Sustainable Oil Palm for Papua New Guinea (PNG)

Project Objectives
- To present the uniqueness of PNG in relation to oil palm
- To provide lessons learnt from existing oil palm projects in PNG
- To present the uniqueness of PNG in relation to social and ecological sustainability
- To set standards and criteria for sustainable oil palm for PNG

Brief Project Description

Context

PNG is known as the ‘last frontier’ on Earth. It is a fusion of vibrant colors and diverse life, ranging from idyllic, paradise islands, lush coastal jungles to high, mist covered mountain peaks bisected by crystal clear waterfalls. This rich, diverse land is mirrored under the sea with reefs sporting a myriad of marine life unrivalled on the planet. It is the largest and most populous country in the Pacific with a land area of 462,000 km² and a population of over 5 million. Much of PNG is classified as a “major tropical wilderness area”, as it contains more than 65 percent of its original pristine vegetation, and its human population is less than five people per square kilometre. With only 1% of the world’s land area, PNG contains an estimated 7.5% of the world’s total biodiversity. A lot remained to be uncovered in relation to PNG’s mega-diversity as there are huge gaps in existing biological data.

Socially, PNG is renowned for its socio-cultural diversity, with over 8,000 autonomous tribes and 800 languages. It is one of the very few countries in the world where about 95% of the land are customarily owned or communally controlled. This customary land tenure system is enshrined by PNG’s constitution and is recognised by law. Papua New Guineans inherit land, matrilineally or patrilineally, depending on the local custom and practice. They have used and managed their natural resources for at least 30,000 years. In return, the natural environment has nurtured the people, providing them with food, medicines, building materials, unique identity and a spiritual focus.

Oil Palm in PNG

There are four major oil palm projects in PNG, situated in the provinces of West New Britain, Oro, Milne Bay and New Ireland respectively. Oil palm is now the country’s largest agricultural foreign exchange earner for the country, ahead of the long-standing PNG cash crop, coffee. Senior bureaucrats and politicians including the Prime Minister, Michael Somare described the oil palm industry as “a silent achiever and is now the leading vibrant, dynamic industry with reputable status in the country, because of its professional managers, and board of directors, who have the vision for the industry for the nation, and to make it the biggest ever industry for the country in the 21st century.” Somare has recently declared tax breaks for company interested in developing the oil palm industry in PNG.1 Plans for the expansion of oil palm plantations were announced for nearly every province in PNG.
This expansion plan inevitably will have immense impacts both on the environment and on PNG society. Furthermore, PNG has a notorious track record of weak institution of governance. It has virtually no capacity to monitor or regulate its industries and hence standard of many of the industries leave much to be desired. It is therefore unrealistic to expect effective institutional intervention for a sustainable oil palm industry. On the other hand, communities wield considerable discretionary power in land use allocation and access from the customary land tenure system. They must be a major stakeholder for any project that involved accessing land and natural resources.

As such, projects such as oil palm and other agro enterprises which involve the transfer and/or conversion of large tracts of land will have many implications for the customary land tenure system and hence the PNG Constitution. The PNG Constitution promises human dignity, self-reliance, ecological sustainability and cultural integrity. Most importantly, it emphasizes development in accordance with the PNG way. CELCOR and other national NGOs have for many years been working with communities throughout PNG. There are major lessons learned and in particularly in relation to participatory land use planning over the past decade. It is therefore crucial for the RSOP to include civil society representative and the resource owners themselves at this forthcoming Roundtable meeting.

Expected Outputs of the Proposed Project

- Clear understanding of challenges for sustainable oil palm in PNG
- Development of indicators, criteria and standards for sustainable oil palm appropriate for PNG
- Linkages made between civil society, resource owners and the sustainable oil palm industry and other relevant stakeholders

Project Activities

- Attendance of a CELCOR representative and two landowners at the forthcoming RT2, one with extensive experience in the PNG oil palm industry, one from area where oil palm has been promoted for the future
- Presentation by all three PNG participants to provide a PNGean perspective on oil palm
- Participation in discussion sessions to establish standards and criteria relevant to PNG in relation to sustainable oil palm.
SESSION III: PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES  
on Sustainable Palm Oil

PROJECT PROPOSALS

Expected Duration of the Project

Equivalent to the duration of the RT2 and post-meeting report-back to the respective constituents of the PNG participants.

Partners/Collaborators/Sponsors Required

Only require travel expenses which include transportation and flight costs to and from place of origin to the conference venue, per diem, accommodation and visa processing costs, as well as transit costs.

Brief Profile of the Proposer and Contact Details

The Center for Environmental Law and Community Rights (CELCOR) was initially established in 2000. Over the years, CELCOR as a public interest NGO law firm has endeavored under its respective programs to assert legal rights to customary resource owners in virtually most of the provinces in Papua New Guinea. CELCOR has been providing legal advice and assistance including environmental litigation support to customary landowners affected by logging, mining and oil palm projects. It has also engaged with NGOs and community based organizations involved in community-based natural resources management and conservation programmes. It has been involved in policy analysis and development work notably the reforms on the Forestry Act and the new Environment Act and is well recognised for its efforts to educate landowners about their rights through its community-based legal education programme. CELCOR is also an active member of the PNG Ecoforestry Forum which has been a crucial force in the forestry sector reform.

Contact details:

Please note that CELCOR’s telephone and e-mail system are both out of order at this point in time.

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1 Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors on a Proposed Technical Assistance Loan to Papua New Guinea for Nucleus Agro-Enterprises, Asian Development Bank, November 2001