

Socio-Environmental Conflicts Caused by Palm Oil Farming: The Case of María La Baja in Montes De María¹

Conflictos socioambientales ocasionados por el cultivo de palma aceitera: el caso de María La Baja en Montes De María

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Resumen³

El presente texto analiza cómo la implementación del proyecto agroindustrial de la palma aceitera en el municipio de María La Baja, ha generado conflictos territoriales en la región de Montes de María durante los últimos años. Del mismo modo, se identifican dinámicas de poder y marginalización social desarrolladas por los procesos de configuración territorial que trae consigo este proyecto neoliberal, frente a las lógicas de resistencia social por parte de los habitantes de María La Baja.

Palabras Clave: Palma Aceitera; María La Baja; Conflicto Socioambiental; Territorio; Montes de María.

Abstract

The present text analyzes how the implementation of the palm oil agro-industrial project in the municipality of María La Baja, has generated territorial conflicts in the Montes de María region in recent years. Power dynamics and social marginalization associated with the processes of territorial configuration of this neoliberal project are also identified, an contrasted with the logic of social resistance on the part of the inhabitants of María La Baja.

Keywords: Palm Oil; María La Baja; Socioenvironmental Conflict; Territory; Montes de María.

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Introduction

The primary objective of this text is to analyze socio-environmental conflicts through a specific case study, which relates to the establishment of oil palms as a large-scale productive project in the municipality of María La Baja, in the region of Montes de María. In order to realize this objective, the process of implementing this agro-industrial model within the municipality is described, exploring the economic, social and territorial consequences faced by the communities residing in this geographical space; as well as the strategies of resistance against these capitalist logics employed by the social communities. The elements identified are addressed through an interpretative framework that focuses on the study of environmental conflicts, which allows us to understand the structural conditions that have helped to shape such agro-industrial processes in the region.

First, the theoretical framework that supports this study is explained in detail. Specifically, the article defines a social conflict of an environmental nature, some notions about distributive justice, environmental racism, social metabolism and its implications in the territory; as well as the conception of economic rationality and the duality of denaturalization of the nature / naturalization of the commodification of nature.

Second, the main aspects that make it possible to understand how the palm oil project was implemented in the territory under study are described. This process involves questioning the logic of oil palms as a constituent element of the neo-extractivist paradigm; then the power dynamics that are generated by an agro-industrial territorialization in Montes de María are addressed, and finally, what happens inside the municipality concerning oil palms will be examined in detail.

Theoretical considerations facing socio-environmental conflicts

According to Homer-Dixon (1994), social conflicts of an environmental nature commonly occur in poor and marginalized societies, which have little capacity to cushion themselves both from environmental scarcity and from social crises. Such conditions contribute to the constitution of a direct relationship between violence and environmental scarcity, a conflict that is fomented in those geographical spaces where the population lives with scarce resources. This generates not only a social marginalization (growth/displacement of the population, unequal access to natural resources, social inequality, etc.) through parameters of ecological and environmental impact (ecological deterioration, scarcity of resources, unsustainable agricultural practices) but also marginalization based on the notion of distributive justice.

According to John Rawls (1986), distributive justice refers to an assignment that does not necessarily coincide with the paradigm of a strict egalitarianism⁴ that, by developing dynamics of inequality, the effect of distributive justice makes the least advantaged within a society, in material terms, better off than one of strict egalitarianism. In this model, the distribution of goods and services is made among the members of society at a specific time, determining the acceptability of the resulting conditions.

Based on the above, the term justice is addressed not only through the notion of recognition or under the logic of the distribution of goods; but through the dynamics of participation and the development of capacities that individuals can generate within society. Therefore, the term justice constitutes a basic tool that allows soci-

4. The principle of strict egalitarianism has as a general principle of the allocation of an equal amount of material goods to each of the members that are part of a particular society.

ety to access diverse social, economic, political and cultural scenarios that help to confront the multiple logics of inequality present in society (Schlosberg, 2007).

