

BIGMUN 2024  
ECOSOC 1: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

# Research Report

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Topic 2: Creating a framework to combat desertification due to palm tree plantations.



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## Introduction

Desertification and environmental issues related to palm oil production have been topics of concern and discussion in various international forums, including the United Nations.

Palm oil plantations are associated with deforestation, habitat destruction, and environmental degradation in tropical regions. These concerns have led to discussions about sustainable practices, conservation, and efforts to address the environmental impact of palm oil production.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Desertification:** is a process by which fertile land becomes increasingly arid, unproductive, and eventually transforms into a desert-like environment. This phenomenon is often driven by numerous factors, including climatic variations, human activities, and natural processes. Desertification involves the degradation of soil quality, loss of vegetation cover, and a decline in the overall productivity of the land.

**Palm Tree Plantations:** involve the large-scale cultivation of palm trees, primarily for the production of palm oil. These plantations can have significant environmental implications, including deforestation, habitat destruction, and soil degradation.

**Conference of the Parties (COP):** In the context of international environmental agreements, particularly the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), COP refers to the Conference of the Parties. The COP meetings bring together representatives from countries that are parties to the convention to assess progress in dealing with climate change, negotiate agreements, and discuss future actions.

## Background Information

Grown only in the tropics, the palm tree produces high-quality oil used primarily for cooking in developing countries. It is also used in food products, detergents, cosmetics and, to a small extent, biofuel. Palm oil is a small ingredient in our diet, but more than half of all packaged products consumed contain palm oil - as it is found in lipstick, soaps, detergents and even ice cream.

Palm trees are a very productive crop. They offer a far greater yield at a lower cost of production than other vegetable oils do. Global production and demand for palm oil is increasing rapidly. Palm oil originally comes from West Africa, but plantations are spreading across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Malaysia and Indonesia are the main palm tree cultivation areas. But such expansion comes at the expense of tropical forests—which form nurturing habitats for numerous endangered species and a lifeline for some human communities<sup>1</sup>. A large problem with palm tree plantations is the clearing of valuable rainforest to make room for the plantations. It affects the environment, the climate and threatens rare animal species.

The Conference of the Parties (COP), at its eleventh session, invited Parties and accredited observers to submit their views on issues relating to reducing emissions. This discussion included: deforestation in developing countries, focusing on relevant scientific, technical, and methodological issues, and the exchange of relevant information and experiences, including policy approaches and positive incentives, to the secretariat, by 31 March 2006

1. The COP also invited Parties to submit recommendations on any further process to consider the issues. It requested the secretariat to compile the submissions from Parties in a miscellaneous document and to post those from accredited observers on the UNFCCC website.

2. At this same session, the COP requested the secretariat to organize, subject to the availability of supplementary funding, a workshop on “Reducing emissions from deforestation in developing countries” before the twenty-fifth session of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA). Following an offer from the government of Italy, this workshop will take place at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome from 30 August to 1 September 2006 and has been made possible thanks to the generous contributions of the governments of Australia, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and New Zealand, and the FAO.

3. The SBSTA, at its twenty-fourth session, decided that the workshop should provide an opportunity for Parties to share experiences and consider relevant aspects relating to reducing emissions from deforestation in developing countries. The specific topics to be discussed in the workshop will include:

(a) Scientific, socio-economic, technical, and methodological issues, including the role of forests, in particular tropical forests, in the global carbon cycle; definitional issues, including those relating to links between deforestation and degradation; data availability and quality; scale; rates and drivers of deforestation; estimation of changes in carbon stocks and forest cover; and related uncertainties;

(b) Policy approaches and positive incentives to reduce emissions from deforestation in developing countries, including causes; short- and long-term effectiveness with respect to emission reductions; the displacement of emissions; bilateral and multilateral cooperation; activities of other relevant international bodies; enhancing sustainable forest management; capacity-building;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/palm-oil>

and financial mechanisms and other alternatives – basing discussions on experiences and lessons learned;

(c) Identification of possible links between relevant scientific, socio-economic, technical, and methodological issues and policy approaches and positive incentives that may arise from the consideration of the topics in subparagraphs (a) and (b) above.

4. The SBSTA also requested the secretariat to prepare for the workshop a background paper on the items contained in paragraph 3 (a) and (b) above, with a synthesis of relevant information in national communications and the submissions referred to in paragraph 1.5

5. The SBSTA decided to continue consideration of relevant scientific, technical, and methodological issues and the exchange of relevant information and experiences, including policy approaches and positive incentives, at its twenty-fifth session, taking into account the outcome of the workshop and the submissions from Parties referred to in paragraph 1 above.<sup>2</sup>

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### Countries with Significant Palm Oil Production

**Indonesia and Malaysia:** Large-scale clearing of forests, including rainforests, for palm oil plantations has been a significant environmental issue in Indonesia and Malaysia. This deforestation contributes to habitat loss for numerous plant and animal species, some of which are endangered. Another environmental concern is the drainage of peatlands for palm oil cultivation. This contributes to carbon emissions and can lead to land subsidence and increased vulnerability to fires.

