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Colombia's oil palm development in times of war and 'peace': Myths, enablers and the disparate realities of land control

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ABSTRACT

Between 1993 and 2015 the land planted to oil palm in Colombia increased fourfold, from 119,000ha to 484,000ha. This rapid growth coincided with a period of extreme armed conflict and displacement, with inequality in land distribution reaching the highest levels in Latin America (Oxfam, 2017). These occurrences spurred this inquiry into conditions on the ground in the palm growing zones and the political and economic forces promoting the crop.

The theoretical underpinnings are derived from the literature on land grabbing, land control, land concentration and exclusion. Oil palm has been favoured by rural elites, conservative governments and right-wing paramilitaries in an attempted 'modernising' of the countryside through agro-industry. Neo-liberal ideas emphasising capital accumulation through the 'market' have minimised land reform efforts and impeded post-conflict land restitution.

The paper is organised in three main parts. Part 1 introduces the crop and its importance, linked to oil palm's culture of continuous expansion. Relevant theoretical concepts are discussed, together with the background to land and violence in Colombia. Part 2 begins the more detailed analysis of the palm oil industry. A descriptive survey of historical beginnings, modern data availability and distribution of holdings is followed by a more nuanced analysis of industry-induced 'myths' and political 'enablers' through the Uribe years (2002–10) and the Santos era (2010–2018). In Part 3 the evidence for 'stolen land' is examined in representative oil palm locations. The findings are summarised in the conclusion.

1. Introduction

Colombia is the leader in South American palm oil production and fourth in the world behind Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand; the first two countries dominate with 86% of total production, while Colombia supplies 2% (Indexmundi, 2017). The 'African palm' has become one of Colombia's most important commercial crops: it ranked third in 2013 after coffee and fruits, accounting for 9% of the total sown area and 13% of the area under 'permanent' crops (Ministerio de Agricultura, ICA and Fedepalma; 2014). It now ranks second in sown area after coffee and continues a high growth trajectory (Mesa Dishington, 2018; Sostenibilidad Semana 2018b).

Rapid growth also occurred during the terms of presidents Pastrana and Uribe (1998–2010), coinciding with the height of the country's civil war in which 6.5 million people were displaced from a total population of about 40 million (Registro Unico de Victimas [RUV] 2018); Banco de la Republica (2017). In 2000, despite the armed violence, it was predicted by the National Federation of Oil Palm Growers (Fedepalma), that through the 'joint efforts of the Government and the palm oil sector', by 2020 national production of CPO (crude palm oil) would reach 3.5 million tons, around 9% of future global output (Fedepalma, 2000). The likelihood of this figure being reached by 2020 was challenged by Castiblanco et al. (2013). However, when production levels reached 1.6 million tons in 2017, Fedepalma Director Jens Mesa Dishington suggested that output would increase to 2.5 million tons by 2023, potentially allowing Colombia to replace Thailand as the world's third largest supplier (Volckhausen, 2018b). This scenario helps explain the culture of constant expansion that continues, despite fears being raised about disease and the potential impacts on Colombia's biodiversity.

1.1. Theoretical approaches

In 2011 Nancy Peluso and Christian Lund introduced a special issue in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* focussed on 'New frontiers of land control'. Their definition is useful: 'By land control, we mean practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming and exclusion … Enclosure, territorialisation, and legalisation processes, as well as force

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and violence (or the threat of them) all serve to control land.' (Peluso and Lund, 2011:668). There are two basic processes mentioned here: the first relates to access to and/or exclusion from land; the second to techniques by which access (for some) and exclusion (of others) may be secured, and land may be controlled. The cases analysed in the third section of this paper reveal high levels of displacement, dispossession and dubious legalisation, which took place under conditions of extreme violence (or threats of violence) between the mid-1990s and 2005. Conditions then continued in modified form under a transition to 'peace', beginning in 2005 and partially secured in 2016, following the agreement reached between former president Santos and the FARC guerrillas. The above processes were enabled to operate through the pro-oil palm policies of the conservative governments and their land agencies, consolidating and legitimising the legal and commercial control of rural land and obfuscating the restoration of earlier small farming systems. These circumstances partly correspond to the 'claiming', 'enclosure' and 'territorialisation' mentioned by Peluso and Lund, as land became locked up in oil palm properties, especially in frontier areas, replacing small peasant food crop farms (with or without coca) and excluding their owners.

Borras et al. (2012: 848) wrote of 'Land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean', in which they included Colombia as one of the territories where 'recent significant (land and capital) concentration has occurred', with oil palm as the leading sector. They identified 'land grabbing' as essentially 'control grabbing' which involved relations of political power, but did not always result in dispossession. Nevertheless, large-scale dispossession did occur during Colombia's civil war as millions of peasants were displaced from their lands or forced to sell them below their true value. Participants in earlier land reforms were supposedly protected from land grabbing, so oil palm plantations looking to expand could secure control, not directly of the land but of its produce, establishing 'alliances' or 'supply allies' with smallholder groups and processing their harvest in plantation mills (2.3). Questions remain however, regarding the legitimacy of present alliance members as land reform participants; and the level of protection legitimate farmers actually received (see María La Baja, 3.11). In the more remote parts of the Eastern Savannas, largely alliance-free, coercion was sufficient for the powerful to 'grab' control of the land and sometimes plant it with oil palm, as in the case of Plantation Poligrow (2.61) (Rodriguez Gonzalez, 2014).

According to Cramer, what has been happening in the development of agro-industry is a 'late transition to capitalism' that tends to be violent by its very nature. Cramer and others use the notion of 'primitive accumulation', defined as 'the twin processes of forceful asset accumulation and displacement of people' (Cramer, 2006:217; Thomson, 2011). Such a definition fits very well with the support of an 'agrarian elite' by conservative governments; the formation of paramilitary groups to protect agro-industry with the backing of many national and regional officials; and the active participation of some members of the elite, such as ranchers, in the civil war (Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2010; Gutiérrez-Sanin and Vargas, 2017).[1]

1.2. Background to land and violence in Colombia

Violence over access to and control of land has been a recurring theme in Colombia's history. Attempts at land reform in the 1960s were only marginally successful, with inequality and poverty persisting in rural areas. This situation led to the growth of guerrilla movements, especially the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia),[2] and their confrontation with the state. Following the partial failure of land reform, the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA), promoted colonisation under the National Agrarian Fund (Deininger, 1999). This resulted in the movement of poor peasants as 'colonists' to remote parts of the country largely outside government control. In these locations they were persuaded to try 'illicit crops', especially coca; 'these territories soon became hotbeds of coca production and of guerrilla expansion' (Gutiérrez Sanin, 2015: 5).

At the same time narco-traffickers used their abundant funds to undertake massive land purchases, a kind of agrarian counter-reform. Richani called this process 'de-agriculturalization', when Colombia's main land use from the late 1970s shifted from crop production to pasture (Richani, 2010: 120). The land was mainly used for speculation and money laundering, but was also a symbol of social and political status (Fajardo, 2002; Richani, 2010, 2012; Salinas, 2012; Hristov, 2014; Gutiérrez-Sanin and Vargas, 2017). Molano wrote that land, 'more than a medium of production was a form of domination', with land control providing access to power (Molano, 2001:34, quoted in Oslender, 2008:91).

The level of violence began to escalate from the 1980s, despite a further 'marginal' attempt at land reform from 1994. The main result of Law 160 of 1994 was to settle far fewer families than anticipated before the programme experienced serious financial difficulties (Fajardo, 1998). It did not solve the huge problems of rural poverty and land shortage, though one useful measure restricted the maximum area per family of vacant government lands (*baldios*) to one family agricultural unit (UAF), the size of which varied according to the conditions. The farmers who did receive titles under the 1994 land reform were supposedly 'protected' from forced sale of their lands during the subsequent armed violence (Amnesty International 2014).

