Is sustainable palm oil production in Honduras achievable?

Research Objectives
Dr Fromm's research focuses on the value chain of multi-country trade commodities such as coffee, cocoa, banana and palm oil.

Personal Response
What inspired you to conduct this research?

I grew up in Honduras, in a small town on the northern coast completely devoted to banana production. Over the last decades, I’ve been observing how these areas where banana was produced have been replaced by the oil palm. The social structures have changed dramatically over this period of time and it seems to me that not all of the labour force once employed in banana production transferred to this industry. One motivation to conduct this research was to understand this dynamic. As more and more people abandon the agricultural sector, it’s important to understand which factors push people out of agriculture, or drive them to migrate, as is the case of Honduras. In most value chain research I have conducted, it’s crucial to observe economic, social and environmental issues and not only the economic drivers in isolation.

Are there any viable alternatives to palm oil that do not have the same level of negative repercussions?

I think that the industry hasn’t had only negative repercussions. It’s an industry which has been beneficial for many people, by providing employment or economic opportunities for small-scale farmers. Currently, the larger companies are actively working with producers in numerous social programs or farmer trainings and there is a sense that more can be done by working together with different actors of the assemblage. The point we did make in the paper was that in order to go forward, the lessons from the past failures in terms of policies which only sought economic gains should be learnt, so industries like this one can be economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

References

Bio
Dr Ingrid Fromm is a research associate and lecturer in international agriculture at the Bern University of Applied Sciences, School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences, in Zollikofen Switzerland where she teaches in the Bachelor and Master’s programs. Her work focuses on global value chains and their impact on economic, environmental, and social development. For the past 17 years, Dr Fromm has focused on value chain research in multi-country trade commodities such as coffee, cocoa, banana and palm oil as well as fresh vegetables and pulses. She has conducted research and consultancies in numerous developing countries in Latin America, West Africa, and Asia.

Collaborators
• Dr Helena Varkkey, Dr Patrick O’Riley (special journal issue editors)
• Mélanie Feurer, Sebastian Mengel (co-authors)

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Palm oil is the world’s most produced vegetable oil. Its production increases the GDP of developing nations and improves the livelihoods of farmers. However, palm oil production has wrought substantial environmental harm to the regions, which grow it through deforestation and biodiversity loss. This leads Dr Ingrid Fromm at Bern University of Applied Sciences to the question: is it possible to produce palm oil sustainably? She is examining the sustainability of palm oil production in Honduras through the analytical framework of assemblage theory.

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Is sustainable palm oil production in Honduras achievable?

Palm oil production in Honduras has become an essential part of the economy. It contributes $400 million to the Honduran economy, making it one of the country’s primary exports. Palm oil has been grown in Honduras for almost 100 years and saw steady growth as a commercial crop until 2000. Since 2000, coinciding with the tropical forest are typically areas of ecological importance with high levels of biodiversity and carbon sequestration capacity. Furthermore, regulates social conflicts over land ownership and land stewardship have arisen from the increased exploitation of land for palm oil production.

From a Honduran perspective, palm oil production accounts for a substantial amount of the country’s international exports and supports numerous small-scale farmers. However, government policies for expanding palm oil production have mostly focused on the economic benefits while overlooking sustainability issues.

To better understand the implications of Honduras’s palm oil expansion policies on the economy, environment, and society, Dr Ingrid Fromm at Bern University of Applied Sciences evaluates the sustainability of palm oil production in Honduras by using assemblage theory as a theoretical framework.

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