

La palma nos está dejando pobres:
**Oil palm expansion and dispossessions in rural
Guatemala**

by

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Abstract

Coinciding with the 21st century rush to appropriate land, agrarian studies have increasingly examined land grabbing caused by the food-feed-fuel complex. While the research often focuses on dispossession of *land*, this thesis studies the *various* forms of dispossession due to the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations in Guatemala since the 1990s. Analyzing the lived experiences of people from oil palm-ridden areas in Guatemala, the thesis also examines the role of the state and of political power relations as essential in these land *control* grabs. Results show that while the oil palm expansion has mostly benefited local creoles or wealthy landowners, it has also brought about lack of access to different resources and even human rights violations. As the Guatemalan people experience domestic food shortages and an influx of foreign foodstuffs, precarious, low-paid work in the oil palm sector is only available for the few. The industry, on the other hand, chiefly serves the interests of wealthy locals and of international markets.

Keywords: land control; land grabbing; dispossession; agribusiness; neoliberal food regime; agro-imperialism

A la gente que está luchando por su derecho a la vida.

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List of Acronyms

BCIE	Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica; Central American Bank for Economic Integration
CARSI	Central America Regional Security Initiative
CICIG	Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala; International commission against impunity in Guatemala
COCODES	Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo; leaders of community development
DR-CAFTA	Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement
ENA	Encuesta Nacional Agropecuaria; national inquiry on agriculture
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
FONTIERRAS	Fondo de Tierras; Guatemalan state land fund
FTN	Franja Transversal del Norte (highway/region)
GREPALMA	Gremial de Palmicultores de Guatemala; guild of oil palm growers
IDB/IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IDR	Import dependency ratio
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
ILC	International Land Coalition
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala; National institute of statistics
MAGA	Ministerio de Agricultura, Ganadería y Alimentación; Ministry of Agriculture
MALR	Market-assisted land reform
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PALIX	Palmas de Ixcan S.A.
PPP/MP	Plan Puebla Panamá/Mesoamerica Project
REPSA	Reforestadora de Palmas de el Petén
RSPO	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USDA FAS	USDA Foreign Agricultural Service
Verité	An NGO promoting fair labour; www.verite.org
WFP	World Food Programme

Glossary

Criollo (creole)	A person of Spanish descent, born in Latin America (in this study also generally used for people of European descent, especially dating back to colonial times)
Finca	A ranch, large farm or plantation
Frijoles	Beans
Ganadero	“cattleman”, rancher
La Franja	Franja Transversal del Norte highway and/or the area surrounding it
<i>La palma nos está dejando pobres</i>	“The palm is leaving us poor”
Ladino	Neither indigenous nor creole; can also be mestizo or “westernized” mestizo
Mestizo	Part-indigenous and part creole or ladino
Milpa	A common form of cultivation in Mesoamerica, where the same land is used for more than one crop at the same time
Mosca	A general name for a fly
Palma Africana/palma	African palm; <i>Elaeis guineensis</i> ; oil palm
Plaga	A plague, plight, pest
Quetzal	Guatemalan currency (GTQ); as of June 2016, 1.00 USD = 7.67 GTQ
Tierra	Land, ground, earth



“These palms take care of the hearts of the Guatemalans”

NaturAceites advertisement next to an oil palm plantation in Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Guatemala.

Source: Author.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Influenced by the powerful Guatemalan domestic elite, international financial institutions, foreign biodiesel demand, and the United States, Guatemala's export-led oil palm industry has expanded since the 1990s whereas its palm oil manufacturing¹ has surged since the early 2000s (FAOSTAT 2016; Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 186; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 512). Despite the emergence of this prosperous new industry, however, rural poverty and landlessness have been on the rise and the country's food security has been severely jeopardized (IFPRI 2015; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 516; Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 145–6, 158; Hurtado 2009). According to the 2015 Food Insecurity report of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Guatemala has more undernourished people now than during the last years of the civil war in the early 90s, with no positive development towards a hunger-free country (FAO et al. 2015, 47). The US Agency for International Development (USAID 2015a) adds that “[w]ithin indigenous areas, 65 percent of the population is chronically malnourished.” These developments, coinciding with a growing palm oil industry, raise further questions about possible peasant dispossession.

The objective of this study is thus to examine the specific forms of dispossession taking place in rural Guatemala as oil palm plantations expand. I will use the theoretical framework of *new imperialism* developed by David Harvey (2003) to interpret these wide-ranging forms of *accumulation by dispossession* including but not limited to the loss of land. In the 21st century, and with the commodification of numerous aspects of life,

¹ Palm oil is the value-added product derived from the oil palm fruit kernels. Its multiple uses make oil palm “the golden crop”, hence all the more popular (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, 2, 3).

“accumulation by dispossession can occur in a variety of ways and there is much that is both contingent and haphazard about its *modus operandi*” (Harvey 2003, 149). Based on field work, I have studied the manifestation and repercussions of this phenomenon. As this thesis will show, unequal land distribution, government policies, the worldwide promotion of agrofuels, and Northern domination of the food trade have resulted in deepening peasant poverty as well as in Guatemala's food import dependency. Meanwhile, the primary beneficiaries are local creoles (descendants of Spaniards), multinational companies and Northern trading partners.

Macrodata exploration of the FAO data base (FAOSTAT), clearly show a correlation between increased palm oil production and exports, on one hand; and increased food insecurity on the other. The results of ethnographic field research in the region of Franja Transversal del Norte (see Figure 1), the specific contribution of this thesis, confirm that the spread of oil palm plantations and the associated land grabs or *land control grabs* (Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Borras et al. 2012, 850) have indeed resulted in dispossessions. These dispossessions, in turn, have given rise to further hardships, especially for the rural, indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Through the analysis of the lived experiences from areas with intensifying oil palm production, I will especially emphasize the involvement of the state, political power relations, loss of access to resources, and exclusion (Borras et al. 2012, 849–50; Peluso and Lund 2011, 668) resulting from this process.

In the early twenty-first century, the pressure on land has increased enormously in line with governmental efforts to reduce oil dependency through the development of agrofuels, and with attempts to fight global warming through producing capital-intensive flex crops², while also feeding the swelling global population (e.g. Borras et al 2012, 851). As the demand for more land soars, the methods of its acquisition may become (even more) controversial/debatable. Amid the fierce competition over resources, the poorer population groups of the Southern hemisphere often sustain the repercussions (e.g. McMichael 2012,

² Crops (e.g. African oil palm) that can be used or “flexed” either as food, feed or chemicals – such as agrofuels (Borras et al. 2014, 2; 2012, 836). Flex crops grant a certain economic security for the producer for the flexibility of the crop in terms of its destination in the market (ibid. 2012, 851).

693; 2009a, 292; 2009b, 834). Oil palm is an essential part of the race for ‘sustainability’, since its use in the global market extends from fast food to everyday-cosmetics and the production of agrodiesel, making it truly a *flexible* crop (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, 3; Borras et al. 2014). As a result, the producers of this valuable flex crop are competing for the same land and other resources (e.g. water) with smallholders and subsistence peasants who often come in second.

Since the 21st century and especially following the 2007–2008 global food crisis, critical agrarian studies have increasingly examined land grabbing and the concomitant peasant dispossession. Although large-scale land acquisitions are frequent in Central America, including Guatemala (Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Borras et al. 2012, 855–56), land grabbing in this region has still received little attention in the existing literature. Furthermore, the voices of those who have been dispossessed in the process have not been heard. The focus has tended to be on the quantitative or technical essence of land grabbing, rather than the lived experiences of dispossession. As research focuses on land and food production, it may fail to observe other important characteristics and problems of land (control) grabbing as well as the various implications that the dispossessions may entail.

Borras et al. (2012) note that the majority of the research has too narrow a frame and “is bound to miss significant aspects of the scope and extent of contemporary land grabbing and possible trajectories of agrarian change” (2012, 849). Land grabbing in Latin America is different from that of the more studied regions of Southeast Asia, Africa and the Gulf States. For Latin America, the authors highlight the prevalence of state power, state-capital linkages and the presence of domestic “elites” as particularly important (Borras et al. 2012, 857–62). Harvey (2003) notes that the state is in fact an active agent in furthering accumulation by dispossession, though its presence is often overlooked (91, 105–7, 145–49, 152). The role of the state is in providing suitable conditions for capital investment, adjusting laws or institutions to facilitate the process or abolishing barriers for capital accumulation (ibid.). The importance of the state and the local actors are considered in this study, making this a valuable addition to the already existing body of research in critical agrarian studies.

The field research for this study was conducted in the region of Franja Transversal del Norte (FTN) in the northern lowlands of Guatemala, an area of growing importance in flex crop production, including oil palm plantations. The field research involved three months of examination of the socio-political situation, participant observation, and finally, interviews with people along the FTN in the summer of 2014. Based on the data gathered, I seek to describe the process of accumulation by dispossession in Guatemala, and analyze the lived experiences of this phenomenon by reference to the lived experience of the mostly indigenous people, amid the expansion of oil palm.

Twenty-first century agro-imperialism on colonial foundations

Western involvement in Guatemala has already been dominant for hundreds of years, in different ways. Starting from colonialism and culminating in the US intervention in the 1950s, imperialism still continues in the twenty-first century with aid to Guatemalan military and security forces (U.S. Department of State 2015; Grandin 2010; Cockcroft 2006). Arguably, the US military assistance also facilitates the expansion of large capitalist projects, such as the growth of oil palm plantations (Grandin 2010; Cockcroft 2006; Buck 2013; Paley 2014, 169–92). As political and financial power is in the hands of a tight-knit group of *criollos*³ and foreign landowning families, the unequal nation has only grown more unequal (Solano 2013; Martínez Peláez 2009). Meanwhile, the country is increasingly dependent on food and other trade from North America, operating as a "factory" for cheap raw materials for various industries – one of them being palm oil (FAOSTAT 2016; Grandin 2013, 2010; McMichael 2009a; Pickard 2002).

In Guatemala, land grabs and land *control* grabs have, in fact, grown alongside the cultivation of flex crops like oil palm and sugar cane (Borras et al. 2012, 852; Alonso-Fradejas 2012). Peluso and Lund (2011) define land control as “practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion,” adding that “[e]nclosure,

³ Person of Spanish (or generally European origin); in Guatemala, essentially a locally born white person.

territorialization, and legalization processes, as well as force and violence (or the threat of them)” can be used as means of the control of land (668). Land control grabs in the country are intimidatingly effortless to carry out, owing to obscure land titling, power discrepancies, and extremely unequal land rights, as well as the market-assisted land reform (MALR), promoted by the World Bank (Grandia 2013, 235, 255; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 510, 513–15). With the aid of the state’s “legitimate” monopoly in the use of violence by the military and police forces, the poor and often indigenous peoples have been dispossessed in the face of the new plantations or their expansion – or repressed when protesting these changes (Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Solano 2013; Harvey 2003, 145).

To supplement Harvey’s broad framework of accumulation by dispossession and new imperialism, the Guatemalan dispossessions brought about by the rise of flex crops and global agrofuel projects can be fruitfully examined as an expression of the *neoliberal food regime* (Pechlaner and Otero 2008; 2010). Scholars describe this regime from the perspective of Mexico and NAFTA in the neoliberal era as one in which the state is far from removed from intervention. Rather, through for instance “neoregulation” of the market influenced by supranational institutions, the state’s multiple forms of intervention have resulted in also promoting foreign direct investments in agribusiness while harming the peasant producers (Pechlaner and Otero 2008; 2010). Otero et al. (2013) have argued the neoliberal food regime in NAFTA’s case has brought about an “uneven and combined dependency” as Mexico is increasingly dependent on especially US imports of basic grains while the country is exporting luxury food items (e.g. fruits and vegetables). Mexican peasants, on the other hand, are less in control of the production of their own food while producing the products integral to the export-agriculture (Otero et al. 2013; Pechlaner and Otero 2010).

As this thesis will show, there is considerable evidence to argue the same process is taking place in Guatemala as a result of neoliberal policies, changes in trade, and dispossessions due to the flex crop agriculture. The 21st century changes in the Guatemala’s agriculture may end up furthering the experience of the neoliberal food regime and the country is even more vulnerable to food shortages and price fluctuation. In fact, rather than

traditional food crops, export-items and raw materials for the food-feed-fuel complex are the growing share of produced crops (FAOSTAT 2016; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 520–21; INE 2014; Larios 2014). Meanwhile, the country is more dependent on the staple food imports, especially from the United States (FAOSTAT 2016).

Food insecurity of an import-dependent country can benefit the food secure, surplus-producing countries with a highly subsidized agriculture, in this case the United States (Otero et al. 2013). In Guatemala, with substantial undernourishment, food insecurity and poverty (INE 2015; IFPRI 2015; USAID 2015), companies from the United States (e.g. *Monsanto, Walmart, McDonald's, Starbucks*) have already grown their market share (Gaitán 2014, 49; U.S. Department of Commerce 2014; Vásquez 2015, 2014; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 91): chiefly American corn as well as other imported grains continue to inundate the local market, which was largely self-sufficient for maize through the 1980s (FAOSTAT 2016; see also Figures 2 and 5, and Appendices C and D). As nearly 60 percent of Guatemalans are officially poor⁴ (Bolaños 2015; INE 2015b, 5-7; 12, 14; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 516; see also Appendix B), the majority struggles to sustain themselves for their susceptibility to volatile food prices.