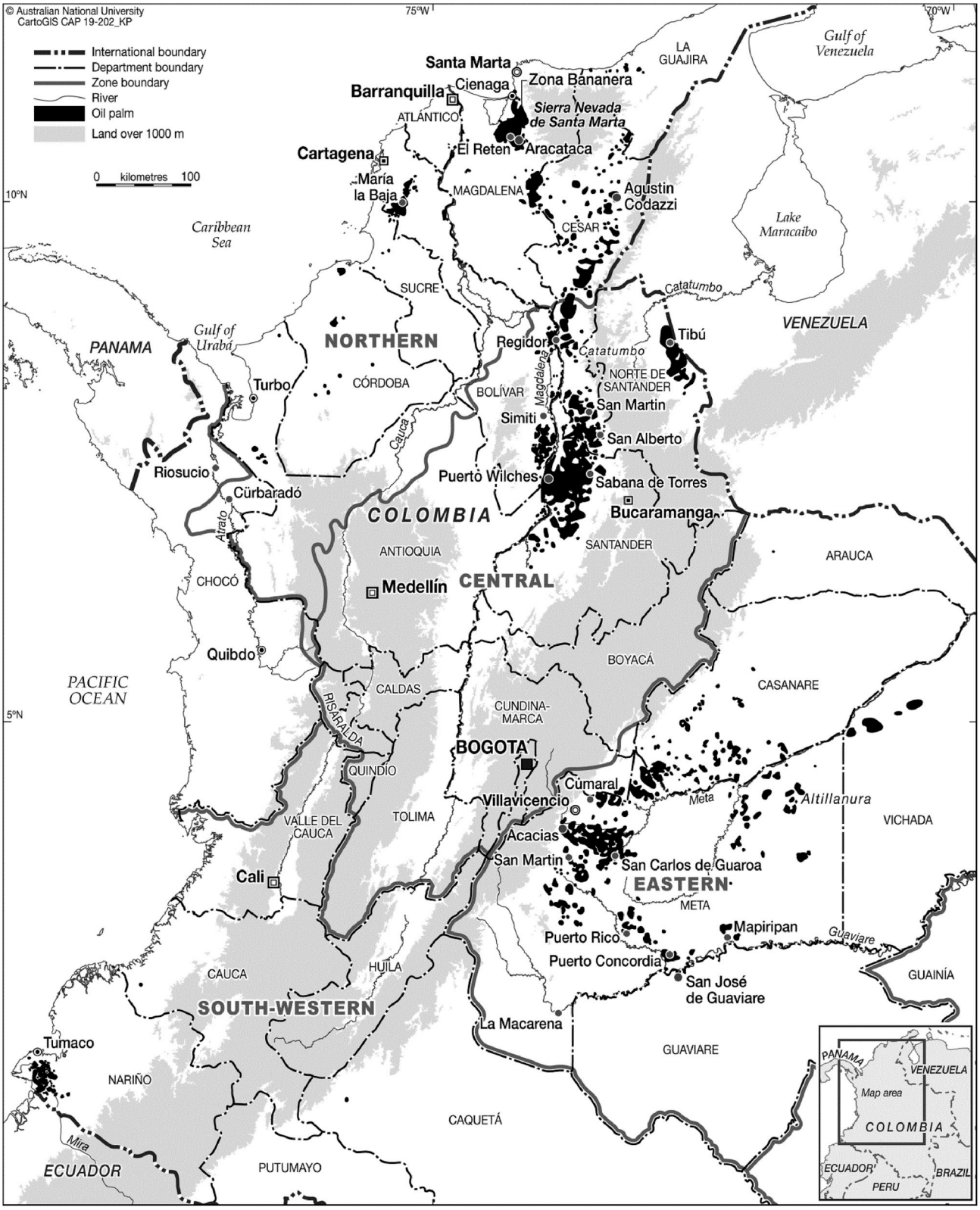
In 1996 'large' properties (over 200 ha) occupied almost 40% of the land but registered 2.5% of agricultural use, while very small properties (0.1–5 ha) had only 3.2% of the land but 38.6% of agricultural use (Fajardo, 2002). These continuing inequalities culminated in the expansion of the leftist guerrillas and the growth of opposing right-wing paramilitary groups, acting along with army units to protect elite properties and attack the guerrillas and their supposed sympathisers.

The paramilitary groups who spread across the country from 1997 after the formation of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) were more violent than the guerrillas, with greater numbers of assassinations, massacres and terrorist attacks, plus seizures of civilian property (Grajales, 2011). Few of the settled areas of the country escaped the onslaught, with 'priority zones' identified for land restitution in 2012 including most of the oil palm lowlands, especially those close to well known guerrilla haunts such as the Montes de María (near María la Baja); the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Magdalena/Cesar); the Venezuelan borderlands near Tibú and the southern savannas in Meta (map 1) (Fundación Forjando Futuros and IPC 2012). After 2005 the levels of conflict slowly lessened, with the demobilization of the paramilitaries under President Uribe and the reduced power of the guerrillas, but paramilitary groups re-armed as 'BACRIM' (criminal groups) and continued to present a violent threat in many areas (Maher and Thomson, 2011; Hristov, 2014). The former paramilitaries remained active in securing land, with assistance from government and private agencies as they infiltrated the 'restitution' process (Amnesty International 2014).

For President Santos's agreement with the FARC, the main guerrilla group, to generate a lasting peace, the question of access to land needed to be solved (Burgos, 2016; Oxfam, 2017; Gutiérrez Sanin and Jaramillo, 2018). While 24 'demobilization, disarmament and reintegration camps' were set up to house former guerrillas and provide

[1] Former President Uribe's family owned ranches: a brother was arrested in 2016 charged with involvement in a paramilitary 'death squad' linked to his ranch (The Guardian, 2016).

[2] Other notable guerrilla movements were the ELN (National Liberation Army) and the EPL (People's Liberation Army), but the FARC was the largest, best organised and most successful.The 'Peace Accord' negotiated in 2016 by former president Santos, was only with the FARC.



Map 1. Colombia, showing oil palm locations and production zones.
(Source: Fedepalma *Anuario Estadistico* 2017)

them with farming land, 11 were placed erroneously in indigenous or forest reserves or unsafe zones of continued fighting and now must be re-located (Veitch, 2019). The land question remains critical for the new Duque administration, as already there are incursions into the Amazon forests, new plantings of coca (and some oil palm) in the Amazon and fighting between new paramilitaries and remnant guerrilla groups such as the ELN and dissident factions of the FARC (Lizcano, 2018a).

2. Colombia's palm oil industry

2.1. Historical background

Oil palm was first grown in Colombia in 1932, but commercialisation only began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, initially through the United Fruit Company seeking a substitute for bananas, followed by a few local growers along the Caribbean coast and in the Department of Cesar (Aguilera Díaz, 2002). Díaz-Moreno (2016:30–32) and Aguilera Díaz (2002: 6–10) outlined the important role played by the FAO in recommending that oil palm be included in the 1960s colonisation programme. Plantations were established in newly settled areas of the agricultural frontier, such as Turbo in Urabá, the forested Pacific coast (Nariño), the Orinoco savannas (San Martín), and the Venezuelan border lands near Tibú (Peña-Huertas et al., 2017) (Map 1).

Garcia Reyes (2014:224) noted the fate of the Turbo plantation, considered an 'imperialistic monopoly' by the FARC who came to occupy the area, its personnel subjected to extortion and selective assassination. It was eventually sold to cattle interests but abandoned in 1989 and parcelled out to colonists.