Considering the above, it is important to clarify two elements: the first is that, when speaking about distributive justice, one should not fall into material reductionism, but rather enter into the field of the symbolic and the intangible. In this case, the social, the cultural and the symbolic are a fundamental part of the notion of distribution within the term of justice; and this holistic notion of the concept can deal with the different relations of domination and oppression that are woven and institutionalized in any society (Schlosberg, 2007). The second precision revolves around the need to acknowledge that the environmental conflict in distributive justice should not be seen only from a negative perspective, as it may also have positive aspects from a society. In this case, when confronted with the problem of scarcity, awareness can be generated in the society which allows the increase of demands or the struggle for an institutional change (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

The problem of environmental racism, according to Bullard (1995), refers to the problematic conditions that are directly related to the areas where marginal societies are geographically located (ethnicity, color, socioeconomic strata, etc.). That is, this problem is directly linked to a problem of economic and environmental inequality, in strategically selected geographical places for the implementation of a capitalist logic. According to this perspective, the institutionalization of a fair and sustainable environment is questioned where there are practices that meet human needs without sacrificing the ecological integrity of the land or threatening the social and territorial rights of certain social groups.

Part of this understanding involves the questioning of those appreciations of economic sustainability due to environmental impacts in specific regions where capitalist and neoliberal actions are implemented. In this case, Martínez-Alier (2004) proposes considering those indicators or fixed indexes of (un) sustainability that examine the economy as a form of “environmental metabolism.” A social metabolism that increasingly consumes raw materials due to the logic of social and economic growth worldwide, which, due to their rational of configuration and consumption, generates uneven dynamics in the economic, political and social scenarios.

This notion of environmental metabolism of Martínez-Alier (2004) is strongly related to that of the economic rationality of Leff (2005), which refers to the continuum of economic progress that, when combined with the current globalization dynamics, generates affectations in the natural world. That is, everything related to those economic questions about the natural, where the externalities of the contemporary metabolism have taken nature to its limits.

It is from this economic rationality where logics of homogenization are generated in the patterns of production and consumption, which undermines sustainability at the local, regional and global levels, and are based on the practices of ecological and cultural diversity. In this way, nature is becoming a “natural capital,” in new forms of economic valorization; that generates a rational-economic paradigm, new geopolitics where nature is denaturalized by inserting it into discourses of ecological (un) sustainability that make it a commercial figure for the logic of global capital. Under this interpretive framework of economic rationality, two different but complementary processes are established: the denaturalization of nature

and the naturalization of the commodification of nature (Leff, 2005).

Based on the above, both in Martínez-Alier (2004) and Leff (2005), a study is begun on the dynamics of distribution (very similar to the judgments on distributive justice), where not only the economic but also the ecological components are taken into account, highlighting the valuations and assignments of natural resources and environmental services within societies, especially those in developing countries. As a result, Martínez-Alier (2004) proposes that in cases of ecological distributive conflicts, decision-making within those contexts where socio-environmental conflicts are present should form part of the analysis. That is, the analysis of both incommensurable values (issues that cannot be measured in economic terms) and irresolvable uncertainties that can lead to the implementation of a capitalist economy in the interior of a given territory.

Accordingly, the patterns of use of resources could be understood not only through an analysis of the implementation of a capitalist economy but also from the different power relations and income distribution present within that territory. Thus, an unequal ecological distribution can be understood, where power relations can be changed through institutional and social strengthening.

To conclude, we want to clarify that all these new geopolitical configurations that awaken new economic and ecological forms of the environmental and the social, are manifested in the territory where spaces are politicized according to a revaluation of the habited space (Leff, 2005). An example of a politicized territory that has been shaped as an essential geopolitical space is the municipality of María La Baja in the Montes de María region. A municipality that

during the last decades has been fighting against the propagation of vast expanses of oil palms in its territory.

The oil palms: constituent link of a neo-extractivist chain

For some decades, the neo-extractivist paradigm in Latin America has been characterized by interdependencies between national and global transformation processes. Within this paradigm one could locate the agro-industrial dynamics that revolve around the global demand for raw and agricultural materials, and that are subject to prices set in the worldwide market.