In this study, I will depict Guatemala's connection to the global food-feed-fuel complex, as crops are increasingly used for various purposes. Former human food crops are now directed to animal feed or agrofuels and other chemicals, provoking land grabbing and dispossessions (Borras et al. 2014; 2012). Following an examination of Guatemala's agrarian developments and food trade in the 20th and the 21st century, I will contextualize these events in the concurrent agrarian processes of land grabbing and flex crop trade worldwide. A brief overview of the distinctive political and social history of the country, chiefly the colonial and post-colonial legacy, will highlight the link between the past and the present. This will illuminate the grounds for the 21st century agro-imperialism (Petras 2008) – imperialism, that is, in the form of large-scale agriculture. The historical

⁴ According to the 2015 report on living conditions of Guatemala's National Institute of Statistics (INE), those who cannot cover the minimum costs of essential food and non-food necessities are considered poor (1). Numbers and indicators were generated using the methodology of World Bank (INE 2015b, 1).

background will also clarify the power relations (Borras et al. 2012, 850) that foster accumulation by dispossession in the country.

Based on ethnographic research and participant observation, I narrate and analyse the lived experiences of the participants who are part of yet another generation in a continuum of repression of hundreds of years (Grandin 2013). Moreover, they are faced with a changing culture and surroundings, and jeopardized livelihoods altered by the new agrarian developments. My research seeks to answer the following questions: what are the specific forms of dispossession? How does the state or the distinctive political power relations between the ruling “elite” and the poor or indigenous manifest in accumulation by dispossession? Can it be argued that such dispossessions and expansion are tantamount to (agro)imperialism and the new imperialism that David Harvey (2003) analyses?

The existing research on land grabs and accumulation by dispossession is often concentrated on the loss of *land* and food security. However, as Borras et al. (2012) observed, land grabbing should be understood as *control* grabbing, encompassing various forms of exclusion and dispossession, from *water* grabs to those of other resources (849–50). On the other hand, the essence of political power relations (ibid.) will be an important element in examining the dispossessions. In fact, in the case of Guatemala the local actors – wealthy descendants of colonialists and the state – are particularly significant agents in the act of dispossession, with local (indigenous)⁵ peoples subject to the repercussions. This does not, however, indicate that international actors, including other countries, can be neglected as unimportant elements in the power complex, especially when considering that Guatemala has experienced dependency ever since the Spanish conquest (e.g. Grandin 2013, 2010; Martinez Peláez 2009). In fact, the country’s past seems to give rise to the current form of agro-imperialism “by invitation” (Petras 2008): this new imperialism

⁵ Not to rule out the impact on also the non-indigenous peasants or generally rural inhabitants. Note that according to INE 2015 calculations (see also Appendix B), Guatemalan poverty figures are the highest in rural areas.

appears to be adopted and implemented by the ruling “elite” of Guatemala, influenced by global neoliberal policies.

The objective of this study is to expose the changes, challenges, and hardships the disposessions of the 21st century (agro)imperialism pose to the often voiceless peasant and indigenous communities in a neocolonial and racially still divided country of Latin America. Specifically, I seek to depict what *new imperialism* is in Guatemala, what accumulation by dispossession means with its various forms of exclusion and control grabbing in the distinctive sociopolitical surroundings, and how the Guatemalan state articulates the neoliberal food regime in its midst.

Methods

Examination of existing research on the Guatemalan oil palm expansion in 2013 suggested the value of additional research on the lived experiences of the people in the areas affected by the growing oil palm production. How did they perceive the industry? Consequently, data for this study were collected by means of participant observation and interviews chiefly in the Franja Transversal del Norte (FTN) region (see Figure 1). Relevant primary and secondary data (prices and cost of living, socio-political state, flex crop operations, climate of opinion, etc.) were also collected in Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango and on the South Coast. For national level contextualization, I conducted an analysis of macrodata from the U.N. FAOSTAT.

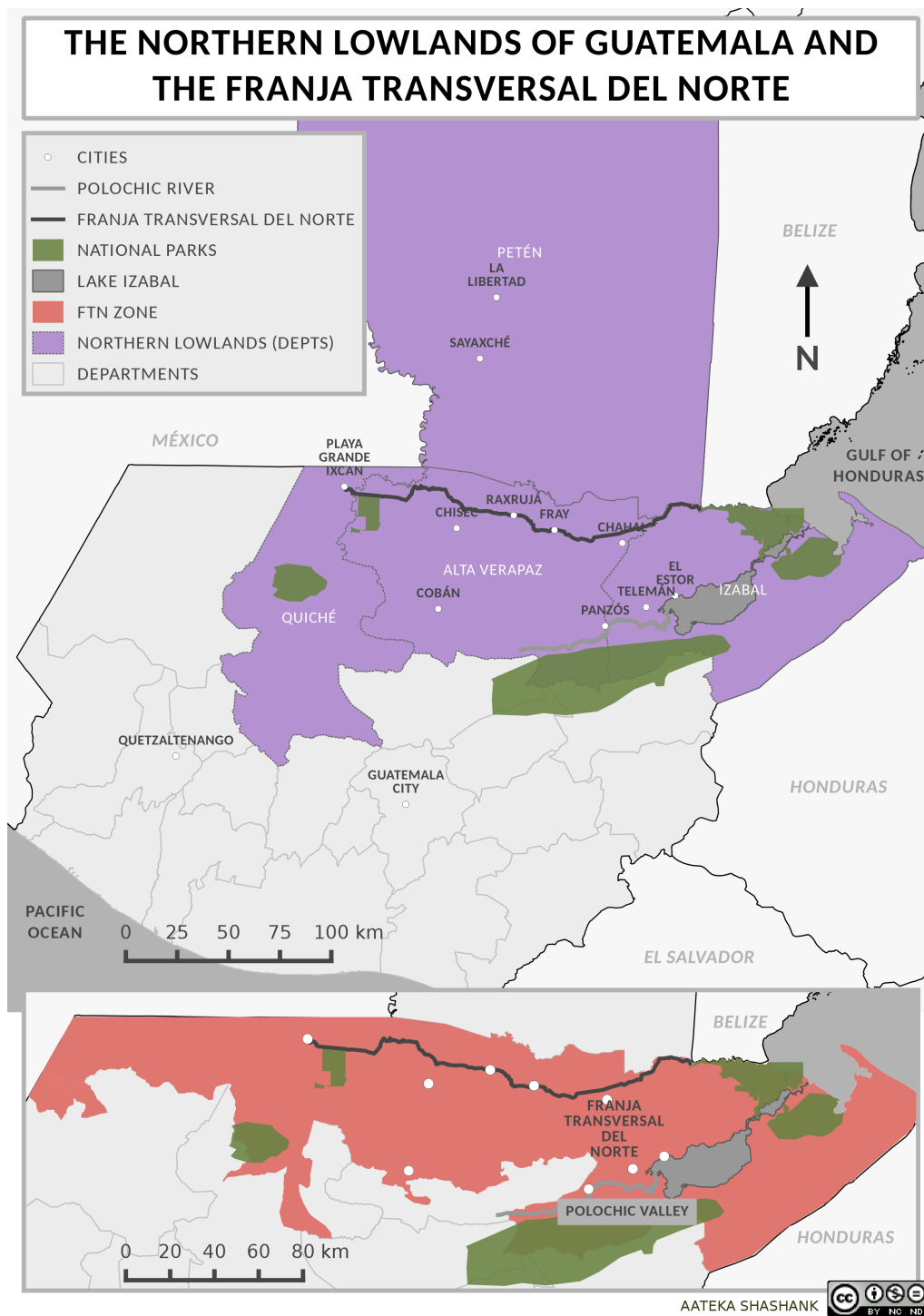


Figure 1 Franja Transversal del Norte area.
 Source: Aateka Shashank (2016), used with permission.

The FTN region is an area of transition, riddled with megaprojects for new infrastructure, catering to the rising agroindustry, among others (Grandia 2013; Solano 2013, 124). Franja Transversal del Norte is also a highway and a “strategic corridor of the [Plan Puebla Panama]”⁶ (Grandia 2013, 242), and an important part of the northern lowlands of Guatemala, which has undergone tremendous land use changes especially after the 1996 Peace Accords, largely due to oil palm (2013, 242, 248–250; Alonso-Fradejas 2012). According to Grandia (2013), flex crops of both sugar cane and *especially* oil palm “have dramatically accelerated peasant dispossession in the northern lowlands since the early 2000s” (248). Hence, it seemed sensible to conduct the ethnographic research in the area surrounding the FTN highway – also significant to the transcontinental logistics of Central America⁷ and, reputedly, part of an economic strategy of the domestic “elites” (Grandia 2013, 241; Solano 2013, 124).

I made day field trips to areas with an increasing presence of plantations, visited indigenous communities and towns, and attended land rights conferences and meetings all along *la Franja*. The vast majority of the interviews regarding the expansion of oil palm were conducted in two departments, Alta Verapaz and Izabal. A few interviewees also described the situation of Petén and el Quiché, other important areas for the oil palm industry. Participant observation took place all along the FTN highway through Polochic Valley – all of which is encompassed by vast oil palm plantations among other flex crops, as well. Although Polochic Valley is not directly along the FTN highway, it can be regarded as a part of the region, and a part of the northern lowlands where oil palm plantations reign.

Since the interviews and visits to the communities depended on the local land rights organization and other contacts, the original plan of carrying out research only in Polochic Valley proved impossible because of safety and access restrictions. However, the inevitable location change was positive and resulted in more interviews and data gathering in other areas of the FTN. The areas visited were located in the area of booming, export-led, large-

⁶ A neoliberal plan for economic integration (Grandia 2012, 172), renamed as the Mesoamerica Project in 2008.

⁷ See Figure A1 in Appendix A.

scale agriculture, to which an increasing number of communities were exposed. Without even being asked for an interview, many people were eager to voice their experiences of the expanding oil palm industry and its effects. The reality of the growing presence of palm was inescapable.

Most of the interviews were carried out with the assistance of a local land-rights organization worker; either just to act as a chaperone for me as I entered a community as a stranger, or, occasionally, as a Q'eqchi' (or other Mayan language) translator; hence the use of "we" upon occasion. I visited eight indigenous communities, but in addition to that, I spent time in some municipalities and visited others increasingly susceptible to the growing plantations and their pressure: Chahal, Chisec, Cobán, El Estor, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Panzós, Raxruha and Telemán. Although I only briefly visited the southwestern part of Petén, some participants in meetings, and a few interviewees from Sayaxché and La Libertad described the impact of oil palm on also those communities. The majority of the communities, municipalities and interviewees had experiences with the company *NaturAceites*, since its plantations dominated the areas visited. Also businesses like *Palmas de Ixcan* (mostly Chisec) and *REPSA* (mostly Petén) were frequently mentioned. Most participants were Maya Q'eqchi' people, however some interviewees were K'iche', Kaqchikel or mestizo. Nearly all indigenous communities visited during field work were considered as Q'eqchi'.

The number of consensual interviews I use in this research amounted to well over 30. One-on-one interviews were almost impossible to carry out, as the whole community, various family members or friends were usually present. Therefore, the figure 30 is an estimate of the certain number of participants, while the real number of participants is higher. Often the person speaking the most in an interview was the leader of a community or the head of a family, speaking of the situation of a whole household or community. Some information from other interviews with peasants, community leaders or land-rights organization workers dealing with land disputes and other flex crops proved to be useful in forming a comprehensive picture of the country, politics and the land issue. Most interviewees were men although the participation of women was encouraged; about 40

percent were women. All names have been changed in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

In the deployment and completion of this research, some limitations of the dataset and its scope surfaced. Although other studies point in the direction of general discontent regarding the oil palm industry amongst non-business owners, an important addition to further research would be the examination of the industry from within. In spite of the few interviewees who had personally worked for oil palm businesses and others whose family members worked for them, the study would have largely benefited from the statements of people who were currently working in plantations so as to examine and analyze the livelihoods of plantation workers, with or without land. This has been studied to a lesser extent, however there have been indications towards challenges in livelihoods on oil palm areas, even if work in the industry has been taken into account (e.g. Dürr 2016; Mingorría et al. 2014; Verité 2014; Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Hurtado and Sánchez 2011; Li 2011; Hurtado 2009). Also business owners' views and opinions may have been beneficial, although obtaining interviews from them has often been reported as difficult.

The country's glaring poverty rate, surging agroindustry, increased dependency on foreign trade and food imports (from the United States), and its sociopolitical history make Guatemala a compelling case of Harvey's (2003) new imperialism based on colonial foundations. With the apparent shortage of this kind of ethnographic research on the dispossessions provoked by the expansion of oil palm plantations, I aim to concentrate on the voice of the people interviewed, seeking to bring to light more than the mere loss of land.

Organization of the thesis

In the first part of Chapter 2, after this introduction, I will shed light upon Guatemala's political and economic power dimensions with a brief historical overview. The role of the United States and the colonial legacy in the 21st century are also highlighted.

This historical background will set the stage for the analysis of the ethnographic data and understanding the underlying distinctive power relations of the country around oil palm expansion.

The second section of Chapter 2 will present some background on the rural poverty and land inequality in Guatemala, and the state policies which have facilitated the growth of flex crop plantations. The rising oil palm industry, trade and its connection with the global food-feed-fuel complex are described in the third section of this chapter. In the last and fourth section, I will discuss Guatemala's adoption of the neoliberal food regime, as food grains are increasingly imported while the vast majority of palm oil is exported to Europe, or for the use of American companies in Mexico (Verité 2014, 29–30).

In Chapter 3, I describe and analyze the interviews and stories derived from my fieldwork in areas of extensive oil palm production in rural Guatemala. Using David Harvey's theoretical framework, I will systematically document how accumulation by dispossession (2003) has been experienced by the rural people in the region of Franja Transversal del Norte.