The Nariño plantations were initially much more successful, especially Palmas de Tumaco (now occupying 5,000ha) and Palmeiras S.A. (800ha) (Arenas, 2018). Located in the 1960s on '*baldios*' (unoccupied government lands) along the Mira River, they were situated in areas traditionally owned by Afro-Colombians. Plantation owners were careful to acquire titled lands, at times resorting to 'tricks', buying lands up quickly as they were opened by the government for colonists. In the 1990s the Tumaco oil palm plantations and surrounding smallholdings (largely Afro-Colombian mixed cultivation [see 2.4]) accounted for around 40% of the national palm oil production. A decade later the palms were destroyed by a devastating disease (budrot). While the plantations received funding to replant their trees with a more resistant hybrid, such funding was not extended to smallholders, unless they became part of an Alliance linked to one of the plantations (see 2.4). The plantations are subject to restitution claims from surrounding Afro-Colombian councils but claim their lands are 'private', being purchased before Law 70 of 1993 granted government lands in the area to Afro-Colombian people (Arenas, 2018).

Fedepalma was founded in 1962, and in 1967 began a policy of import substitution through oil palm. It now represents 85% of the large plantations and has become an important lobby group. Its present director, Jens Mesa Dishington, has held the position for 30 years and, together with Carlos Murgos (a previous director, former politician and prominent planter) is regarded as one of the leading rural power-brokers (La Silla Vacía, 2013). Growth was slow until recent times, with 54,000 ha under production in 1986, rising to 103,000 ha in 1991. High quality seed was produced in Codazzi (Cesar) and the Colombian Agricultural Institute in Tumaco (Nariño), though not in general use until the end of the 1990s.

2.2. Fedepalma's current oil palm geography

In Colombia the smallest administrative units are municipalities, followed by departments and (for oil palm only) 'zones'. According to Fedepalma, the oil palm area may be divided into four geographical zones: Northern, Central, Eastern and Southwestern (see Map 1). The zones conveniently divide the country (minus the Amazon and much of the Pacific Coast) into four roughly equal areas, with the Eastern zone (the Orinoco savannas) being the largest. The zone boundaries cut across four north-south trending departments: Antioquia, Bolívar, Cesar and Cundinamarca, which each occupy two zones. In 2016 the Eastern Zone held 40% of the area planted, Central 32%, Northern 24% and Southwestern 4%.

Oil palm holdings are scattered across 20 departments, but the majority are contained in just eight: Meta and Casanare (Eastern zone); Bolívar, Santander, Norte de Santander, Cesar and Magdalena (Northern and Central zones); and Nariño (Southwestern zone) (Map 1). The top four departments: Meta (32%), Cesar (22%), Magdalena (16%) and Santander (14%) in 2015 were together responsible for 84% of the total production (Fedepalma, 2016a).

The present zones also include mountainous areas devoid of oil palm; however an earlier map by Fedepalma dated 2008 (reproduced in Castiblanco et al., 2013: 174), confined the zone boundaries to suitable lowlands, omitting the central mountains and excluding a large area in the east (eastern Meta and Vichada), up to the Venezuelan border. That area, the high savannas or *altillanura*, is now perceived to be promising for future oil palm development, so is included in the Eastern zone. Zone boundaries are thus political/economic constructs, likely to vary as the industry expands.

The number of municipalities in which oil palm is present, but not necessarily in major plantings, has grown markedly, from 53 in 1994 to 125 in 2015 and 152 in 2016 (Fedepalma, 1999; 2016b; Mesa Dishington, 2016). Most recently, satellite photos revealed that the total area of planted oil palm in 2018 was in fact 551,800 ha, not 516,961 as claimed by Fedepalma (Sostenibilidad Semana 2018b). Flights over the Amazon have shown new incursions of oil palm into areas south of San Jose del Guaviaré, inside the borders of protected Amazon forest reserves Nukak and El Guaviaré (Sostenibilidad Semana 2018a). Fedepalma has condemned such incursions, which undermine the industry's claim of 'zero deforestation'.

Fedepalma's collected statistics have been available since 1989 and are quite comprehensive, at least at the 'zone' level, but omit producers who are not members of the growers' organisation.

However, 'it is not possible to identify exactly which oil palm companies operate in each zone' (Seeboldt, 2010:19). Neither do statistics at zone level allow for any detailed analysis of particulars such as plantation size, although the location of mills is supplied and mapped. The general figures for property sizes taken at the two oil palm censuses of 1998 and 2011 (Table 1), are not broken down spatially. The census of 2011 was only published in 2015, so comparisons of the two periods

Table 1
Size distribution of properties and area of oil palm: 1997-8 and 2011.
Sources: Fedepalma (1999) (Aguilera Diaz, 2002:25); Mesa Dishington (2015) (Oil Palm Census 2011)

Size (ha)	Properties	1997–8	Properties	2011	Area of oil palm	1997–8	Area of oil palm	2011
	No	Per Cent	No	Per Cent	Area (ha)	Per Cent	Area (ha)	Per Cent
>5	1617	58.7	662	12.5	2217	1.5	1858	0.5
5 > 20	544	19.8	3104	58.4	3284	2.2	30,029	7.7
20 > 50	146	5.3	630	11.9	3733	2.5	19,234	4.9
50 > 200	192	7.0	573	10.8	15,451	10.4	57,044	14.6
200 > 500	113	4.1	188	3.5	26,370	17.8	58,681	15.0
500 > 1000	93	3.4	77	1.4	30,545	20.6	54,701	14.0
1000 > 2000	25	0.9	51	1.0	18,244	12.3	66,169	16.9
<2000	23	0.8	29	0.5	48,515	32.7	103,471	26.5
Totals	2753	100.0	5314	100.0	148,360	100.0	391,187	100.0

represented in Table 1 were not previously possible. Although limited, these census figures are the most accurate in supplying an overall picture of the industry.

The period from 1993 to 2015 saw a large expansion in the area planted to oil palm in suitable lowland locations (Fedepalma 1992–1996, 2016b). Yields fluctuated over the period, partly as a result of bud rot disease, more serious in very humid locations such as the Pacific coast (Nariño) (2.1). Bud rot (*Phytophthora palmivora*) is estimated to have removed more than 75,000 ha from the two worst hit areas, Tumaco/Nariño (Southwestern zone) and Puerto Wilches (Central zone) (Ministerio de Agricultura, ICA y Fedepalma, 2014; Torres et al., 2016). Temporary yield decreases may also be due to climatic factors, especially El Niño droughts, which severely impacted the producing areas in 2016. Where irrigation facilities are established in the drier Northern Zone, as in María La Baja, yields may be the highest in the country (Mosquera et al., 2016.)

In the early 1990s attacks on plantations by FARC guerrillas were said to be stifling growth (Fedepalma Estadisticas 1989–1993). In 1994 the Gaviria government provided funds promoting productivity, commercialisation and exports, though not directly tacking the guerrilla 'problem'. The Pastrana government (1998–2002) was more actively supportive, enlisting direct US assistance from 1999 under the anti-drug programme 'Plan Colombia'. Oil palm was promoted as one of the legal alternatives to coca (others being coffee, cocoa, rubber and commercial tree plantations, such as teak) (Ballve, 2012). Between 2001 and 2009, USAID supported 24 oil palm projects, a total of 52,000 ha in 57 municipalities (Marin-Burgos, 2014:84). Ballve (2012) noted attempts by paramilitaries (some successful) to access such funds in support of illegal plantations and spurious 'alliances'.