**Thailand:** While Thailand is also a major producer of palm oil, its involvement in deforestation has not been as extensively reported as in Indonesia and Malaysia. However, palm oil cultivation in Thailand has faced scrutiny for environmental and social issues, including deforestation and land conflicts.

**Colombia:** In South America, particularly in Colombia, the palm oil industry has also faced criticism for contributing to deforestation and environmental degradation. Expansion of palm oil plantations in Colombia has been linked to clearing land previously covered by rainforests.

### International Organizations

**United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):** addresses various environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. It supports countries in the development of policies and practices that promote sustainability.

**Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):** is involved in various aspects of agriculture, including sustainable practices, food security, and combating hunger. It plays a role in promoting sustainable agriculture and responsible land use.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/introduction\\_background\\_paper.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/introduction_background_paper.pdf)

**Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO):** aims to address the environmental and social issues associated with palm oil production by establishing criteria for sustainable practices and providing certification to those who meet these standards.

**UNDP<sup>3</sup>:** is involved in various development initiatives worldwide, addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. It often collaborates with countries to implement projects that promote sustainable development.

**UNFCCC:** organizes annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings where countries discuss and negotiate climate-related policies and agreements, including the landmark Paris Agreement.

**UNCCD:** addresses desertification, land degradation, and drought, promoting sustainable land use practices. It aims to improve the livelihoods of affected populations and enhance ecosystem resilience.

### Relevant UN Resolutions

Paragraph 33 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on the linkage between sustainable management of the planet's natural resources as well as social and economic development as well as on *“strengthen cooperation on desertification, dust storms, land degradation and drought and promote resilience and disaster risk reduction”*.

Sustainable Development Goal 15 of the 2030 Agenda aims to *“protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”*.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)<sup>4</sup> - *“The UNCCD is the only legally binding framework set up to address desertification and the effects of drought. There are 197 Parties to the Convention, including 196 country Parties and the European Union. The Convention – based on the principles of participation, partnership, and decentralization – is a multilateral commitment to mitigate the impact of land degradation, and protect our land so we can provide food, water, shelter and economic opportunity to all people.”*

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

### Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

At the Rio+20 Conference, Member States reaffirmed, through paragraphs 197- 204 of the outcome document, the Future We Want, that *“intrinsic value of biological diversity, as well as the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its critical role in maintaining ecosystems that provide essential services, which are critical foundations for sustainable development and human well-being”*. Member States also recognized *“the severity of global biodiversity loss and degradation of*

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<sup>3</sup> [The Indonesia National Action Plan on Sustainable Palm Oil: a UNDP Impact Story | United Nations Development Programme](#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unccd.int/convention/overview>

*ecosystems” and stress the negative impact that this situation has on food security, nutrition, access to water, health of the rural poor and people worldwide”<sup>5</sup>*

## Possible Solutions

*“WWF helped found the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in 2004 to give farmers, processors, consumer brands, and retailers better choices in palm oil. Together, these groups have developed palm oil production standards that protect habitats and biodiversity, conserve natural resources, and ensure transparency about production processes. In 2015, about 20% of the world’s palm oil was certified sustainable by the RSPO”.<sup>6</sup>*

Joint Submission to the First Global Stocktake: A satellite-based deforestation monitoring system for tropical forests, “JICA-JAXA Forest Early Warning System in the Tropics (JJ-FAST)”.<sup>7</sup> “[...] This system can help countries to locate illegal deforestation, so that it can be combatted more efficiently. Reduced deforestation contributes to reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. [...] JJ-FAST has detected about 3 million potential deforested plots in 78 tropical-forest countries between 2016 and 2021 including more than 1 million deforested plots in Brazil. IBAMA uses JJ-FAST and other optical satellite systems to monitor and control illegal deforestation throughout the year, including rainy and cloudy periods. Practices of JJ-FAST application in Brazil should provide useful information on how tropical countries can enhance climate action by using JJ-FAST to detect and control illegal deforestation.”

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<sup>5</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/biodiversity-and-ecosystems>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/summer-2016/articles/ice-cream-s-impact-on-the-environment>

<sup>7</sup> [https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/202202241019---2022GST\\_GQ23\\_ALOS-2\\_JJ-FAST\\_final.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/202202241019---2022GST_GQ23_ALOS-2_JJ-FAST_final.pdf)

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