In concluding Chapter 4, I summarize the main findings of this study and discuss the linkages between the country's adoption of the neoliberal food regime, the new imperialism and the dispossessions caused by the oil palm expansion in Guatemala. I will also briefly outline, how the oil palm expansion is a compatible part of the neoliberal food regime, and how the two phenomena work together. Finally, I will suggest topics for future research.

Chapter 2.

Guatemala in the Global Complex of Food, Feed and Fuel

In the first section of Chapter 2, I will describe the historical emergence of the ruling class and creole control, the establishment of state power and its manifestations, as well as the impact of the United States on the Guatemalan agrarian question. These factors have been fundamental to the existence and realisation of land-control grabs in the increasing land rush since the 1990s. It is thus important to trace out the birth of the specific power relations and their continuity from colonial times to the new imperialism of the 21st century oil palm expansion and neoliberal food regime.

From colonialism to agro-imperialism

Imperialism only succeeds in building neo-colonial structures in societies whose colonial past has not been swept aside by revolutionary change, as in the case of Guatemala.

(Martínez Peláez 2009, 280)

The history of Guatemala has been a violent one, filled with tyranny and oppression. This has been implemented by the coercive state while its actions were instigated or facilitated from outside. Since colonial times, the racial divide between creoles and indigenous peoples of the country has grown and still appears strongly to determine the status quo of the nation in 2016 (e.g. McAllister and Nelson 2013). In the 21st century, socio-economic standing is still determined by race: the wealthy are the white, the poor are the indigenous, with *mestizos* somewhere in between or amongst the poorer parts of the population (Cabrera et al. 2015; field notes summer 2014).

According to Mahoney (2010), the prevailing trajectory of the country took off in the early 16th century as the Spanish conquistadors subjugated Mayas, either violently or by coercive displacements into colonies in the early 1500s in an effort to exploit these

indigenous peoples (101–5). The mercantilist conquistadors proceeded by establishing colonial institutions and an authoritarian grip over the Mayas (Grandin 2013, 52; Mahoney 2010, 101–5). Guatemala’s economy grew to depend on the labour-exploiting plantation agriculture, as the need for workforce halted the decline of the aboriginal population, whereas the ruling class, conquistadors, took a hefty share of the profits (Mahoney 2010, 101–3). Mahoney (2010) suggests this progression towards a highly segregated society cast the indigenous people into poverty and "low levels of social development" (104) whereas Spaniards, criollos and ladinos (the non-indigenous and non-creoles)⁸ were to reap the benefits (101–5, 171–74, 183–88, 203–28).

An important feature of Guatemala’s oppressive state has long been the “counterinsurgent nationalism” (Grandin 2013, 55), which even the 21st century governance of the country echoes. According to Grandin (2013), the tendency of conducting a “punitive retaliation against indigenous protest” (55) was born during colonialism from the fear that the indigenous majority would rise against the plantation owners and the state (55, 57). As the increasing extractivism and regulation of local people’s lives had given rise to indigenous revolts against the ruling class, punitive counterinsurgencies regularly followed to thwart these uprisings in an effort to secure continuing profits (ibid. 53–4). While the creoles expanded their lands, increased their power and the use of coercive workforce on the plantations, the country grew reliant on militarized politics and the questionable tradition of appropriating land (Grandin 2013, 51).

Independence from Spain in 1821 and later from the Federal Republic of Central America only meant worsening conditions for the indigenous people (Grandin 2013, 55–57). Regardless of the conflicts within the ruling class its power ultimately augmented and independence brought along various dictators and the further centralization of the government (ibid.). The post-independence era of the coffee capitalists saw a country more dependent on export capitalism executed with violence (ibid.). According to Grandin (2013), the proletarianization and repression of the indigenous became a norm in this

⁸ The word ladino is often used interchangeably with *mestizo*; see also Glossary.

period as “capitalists came to rely on a coercive state to guarantee their profits” (57) (see also Martínez Peláez 2009, 274–80). In fact, Bandeira and Sumpsi argue (2011) that an extreme land concentration occurred only after independence and during the ‘liberal dictatorships’, as “an important part of [the new] landowners were German or North American”⁹ (144). Hence, though the colonial establishment and the hierarchical indigenous society previous to this can be seen as playing a part in creating great inequality in control over land, the developments since the beginning of the 19th century were also pivotal to the land inequality of the 2010s.

At the turn of both the 19th and 20th centuries the state worked towards promoting economic liberalism and repression: the latter used for the pursuit of the former (Grandin 2013, 56–61). Forced work, land grabbing and policing of the indigenous were common as repression was key for the success of the bourgeoisie (ibid. 53, 55, 57). Land grabbing among the rural communities also stirred opposition from the indigenous and rural poor, which was yet again met with punitive measures and even executions (ibid. 57–9). Wealth accumulated increasingly in the hands of the ruling class, while the oppressive state, expansions of plantations and scarce resources sparked conflicts both between and within communities only facilitating the growth of the state’s repressive power (Grandin 2013, 56–61).

Twentieth century insurgencies and American interventionism

In the early 20th century and during its first lengthy dictator rules which were to be followed by others, foreign investment started streaming in as the American *United Fruit Company*¹⁰ introduced bananas, only to continue the already fully consolidated plantation capitalism of the country (e.g. Grandin 2013). Indigenous people were, yet again, violently dispossessed of their land when then dictator-president Manuel Estrada Cabrera handed out 165,000 acres of land to the banana industry from the already conflicted area of

⁹ For instance, one of the dominant businesses in the field research was *NaturAceites*, whose owner Juan Ulrico Maegli Mueller is a descendant of Swiss-German parents (Solano 2011a, 21).

¹⁰ Thereafter known as *United Brands* and later as *Chiquita Brands International*.

Polochic Valley (Solano 2013, 122). In addition, the economically liberal Guatemalan dictatorship allowed the United States to access and "[gain] control over strategic elements of Guatemalan national sovereignty, such as train networks, harbors, [and] international telephone networks" (Kalny 2010, 77).

During the US-backed president-dictator Jorge Ubico's despotism (1931–44), the plight of the rural poor (both indigenous people and the mestizo proletariat), combined with the surprising emergence of multiple parties, eventually brought about the October Revolution of 1944 and a second one in the October of 1952 (Grandin 2013, 63–4). The first revolution resulted in the resignation of Ubico and after a series of puppet leaders, the first democratic elections of Juan José Arévalo Bermej took place, followed by the election of the revolutionary Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in 1950 (Immerman 1983, 37–43).

The revolution entailed demands for justice and land as the protesters were the dispossessed former landowning peasants and the exploited plantation workers – as well as the small silenced middle class (Grandin 2013, 64; Immerman 1983, 38). After president Arbenz took power, he implemented an Agrarian Reform in 1952, due to which over 600,000 hectares of mostly uncultivated land was expropriated and delivered (back) to land-deprived peasants, and more land was yet to be allocated until the coup (Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 144). This caused major distress to the creole, ladino and foreign landowners (Grandin 2013, 64–5).

As the voice of the oppressed population rose and the US-supported Ubico had been overthrown, the fear of communism and its threat to capitalism had grown, both within Guatemala as well as in the United States (Grandin 2013, 63–4; 2004, 52; Kalny 2010, 77; Streeter 2000, 12–3). Alarmed by the uprising, the *United Fruit Company* lobbied the US administration to thwart the agrarian revolt. Arbenz was finally overthrown in 1954 under the auspices of the United States and the CIA, to halt the influence of communism from infiltrating other countries (Granovsky-Larsen 2013, 329; Grandin 2004, 52; see also Immerman 1983). The earlier expropriated land was delivered back to the large landowners and over three decades of dictator rule and a civil war ensued (Bandeira Sumpsi 2011). The

still authoritarian system that followed was supported by the United States (Kalny 2010, 77–8; Grandin 2013, 68).

The American intervention arguably facilitated the further consolidation of military force and the repression of the state, only "prompting a rapid and precipitous downward spiral of polarization" (Grandin 2013, 68). The uprisings of the rural and indigenous population were suppressed with cruelty and violence, and the bloodshed of the civil war included torture, disappearances, and genocide of indigenous peoples (Grandin 2013, 68–9; 2004, 74–5). The increasing control of the state, with foreign assistance, allowed the violent and authoritarian state to carry on with augmented brutality during the civil war (Grandin 2013, 68–70).

Neoliberalism and militarized imperialism

Martínez Peláez argued that the colonial roots and the continuation of the colonial structures by the *criollo* power are the reasons why Guatemala "is what it is" (2009, 279). He also asserted that US intervention played a significant role in shaping the Guatemalan society into an ethnically-stratified and underdeveloped country, where the 'colonial essence' remained and the poor were easy to exploit (Martínez Peláez 2009, 274–81). In the 1970s, Martínez Peláez argued that after the US-led coup, Guatemala had been under US imperialism and neo-colonial structures were established on the still existing colonial ones; meanwhile, any attempt of revolution has been successfully thwarted (2009, 274–81).

The violent suppression of revolutionary uprisings in Central America has, in fact, facilitated the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1990s (Grandin 2010, 22). In the Peace Accords, this agenda of the IMF and the World Bank took a strong hold in Guatemala, in the form of structural adjustment and the market-assisted land reform (MALR) (García 2010/1, 5–6). Neoliberal restructuring appears to have directed the way in which the post-conflict era emerged, while the state and the existing powerful ruling

class fostered the progress of the new “agro-imperialism” by means of the MALR (Granovsky-Larsen 2013, 329; García 2010/1, 6).

The injustices that especially the poor peasants have experienced in Guatemala have not gone without opposition. Yet, often land conflicts, disputes or opposition are quelled by the use of excessive force, by means of security guards, police officers and military, including kidnapping, imprisonment, disappearances or deaths (Granovsky-Larsen 2013). State repression and the continuation of the agribusiness invasion has been furthered by the continuing flow of capital from the United States, even after the civil war. In fact, the suppressive security forces have continued to receive financial support from the United States, while facilitating economic and spatial expansion and dispossession (U.S. Department of State 2015). Grandin (2010) argues that with the support of the former Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), in 2008 renamed the Mesoamerica Project (MP), United States may be building a "security corridor" (21) through Central America and all the way to Colombia while "armoring the NAFTA"¹¹ (ibid.). Grandin suggests that "the U.S. is...consolidating its authority over a circumscribed territory, with a deepening reliance on applied military power" (2010, 21).

Grandin (2010) has argued that the idea behind the MP and other similar programs “is to integrate the region's transportation and communications infrastructure, energy production and distribution network, and, most importantly, its *military capacities*” (21, emphasis added). Pickard (2002), in turn, suggested MP (former PPP) is in fact a neoliberal project of "private plans for profit": a program to make the region of Central America and Mexico "a massive free trade zone, competing in the world wide race to the bottom of wages, working conditions, lax environmental regulation and disregard for human rights" (Pickard 2002, 1), profiting especially large American companies.

¹¹ Statement of Thomas Shannon – George W. Bush’s envoy to Latin America and Barack Obama's former Brazil ambassador (Grandin 2010, 21).

The neoliberal Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) of 2006 – nearly identical to NAFTA – appears to be a part of a logical continuum in the promotion of US trade in Latin America (Hill 2007, 6; Stokes 2005). The addition of the US-backed Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) has paved the way for various developments in keeping with the economic pursuits. Financial support from the United States has fuelled the militarization of the region (Mowforth 2014, 98, 150–69, 193–95). Cockcroft (2006) calls this ensemble *militarized imperialism*, “to ensure and increase control over natural resources, the expansion of big financial and industrial capital and the best possible conditions for U.S. trade and investments” (69). Among the adversaries of this imperialism are, of course, the indigenous, the poor and the peasants (ibid. 73–5).

DR-CAFTA was planned to facilitate and increase US trade and investments to Central American countries and the Dominican Republic (United States Trade Representative n.d.), while CARSI, on the other hand, may be a convenient instrument to guarantee the goals of this trade agreement. These developments would appear to present a continuity of US intervention, which already began in the early 20th century. According to the U.S. Department of State (2015), the objectives of CARSI, “coordinated with other nations, international financial institutions, the private sector, civil society, and the Central American Integration System (SICA)”, were to enhance the security and safety of the Central American countries. Some of the objectives are to “[s]upport the development of *strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments*” and to “re-establish *effective state presence, services and security* in communities at risk” (U.S. Department of State 2015, emphases added). However, it would appear the United States has in fact supported the “maintenance” of a coercive state that uses its law enforcement and security capacities relentlessly when economic interests are threatened by peasant/indigenous occupation or poor people (Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Solano 2013; Grandin 2013).

‘Policing the new enclosures’

The global, regional and national neoliberal developments and the reinforced state and corporate power have led to an era of 'new imperialism' (Alonso-Fradejas 2012 [513]; Harvey 2003) built on the colonial foundations. In Guatemala, new imperialism manifests itself in the form of agro-extractivism (Petras and Veltmeyer 2014) and the rapid expansion of especially oil palm agribusinesses. The palm oil boom serves the needs of the agrofuel, chemical and food markets in Europe, Mexico and the United states, mainly benefiting American, European or other multinational food, cosmetic and chemical corporations. Many of these enterprises are, in fact, operating in Guatemala, or have their products sold in major chain retailers such as *Walmarts*.