The production of biofuels in Latin America has increased as a result of the adoption large scale single crop farming, of crops such as sugarcane, soybeans and oil palms. This model brings with it the transformation of the territory historically constructed in the regions, into socio-productive spaces that depend not only on the international market, but also national policies and price volatility.

Gudynas (2009) argues that the neo-extractivist development model has had significant impacts on territories in those areas that have remained in situations of marginality in relation to the advance of capital; succeeding in imposing, at the same time, new geography based on extractivist practices or agro-industrial production. This is the case of the municipality of María La Baja, in the Montes de María region. A region that in recent decades has been in a situation of economic, political and social vulnerability, due to structural conditions such as violence, poverty, and state absence.

Palm oil is produced mainly in vast monocultures, and its life cycle revolves around 25 to 30 years. Accordingly, its implementation is linked to the long-term transformation of the territory,

where new logics on the control and land use are constructed based on the institutionalization of private property rights (Peluso and Lund, 2011).

From the implementation of agro-industrial activities, in this case, the oil palm, new logics of nature are created that are configured according to a capitalist valorization and new localities that, in turn, alter and generate new representations and territorial structures. In this way, such practices in a territory could be classified as an environmental conflict or as a conflict over land use based on what Bebbington (2007) describes, since these:

...are also conflicts about the production of the territory; about the type of relationship between society and the environment that should prevail in a territory; on how these territories should be governed and by whom; about the meaning that these spaces should have; and about the types of ties that these territories should have with others (Bebbington, 2007:p.33).

Power and agro-industrial territorialization in Montes de María

Located within one of the six major regions that make up the Colombian geography (the Caribbean), the Montes de María are composed of 15 municipalities belonging to 2 different departments. In the Department of Bolívar there are the municipalities of Córdoba, El Carmen de Bolívar, María La Baja, San Jacinto, San Juan Nepomuceno, and Zambrano; while the municipalities of Chalán, Colosó, Los Palmitos, Morroa, Ovejas, San Antonio de Palmito, San Onofre, Tolúviejo and Corozal are located in the department of Sucre. 396,000 hectares (3,960 km²) is the total area of the municipalities corresponding to the Department of Bolívar, while the municipalities in Sucre form an area of 284,800 hectares (2,848 km²) (Rodríguez, 2016). Therefore, the total geographical area that comprises this territory is 680,800 hectares (6,808 km²).

This region was marked by the dynamics of violence which developed within the territory. The presence of multiple illegal armed actors generated large waves of forced displacement, due to the attacks and massacres of the population. As a result, dynamics of abandonment and dispossession of the lands developed in the region. In the municipalities of Montes de María that correspond to the department of Sucre⁵, 4,172 hectares were identified in Ovejas and 3,018 hectares in San Onofre, with a total of 7,190 hectares; while in the municipalities corresponding to Bolívar, 71,862 hectares were abandoned. With the municipalities of El Carmen de Bolívar with 54,312 hectares, San Jacinto with 4,758 hectares, Zambrano with 3,713 hectares and San Juan Nepomuceno with 2,683 hectares (Reyes, 2009).

Regarding the municipality of María La Baja, we should highlight the great violations of human rights that have occurred in recent years. This municipality is socio-demographically afro-descendent, where more than 90% of the population identifies as having African ancestry. According to Victorino (2011), in 2010, after the consolidation phase of paramilitary groups, 17,680 displaced persons were registered in this municipality; a significant number when one considers that María La Baja had at the time a little more than 45,000 inhabitants.

As a result of this intense process of forced displacement, considerable impacts can be observed in the use and access of rural lands in the municipality of María La Baja. According to the Single Registry of Abandoned Land and Territory (RUPTA, Spanish acronym), 21,785 hectares of the 54,700 hectares in the municipality were abandoned. This dynamic of land

5. There are multiple territorial conceptions about which are the municipalities that make up the Montes de María region. For this study, the municipalities were chosen that in general terms coincide with these conceptions and, in turn, those are where it is pretended to apply the ethnic-rural planning figures of interest for this research.

abandonment allowed the legalization and normalization of territorial dispossession based on administrative and judicial procedures. The aforementioned affected the concentration of land just at the time when there is evidence of greater displacement and abandonment of land by the peasant population of the municipality.