2.3. Strategic alliances

An important technique adopted by the elites to increase access to land for oil palm in the Northern, Central and Southwestern zones has been through the formation of alliances. The 'strategic alliances' between large plantations/mills and smallholders, were mainly formed between 1998 and 2008. Many of the alliance groups were beneficiaries of earlier land reforms, their holdings legally protected from sale. However, if they could be persuaded to plant oil palm by nearby mill owners, this opened to the latter an increased supply of palm fruit (Marin-Burgos, 2014: 87). About 25% of the new hectares of oil palm planted between 2000 and 2010 were said to be in alliances (Mesa Dishington, 2011). Marin-Burgos (2014: 87–88) noted that the participants or 'supply allies' were a heterogeneous group, not only land reform recipients. In her field work in the Central Zone in 2011, she found that they also included former oil palm estate workers, ex-peasant cultivators of 'illicit crops' (generally coca), small-scale independent oil palm growers and displaced peasants. Those displaced would be assigned land by the government, provided they formed or joined an alliance to plant palm.

Generous government subsidies, especially through the Rural Capital Incentive and tax exemptions, were provided to plantations establishing smallholder alliances. These payments were mainly confined to the owners of large properties, especially wealthy growers such as the Murgos Oleoflores group and the Daabon group, strong supporters of the Uribe government (Seeboldt and Salinas, 2010). Oleoflores (Carlos Murgos[3]) is the largest oil palm company in Colombia, managing 55,000ha with 35,000ha in smallholder alliances; Indupalma has around 10,000ha in San Alberto (Central zone) (Marin-Burgos, 2014:86) and Daabon also holds about 10,000ha in Magdalena (Northern zone) (RSPO, 2017).

[3] Murgos is known as the 'Tsar of Oil Palm' because his alliances are scattered across the Northern and Central zones. Marin-Burgos counted 35, compared with 7 for the Daabon group and 5 for Indupalma (Marin-Burgos, 2014:86).

Carlos Murgos called the participants in alliances under his tutelage 'schemed smallholders', resembling their 'scheme' counterparts in Indonesia who had a tied relationship with a particular plantation. A survey of 22 companies and 91 associated organisations was undertaken in 2009 in the Northern and Central Zones (Fedepalma, 2010). The 'schemed smallholders' had a close relationship with a mill to which they supplied their fruits, in return for technical assistance, credit during the non-productive years of the palms and quality seed. These 'supply allies' signed contracts for the life of their palms, around 20 years (Seeboldt, 2010:30). This was Murgos's arrangement in his large alliances María la Baja (Northern zone) and Tibú (Central zone); it was considered the best and was the most common type: 61% of cases. The other main type was a producer organisation without a direct tie to a mill (more like the Indonesian 'independent smallholder'): 35% of cases. In the early years the alliances were not very productive and needed constant monitoring (Marlin, 2010). One common problem was for the companies to ensure that the fruits were returned to the mill which supplied the original credit. In parts of the Northern Zone there were many mills, so the temptation was for alliance members to bypass the original mill and take their fruit elsewhere (Fedepalma, 2010:34).

The 2010 study compared the likely annual incomes earned by a hypothetical family with two members employed and either 10 ha of oil palm (USD16,200), 10 ha of rice (USD11,760) or employment as 'formal' (USD6,480) or 'informal' (USD 5184) estate labourers.[4] If such incomes were widespread, the alliance members would appear as a privileged group. A new study of a number of Northern and Central zone alliances (November 2013 to January 2014) confirmed the relatively high annual incomes earned by participants: between USD19,000 and 20,200, an average monthly income of USD1,600, compared with the national monthly minimum wage of USD300. Those participating in the few alliances in the Eastern Zone received about half the above incomes, being largely people displaced from other areas.[5] The study concluded that the majority of small producers believed that growing oil palm 'dynamized' the family economy and offered major benefits compared with other crops (Rueda-Zárate and Pacheco, 2015: 43, 49).

Despite these favourable figures, there is evidence that in Puerto Wilches (Central Zone) the producers in alliances did not earn enough to meet their subsistence needs, with entire families (including children), having to work, and many being forced further into debt (Seeboldt, 2010:30, 37 and see María la Baja, section 3.1).

2.4. Oil palm properties by size: censuses of 1997-8 and 2011

Table 1 reveals the national size distribution of oil palm properties at the 1997-8 and 2011 censuses. The 1997-8 count was taken before the formation of most of the alliances and some of the major eruptions of violence from the paramilitaries. The large number of very small properties (>5 ha) is clear. At the other end of the scale, there were 23 plantations with more than 2000 ha, an average size of 2109 ha per plantation. These were small plantations by the standards of Indonesia or Malaysia and were eclipsed by greater numbers of 'medium-sized' properties, with 50–500 ha.

By the 2011 Census the total area under oil palm had more than doubled, but 70% of properties still had 20 ha or less. These 'smallholder properties' have moved up a category, now averaging 8.4 ha. Plantations in the largest category (over 2000 ha) have increased in average size from 2109 to 3,568ha. They thus continue to be quite small by international standards, although there are more of the bigger

[4] 'Formal' workers on estates were permanent and engaged in supervisory positions, while 'informal' workers tended to be casual, sub-contracted for particular tasks such as harvesting or fertilising.

[5] See Colmenares (2012); Potter (2015: 54–55); for a description of one of these alliances in Meta, in which the main aim was to work with traumatised people to rebuild confidence.

properties. There remain also a considerable number of 'medium' sized holdings, especially between 200ha and 1000ha. 'Smallholders' (below 20 ha) occupy only 8.2% of the sown area. The Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) uses a 50ha cut-off for smallholders. Although this seems large for Colombian conditions, it would give smallholders 13% of the area planted (claimed by Mesa Dishington, 2015) and cover 83% of total properties.

Many of those smallholders would be in alliances, at least in the Northern and Central zones. It was suggested that there were 127 alliances by 2014, occupying around 70,000ha (15.7% of a total sown area of 447,000ha, with around 5600 small and medium producers). Only 7 alliances were listed from the Eastern Zone, all in the less distant piedmont area (Mesa Dishington, 2015). Aceites Manuelita, the prominent plantation in the municipality of San Carlos de Guaroa, further east, is not listed as having an alliance, but claimed 4000 ha worked by independent growers and over 6,000ha of oil palm on the estate (RSPO, 2016). One may contrast the 20 plantations in San Martín municipality, Meta Department (Díaz Moreno, 2016:89) that do not support smallholders but just hire labour, often from other zones, especially migrants from Tumaco following the bud rot tragedy (Díaz Moreno, 2016: 141).

There is little information about other smallholder growers, except for a brief description included in a World Bank report, drawing on information from the Eastern and Central zones (Johnson and Franco, 2009: 10). The authors mention 'family farm producers' who engage in mixed cultivation, growing perhaps 10 ha of palm among other crops. They are described as having poor quality planting materials and minimum technology, therefore low yields.

Another 'smallholder' group (now much reduced) were the 1800 Afro-Colombian 'family' growers in Tumaco (SW Zone) who cultivated 3,500ha of oil palm mixed with food crops, bananas and cocoa, having learned the cultivation techniques from previous plantation employment (Restrepo, 2004; Cardenas, 2012). However, 13 groups were persuaded to join an alliance (Cordeagropaz) and work with one of the existing plantations in the area. The bud rot, which largely destroyed the palm cultivation, left them exposed to debt and needing to take on further debt if they were to replant with a hopefully resistant hybrid[6] (Maughan, 2011; Cardenas, 2012). Those who accepted were encouraged to diversify (Cordeagropaz, 2012).

