preferring to finance the former. One official called plantations "the more important part of the [NES] venture."¹⁶⁰ The World Bank wound up paying for smallholder components but took a pessimistic view of their economic value in Nigeria.¹⁶¹

The Bank and other foreign lenders did ultimately agree to finance a huge "grove rehabilitation" project in Nigeria, but the civil war ruined those plans. When foreign lenders returned to Nigeria in the mid-1970s, their expectations for oil palm were limited, focused on solving "domestic shortages and Nigeria's impending dependence upon foreign supplies."¹⁶² Injections of money kept the Nigerian Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR) running, but efforts to self-finance its research through sales of seedlings and oil from its experimental plots didn't come close to meeting the institute's needs.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, NIFOR's expatriate staff had decamped to Malaysia, where public and private research institutes reaped the benefits of decades of experience in Nigeria, funded by taxes on African farmers through the marketing boards.¹⁶⁴

The Bank supported four smallholder oil palm projects in southern Nigeria in the late 1970s.¹⁶⁵ SOCFIN planned one project in Rivers States and another in Imo State, calling for farmers to use hybrid tree varieties, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, cover crops, and other trappings of the modern plantation.¹⁶⁶ There was no room for intercropping or "wild" palm groves.¹⁶⁷ As the projects unfolded, SOCFIN complained about "poor smallholder discipline," urging the government to remove all old palms and ban food crop interplanting.¹⁶⁸

After ten years, the Bank compared the results of the Rivers and Imo State projects. Although the nucleus plantations did well, smallholders in both projects fell 30 percent short of fruit-delivery targets. SOCFIN's experts insisted that this proved the need for a plantation to keep oil mills running. They also stressed the benefits of professional (i.e., expatriate) management, blaming Nigerian staff for inefficiency and political intrigue.¹⁶⁹ Smallholders had no voice in project design, but they succeeded in convincing managers

and NIFOR experts to change some policies. The Imo project managers “accepted, albeit reluctantly” farmers’ demands to grow food crops among the palms.¹⁷⁰

Farmers saw clear benefits in growing a diverse range of crops to hedge against disease, drought, and market fluctuations.¹⁷¹ Importantly, Imo farmers agreed to sacrifice their old palms so long as they could grow food. They saw the value of *tenera* palms, so much so that farmers continued to plant them even after the cheap fertilizer provided by the Bank disappeared in 1985. Farmers outside the project area also planted *tenera* seedlings. Bank officials praised Imo farmers for their “enthusiasm and business-like attitude” toward oil palm. Many were in fact veterans of late colonial tree-replanting projects, with plenty of knowledge about *tenera* palms and “scientific agriculture.” Families still made oil in the household when local prices were attractive, but they sold to the mill and even harvested palm groves outside their own plots when the mill offered better prices.

In contrast, the Rivers State project, Risonpalm, banned intercropping. Land for a nucleus estate was seized from eleven communities, who complained about the loss of fallow farmland and resource-rich forests.¹⁷² Risonpalm staff found that smallholders were reluctant to fell old palms and plant new ones; they had ample access to “wild” groves in addition to palms on their farms. Risonpalm’s managers quickly adapted to this reality. The mill machinery was designed for *tenera* fruit, but local farmers began harvesting so many grove palms that the mill began accepting mixed *dura* and *tenera* fruit.¹⁷³ Risonpalm bought thirty trucks to collect fruit from what was becoming a bustling “wild” palm district, instead of the two that the budget had called for. Risonpalm also allowed farmers to buy up to one ton of palm oil for every twenty tons of fruit they delivered, recognizing the importance of women’s oil-selling income in local marketplaces.¹⁷⁴

Neither farmer initiative nor adaptable management could protect the oil palm sector from the other kind of oil Nigeria is famous for. Petroleum might have made Nigeria rich. Instead it fed a kleptocratic elite and polluted huge areas of the Niger Delta.¹⁷⁵ With an overvalued currency, Nigeria’s exports became uncompetitive. Domestic wages skyrocketed in the 1980s, and young men flocked to towns, stripping plantations and smallholders alike of the labor needed to harvest oil palms.¹⁷⁶ The nucleus plantations and the smallholders they were supposed to serve suffered major neglect in the 1980s and early 1990s, as politicians squabbled over what to do with these debt-ridden projects.