Likewise, there is evidence of a relationship between the massive purchases of land and the era of violence in the region. Lands that are currently dedicated to the establishment of agro-industrial projects, as is the case of those purchased by the “Friends of the Montes de María Corporation,” a group of businessmen from Antioquia that has purchased approximately more than 60,000 hectares in recent years (León, 2009). Purchases of lands that, despite having been made in a context of systematic displacement and violence, enjoy legal sanction, due to their registration through the official procedures defined by the authorities.

Oil palm in María La Baja

According to CEPAL (2007), the large areas of land destined for the production of energy crops generate significant changes both in the productive agricultural structure and the concentration of production, land tenure, social and institutional configuration from the appearance of new actors and powers. The previous processes of territorial transformation in the means of production and the rural economic structure are evident in the incursion of oil palms in the municipality of María La Baja.

According to Fedepalma (2011), by the beginning of the second decade of this millennium, there were approximately 427,368 hectares in rural areas of Colombia with oil palm crops. Of this amount, 124,340 hectares were registered in the northern area of the country, representing 29.1% of the total planted palms nationwide

(Páez-Redondo, Blanco-Muñoz, and Ospino-Castro, 2013).

The oil palm arrived in the territory of Montes de María in 1998, when the irrigation districts of the region were facing a profound crisis summarized in decline in the production of rice and plantain, which generated a generalized bankruptcy due to the underutilization of the soils and the indebtedness after a long period of failed crops (Aguilera, 2013). During that period, oil palm was inserted in María La Baja through Hacienda Las Flores⁶, where an agreement was made to implement a pilot plan, in association with the farmers, to plant 100 hectares of palm (Rivera, 2011).

During the presidential terms of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006 and 2006-2010), there was strong support for this agro-industrial project through the National Development Plans (in rural and agricultural areas), where the planting of crops was encouraged to produce fuels from organic matter, favoring sugarcane and palm oil for the biodiesel (INDEPAZ, 2013). This can be seen in the extension dedicated to the production of oil palm in María La Baja between 2001 and 2012, with a registered increase of 1,358%, from a total of 570 hectares in 2001, to 8,310 hectares in 2012 (Ministry of Agriculture, 2012).

In this way, between 1998 and 2015, the palm industry in María La Baja was consolidated through the so-called productive alliances. The business expansion of oil palm cultivation is based on the integration of the peasant economy to industrial development. In this case, the regional farmers had land and labor available, and the business community supported the financing of the project (Ávila, 2015).

6. Property of the former minister of agriculture and former president of Fedepalma, Carlos Murgas Guerrero.

According to INDEPAZ (2013), in 2009, 30% of the palm plantations in María La Baja were part of *productive alliances*. Such a figure allowed the configuration of a concentration of land and asymmetric relations between the owners of the land and the entrepreneurs. According to this report, the area planted by small producers has decreased by 40%, the area cultivated by medium producers has reduced by 80%; while for large producers it has increased by 98%.

This is how a change in tenure and land use in María La Baja can be demonstrated. A territory where, before the incursion of the oil palm, 59.7% of the farms were dedicated to the production of crops, while 38.7% was used for livestock activities and 1.6% for production/conservation of forests and stubbles. Thus, between 2001 and 2012, it is estimated that approximately 4,961 hectares of agricultural land moved to palm oil production (Herrera and Cumplido, 2015).

The configuration of resistance dynamics

In the territory some logics of resistance to the dynamics of dispossession and land grabbing by the palm oil industry have developed in María La Baja. The community of San José del Playón, which is articulated to the Montes de María Interlocution and Concertation Table, entered into a project of debate and construction of new forms of rural development from the peasant bases, committed to strengthening of agriculture family, diversified food production and the implementation of agroecological systems (Ávila, 2015).