In the Central Zone a further alternative system exists: not-for-profit organisation Fundepalma encourages mixed cultivation (including cattle) and is linked to the program for Development and Peace in the Magdalena Medio (PDMM) (see summary in De Roux, PNUD, 2011 45–46). Molano Bravo (2009), provided a useful description of the development of these farms in three departments, dominated by the large plantations of Indupalma. Marin-Burgos (2014) included two Fundepalma alliances in her 2011 field surveys: the anti-plantation stance of the farmers concerned was very clear, especially their anxiety to be able to grow food as well as oil palm on their land. This initiative resulted from concern over food shortages in the area, as smallholders in conventional alliances (such as those at Puerto Wilches), grew only oil palm (Seeboldt, 2010: 31-2). Fundepalma had 8 alliances in 2014 for independent growers (Rueda-Zárate and Pacheco, 2015). Those growers are not members of Fedepalma, while those in other alliances are 'affiliated' (Fedepalma, 2016c).

2.5. Myths 1. oil palm and the violence

During the Uribe government period (2002–2010) there was almost no mention by Fedepalma or Mesa Dishington of the violence that was so widespread, suggesting that it was only taking place 'where there are no palm trees' (Fedepalma 2007; quoted in Maughan, 2011). In similar vein on its 2009 website (English version) a Fedepalma official described oil palm as 'peacefully and sustainably spreading over the national territory' (Fedepalma, 2009: 3). A study by the 'Foundation for Security and Democracy' (sponsored by Fedepalma) concluded that: 'There is no cause-effect relationship between palm growing and forced displacement of the population' (Rangel et al., 2009:119). Mesa Dishington later admitted that some oil palm properties had been involved in land litigation issues but declared they covered only 3.8% of the total area (Mesa Dishington, 2012). Another admission, five years later was that '52% of palm oil municipalities were in post-conflict zones' (Mesa Dishington, 2017).

However, when discussing the Voluntary Agreement for Zero Deforestation in the Oil Palm Value Chain (Alianza 2017: 4) the author (unknown) stated: 'The process implies a recognition of the fact that 83% of the 6000 palm oil producers were classified as small or medium, a challenging result in the light of the situation that *the majority were in vulnerable territories with little state presence, lacking a business plan or modern cultivation techniques')* (italics and translation mine). That comment would seem to admit that the producers were also in 'post-conflict zones'. Marin-Burgos (2014:81) argued that 'Almost all the municipalities in the palm oil frontier registered high or medium levels of displacement' (and see discussion in section 3.12).

2.6. Myths 2: Fedepalma and the Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

Fedepalma joined the RSPO soon after the organisation was established in 2004; in 2008 the growers' organisation began the process of developing the Colombian National Interpretation (NI) of the RSPO's Principles and Criteria (P and C) (Seeboldt and Salinas, 2010). Once the NI is accepted by the parent body, members can work towards having their oil palm certified. As the Colombian industry sought to expand its production and exports, several countries of the EU, especially the Netherlands, were insisting that Crude Palm Oil (CPO) imports must be certified as coming from a sustainable source. The RSPO's Principles and Criteria promoted environmental and social sustainability, laying down regulations for environmental management and protection of biodiversity in plantations and surrounding areas. 'Free, prior and informed consent' (FPIC) was necessary if lands were to be resumed from local communities (RSPO 2007; 2013). Compliance with these criteria was not likely to be easy for the industry, but it was important that it was seen to be complying.

Colombian civil society organisations claimed that the NI process would be used by the industry to 'clean up its reputation' without changing its practices, especially in relation to treatment of estate workers (Seeboldt and Salinas, 2010: 33). It was considered very important for the NI meetings to include NGOs, ethnic and labour organisations, to obtain a more balanced perspective than provided by the industry, but they had not been consulted (Seeboldt and Salinas, 2010). Marin-Burgos et al. (2015) noted the 'power asymmetries' at play in the NI meetings. After some delay brought about by Oxfam-Novib, which commissioned an evaluation of the process, criticising the 'procedural power' in the hands of Fedepalma, the initial Colombian NI was eventually accepted by the RSPO in November 2010. However, the parent organisation revised its P and C in 2013, so a further NI was needed, this time organised by the Daabon group. Social NGOs such as Solidaridad and Indepaz were included, but again local ethnic and labour organisations were omitted (Potter, 2015). Genoud (2017:2) has argued that 'the RSPO provides a simplified account of palm oil production, eluding power relations'. She suggests that RSPO certification is being used by the plantations to legitimize land grabbing because there is a 'disjunction' between local practices and the RSPO's principles and criteria.

The revised NI for Colombia were accepted in 2016, with 50,879 ha

[6] The hybrid, known as OxG, combines *Elaeis guineensis* (the African palm), and the local palm *Elaeis oleifera*. While OxG is less susceptible to disease, the two species sometimes cross spontaneously, giving rise to fears of diversity loss and impacts on other native palms by the 'invasive' African palm (Bernal in Volckhausen, 2018b).

being certified from 10 plantations by January 2019 (RSPO, 2019a,b). One unexpected benefit may have ensued as a result of certification. Conditions for estate workers were poor on plantation Indupalma (Central Zone) (recently certified). A new union has been able to move the status of 730 workers from 'indirect' to 'direct 'employment, thus improving wages and job security and abolishing sub-contracting and illegal co-operatives (Stewart, 2018).

There has been a rush for plantations to receive certification, assisted by a mix of Indonesian, Malaysian, Brazilian, Dutch and (2) Colombian auditors. One has to look cautiously at these results, bearing in mind the study 'Who Watches the Watchmen?' by EIA Global (2015b). Using examples from Indonesia and Malaysia, EIA Global's research uncovered many systemic failings of the auditing companies, which were not only incompetent but did not seek to identify shortcomings 'and hold companies to the standards of the RSPO'. Although there are now 36 plantation (ordinary) members of the RSPO in Colombia, 11 joined only in 2018 (RSPO, 2018c): it will be some time before all production is certified, if indeed this happens.[7]

The Colombian area certified included the Daabon group with associated smallholders: they had become a world first in being awarded the classification 'RSPO NEXT', only given to companies with outstanding performance. They certainly stood out among the other certified companies, their CPO being 'Identity Preserved', with no mixing from other sources. All their produce is certified organic and they have established methane capture of their mill effluent (RSPO, 2017).

When addressing international audiences, Fedepalma's Mesa Dishington had always been careful to state that for the Colombian industry (unlike that of Indonesia), 'deforestation was not an issue', with oil palm just transforming 'stubble and grass pasture' (Mesa Dishington, 2009). A commissioned study of the environmental performance of the industry (withheld by Fedepalma) noted that 17% of new plantings had been on previously forested land (Rodriguez-Becerra and van Hoof, 2004). Other observers such as Garcia-Ulloa et al. (2012), Castiblanco et al. (2013) and Ocampo-Peñuela et al. (2018) have agreed that Colombia's oil palm expansion could most easily take place on unproductive pastures. With the exception of the Tumaco area (Southwest zone), it should not involve deforestation. However, given the increased risk of new oil palm developments in highly biodiverse areas such as the 'Andes-Amazon transition', Ocampo-Peñuela et al. (2018:119) recommend the use of strict and location-specific certification from organisations such as the RSPO.

Aware of the need to improve training prior to certification, Fedepalma had set up a Global Environment Fund project to study biodiversity, which was carried out on six selected plantations, three each from the Northern and Eastern zones (Fedepalma, 2013). The GEF application had acknowledged a number of environmental and technical weaknesses among oil palm growers, including difficulty in identifying High Conservation Value areas and the recognition and protection of natural systems within the plantations. Results indicated 47 species of 'high conservation value' among the Northern zone samples, as against 76 in the Llanos (Eastern zone). Differences between the zones were especially marked among birds, plants and mammals (Barliza and Gonzalez, 2016). This preliminary study has been partly superceded in the Llanos by the rigorous analysis of the severe impact of oil palm on mammal distributions by Pardo et al. (2018).