In a country with a clear history of discrimination, segregation, and a rich oligarchy, wherein creole and other non-indigenous power circulates between only a few families (e.g. Palencia Prado 2012), it appears to be almost effortless to “eliminate” the obstacles to capital accumulation – in this case poor and mostly indigenous people (Buck 2014; Grandin 2013; Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Solano 2013, etc.). Lamentably, the triumph of the use of palm oil in various western industries has meant the ongoing growth of the plantations, which has consequently given rise to "a new postwar period of rural violence" (Grandin 2013, 70). This era resembles a war of attrition in pursuance of eliminating the rural poor who stand in the way of various capitalist projects. Evictions, violence, and dispossessions of these groups are furthered with, for instance, CARSI dollars. Often they take place behind the scene of “responsibly” produced palm oil, which is then exported to various regions either as a raw material or in value-added products, whether the destination is Mexico, the EU, or the United States.

Agricultural changes in the land of the rural poor

Guatemala is one of the most unequal countries in the world. In 2003, prior to the increasing land rush and the food crisis stemming from peak oil, agrofuel production, population growth and the corporate culture of agribusinesses (e.g. Anseeuw et al. 2013;

McMichael 2009a), 8 percent of the landowners held 78 percent of all arable land (INE 2003). A common estimate is that only 2 percent of the whole population owns over 80 percent of all land (Jonas and Tobias 1981, in Iadicola and Shupe 2013, 443).

According to numerous authors (e.g. Grandin 2013; Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 144–6; Mahoney 2010; Martínez Peláez 2009), this is the legacy of the colonial era and its aftermath. Severo Martínez Peláez' book title *La Patria del Criollo* states that Guatemala is “the homeland of the criollos” which also several Guatemalans confirmed to me; creole families are still mostly intermarried (Palencia Prado 2014; field notes summer 2014). The wealth as well as the economic and political power of the country has remained and continued to accumulate in the same families, which the high Gini index for income distribution of 52.4 also reflects (World Bank 2016; Vásquez 2014; Solano 2013, 134–5, 2011a, 2010). Especially the inequality of land is striking as the relevant Gini coefficient¹² has been reported as 84.0 (Mingorría and Gamboa 2010, 6).

Although the World Bank (2015a) qualifies Guatemala as a lower middle income country, an appalling 59.3 percent of the population is officially regarded as poor, having grown from 56.4 percent in 2000 (INE 2015b, 3, 4). In addition, 76 percent of the rural people were poor, and 46 percent of them are *extremely* poor (INE 2015b, 4). Poverty falls especially and most severely on the rural, indigenous population, living on the Franja Transversal del Norte area; however, other regions, too, experience poverty (INE 2015b, 3, 4; Bolaños 2015; see also Appendix B). While Guatemala's Human Development Index is lower than nearly the whole of Latin America, the country is also badly affected by food insecurity (WFP 2015; UNDP 2014). Half of the children under 5 are chronically undernourished (USAID 2015).

Researchers argue that the long-time trend of decreasing land access is likely linked to the dire statistics above. Data comparison between 1979 and 2003 show significantly

¹² Gini coefficient (or Gini index) represents the income distribution, 0 being perfect equality (everyone having the same amount), and 100 absolute inequality (see also World Bank 2016).

fewer families owning and farming land, the emergence of more micro farms (under 0.7 ha) and rented land, and more entirely landless households. These people are poorer, lack access to education and are more dependent on land, yet the "monetary income derived from agricultural production is quite small" (Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 144). The average family farm size in Guatemala is a meagre 13 percent of the area the United Nations defined as the *sine qua non* of sustenance for a rural Guatemalan family of five (United Nations 2000, 179; Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 194). Since the early nineties, a rather drastic downward trend in food production has coincided with the reduction of access to land (Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011). Alongside the expanding flex crop production, especially of oil palm, the per capita basic grain production has dropped by 30 kilograms from 1993 to 2007 (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 23–5; see also Appendix C).

Even though a slim majority of the population have been urban-dwellers since 2012, nearly half of the over 16 million people still live in the countryside as of 2015 (FAOSTAT 2016). Families in the countryside mostly obtain their income from non-farming activities as integral resources for sustenance, such as land, are often unavailable (Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 146, 158). Although scholars argue that even a slight increase in the amount of land available to households could in fact help fight rural poverty (e.g. *ibid.*), access to land appears to be conspicuously absent in the Guatemalan countryside.

Market-assisted land reform, state policies, and rural hardship

Market-assisted land reform (MALR) which followed the 1996 Peace Agreement of the civil war has likely fostered the increased landlessness and rural poverty in Guatemala (Gauster and Isakson 2007; Lahiff et al. 2007; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 513–14). The state-imposed MALR was to encourage land deals without market distortions and to enable the highest prices possible. Scholars, however, have widely reproached this neoliberal policy framework promoted by the IMF and the World Bank as being “anti-poor” and as having, in fact, benefited the already wealthy large landowners (e.g. Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1520; Lahiff et al. 2007, 1431).

Although touted as a success by some, the state policies in keeping with the MALR have helped direct more land and credits to the already existing agricultural companies (Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 146; Gauster and Isakson 2007; 1533–34). This, in turn, has facilitated the mushrooming of flex crop production in the country (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514). In contrast, the few peasant “beneficiaries”, only 1.3 percent of all agricultural households, have largely had problems with paying off their increasing debt after the land transactions, often resulting in exacerbated poverty (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 513–4; Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1529; Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011).

The MALR programs, especially the land trust fund *Fondo de Tierras* (FONTIERRAS), were purportedly created to direct land towards the land poor. The land fund was to control land titling and its regularisation, and to provide assistance and other financial support to people in need of land (Alonso Fradejas 2012, 513–4). However, it is widely argued that FONTIERRAS fostered landlessness and growing rural poverty as 95 percent of landless or near-landless households did not receive help through the fund between 1997–2008 (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514; Bandeira and Sumpsi 2011, 145–6). According to Gauster and Isakson (2007), FONTIERRAS has only assisted with “an estimated 1% of the total demand for land” (1524).

The neoliberal World Bank-driven agenda of FONTIERRAS has been detrimental to the traditional collective farming (of peasants) as the lands have been divided and privatized (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 513–4). But this agenda goes hand in hand with the efficiency rationale, which is why the already economically successful landowners have benefited rather than the ones in desperate need of land (ibid.). Consequently, especially subsistence food production has suffered, and often the ownership of land has been replaced with highly insecure tenancy agreements (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1524–33). The relatively few times land has been delivered to poor peasants after a costly process, the low quality of the soil has often meant that those who acquired land have subsequently experienced financial problems (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1525–27; Lahiff et al. 2007, 1431). Farmers have had difficulties earning a living from agriculture, and the increasing debt to FONTIERRAS has yielded insurmountable problems (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514).

Alonso-Fradejas (2012, 514) argues that agribusinesses have profited from the market-led land reform as "safe property rights allow markets to transfer land towards more efficient uses and producers" (World Bank 2007, 138). These producers have chiefly been large landowners with businesses growing flex crops. Yet, their expansion has meant the dispossession of peasants – through legal means (Alonso Fradejas 2012, 513–4, 518–20). To make matters worse, FONTIERRAS carries a stigma of corruption, as the decisions of the fund not only depend on powerful people, but also blatantly profit (or are intended to benefit) large landowners (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1529–30). Moreover, while the autonomy of the fund is compromised (*ibid.*), it has in fact turned into somewhat of an “old boys’ club”; for peasants, decision-making processes and information regarding land deals are nearly impossible to reach (Gauster and Isakson 2007, 1529–30). These problems are far from surprising as the principal beneficiaries of MALR – for instance, agribusiness owners – are known to be close with politicians (Palencia Prado 2014; Solano 2013; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 25–7; Alonso-Fradejas 2012).

Oil palm expansion in Guatemala

The cultivation of oil palm started to grow in the early 1990s, rapidly increasing after the beginning of the 21st century, in tandem with the rising demand for agrofuels from the European Union (FAOSTAT 2016; European Parliament 2009; European Commission 2004). In 2014, oil palm covered 153,000 hectares, approximately 10 percent of all arable land, yet with the possibility of covering more than half a million hectares according to a 2011 estimate of the Guatemalan Ministry of Agriculture (FAOSTAT 2016; INE 2015a, 11; Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 183, 192; Moll Fetzer 2013). The cultivation of oil palm has been accelerating very fast since the early 2000s. The production has exploded in ten years, increasing 118 percent in just one year from 2013 to 2014 (INE 2015a, 22; 2014). While the area for the cultivation of Guatemala’s domestic food crops has sunk, the cultivation of mono- or flex crops such as oil palm has steadily grown, oil palm being the fastest-growing crop (INE 2014; see also Appendix C). In 2013, Guatemala was the world’s 8th biggest producer of oil palm (FAOSTAT 2016).

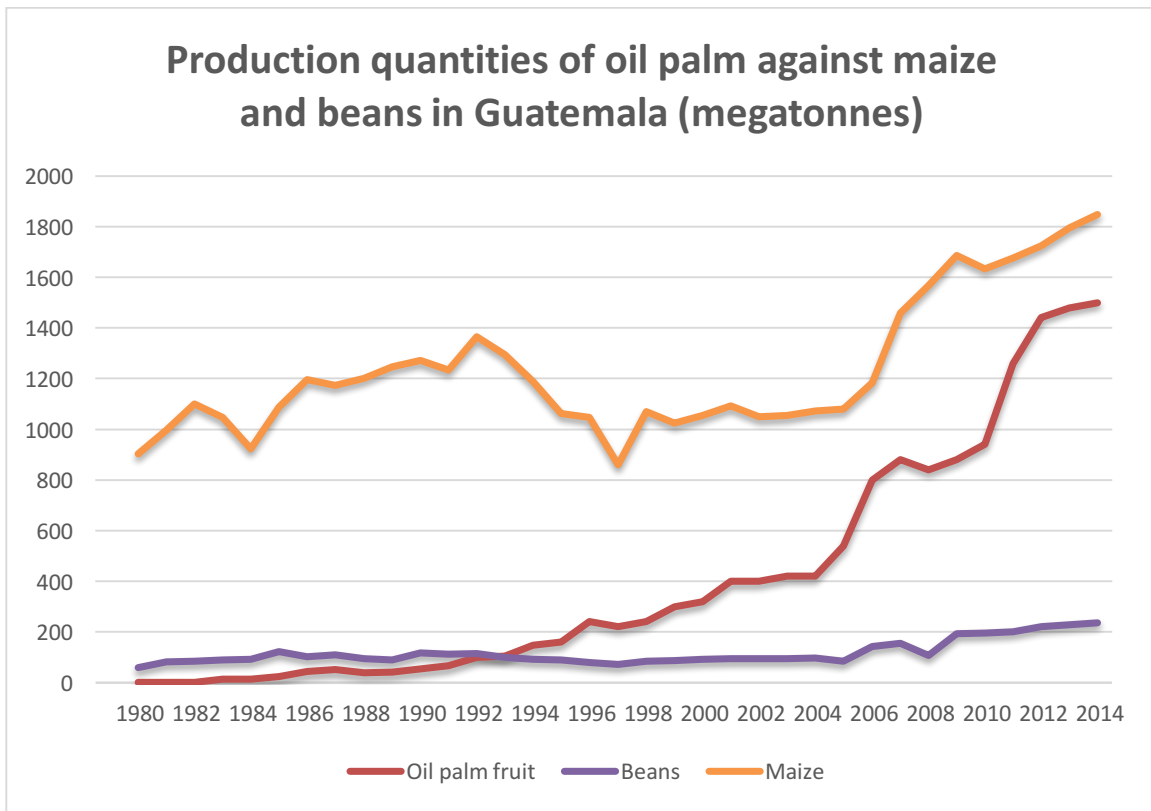


Figure 2 Guatemalan oil palm production and the production of maize and beans.

Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

The main value-added product of the oil palm industry is palm oil made from the palm tree fruit kernels. Ninety percent of it is exported and in 2015 Guatemala was the 5th largest exporter (FAOSTAT 2016; USDA FAS 2015d). Although Mexico receives 55 percent of the total, there are also other significant buyers: Netherlands (22.9%), El Salvador (7.1%), Germany (3.9%) and even the United Kingdom (2.8%) (FAOSTAT 2016; SIECA 2015; Moll Fetzter 2014a, 2013). In fact, export destinations have changed increasingly to cater to European demand in 2013, whereas in 2011 the markets were still mainly in Central America (Moll Fetzter 2014a, 2013).