It is essential to take into account the different protection and land use planning figures that can be established in Montes de María by the ethnic-rural communities, and that would serve as control strategies and resistance to the opening of the agricultural frontier for the implementation

of vast oil palm crops in the region. The aforementioned makes reference to the collective land titles for the afro-descendant communities (two collective titles in the municipality of San Jacinto led by the Community Council of Paraíso and the Community Council of San Cristóbal) and the peasant reserve areas for the peasants (two geographical polygons that cover the majority of the territory of the region) that community have been attempting to be implemented in the rural areas of Montes de María over the last few years.

The Decree 1745 of 1995 gives afro-descendant communities in Colombia access to specific territories when they comply with the following characteristics: an ancestral occupation of such lands, a common history of settlement, that the afro-descendant population is residing in untitled lands or areas reserved by the State, whether in public ownership with or without rights of collective use and enjoyment; that they have lands of private property or other forms of property, that there is a self-recognition as a afro-descendant community and that it is led under the organizational process of a community council.

On the other hand, Law 160 of 1994 in Article 80 presents the Peasant Reserve Zones as a figure “for the land use, social and cultural planning of property, for the stabilization and consolidation of the peasant economy.” Similarly, Article 1 of Decree 1777 of 1996 ensures that the areas of application of this figure are “geographical areas whose agro-ecological and socioeconomic characteristics require regulation, limitation, and use of the ownership of rural properties”.

Given the legal and normative characteristics for its applicability in the territory, both the collective titles and the zone of peasant reserve that could be established in Montes de María, would affect the territorial and geographical logic of

the region since, when considered as figures of territorial, ecological, social and cultural conservation, they would be capable of resisting the expansion of oil palm cultivation.

Concluding remarks

Based on the above, it could be considered that the project of large-scale implementation of oil palm in the municipality of María La Baja, in the Montes de María region, is a clear reflection of a social conflict with an environmental character. This is because there is evidence of potentiation of such conflicts in geographical areas where the population lives with scarce resources and, at the same time, generate dynamics of social marginalization through logics of ecological and environmental impact (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

In this case there is a clear example of an unequal environmental distribution (Schlosberg, 2007) not only in terms of acquisition and hoarding of the assets, which in this case is expressed under the logic of the land; but also, the entire social and agricultural structure that has been constructed historically in the territory is affected. Therefore, all the social practices of sovereignty and rural culture of the communities of this municipality are being affected, as they are fragmented by the implementation of this neoliberal model of the oil palms.

Based on the previous assertions, one can catalogue the neo-extractivist practices of oil palms in the territory as a result of an “environmental metabolism,” which depends on the logic of consumption given by the social and economic dynamics worldwide (Martínez-Alier, 2004). This “environmental metabolism” generates practices of homogenization in the patterns of production and consumption, attacking the logic of sustainability in the region, as is the case with the vulnerability existing in the scenario of

food sovereignty in the region; since they have diminished the crops and products for their subsistence and the capacity to trade these goods.

Through this process, the territory of María La Baja has gradually become a “natural capital”, where the land has been configured as an element of merely economic value, where a new economic and geopolitical rationality is expressed that denatures nature to be able to insert it into the logic of global capital (Leff, 2005). That is to say, a marketization of nature is prevailing in this municipality by implementing, in a veracious way, the indiscriminate sowing of oil palms, without taking into account not only the environmental consequences in the territory, but also its social and cultural ones.

In the same way, it is also evident in the case of the oil palm in the municipality of María La Baja a clear process of environmental racism (Bullard, 1995), since problems of hoarding and territorial dispossession are identified through dynamics of violence for land grabbing and the implementation of neo-extractivist projects, not only in rural areas of Colombia which have been historically characterized by the absence of the State, but also because it is observed that such projects are implemented in territories where ethnic communities reside, in this case, afro-descendant populations.

Although this population is an ethnic minority and has historically been characterized by being in conditions of social, political and economic marginalization by the Colombian national state, there is an awakening and awareness on the part of these communities regarding the affectations of oil palms in the territory (Homer-Dixon, 1994). An example of this is the organizational processes designed to cope with the expansion of the agricultural frontier for the planting of more palm crops in the municipality. Through

this process, we can highlight this positive aspect around an environmental conflict given by dynamics of distributive (in) justice.

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