A follow-up programme by Fedepalma, known as UAATAS (Audit and Environmental and Social Technical Assistance Units) concentrated on providing necessary environmental and social training to 60 palm nuclei. Progress was assessed in 2013, with 14 of the first 20 advancing strongly; these achievements then dropped sharply to Plantation Poligrow, one of the final 3, with no notable progress (Mesa Dishington, 2015).

2.6.1. The case of poligrow

The Spanish/Italian plantation Poligrow, established in Mapiripán (Meta) in 2008, is one of the more remote RSPO members. In May 2015 Fedepalma organised an excursion of prominent people to Mapiripán, lauding Poligrow as an example of 'sustainable development, social inclusion and environmental protection' (Fedepalma, 2015). This statement is an egregious example of the 'myths' perpetrated by Fedepalma concerning the state of some Colombian oil palm plantations.

In August 2015 the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) released a video 'Between Land and Palm Oil', exploring the effects of Poligrow's operations on communities in Mapiripán. It was alleged that the company had taken over indigenous land without 'free, prior and informed consent' and was restricting indigenous peoples' movement to sacred sites. A land activist complaining of forced displacement of local indigenous communities was threatened with assassination by a paramilitary leader linked to Poligrow (EIA Global, 2015a). This video led to the RSPO declaring a complaint against Poligrow in October 2015; an independent investigation began in May 2016 and is still continuing (RSPO, 2018a).

In June 2016 the environmental authority Cormacarena ordered Poligrow to suspend operations for six months for alleged 'environmental infractions'. These included dumping of industrial waste waters into local forests and *morichales*[8]; impeding natural flows by means of a cement dyke without a permit; using water for domestic and industrial purposes without proper permits and dumping leachates from the company's compost area. The plantation is accused of damaging natural resources - local forests, wetlands, soil and subterranean water - and depriving rural and indigenous communities of these resources, on which they depend.

The courts have also been questioning 'irregularities' in Poligrow's land acquisition practices (Controloría General, 2014; Miroff, 2014), most recently over a plot of land in Mapiripán with a tangled history of ownership. The Director was before the court accused of 'deceptive manoeuvres and land hoarding' in trying to obtain this land at a very low price for planting oil palm (El Espectador, 2017). He denied the charge, which was eventually dropped for lack of detailed evidence.

By 2018 officers from Fedepalma were in Europe, arguing that Colombia's oil palm was 'unique and differentiated' (Michail, 2018). While this appellation may be correct for the Daabon group, almost all the other certified plantations were classified as 'Mass Balance', in which certified and non-certified oils were mixed. The voluntary 'zero deforestation' claim (Alianza TFA 2020: Acuerdo 2017) was signed by a collection of 21 companies, many on the Llanos, most relatively unknown and including several non-members of the RSPO. Some were supply companies for biodiesel mills, such as BioD S.A. (unlikely to participate in exports). The Daabon group did not sign, nor did Murgos, but Poligrow was included.

2.7. Enablers 1) the Uribe era (2002–2010)

President Alvaro Uribe enthusiastically supported increased oil palm planting. In a speech delivered in 2005, the President claimed 'Colombia could have, without major improvements in infrastructure, 3 million ha of oil palm. With some work to adapt land, around 6 million

[7] The RSPO again revised its Principles and Criteria in November 2018, with stricter requirements regarding deforestation, particularly areas of High Conservation Value (HCV) and the identification and maintenance of High Carbon Stock forests, a new criterion involving carbon-rich forests, including secondary forests. More attention must also be given to human and labour rights. No new NI has yet been required for Colombia and growers are given a year's grace before the new criteria are implemented (RSPO, 2019b). This situation may partly explain the rush for certification under the 2013 rules.

[8] Morichales are natural wetlands dominated by the Mauritia palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*), but also highly diverse. They are often used as corridors by migratory animals and by indigenous inhabitants for hunting.

ha of African palm' (Mingorance, 2006:56). More direct was the message in Uribe's National Development Plan 2002–2006 entitled 'Social Management of Rural Areas', which aimed to 'recuperate' 496,000ha for agro-industrial development, including 62,000ha for oil palm. This was to be accomplished through the 'conditioning' of lands to prepare them for monoculture plantations (Oslender, 2007). There was even an attempt by the Uribe Government through several laws to reverse the direction of previous land reforms, promoting 'the market' as the principal mechanism for distributing land (Amnesty International, 2014). Law 1182 of 2007 sought to 'legalise' the titles of lands appropriated illegally: this law was eventually declared unconstitutional (Fajardo, 2015:42).

The replacement in 2003 of the land reform agency INCORA by INCODER, re-named the 'Colombian Institute of Rural Development' was a demonstration of the Uribe government's ideological attitudes to land, and who should control it. At the time the Minister of Agriculture announced: 'No more land reform' (Richani, 2012:58). The replacement of INCORA liquidated various agencies working on agrarian reform and redistribution, leaving INCODER with the responsibility of overseeing the resettlement of the paramilitary forces as they disarmed. Although the ex-paramilitary were supposed to hand back their misappropriated lands and property, little was returned. Between 2006 and 2011 corrupt INCODER officials allocated land to businessmen and paramilitaries pretending to be peasants (Amnesty International, 2014). Molano suggested the agency had been 'co-opted' by the paramilitaries (Molano 2013 quoted in Gutiérrez and Jaramillo, 2018). Hristov lists many examples of the important role of INCODER in 'the war for land during the post demobilization era', revoking the titles of victims of displacement by declaring their farms abandoned, then re-assigning the land to paramilitaries, their families or 'front men' (Hristov, 2014: 100–101; 121).

The online journal *La Silla Vacía* compiled a list of the many connections between President Uribe's government and prominent people in the palm oil industry (Marin, 2009). The oil palm sector was perceived as operating within a 'closed power space' which precluded consideration of alternative development models (Seeboldt, 2010: 39). A critical discourse analysis of leading newspapers *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* from 2002 to 2012 revealed support for oil palm expansion as representing 'development' and 'progress', while neutralising any negative effects on the 'passive' rural population. Environmental impacts were scarcely noticed (Hortúa-Romero, 2014).

2.7.1. Biodiesel

A further technique to expand the planting of oil palm was to establish compulsory blending of palm oil-based biodiesel with imported diesel fuel. The biodiesel was largely developed for local use, with Law 939 in 2004 providing tax exemptions for the fuel, to be used mainly in buses and trucks. President Uribe announced 'In a country with declining oil production, biodiesel becomes a necessary alternative to petroleum' (quoted in Grajales, 2013: 226). The oil palm industry was happy with the development of biofuels, especially in the Eastern zone, relatively close to the Bogota market but distant from ports, making exports difficult (RSPO, 2015). However, human rights activists questioned this additional use of land to produce oil palm, which they perceived to lead only to food shortages. A series of seminars in different locations across the country (CINEP et al., 2008) basically asked the question: 'Biofuels from palm: a model of development or a model of exclusion?' In 2008 a 5% biodiesel blend (B5) was introduced, increased to B10 in 2010, though more remote areas still only blend B8 (or even B2 or B0) (Fedebiocombustibles, 2016). Twelve biodiesel plants have been constructed in the main growing regions. Colombia neither imports nor exports biodiesel, although the industry would like to start exporting as the area under oil palm continues to expand (Colombia: Biofuels Annual, 2017).