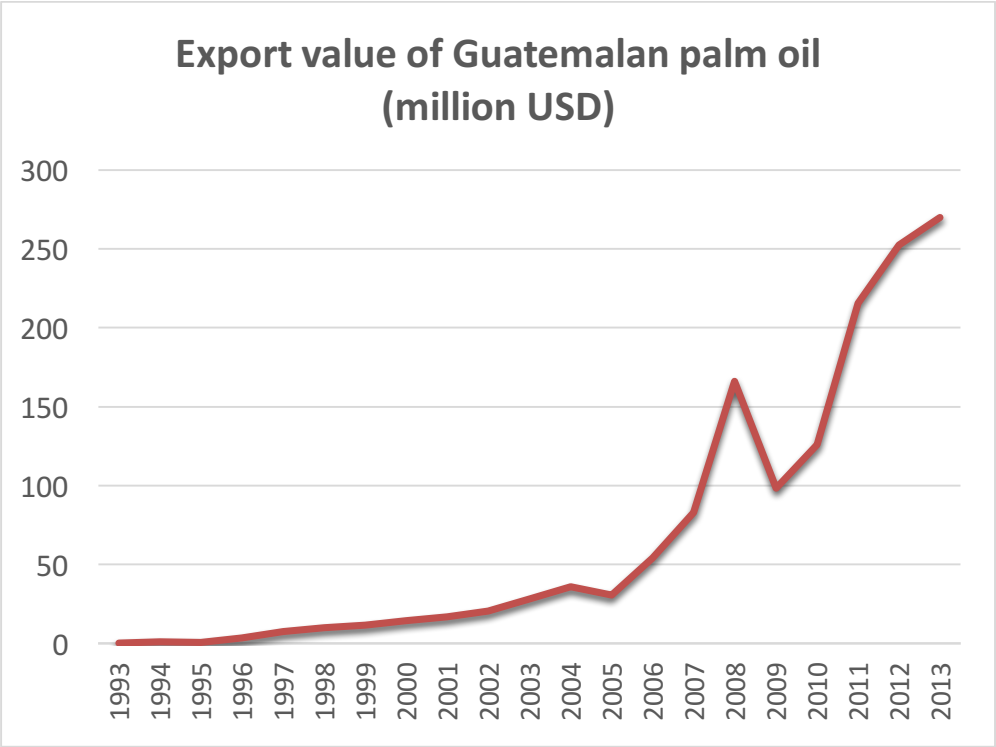


Figure 3 Export value of Guatemalan palm oil.
Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

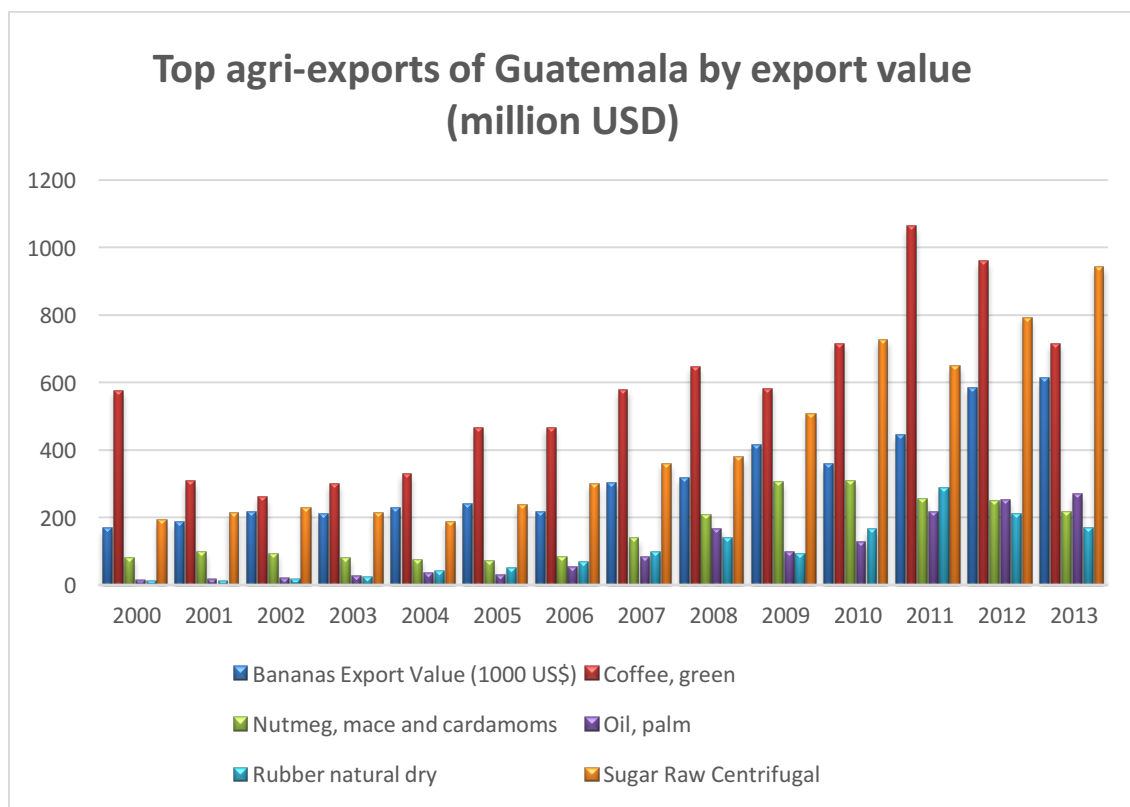


Figure 4 Top agri-exports of Guatemala.
Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

The growth of flex crops like oil palm, has been accompanied by foreign direct investment as the land-capital concentration has intensified (FAOSTAT 2016; Caribbean Update 2014; Borrás et al. 2012, 848, 852, 856). While the productivity and capital in flex crop production have been drastically rising since the turn of the 21st century, the jobs offered in agriculture have, however, decreased (FAOSTAT 2016; INE 2014; Larios 2014; See also Appendix C). Data from the 2014 national report on agriculture show that although the area for mono- and flex crops such as oil palm has increased, agriculture employed 26 percent fewer people than ten years before: in 2013 only 31 percent of the population worked in agriculture (FAOSTAT 2016; Larios 2014; INE 2014; see also Appendix C). According to Alonso-Fradejas (2012, 521–22), the oil palm industry offers, in fact, less work than peasant owned farms/estates (e.g. corn, bean, and other food crops) albeit GREPALMA, the ‘guild of the palm growers’ in Guatemala, has reported the creation of

“17,300 direct and 45,000 indirect jobs” (Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 195). Although the industry is a notable employer, its benefits have been questioned and the employment figures in, for instance, South East Asia¹³ cited as “exaggerated” (Li 2011, 283–4).

Despite GREPALMA (2014) having exalted the employment benefits of the oil palm industry, this flex crop is generally capital-intensive, with the exception of independent oil palm growers (Borras et al. 2014, 10). Yet, these growers represent only a fraction of all oil palm workers in Guatemala, 0.7 percent as of 2010 (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 153). Jobs with oil palm (especially on plantations), are commonly precarious, lacking social insurance and benefits, and demanding a great deal from the workers and their families (Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 195; Verité 2014; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 49–56; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 520–22).

According to a study of two distinctive communities in Polochic Valley¹⁴ (see Figure 1), Mingorría et al. (2014) argue that the expansion of oil palm and the work in plantations have several socio-economic implications, and may cause difficulties for households. The study compared households who grew maize for subsistence to households who had their member(s) working on oil palm plantations while also growing maize. Mingorría et al. (2014) state that families whose member (predominantly male) works in a plantation do have a higher overall income but a lower production of maize crops. The households only relying on maize for subsistence had stronger food security and more time for social activities and life outside work, whereas the women in the families with oil palm work had less time to rest and (e.g. Mingorría et al. 2014, 861–4). The scholars also report several cases in which the minimum wage and other labour rights were not warranted, and the work on the plantations was reported insecure (ibid. 863).

¹³ Indonesia and Malaysia are the biggest producers of palm oil as of 2015 (USDA FAS 2015d).

¹⁴ The study has been conducted in an area which is under the cultivation of *NaturAceites* (field research 2014; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 27).

Guatemala as a part of the global agrofuel boom

The rise of oil palm production in Guatemala has been somewhat mirrored by the sugar cane industry (FAOSTAT 2016) – both used for the raw materials of agrofuels. Levels of production in both industries have increased following the passage of “biofuel” decrees in the United States and Europe, and the subsequent demand for raw materials (FAOSTAT 2016; Tay 2012; Hertel et al. 2010, 77; Solano 2010, 20). Reports by the United States Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service (USDA FAS) have praised the potential of Guatemala as an agrofuel producer on numerous occasions for “the high yields of sugarcane and palm oil, and [the] efficient well-developed local industries” (Tay 2012). Repeatedly lauding the future prospects for palm oil in Guatemalan biodiesel production, reports lament the legislative issues hindering such developments (e.g. Tay 2013; 2012; 2009).

Echoing the increased global demand, GREPALMA, the Guatemalan government, as well as several foreign entities like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) have shown interest in the domestic manufacturing and consumption of agrofuels, such as palm oil biodiesel (Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 192–3; Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Borrás et al. 2012, 863; Tay 2012). In 2013 all of Guatemalan palm oil was still directed to the edible oils market for the larger and more secure profits (Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 192–3); however, the first steps toward a domestic agrofuel production have already been taken. The production and use of sugarcane ethanol, jatropha biodiesel, palm oil biodiesel and oil palm debris biogas is in progress (Avila 2015; ACR Guatemala; Bolaños and Paredes 2015; Solano 2013, 134).

Investments and funding directly from the IDB and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) have supported Guatemalan agrofuels research and planning, which is aimed towards local biofuel production (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 20–1). The United States is also a major investor in agroindustry (U.S. Department of Commerce 2014); in fact, the oil palm company *Palmas de Ixcán* originally started as a subsidiary of a Texas-based *Green Earth Fuels*, which *Carlyle Group*, *Goldman Sachs* and *Riverstone*

Holdings created as a part of their “green investment” (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 30; Solano 2013, 130; 141). Furthermore, “negotiations are under way with potential biofuel importers from the United States and Europe, as well as with other neighbouring countries in the context of the Mesoamerican Biofuels Program”, which receives partial funding from the IDB (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 19-20).

The oil palm “elite”

Oil palm production in Guatemala is intertwined as well as connected with other industrial sectors (Palencia Prado 2014). Ownership is concentrated within a small number of businesses and thus under the control of the few creole families or European immigrants (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 512). In the areas where this study was chiefly conducted, *NaturAceites* and *Palmas de Ixcán (PALIX)* were the predominant and expanding ones, whereas *Reforestradora de Palma del Petén S.A. (REPSA)*, owned by the Molina family and related to the former president Otto Pérez Molina (Rodríguez 2013), was often referred to in Northern Alta Verapaz, near the southern border of Petén. These three are amongst the biggest ones operating in the palm oil industry of Guatemala (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 25–7; Solano 2013).

NaturAceites, which also operates with the names of *INDESA*, *PADESA* and *GRASA S.A.*, is owned by the Swiss–German Maegli–Müller family. The family was part of the anti-communist wing supporting Reagan’s government during the beginning of the neoliberal era (Solano 2013, 134). The Maegli–Müllers have historically benefited from the land giveaways of the state, also after the reversal of Arbenz’ reform (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 27; Solano 2013, 134). *PALIX*, on the other hand, is currently owned by a corporate group registered in Panama called *Luma Holdings*, whose director is a Guatemalan banker and whose investments extend to other business sectors in Guatemala (Solano 2015b, 14–16, 19). Also *NaturAceites* is connected with *PALIX* in a variety of ways, while involved in other business ventures as well; for instance those of banking and agricultural

machinery¹⁵ (ibid.; 2013, 134–36). Out of the three above-mentioned companies, only *NaturAceites* produces agrodiesel (for its own use) (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 27; Solano 2013, 134). It also has partnerships abroad, working with the *Unilever* of El Salvador (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 27).

Alonso-Fradejas (2012) remarks that even drug lords are involved in the businesses, laundering money in the operations of the industry (510, 512). Hence, due to the intimate links between opulent economic, and powerful political actors (see also Palencia Prado 2014), the pursuits of both industries are perhaps not easily halted, if an attempt to do so were ever to be made. Richani (2010) has in fact suggested the level of homicides, lower than that of El Salvador, may be due to the interconnection of organized crime and state structures, possibly facilitating capital accumulation in the hands of the few.

Agrofuels, flex crops, and land grabs

An increasing use of arable land has followed the agrofuel uprush globally. A report by the International Land Coalition (ILC) states that agrofuel production is the most important factor in fuelling land grabbing worldwide (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 4, 24; see also Hertel 2010). According to the report, between 2009 and 2011, 57 percent of all vast tracts of land purchased in the world were for the production of agrofuels (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 24). An International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) report asserts that using palm or any other vegetable oil in the production of agrodiesel gives rise to demands for more palm oil to compensate in the edibles market, as it is the most cost-effective vegetable oil (Laborde 2010, 54, 66, 72–3). Augmented demand for palm oil production, in turn, brings about extensions of cultivations rather than an intensification of the already existing production (ibid., 76).

¹⁵ The Maegli-Müller family owns an enterprise called *TECUN*, which is involved in various industries extending from agricultural machinery to mining, energy and construction. (<http://www.grupotecun.com/guatemala>. Accessed June 30, 2016.)

In Latin America, roughly a third of the land grabs occurred due to agrofuels in 2009–2011, whereas only 15 percent were for food crops (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 24). These numbers can, however, be rather equivocal. Agrofuel demands can impact the oil palm industry in Guatemala, although most of Guatemalan palm oil is not used for fuel. Since a business – e.g. that of oil palm – acquiring vast tracts of land may not yet be manufacturing agrofuel, the land acquisition may be marked under vegetable oil, hence food production. On the other hand, the business may need to extend their production to new customers, if the customers’ previous providers have started selling palm oil for agrofuel purposes. As the abovementioned figures of land grabs due to agrofuel production do not entail these kinds of *indirect* land grabs (or ‘indirect land use changes’ [ILUC]), the exact amount of land grabs occurring because of agrofuel production may be somewhat uncertain. Consequently, the effect of global biofuel policies specifically on Guatemalan palm oil production is indefinite; however, numerous scholars have discovered the policies promoting the use of biofuels *do* have a substantial effect on global land use and crop availability, resulting in price increases of especially staples like maize (e.g. HLPE 2013, 27–41; Borras et al. 2012, 863; Wise 2012; Laborde 2011, 20; 85; Hertel et al. 2010; Berthelot 2008, 27 in McMichael 2011, 36). In Guatemala, the newspaper *el Periódico* noted the surge in demand for land in July 2008, marking the impact of the demand for agrofuels during the global food crisis (Central America Data 2008).