Ivory Coast: An Oil Palm Success Story

The World Bank and other international lenders failed to resuscitate the palm oil export economy in Nigeria and Congo, contributing to a growing view in the West that Africa was a “hopeless continent.” The Ivory Coast followed a different path. Today at least 40,000 farmers operating small and medium-sized oil palm plots work alongside plantations. Ivorian smallholders produce about 70 percent of the country’s industrially processed palm fruit, using 72 percent of the land planted with oil palms. Together with the plantations, Ivorian smallholders have achieved what no other African country has managed in recent years: domestic self-sufficiency in palm oil along with a big surplus for export.¹⁷⁷

Ivory Coast embarked on NES-type projects shortly after independence, guided by experts from the IRHO and funded by European and international lenders. The initial focus was on domestic food needs, but the government also hoped to diversify the country’s export sector, which was dominated by cocoa and coffee. Oil palms could grow on soils unsuited for coffee or cocoa, opening up new land for cash crop production.¹⁷⁸ The government’s *Plan palmier* envisioned “Industrial Plantations” working alongside smallholders organized into “Village Plantations.” The latter got loans to plant and maintain *tenera* palms, with a six-year grace period (the palms bore fruit in year 4 or 5). Smallholders and plantations both benefited from state land policy, as the government opened up colonial-era forest reserves. It also “streamlined property rights,” offering secure land titles to “whoever puts it to productive use.” Traditional chiefs worked with government officials to enforce new property rules.¹⁷⁹

Ivory Coast initially partnered with two colonial-era companies, SOCFIN and Blohorn, to run state-owned plantation and oil-milling firms. It bought out the private firms in 1976 but invited them back a few years later.¹⁸⁰ The *Plan palmier* called for the replacement of colonial-era hydraulic oil presses with expellers, which entailed the replacement of *dura* palms with *tenera*.¹⁸¹ With help from the IRHO, experts ensured that plantations and smallholders planted high-yielding trees selected for the regional environment. The World Bank, CDC, European Union, and the *Caisse Française de Développement* all provided capital to finance the projects, which today cover more than 250,000 hectares. The original plan called for smallholders to take over the plantations, but this was scrapped in favor of running them with wage labor.¹⁸² Good roads built for the project ensured that outlying farmers could sell their

produce to the mills, located up to twenty kilometers away in the “industrial plantation” zones.¹⁸³

Relations between smallholders and the Société pour le Développement du Palmier à Huile (SODEPALM), the state plantation company, weren’t always smooth. Initially managers banned intercropping, but they soon gave up on enforcement. Farmers mixed oil palms and food crops as they had done for centuries.¹⁸⁴ SODEPALM also struggled to convince farmers to use chemical fertilizer. In historic cultivation patterns, oil palms *are* fertilizer, building up the soil with organic matter. Farmers were skeptical about the need for chemicals, the cost of which came out of their fruit sales. Yet they were obligated to buy fertilizer from SODEPALM by their fruit-selling contracts; many simply resold it.¹⁸⁵ Still, state firms kept prices fairly constant, riding out the highs and lows of the global market until the government liberalized pricing in the 1990s. When smallholders thought prices were too low, they often sold fruit in local markets, though their *tenera* fruit proved less popular than *dura*.¹⁸⁶

Ivoirian farmers also saw palm wine as an important source of income. Foreign experts often wrote about wine-tapping as a “wasteful” practice—harkening back to colonial debates over palm wine—but farmers weren’t acting irrationally.¹⁸⁷ Palm wine was the logical end of a crop cycle, one that began with cassava and other food crops, shifted to oil palm as the trees matured, and ended with wine-tapping and land-clearing to start the cycle again.¹⁸⁸ A 1983 study found that a hectare of palms felled for wine in Ivory Coast was worth four times what a year’s worth of fruit earned, without taking into account the cost of harvest labor. In places like southeastern Nigeria where more benign forms of tapping are practiced, palm wine is seen as a permanent “money spinner,” paying tree-owners more than oil and creating jobs in tapping, transport, sales, and distillation.¹⁸⁹ Palm wine is still an important part of the oil palm story in Africa, but it’s one that foreign agencies and experts ignored or actively opposed.

Uneven Development across the Oil Palm Belt

The NES model didn’t deliver miraculous results in other countries. In the early 1980s, SODEPALM moved across the border into Liberia in a \$37 million project financed by a cast of international lenders. A Malaysian plantation firm provided managers, rounding out a truly global development project. It was a fiasco from the start.¹⁹⁰ Global palm oil prices slumped, crushing hopes for exports. The Bank’s experts recognized that making oil

by hand and selling it locally proved far more lucrative for smallholders than selling fruit to the mill. Still, Bank officials griped that Liberians were corrupt and lazy, practicing “poor husbandry.” Liberia’s government never got a chance to respond. As the Bank’s report tersely states, “The Borrower could not provide [a response] due to the ongoing civil war and the collapse of the Government.”¹⁹¹

Civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) also wrecked oil palm projects, on top of the tens of thousands of lives lost. The World Bank and CDC tried NES projects in the country beginning in 1972, hoping to recycle colonial-era Pioneer oil mill equipment.¹⁹² CDC experts designing the project relied on lingering colonial stereotypes, and some were in fact former colonial officials who failed the grasp the gendered economics of harvesting, making, and selling palm oil in Africa.¹⁹³ As in the Liberian case, farmers found that they earned more selling fruit locally or by tapping “valueless” family labor to make oil at home.¹⁹⁴ Men told researchers that they no longer knew how—or cared to—climb oil palms.¹⁹⁵ When the project closed in the early 1980s, the Bank suggested that Sierra Leone drop smallholders and focus on plantations, though the start of the civil war halted new work.¹⁹⁶

To the east, Ghana escaped the horrors of civil war. Yet its policies toward oil palm were, in the words of one critic, “comparatively schizophrenic and extremely modest” when contrasted with the “evangelical zeal” for oil palm shown in Ivory Coast.¹⁹⁷ The first major oil palm project was the 1975 Ghana Oil Palm Development Company (GOPDC). Relying on Ivoirian and IRHO expertise, GOPDC hoped to revive a defunct Nkrumah-era “state farm.”¹⁹⁸ Unilever agreed to a similar project in southwestern Ghana in the same year (Benso Oil Palm Plantation).¹⁹⁹ Early settlers fought with GOPDC over food crops, and the company abandoned resettlement in favor of contracting with “outgrowers,” independent smallholders not formally tied to the NES project.²⁰⁰ Together, plantation workers and outgrowers launched a modest recovery in Ghanaian palm oil production, though by 1990 their output still couldn’t meet domestic demand, to say nothing of an export surplus.

Cameroon came closest to matching Ivory Coast’s success with oil palm. A mixture of private plantations and government-owned estates dating back to the German occupation fed the domestic market and generated respectable export earnings into the 1970s. At the urging of the World Bank, plantations took on outgrowers, though with less enthusiasm and on a smaller scale than in Ivory Coast.²⁰¹ Economic and environmental woes battered the industry in the 1980s, however. High wages kept workers job-hopping, preventing the development of the skilled workforce needed to prune and

harvest aging oil palms.²⁰² A drought in 1983 slashed palm oil yields, and by the mid-1980s, plantations and smallholders were locked in a price war with each other and with imported palm oil from Malaysia. Smallholders won the fight, and the plantations were forced “to dump their produce onto the world market, suffering major financial losses.”²⁰³ By 1990, Cameroon had the distinction of remaining self-sufficient in palm oil but had little left over for export. Unilever, the biggest private plantation owner, sold off its Cameroon holdings as part of a strategic shift away from plantation ownership.²⁰⁴

Setting the Stage: Postcolonial Development and the Structures of Growth

National and local politics, economics, and ecologies were what made or broke oil palm projects in case after case. The conflicts among farmers, workers, and plantation owners in places as far apart as Mindanao and Colombia were superficially similar, but they reflected histories that long predated the arrival of *E. guineensis*. What links the stories of peasant activists invading banana-company land in Costa Rica with those of Javanese settlers in Kalimantan or Nigerian smallholders negotiating with state-owned companies was, of course, the crop they all raised—and the forces that pushed that crop above others. It could have been cocoa, coffee, rubber, cotton, or a host of other cash crops. But oil palm had special appeal for policymakers at national and international institutions, because it seemed so versatile. It grew in many tropical soil types, met pressing domestic food needs, and offered the dream of cash-earning exports in the future. It was the perfect crop for planners looking for “permanent” crops that could anchor farmers—and local and foreign capital—in an industry with seemingly unlimited demand.

As young palms spread in neat rows across three continents, they were always overshadowed by the state. Corporations did press the oil palm frontier outward—think of Guthrie in Mindanao; Unilever and a clutch of others in Sabah and Sarawak; Indupalma in central Colombia—but the role of the state was important everywhere. At the most basic level, states continued to open land for development, classifying it in ways that denied forest peoples, “squatting” farmers, and others a legal stake. NES projects provided political cover to plantation companies: for the CDC, World Bank, and other lenders, smallholder participation justified loans that paid for infrastructure, mills, and trees that could well have been financed by private capital.

All told, smallholders who stuck with oil palm did fairly well through the 1980s. But the “neoliberal turn” of the late 1980s and 1990s led to stark reversals in many places. Farmers lost subsidized loans and fertilizer, and they faced new threats from imported palm oil as their governments implemented austerity programs and trade liberalization. More startling, state-owned plantations wound up in private hands as governments sold off assets at fire-sale prices. Many of Indonesia’s state plantation and NES ventures wound up in the hands of domestic and foreign investors. Malaysia’s FELDA transformed into a global holding company, trading in smallholder development for mega-agribusiness. And in Africa, old companies like SOCFIN—joined by new competitors headquartered in Singapore, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur—got what they had never been able to achieve in the colonial era: legal title to big tracts of land for plantation oil palms.