2.8. Enablers 2: the Santos years (2010–2018)

The government of Juan Manuel Santos, elected in August 2010 and narrowly re-elected in June 2014, was not as generous to the oil palm industry as its predecessor, placing more controls on the flow of subsidies. Nevertheless, government officials assured oil palm growers of their support, particularly as part of the strategy of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development *Colombia Siembra* [Colombia planting] (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural [MADR]2016). This project sought to improve conditions in rural areas by encouraging new planting of both food and export crops and raising agricultural productivity. Valuable permanent crops, such as oil palm, were seen as essential to the success of *Colombia Siembra*, mainly through employment creation and export generation (*Revista* Palmas, 2016b). Exports of CPO have risen sharply from a low of 59 thousand tons in 2010 to 634 thousand tons in 2018, with the Netherlands, Brazil and Mexico as major markets (*Fedepalma*, Sispa, selected years). Under *Colombia Siembra* 150,000 new hectares of oil palm were expected to be planted by 2018 (MADR, 2016:32). However, latest figures indicate a decline in the level of new planting from 2014, perhaps reflecting lower palm oil prices, so only 75,922ha or a little more than half this total has been realised, consisting of both 'new plantings'and 'renovations' (Fedepalma-Sispa, 2019).[9]

2.8.1. Restitution?

President Santos also initiated a program of restitution of lands dispossessed during the height of the violence. Land restitution to those displaced has been proceeding very slowly since Law 1448 was passed in June 2011. By April 2018, 291,000 ha of land had been returned from 100,000 claims, but there was still a long way to go. In some districts new paramilitary groups were formed specifically to oppose the law (Amnesty International, 2014), while other observers saw it as eventually stabilising titles in favour of large businesses (Tenthoff and Eventon, 2013). This appears to be what has been happening, given that the Government 'seeks to develop large scale agro-industry' (Amnesty International, 2014:41).

Officials of INCODER informed Amnesty that they encouraged displaced subsistence farmers to participate in agro-industrial projects (mainly oil palm). If the land was already developed in oil palm, then 'that project will take precedence over the right of the claimant to return to the land'. If the project had been developed 'in good faith', the claimant could receive rent for the land or participate in the production: if it was 'in bad faith', then the land reverted to the government and an administrator would pay the rent (Amnesty International, 2014:40)[10]. Amnesty was concerned that many paramilitaries and others acquired false land registry documents, so appeared to be 'in good faith' while illegally occupying land. These activities are further examples of 'practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming and exclusion' as suggested by Peluso and Lund. Lizcano (2018b) quoted the Superintendent of Notary and Registry as claiming that more than 65 forms of legal dispossession in Colombia have been identified, while 43% of large landowners do not know the legal origin of their lands, which may have been acquired in numerous small parcels.

The restitution law has caused anxiety among major oil palm growers, revealing as it does the uncertainty of property rights for rural lands (Mesa Dishington, 2016), which they stated had been 'acquired in good faith'. In their journal *Revista Palmas*, growers suggested it was time to 'give commercial agriculture the importance it deserves'

[9] It is not known how many of the almost 35,000ha of additional plantings detected by satellite would be 'new' but it is presumed this designation would apply to a good percentage of them. This could bring the total new plantings to almost 112,000ha.

[10] INCODER was finally liquidated in December 2015 for corruption (El País.com.co, 2015; Sostenibilidad Semana 2016).

(Revista Palmas, 2016a; Editorial [English Version] 2016:7–8).

2.8.2. Recent land laws of the Santos government and their potential impact on oil palm

The Law covering Zidres (Zones of interest for Rural Economic and Social Development), passed in 2016, is supposed to increase competitiveness through models of association between peasants occupying 'family agricultural units' (UAF) and large enterprises. The government is keen to encourage large companies to invest in the rolling upland plains of the *altillanura*, which they hope can be brought into crop production using lime to improve the acid soils. Oxfam was opposed to the Zidres plan, citing the behaviour of the international company Cargill. Growing soy and corn in the Department of Vichada, Cargill used a number of 'shell' companies to gain access to large areas of *baldios*. Oxfam discovered that Cargill had amassed 52,576 ha, more than 30 times the maximum UAF (Oxfam, 2013). The Cargill project has now been cancelled, as have others in a similar position (Dominguez, 2013). The Zidres plan was seen as a thinly veiled attempt to seize land from small farmers and undermine the land restitution process (McFarland, 2015). Eberto Díaz understood the Zidres law as representing 'the second stage in counter-agrarian reform. The first was because of paramilitary violence. This time it is through the law' (Díaz in Volckhausen, 2018a).

The Zidres law and the latest land law (Ley de Tierras) of the Santos government plan to remove the restrictions on *baldios.* This would spearhead the expansion of agro-industries across the country, assisted by a new report on soils that suggested that 16 mha or 14% of the country would be suitable for oil palm cultivation (Volckhausen, 2018a). Little attention seems to be given to yield improvement. Given the constant threat of bud rot and other diseases to which Colombia is prone, that seems a short-sighted policy. One prominent plantation owner has emphasised the need for a 'cordon sanitaire' around the best growing area and a concentration on productivity (De Hart 2018) but so far scant notice appears to be given to such aspects.

3. Stolen Ground: What evidence connects oil palm, forced displacement and land control?

It is important to find detailed studies of specific locations in which there is a clear relationship between forced displacement, subsequent land control and planting of oil palm, with access being denied to the original inhabitants. Displacement may be easy to see but the processes of transfer, often illegal, are well hidden and usually difficult to prove (Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2006; Molano Bravo, 2012; Gomez et al., 2015; Cramer and Richards, 2011).

3.1. Summary of the evidence, both descriptive and statistical

The National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH, 2016) has a chapter on palm oil (455–472), in which they identify eight descriptive cases with a direct relation between displacement, abandonment and palm cultivation. CNMH say that it is not possible to claim that all the oil palm areas fall into this position, and I agree. I deleted one case (the Nariño plantations) (see 2.1) and added two that emerged with new evidence (Catatumbo/Tibú and Southern Meta). The sizes of the examples vary, from a single holding to an alliance or a wider area covering several municipalities. The examples are listed below, beginning with the larger ones, noting the main characteristics, the occurrence or lack of violence, and general outcomes.

3.1.1. Descriptive studies

a) Overt land grabbing in Afro-Colombian land: the lower Atrato river, Choco´: A famous early case (1996) of invasion of Afro-Colombian lands by army and paramilitaries, followed by planting of oil palm on the 'cleared' lands. While some violence did occur, the lands were vacated mainly through fear. Palm crops developed by 'the rich' were considered by the paramilitary chief to be 'durable and productive', though planted in an area with unalienable titles to Afro-Colombians through Law 70 of 1993 (Oslender, 2007; Grajales, 2013; Ballve, 2013). Paramilitaries were invited by Medellín-based companies to 're-colonise' the lands, a scandal only revealed in 2007 (Kinosian, 2012). After many delays, some perpetrators were gaoled (Verdad Abierta, 2014). Most recently 39 oil palm companies were convicted of stealing Urabáland from 1997 to 2005 (Alsema, 2018). The idea that paramilitaries somehow had the right to 'reclaim' land legally granted to others has also permeated the restitution process.