Agrofuels and the food insecurity of the poor

The increased pressure on land has had both local and global implications (e.g. HLPE 2013). Especially domestically consumed food crops, but also major global food crops have and will experience decreases in cultivated area, therefore increasing food prices (ibid. 55–75). Moreover, agrofuel crop plantations also negatively affect local water resources where irrigation is necessary for the plantations (Tokgoz et al. 2012, 418, 428; HLPE 2013, 107). The agrofuel expansion and particularly sugar and vegetable oil-based fuels have affected food prices, which may mean “changes in consumption, calorie

availability and even food security¹⁶” (Tokgoz et al. 2012, 429). Although Tokgoz et al. (2012) argue that agrofuel production can, in terms of the authors’ macro model, increase the amount of food available predicting decreased child malnutrition (416, 425–6), the work of other scholars differs from these positive forecasts. While Guatemala experiences very high levels of the undernourishment of children, a heightened risk of food insecurity and hunger have been confirmed especially in areas of intensive oil palm production (e.g. Mingorría et al. 2014, 863; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 43–44; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 56; Hurtado 2009).

A report by the High Level Panel of Experts of the Food and Agriculture organization (HLPE 2013) further confirms that the proliferating agrofuel industry poses a threat to global food security. Although the effects of the intensifying industry can be multifaceted, both positive and negative, the negative implications appear to mostly fall upon the developing countries and the poorer population groups within them (HLPE 2013, 55–76). As agrofuel production reduces the amount of *food* stocks for exports worldwide, international staple prices mount. This can be detrimental for consumers in countries importing grains due to the volatility of world food staple prices (ibid. esp. 57). This is especially the situation for corn importing countries like Guatemala, where the US corn prices have soared due to American corn ethanol production (Wise 2012; Babcock 2011). While Guatemala has indeed experienced a rather notable decrease in the food supply per person, the imports of primarily American corn have increased steadily (FAOSTAT 2016; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 25; Etten and Fuentes 2004; see also Appendix D).

As the land and water use of agrofuel (or flex crop) production leads to a lack of resources at the disposal of local peoples, it may also hinder the production of food as well as hamper subsistence farming (HLPE 2013, 77–79, 86). In contrast, coinciding with the difficulties of food crop production in the global South, the Northern markets, especially those of North America, the European Union, and Brazil can reap increased profits in the

¹⁶ The authors measured food security “in terms of malnutrition risk for children” (Tokgoz et al. 2012, 429).

grain market as well as from the rising agrofuel industry (ibid. 55). Since most major manufacturers or consumers of the final product (agrofuels) are food secure Northern countries (ibid.), the connection obscures between the successful biofuel policies (e.g. carbon offsets, reduced oil dependency) and the implications for the mostly Southern countries producing the raw materials for “biofuels”. That is, the possible negative implications are largely out of sight for the northern consumers, as often the poorer population of southern countries face the risks of poverty, food insecurity or other hardships (HLPE 2013, 55–76; 107).

During the period of the emergence and expansion of flex crop plantations in Guatemala, the northern lowlands, formerly known as a ‘surplus food-producing region’, has paradoxically turned into an area where the minimum wage will not suffice for the Basic Bread Basket (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 516). Almost a fourth of the land used in oil plantations in 2010 was formerly used in food crops and 10 percent in livestock grazing; 27 percent was previously rainforest (ibid). According to Alonso-Fradejas (2012), "direct land use changes [owing to flex crops] have severe implications for peasant, rural and even urban livelihoods, among which eroding local and national food security is of no petty importance" (516).

Guatemalan land grabs and the state

Borras et al. (2012) suggest that most existing research on land grabs fails to capture the full extent of the phenomenon, arguing that the research focuses excessively on food insecurity and large-scale land acquisitions. The scholars emphasize the complex intertwining of climate change mitigation, food security, pursuit of energy dependence and natural resource extraction, which altogether push the 21st century land rush (Borras et al. 2012, 849–52, 855). This fusion of different driving forces has also induced the emergence and increasing significance of flex crops (ibid. 846). In Guatemala, flex crops like oil palm are indeed the fastest growing in terms of land acquisitions (FAOSTAT 2016; Borras et al. 2012, 855).

Furthermore, according to Borras et al. (2012), the manner in which land grabs occur in Latin America and the Caribbean differs from Africa, the centre of most studies on land grabs. The authors emphasize that land grabbing should be viewed as ‘land control grabbing’, whereby rural people are dispossessed not only of land but also of water and other resources. Borras et al. (2012) also point to political power relations, as some deny access from others – mostly the wealthy and politically powerful from those who are often already deprived (849–51). Hence, peasants or rural inhabitants are not necessarily physically evicted from their lands, but may lose the control of their surroundings (ibid. 850). Also the ILC report highlights the risks land grabbing poses to the accessibility of resources, food security, livelihoods and food self-sufficiency, threatening even notions of dignity and self-determination (Anseeuw et al. 2012, 30). While the most vulnerable to these developments are indeed the rural poor, the ILC report also states that the most fragile groups are not just marginal, but often even entire societies (ibid.).

Borras et al. (2012) also argue that too much focus has been on foreign companies executing land grabs. In addition to the rising new capital hubs (e.g. BRICS and Mexico), the scholars assert that regional investors from Latin America and the Caribbean should also be highlighted. In fact, in Guatemala, capital often flows in from Mexico, Costa Rica and even Colombia – in addition to the American investors (U.S. Department of Commerce 2014; Borras et al. 2012, 859; field research 2014). Moreover, the authors assert that state involvement in land grabs is not given the attention that it requires. Arguably, states may use "technical re-mapping and land use reclassification" (Borras et al. 2012, 857) to expedite the land grabs of "marginal" or "vacant" lands. Such land is often in the immediate vicinity of transportation and water networks – but, in fact, occupied (ibid.). In case the desired land is in the use of a community, the state may step in using coercion and violence to vacate the territory (857–59). The state has even resorted to the use of police forces or military and paramilitary troops in "enforcement of its sovereignty and authority as well as its ardent support for private accumulation"¹⁷ (Borras et al. 2012, 857). In the face of the

¹⁷ See also Harvey (2003) on state involvement in accumulation by dispossession (91, 105–7, 145–149, 152).

expanding plantations, numerous violent and even state-assisted evictions of entire rural communities have taken place while others continue to be under an imminent threat of expulsion (e.g. Oxfam 2016; Verité 2014, 35; Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Solano 2013, 131; Alonso-Fradejas 2012).

Amid land grabbing in Latin America, the actions of the state are frequently in support of the ruling class, which in Guatemala is primarily comprised of the wealthy creole families (Borras et al. 2012, 858). This appears to be a natural continuation of history as the financially powerful are also ones strongly to influence politics (e.g. Grandin 2013; Solano 2013). The state and capital thus have an extremely strong connection to the ‘foreignization’ of land (i.e. land grabbing), for instance, forcefully promoting the expansion of oil palm while preparing for a growing agrodiesel market in the European Union (Borras et al. 2012, 855–65). Although the most important investors in Latin America are seemingly domestic, linkages abroad to the budding industries exist, as often foreign capital is allied with domestic actors (ibid).

Alonso-Fradejas (2012) depicts the Guatemalan situation of land-control grabbing with sugar cane and palm oil, emphasizing the state-capital link as well as the international involvement in furthering the land rush. The World Bank-promoted neoliberal MALR programme undertaken by the Guatemalan state has, in fact, facilitated the mushrooming of agribusinesses and simultaneously fostered capital-intensive and ‘corporatized’ agriculture, “linked to global value chains” (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 513). Alonso-Fradejas points out that so far some "11 percent of the total peasant households from the investigated areas, mainly Q’eqchi’, have lost their land tenancy rights during the last decade" (2012, 518). According to the scholar, 92.5 percent of these losses of land access were due to sugar cane and oil palm businesses (ibid.).

Oil palm and the neoliberal food regime in Guatemala

Guatemalan society – its changes in agrarian structure, food production and consumption since the early 1990s – manifests the adoption of the neoliberal food regime (e.g. Pechlaner and Otero 2010; 2008; Otero et al. 2013). The past developments of MALR, the promotion of free trade between the United States and Guatemala (Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement) and other neoliberal policies can, in turn, be referred to as neoregulation, an integral factor of the neoliberal food regime, as the state enforces the deregulation of the market (Pechlaner and Otero 2010, 180). According to Otero et al. (2013) the neoliberal food regime is established upon a “series of international agreements and national legislation that promotes the neoliberal agenda, including favoring ABMs [agribusiness multinational corporations]” (272). The deregulation of the market is not the only form of state intervention, however. As mentioned in the preceding section, the state has appeared to play a key role also in implementing and facilitating the land (control) grabs that serve the agro-export industries in Guatemala.

As previously noted, despite the exploding oil palm industry, chronic hunger and food insecurity have remained the same, possibly intensified, while poverty has worsened (Bolaños and EFE 2015; INE 2015b; FAO et al. 2013, 45; FAO et al. 2014, 43; see also Appendix B). Meanwhile, Guatemala has grown to be an extremely important market for subsidized American agriproducts in the 21st century, whereas still in the late 1980s the country was fairly self-sufficient, especially in terms of maize (FAOSTAT 2016; see also Appendix D).

In the fiscal year of 2014, the sales of US produce in Guatemala ran to 1.1 billion US dollars, whereas in 2013 the whole of Central America purchased 3.8 billion dollars worth of American products (USDA FAS 2015ac; 2009). USDA Foreign Agricultural Service has applauded DR-CAFTA several times for being beneficial to US trade. In less than a decade after its implementation, “U.S. exports to Guatemala have grown 90 percent” (USDA FAS 2015c; 2009). Since Guatemala has not been able to provide its population

with enough foodstuffs by domestic production for many consecutive years¹⁸, corn, rice, wheat, fodder, and beans have been the top agri-imports (FAOSTAT 2016; Caribbean Update 2015; SIECA 2015). The list of imported food products only seems to be growing. Although maize is a native crop in Guatemala, it is increasingly imported primarily from the United States (FAOSTAT 2016; see also Appendix D); in 2014, Guatemala’s maize self-sufficiency was 59 percent (FAO GIEWS 2015).

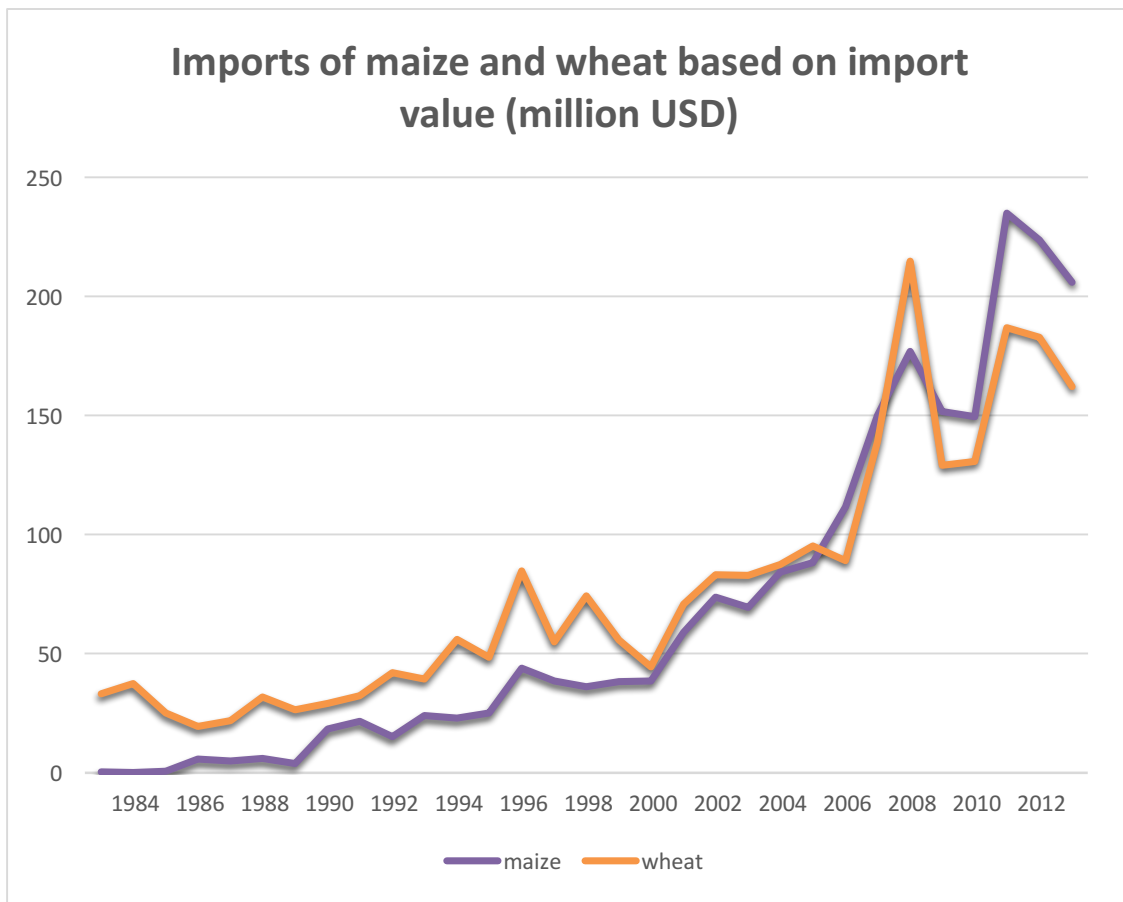


Figure 5 Imports of maize and wheat since the beginning of oil palm production in Guatemala.

Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

¹⁸ USDA FAS Exporter guide (Vásquez) e.g. in years 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015.