b) María la Baja, Bolivar: One of Murgos's alliances (also mainly Afro-Colombian). Huge displacement took place (1999–2002) due to paramilitary violence with as many as 56 massacres (Castro, 2016). Despite their status as land reform recipients, the carry over of high debt from a failed rice-growing scheme brought pressure on alliance members to sell their holdings (La Tierra en Disputa, 2010). They were encouraged to sell by both INCORA and later INCODER, as new buyers sought the land, attractive for its irrigation scheme and potentially high palm yields. There is some evidence that members of Murgos's staff were also attempting to buy back land although this was illegal (Verdad Abierta, 2018a). Like many alliance residents, those at María la Baja had problems accessing food (La Tierra en Disputa, 2010; Gomez Lopez, 2010; Rivera, 2011; Coronado Delgado and Dietz, 2013), while incomes were low. Finding drinking water could also be difficult, especially for those living outside the oil palm blocks (Ojeda et al., 2015; Verdad Abierta, 2018b). 'A climate of fear' was still said to exist, the result of spasmodic attacks by armed gangs (Ojeda et al., 2015). The details of this study cast doubt on the rosy conclusions of the official accounts of the alliances.

c) Catatumbu and Tibú, Norte de Santander: This area also suffered strongly from battles between paramilitaries and guerrillas, in what Vargas and Uribe (2017:751) described as 'a genuine reign of terror against civilians'. While there was also an alliance here, the authors concentrated more on the fact that the 'Catatumbo Block' of paramilitaries did not seek to control land themselves, just to attack coca growers and guerrilla sympathisers, then leave the land vacant for others to move in, which they wasted no time in doing. Land transfers to established oil palm companies blatantly disregarded the law, with purchasers acquiring land below market value and beyond legal limits (Vargas and Uribe, 2017: 755). This example appears to be a prime case of Cramer's 'primitive accumulation', with rapid and largely illegal land concentration into agro-industry, supported by local authorities. The political and economic power of Murgos also enabled funds to be secured from USAID to support his alliance at Tibu.

d) Laundering drug profits through oil palm: Southern Meta: The less populated southern municipalities of Meta first became a haven for guerrilla groups, then later the scene of fighting with paramilitaries and the army. There is clear evidence of the widespread occupation of government land (*baldios*) and its planting with oil palm by ex-paramilitaries after 2005; the lands were later sold to oil palm companies (Díaz-Moreno, 2016:51–2). Oil palm was seen as a convenient way of 'laundering' drug profits by unscrupulous operators. Using data disaggregated to the level of the municipality, Maher (2015:320) has shown that Vista Hermosa, Puerto Rico, Puerto Concordia and Puerto Lleras, all in the south of Meta, grew very rapidly in area cultivated to oil palm from 2007 to 9, but also experienced high levels of violence and displacement over the same period, leading him to conclude that there was a direct relationship between displacement and continuing increases in the crop.

e) Zona bananera and Ciénaga, Magdalena: Mixed outcomes: oil palm was already being planted in the area to replace bananas, then many people were displaced through the fighting, so more oil palm was planted on the vacant lands (Goebertus, 2008).

f) Hacienda Las Pavas, Bolivar: Contested ownership from the point of view of the peasants; a complicated ownership tangle solved in favour of the farmers, who still do not have their land. This example

created much interest because of the involvement of a Daabon plantation, which later withdrew (Vargas et al., 2010; Perez Rincon, 2010; Marin-Burgos, 2014; Gomez et al., 2015).

g) Pitalito and El Copey, Cesar: Two small examples of contested ownership in Cesar, with El Copey experiencing particularly high levels of violence (Verdad Abierta, 2013a, b).

h) La Gloria, Cesar: Contested ownership from the point of view of the company, which ignored the court's decision to hand over part of their holding, once a *baldio* occupied by small farmers. The RSPO signalled a 'dispute' over this case (RSPO, 2018b).

3.1.2. Statistical studies

A number of other researchers used statistical analyses to test the relationship between displacement and oil palm development.

a) Palacios (2012): Comparing rates of forced displacement between legal crops (oil palm) and illegal crops (coca) with different labour intensities, the study found that displacement was more likely where labour intensity was less, i.e. oil palm.

b) Hurtado et al. (2017): Found a causal effect between the development of the oil palm industry and displacement in the Department of Magdalena (northern zone). They also noted that the positive correlation between paramilitary activities and expansion of oil palm was stronger in newer areas.

c) Rey-Sabogal (2013): Discovered a direct relationship between palm and displacement across municipalities considered new oil palm producers. He was very critical of the results achieved by Rangel et al. (2009) in their Fedepalma-sponsored study using data from a mere 16 municipalities to disprove any palm/displacement relationship.

d) Marin Burgos (2014): Identified municipalities on what she described as the 'oil palm frontier' of new plantings and was able to find high and medium levels of displacement in those areas, many of which also contained alliances.

Studies **2–4** were consistent in claiming displacement to be mainly in newer areas of oil palm development. Study **5** (below) adopted a different approach.

e) Castiblanco et al. (2015): The authors conducted a statistical analysis across 'oil palm' and 'non-oil palm' municipalities to test the socio-economic impact of oil palm's presence or absence over the years 2000, 2005 and 2009. The General Unmet Basic Needs Index and the Municipal Income Index showed significantly positive results in favour of oil palm, especially in later years with increased government subsidies and tax exemptions. However, Land Concentration and Violence indexes were higher in oil palm areas, especially in particular zones and periods, while general levels of poverty remained high. The authors' conclusion was that: 'a better income for oil palm producers does not guarantee an increased equity in the distribution of regional incomes, and a reduction of rural and urban poverty. It seems that high levels of land concentration and violence obstruct the possibility of an equitable development in palm producer regions' (Castiblanco et al., 2015). 'High levels of land concentration' presumably also mean the reverse – high levels of expulsion of previous owners, often with associated violence.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have investigated the historical and current forces encouraging the expansion of oil palm in specific lowland areas of Colombia, noting high rates of growth of the crop under favourable circumstances, despite some impediments such as disease. Continuous expansion of oil palm has been endorsed by successive governments (and Fedepalma) and many resources have been directed to that end, the aim being the imposition of a particular model of agro-industrial development, predicated by substitution of oil palm for peasant–based traditional agriculture. This seems almost exactly to follow Cramer's (2006) model of 'primitive accumulation', though Fedepalma (and its president, Mesa Dishington) were initially at pains to hide any involvement of the industry in violence, displacement or dispossession of small farmers. As more evidence has emerged, there has been some reluctant admission of partial involvement.

Likewise there has been a strong effort to persuade the EU countries that the industry has no record of deforestation or detrimental environmental or social practices, with RSPO certification being used as proof, despite the need for caution in the face of strong 'power asymmetries' at work and growing evidence of deforestation in the new frontier, the Amazon.

The alternative picture reveals the direct role of oil palm in the struggles over land concentration and land control, with death, displacement and dispossession of small farmers as the commercial crop has triumphed and expanded and seems set to continue in that trajectory. The picture also reveals the variety of situations that have arisen, from small to larger scale, with several on the margins of the settled areas, for example in María la Baja, Tibú, Chocó or Meta. It seems to be mainly in these 'marginal' municipalities that the actions of the paramilitaries were most severe, with continuing violence and inappropriate plantation behaviour in areas beyond the normal reach of government. In the older oil palm districts, close connections with violence and displacement are less likely to have occurred, though this was not the case for newer 'fringe' locations on the edge of the traditional areas. But even the prize plantation group, that of Daabon, was, it seems, still looking for places to expand in Las Pavas and its subsidiary is not relinquishing the territory to the rightful owners. Neither is La Gloria, despite a Court Order against them and criticism from the RSPO, as land remains a most important source of power and control.

Increasing violence seems to be characterising the early months of the government of President Duque, as businessmen use death squads to assassinate social leaders seeking to return stolen land to the rightful owners (Alsema, 2018). These revelations do not bode well for the kind of 'comprehensive rural reform' suggested as necessary for Colombia by the FAO and other agencies, such as Oxfam (Burgos, 2016).

Declaration of competing interest

There were no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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