According to calculations based on FAOSTAT data (2016), the import dependency ratio (IDR)¹⁹ for cereals has been growing for decades with the pace intensifying since the 1990s, reaching 44 percent in 2013. While the IDR for wheat in 2013 was 100 percent (nearly only from the United States), rice came in second with 80 percent. Yet, consumption has earlier, before the beginning of the neoliberal era in the nineties, relied more on the domestic production of these non-native plants (FAOSTAT 2016). The increase in the IDR for maize is the most striking, however: it has grown slowly from the sixties when it was less than a percent, hitting 9 percent in 1990, 24 percent in 2000 and seemingly hovering between 30 and 40 percent after that until 2013 (ibid.). Etten and Fuentes (2004) called this “the crisis of maize”, as they saw the growing imports of corn as possible threats to Guatemala’s domestic agriculture and food security (52).

The state-assisted development of the oil palm expansion combined with the decrease in the local production of main staples and the increase of cereal (and other food) imports advanced by DR-CAFTA seem to represent an epitome of the neoliberal food regime (Pechlaner and Otero 2010; Otero et al. 2013; INE 2014, 2015a). The situation has resulted in an “uneven and combined dependency” (Otero et al. 2013) between the North and the South – here the United States and Guatemala. Guatemala is dependent on US corn and other cereals while the United States is not dependent on these basic staples. In fact, the American consumers rely on the imports of “luxury foods” such as vegetables, beverages or fruits, which do not represent a significant portion of the daily caloric intake – hence the *uneven* and combined dependency (FAOSTAT 2016; Otero et al. 2013, see esp. p. 274). In turn, an average Guatemalan receives nearly a half of the total of daily calories from just maize, wheat and rice; hence, the consumers are reliant on these imports and extremely susceptible to changes in global commodity prices (FAOSTAT 2016; Otero et al. 2013, 274).

$$IDR = \left(\frac{Imports}{Production + Imports - Exports} \right) 100$$

¹⁹

Source: <http://philfsis.psa.gov.ph/index.php/id/16/meta/IDR>. Accessed June 19, 2016.

While basic grains are in high demand, USDA FAS reports (Vásquez 2015; 2014) also highlight a new direction of trade and commerce between the countries, observing Guatemala's growing food processing industry. This may also benefit the local oil palm production as it is commonly used in a variety of processed foods amongst myriad other purposes (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2016, 144). Processed foods are linked to the growth of retail, also an important factor in the Guatemalan context, while the retail sector, on the other hand, is closely connected to the US exports and the agrarian changes in the 21st century – including the rise of oil palm. In fact, supermarkets are getting an increasing share of the resale of food in Guatemala as 30 percent of foodstuffs are sold through them (Vásquez 2015). *Walmart*, *Pricesmart* and *Unisuper* are the leading ones, and only the multinational *UniSuper* is domestically-based (ibid.). For the United States and its exports, supermarkets are an important area for business as they continue to grow: *Walmart* is indisputably the biggest in Guatemala, directly importing 85 percent of the foodstuffs sold (Vásquez 2015, 2014). Otero et al. (2013, 273) describe supermarkets as “key economic agents of the neoliberal food regime”, which for instance the rise of *Walmart* represents – it is a destination of imported grains and processed products as well as commodities containing palm oil.

Numerous foreign restaurants have also entered the country, building their success on low prices: *Burger King*, *Dairy Queen*, *Dunkin Donuts*, *IHOP*, *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, *McDonald's*, *PizzaHut*, *Taco Bell*, *Wendy's* and so on (Central America Data 2015; Vásquez 2015). The vast majority are from the United States and use palm oil in their operations, often derived from controversial sources (Union of Concerned Scientists 2014; Verité 2014, 29). When these companies are located in a hub of this raw material, the palm oil in use may well be of Guatemalan origin. Although most of the country's palm oil is exported to Mexico, the businesses there are connected to the United States. Allegedly, this palm oil is utilized and sold for (or by) corporations of American origin (Verité 2014, 29). These processed value-added goods are then likely sold in supermarkets like *Walmart*.

The pressure on land and the increase of land grabs appears to arise for various reasons. As biofuel policies of both the United States and the European Union stimulate

rising demand for land for flex crops such as oil palm, the decreases in the availability of the flex crops for the immense food-feed-fuel complex pushes the demand for land indirectly. Northern governments urge agrofuel production in Southern states like Guatemala, while the respective governments (and the ruling class) yearn for foreign investment coming from the global North's "environmental" projects (McMichael 2011, 35). These agrofuel projects can be attributed to the challenges of peak oil and energy security, yet their socio-ecologic implications may be negative (McMichael 2011).

The neoliberal food regime imported in Guatemala's agrarian developments is presumably not a malicious scheme of the global North. The influx of US grains, American/foreign supermarkets and restaurants, and the simultaneously occurring land grabbing by the oil palm industry all cohere rather perfectly, however. The palm oil production provides cheap raw materials for foreign multi-million dollar corporations which manufacture products for other giants like *Walmart*. Meanwhile, vast oil palm plantations continue to expand, and the decreased supply of land and crops brings about increases in food imports. Foreign-based supermarkets and fast-food joints will yet again benefit, selling both imported, processed and often palm oil-utilizing products. The palm oil may originate in the plantations where the dispossessed peasant works, so that he can buy the American imports at the very same local supermarket. The combination of an increasing oil palm production, DR-CAFTA and national policies have resulted in the emergence of a neoliberal food regime. It appears to reinforce itself as it continues, perhaps advancing the dispossession of the varying traditions, local ways of life, and economic security, also posing challenges for lives and livelihoods.

Chapter 3.

Stories of Dispossession

In this chapter, I will illuminate the essential elements of the process of accumulation by dispossession that is taking place in Guatemala through the expansion of oil palm cultivation. The first section will clarify the basics of dispossession, focusing especially on *land* grabbing and the part played by the state land fund (FONTIERRAS), and how the phenomenon may be likened to the “appropriation of assets” (Harvey 2003, 145). In the second section, I describe the way in which oil palm expansion has involved “enclosing the commons” (Harvey 2003, 148; Buck 2013, 52–69) and how this has led to grave problems for rural people, as access to resources has become jeopardized. The third section builds upon this analysis, examining the dispossession of resources through the process of commodification (e.g. Harvey 2003, 148). Furthermore, the oil palm industry treats nature merely as a commodity, leading to severe ecological repercussions. In the fourth section, I show how oil palm expansion has generated serious hardships in regard to subsistence and food security, resulting in the proletarianization of many peasants, and “the suppression of the alternative forms of production and consumption” (ibid., 145). Finally, in the chapter’s conclusion, I will outline how accumulation by dispossession in the midst of the Guatemalan oil palm expansion occurs by the “policing [of] the new enclosures” (Buck 2013, 52–69) and how Harvey’s claim of “the loss of rights” (2005, 178) is, in fact, part of the dispossessions occurring in the country.

Land, livelihoods, and the appropriation of assets

The first community I visited during field research in July 2014 was one of the few left in Polochic Valley²⁰, in the department of Izabal. It turned out there had been 18

²⁰ Places are often referred to as “Chisec area”, “Fray area”, “the Franja” and so on for three reasons: 1) anonymity and safety of interviewees, 2) the sometimes obscure borders of municipalities or communities or 3) vague locations of cited communities by interviewees (i.e. second-hand information).

communities in the area, but only 11 were left. Apparently, communities had begun to disappear following the emergence and expansion of oil palm plantations, which started in the late 1990s.

In '96 the palm [cultivation] began, without the consent of the communities. There was no consensus, they just came and put their palm and their factory...they didn't ask if it's okay or what the communities think about it...as human lives meant very little to them...because at first they said it's going to bring development and it's a good process. But the truth is, there is no development, but rather, a disaster. (Santiago, 48 years old, Polochic Valley)

Nearly some two decades later, the same palm oil company, called *NaturAceites*²¹ in 2014, described the inhabitants as “invaders” (interviews in Polochic Valley) while it was taking over lands that had belonged to the indigenous peoples for at least five centuries. At the time of fieldwork, the people lived under a constant threat and fear of losing their land and way of life, since the general tendency of palm was to expand rather than intensify production. Allegedly, some communities in Polochic Valley had been bribed to support oil palm while the ones favouring Maya Q’eqchi’²² ways of life and livelihoods were reproached by *NaturAceites* or municipal and governmental authorities for “being against development” (interviews in Polochic Valley). Nevertheless, field research showed that human habitation seemed to be no impediment for the company’s crusade to plant capital-intensive crops. Receiving any kind of approval from communities whose lands were in question seemed merely a needless formality. In fact, it had rarely happened as peasants and indigenous peoples appeared to have very little say in this *criollo*-dominated country.

²¹ NaturAceites S.A. is a certified member of the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil. On an RSPO report from 2012/2013 they state, “[w]e are a socially responsible company, and we align our projects with those of the communities that surround us...NaturAceites built a strong mutually beneficial relationship with community leaders in every one of the regions it operates. This has translated into open dialogue and discussions to establish priorities for working together and ultimately raising the living standards of the communities” (RSPO 2015).

²² Guatemala has 23 different Mayan groups (and thus varying “traditions”) of which Q’eqchi’ is the fourth largest, although representing the majority of the research participants. Nevertheless, most Guatemalans are considered as mestizo according to the official census from 2013 (<https://www.ine.gob.gt/sistema/uploads/2014/02/26/5eTCcFIHErnaNVeUmm3iabXHAKgXtw0C.pdf>. Accessed August 19, 2016).

Yet, *palma africana* was a curse word in many communities. The story heard everywhere was of oil palm just rolling in, with no questions asked. "We don't want any more palm!" was repeated enough throughout the field research to be a slogan.

Land-rights organization workers and people from communities especially in Polochic Valley described numerous occasions in which companies used the police or troops to expel the inhabitants of communities so as to clear land for plantations. Most cases of "forceful expulsion" (Harvey 2003, 145) with state security forces and private guards had taken place because of sugar, yet oil palm companies too used violent tactics. For instance, Claudia, a community worker in the Chisec area, told me about the ruthless expulsions by the company named *Palmas de Ixcán (PALIX)*:

There have been many [evictions] because to the companies it doesn't matter if the families have the papers, the money and the deed of sale. For example, you have the deed, the plot layout, and all that under the name of one person—whatever—but for the company it doesn't matter and there will be an eviction! A complete one! Because [the company] already has a permit [for it] from the authority, from the mayor!

Moreover, as this quote also shows, a mandate from the local administration, for instance that of a municipality, had an integral part in many land grabs or land control grabs. While in Chisec, for instance, the local administration authorized the appropriation of land directly, in other communities the support for dispossession was more clandestine, yet widely known.

This was the situation with *NaturAceites* in Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Fray) and Polochic Valley in Izabal, where payments in the form of new cars or other type of wealth to the local administration made by the company facilitated the entrance of palm. Even if a mayor (or other governing authority) would not openly further or endorse the company's goals, it still seemed futile for the dispossessed people to turn to the municipality for help against the company. For many it was safer and more lucrative to stay silent. For instance, in Fray, the objection of *NaturAceites* would mean trouble. People in agony, losing their land or resources to palm got threats, spite or blacklisting if they turned to either the

company, the mayor or other beneficiaries of palm for help as plantations gradually surrounded them. Mostly, however, dialogue with any authority was simply impossible.

One of these authorities was Fondo de Tierras (FONTIERRAS), the state land fund²³, an instrument of the market-assisted land reform (MALR) and neoliberal food regime in Guatemala. The fund, which was allegedly established to help people in obtaining land, had been ineffective and slow in its actions. Usually, interviewees reported that answers from FONTIERRAS were pending, when people had made inquiries about their plot in the wake of a series of land grabs or large deals in their area. Furthermore, interviewees frequently told me they were simply not told what was happening with their land or plot – until they found out it was no longer theirs. Some had even travelled to the capital up to ten different times to ask for help with land access from FONTIERRAS, but ended up getting neither assistance nor answers.

The more experiences I recorded of the land fund in context of oil palm, the more it started to indeed seem like a "fiasco" (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514). People from Fray, the population of which is over ninety percent indigenous, had met with a director of a land fund agency about the ongoing land dispute. The answer from the director had been harsh: "Your deeds are worth nothing," a peasant-rights activist and nurse told me in an interview. The once reportedly legal documents for the people's plots had lost their worth, whereas *NaturAceites* had emerged as their new owner in the municipality. For instance, Manuel, a freelance journalist from Fray, had bought the lot for his house from the state through FONTIERRAS in 1994. Nevertheless, shortly after the oil palm company entered the town in 2007, it turned out the once remitted payment to the state meant nothing. Manuel and many others in the same town discovered that the owner's name on the plot was *NaturAceites*. Hence, the people's deeds of sale were not regarded as deeds of ownership; not anymore. TeleSUR, the Venezuela-based T.V. channel with Latin American reach,

²³ On their website, FONTIERRAS (<http://www.fontierras.gob.gt>) promises to work with four intentions: "1. Access to land for integral and sustainable development. 2. Regularization of the processes of awarding the lands of the state. 3. Development of sustainable rural communities and 4. Institutional strengthening to respond to social aspirations and legal mandates; supported by complimentary measures which strengthen their actions." Accessed Nov 27, 2015. Translated by author.

reported on this issue (2014a), with a community leader displaying an official document stating that half of Fray, inclusive of the homes of several people, had been mortgaged for 8 million US dollars to BANCOLOMBIA located in Panama. If people wanted to get a legal right for their plot, they would have to buy it – again.

Similarly, when other interviewees had begun noticing problems with palm cultivators regarding access to their land or resources, and wanted to secure their ownership with FONTIERRAS, the land fund employees would regularly inform them that the plots in question were now property of *NaturAceites*, *Palmas de Ixcán*, REPSA or some other company. The people had, however, once bought or inherited their plots, or they were granted the land by the state after the civil war ended in 1996. It seemed the land fund nowadays was indeed serving large landowners like those of the oil palm industry (see e.g. Alonso-Fradejas 2012; Granovsky-Larsen 2013, 330; Gauster and Isakson 2007). On April 15, 2016, FONTIERRAS published a press release on their website (<http://www.fontierras.gob.gt>, see Appendix E), concerning a land fund scandal in which campesinos were the violently dispossessed casualties of corruption and crime. Fourteen people including FONTIERRAS employees vacated 28 *fincas* of already occupied land to make more money out of the land (CICIG 2016; Juarez 2016). After the violent dispossessions, the land worth 24 million quetzals (roughly USD 313,000 as of June 2016) was registered to the new owners who used it for money laundering (Juarez 2016).

The covert changes of land ownership that I was told of during fieldwork appeared to be dismissive of people's rights. What is more, those changes were possibly illegal. A few traders, whose livelihoods in Fray depended on loans secured by mortgaging their plots, lost everything when one month they found out that they had nothing to mortgage as the bank said they were no longer owners of their plots; it belonged to *NaturAceites* or, more precisely, to BANCOLOMBIA. Other people in Polochic or Chisec, who practically owned their land by merit of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2008), suddenly had no control over what was to happen to the area where their homes, crops or other resources were located.

Although evictions or their threat was common news to the people (as the land rights organization workers reported), palm companies seemed to find ways to dispossess people of their lands also in a more indirect manner: by producing a “voluntary” abandonment of areas. The most brutal and blanket method was, deliberately or not, to create conditions forcing people to give up their land. Though legal, these kinds of dispossessions frequently led to human misery and indigence. In Polochic, for example, *NaturAceites* had incrementally started to plant oil palm seedlings on the communities' lands. These lands had been granted to the community by the state and legally theirs: the people had relied upon the land for cultivation or the building of new homes.

In Chisec and in the area of Raxruhá, *Palmas de Ixcán* had channelled water away from people's lands to the plantations, giving rise to drought and immense hardship for the cultivation of crops. On the other hand, sometimes drought or problems with soil had ensued automatically, when the palm plantations had beset a community. Ordinary subsistence crops could not survive next to the plantations and their massive use of water or perhaps because of the agrochemicals²⁴. The difficulties with crop cultivation after the emergence of plantations was reported in all areas, severely threatening the existence of communities.

Various land rights organization workers from the Franja, and a Raxruhá man with years of experience in municipal work, exposed several other dubious ways in which the palm oil companies had provoked seemingly unprompted abandonments of communities. It was fairly common for the companies to buy people's small subsistence plots next to or in the middle of others, one by one. Alonso-Fradejas (2012) also referred to this phenomenon: "hamlet common lands over which farming rights used to be collectively distributed have been split up, privatised and titled as individual property" (514). Once the demanding oil palm plants were growing right next to the modest *milpa*²⁵, the maize, beans and other plants for food and cash income could not compete. The owners of the plots

²⁴ See e.g. Gaitán 2014, 49; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 90–92.

²⁵ A common form of cultivation in Mesoamerica, where the same land is used for more than one crop at the same time.

found themselves in distress, eventually having to sell their land for whatever the company would pay. Luring farmers into thinking companies would buy uncertified oil palm fruits has also led to this outcome (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 7, 29–31, 37–42, 47, 57–58): people spend a fortune on the cultivation of African palm, ending up having to give up their land as the fruit of the novel effort does not meet the oil palm industry's standards. The end result is only accumulated debt, as also Guereña and Zepeda report (2013, 7, 41, 58).

It was also reported that companies bribed community development leaders²⁶ as well as the general leaders of communities to persuade other community members to sell their subsistence plots. A municipal authority and numerous other interviewees along the FTN indicated that bribery has happened everywhere along the Franja where four different oil palm companies reportedly operated. Chisec community worker, Claudia, also confirmed the same pattern in the communities of her area. Interviewees frequently described poor people as selling their lands to palm oil companies “against [their] better judgement.” Often they were induced by a lump sum of money, which to the least educated people probably seemed a better deal than it actually was. In fact, since most people derived their living from land, after the plot for food crops was sold and the modest, often petty amount received was spent, the whole family would fall into poverty.

Though palm oil enterprises had rarely evicted people from their lands directly, at the time of field research, it seemed to be something waiting to happen. Violent eviction was, however, the method used when people refused to vacate the land they held or sowed, or in cases people had (re-)occupied an already abandoned or vacated land. It was reasonable for people to be worried, as they were slowly losing their only means of livelihood.

"The palm is leaving us poor", a man from Fray said, referring to the negative changes brought about by the arrival of oil palm plantations. Instead of all the development

²⁶ Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo, COCODES.

initially promised, people were disappointed, sad and fearful everywhere. Whole villages were abandoned, there were marginal amounts of food available, and some people had already fallen into extreme poverty due to the loss of ownership of their plot. It seemed as if palm had dispossessed more people than it had employed. In fact, the Verité (2014) (an NGO) report regarding labour rights in the Guatemalan oil palm industry stated that despite the high *total* amount of jobs, “[oil palm] generates fewer jobs *per acre* than almost any other crop” (Verité 2014, 31, emphasis added). The only agricultural activities creating fewer jobs in Guatemala are, in fact, cattle and sugar cane (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 521).

During fieldwork, interviewees claimed that even the people who had indeed received a job with the palm companies were no richer than the ones fighting poverty in the areas of oil palm expansion, trying to grow subsistence crops. “They are the same...what [the company] offers them is *nothing*,” sneered even-tempered Diego, a 21-year-old former Polochic Valley temporary employee of *NaturAceites*, who himself had received 85 *quetzales*, whereas the minimum wage was about 74 quetzals in July 2014 (about USD 9.50²⁷). Working conditions in the palm oil industry have been reported to be often miserable and the mostly temporary work to pay the daily minimum wage, at best (Verité 2014; Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 194–5; Mingorría et al. 2014; 863). The few participants who themselves or whose family members worked or had worked on plantations said that daily wages were around Q50 or Q60, well under the minimum – confirming previous studies (Mingorría et al. 2014; 863; Tomei and Diaz-Chavez 2014, 194–5; Verité 2014, 42–3, 54–9). It has been argued that the only reason for many to stay with oil palm is that there is no alternative work available, or the workers do not have land or other assets for subsistence (Verité 2014, 42–3). In a study conducted in Sayaxché, Petén, Hurtado and Sánchez (2011) concluded that the landless people dependent on wages from oil palm were more susceptible to food insecurity than the people who had land (70).

²⁷ http://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-GTQ-31_07_2014-exchange-rate-history.html. Accessed June 29, 2016.

Enclosing the commons and the problematic of resources

The second morning up north from Cobán, in Fray, the shortage of water got very real in the humid heat. *No hay agua!* the hoarse voice of an outspoken *señorita* rang, as I opened the door to query why the tap did not work. I attempted to scrape the sludgy bottom of the motel rainwater tank in search of water, since there was no potable water available.

The motel attending woman found the effort hilarious, laughing: *Ooh, solo cada cinco días, chica!*

Later, I discovered the municipality was indeed regulating the provision of potable water and only supplied water to the people once every five days. Even though it was the rainy season, rain did *not* seem to arrive and the only way to wash oneself would have been dipping into one of the dirty creeks in the municipality – that is, in the water sifted through the oil palm plantations.

Availability of the water was not a given – at least not for the locals. Potable water was not safe to drink nor necessarily available, and plantations seemed to give rise to difficulties with the supply of clean water. The regulation of the water in Fray had begun after the local oil palm production had been established.

By contrast, in Polochic, the four, age-old, indigenous communities were shut in by palm, and the water resources formerly used were now in between the meticulous rows of palm trees. There, the pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers would seep into the creeks, which were previously profuse and clear rivers in between lush forests. The kinds you could see in natural parks that were saved for attracting tourists.

Disagreements over whether palm is good or not had resulted in the cutting-off of potable water from the Polochic community I visited, and now most of the water consumed or used in domestic errands was derived next to or from inside the plantations. Apparently this community was not the only one with severe domestic water scarcity.

As the humid, hot air burnt the skin and my head felt hollow already at 10 o'clock in the morning, I wondered how people with very low income managed as the access to water was regulated or so very limited.

(Field notes, July 7th–July 13th 2014)

As research on land grabbing in critical agrarian studies generally emphasizes, restricted access to land or shortage thereof is the most common result of the oil palm expansion (and land grabs). In Guatemala, however, it was not only the commons that had become limited. Additionally, other resources, their use and the access to them were compromised. Most importantly, water and its supply were clearly affected in all places where there were oil palm operations. As the palm plantations would absorb significant quantities of water²⁸, people in towns and communities were struggling to meet their water needs. Household water used to be mostly derived from springs, rivers or creeks prior to palm, but in 2014, people struggled with where to get water for drinking, bathing and laundry – not to mention their own crops. Interviewees at all locations lamented that water was simply not available. Rivers or creeks formerly used as water sources were now frequently *enclosed* inside plantations. Besides, the ones that were still at hand, were reportedly polluted or dry, streaming through the chemical-rich palm crops or, for instance, next to a palm oil plant, which had its waste water running into a river. Distraught and terrified people told me that even springs were drying out. In October 2015, even the Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* covered the reported appropriation of water by oil palm and other plantations in Guatemala (Gándara 2015).

According to a long-time nurse in Fray, the increasing lack of clean water made people sick more than before the emergence of palm in 2007. Of course other reasons might explain the increased incidence of sickness, but one could very well be the shortage of clean water. Regardless of the reason for the sickness, oil palm had already dispossessed many of water. The nurse described the hopelessness of the people, when there was no water for four to five days. Even the desperation to just bathe grew intense in the heat: "What do the people do? They all go to the river, to get water, to bathe! And [all] the

²⁸ One palm uses approximately 170 to 368 litres of water per day and one hectare of palm usually contains 143 palms (<https://www.netafim.com/crop/oil-palm/best-practice>. Accessed in December 2015). Therefore, a hectare of palm can consume from 24,310 litres to 55,198 litres per day in "humid tropics" – that is, in places which do not require specific irrigation. In 2014, oil palm covered approximately 153,000 hectares of land in Guatemala; hence, at the very least, over 3.6 billion litres of water went into oil palm plantations per day.

contamination!" Loss of access to clean water was reported everywhere else, too: either the crops did not grow, or people got sick because only dirty water was available for drinking.

Hence, not only did oil palm cultivation dispossess people from their land, it also seemed to prevent them from obtaining water. The drought and the allegedly contaminated and intentionally restricted water resources gave rise to concerns regarding food crops which were already quantitatively on the decrease. This could have possibly resulted in the disappearing street markets and the arrival of more imported products, such as corn and beans²⁹.

José, an older peasant, who had lived in Fray for 47 years since he was born in 1967, strongly lamented the other trends following the arrival of the oil palm company in 2007. There was a general tendency towards restricted access to land, water, soil and other resources, generating hardships for especially the poorest population groups:

There's no land – none! So far, it's been hard because we haven't had anything to work with, no place... we have no *land* to work with, because of the rich. You would see the rich here—and so many palms would appear! They have taken a lot of land for the palm. And now, you can't cultivate anything! They don't let us go inside the palm [plantation] anymore: if somebody entered, they would tell you they will kill you there. You can't search for firewood either, nor can you fish at the river. They don't let you pass anymore.

The neoliberal era in Guatemala has brought stricter rules limiting the use of assets such as land. While water appeared to be semi-privatized in the country, so were often tracts of land. Plantations had gates and fences, most often with armed guards, and only people with permission were to enter. Even if people had permits, guards could cause havoc to scare people away. Having one's only water source inside plantations or needing to pick up firewood or attend to one's own crops on a legal plot of land were not good enough reasons to permit access to plantations.

²⁹ As noted in Chapter 2, corn is imported primarily from the United States. According to most recent data, beans are chiefly imported from the United States and China (FAOSTAT 2016).

While the people interviewed in Polochic were slowly left stranded by the plantations and only able to rely on the area virtually under their feet, dispossession had come about more abruptly in other places. Claudia from Chisec comprehensively illuminated the practices of the company *Palmas de Ixcán*. The company had prohibited people from accessing land by closing roads from public use, especially if it owned land around the road in question. Therefore, it did not matter if peasants legally owned plots for crops by the road. Even people with houses along the route were under excessive scrutiny and harassment every time they would leave or enter. A municipal authority in another town in Northern Alta Verapaz confirmed similar action by palm companies in the region from Raxruhá area to Fray and Chahal. In the areas visited in Polochic Valley plantation areas were also closely monitored as comparable problems with access to resources surfaced.

The denial of entry on roads and areas with plantations led to another significant issue for the rural people: the dispossession of sources for energy. In the rural areas, especially in remote communities, firewood was a common if not the only source of energy used in preparing food or heating. Therefore, in many places the repercussions of enclosing the commons would hinder the fulfilment of basic human needs like food and water. A former guard for *Reforestadora de Palma del Petén S. A. (REPSA)* in Sayaxché, Petén, told me:

The colonel obligated us – he told us to throw out all the people. Say, a lady used to pick up a bit of firewood [inside the plantation area], since there is some... They didn't allow that. I wasn't allowed to let the poor ladies pick up the firewood, even though there is barely wood for fire anywhere, as more than 150 caballerías [6,750 ha] of the terrain is pure palm.

Speaking with two and a half years of experience at *REPSA*, he continued to explain how the guards were encouraged to maintain a 'climate of fear' (e.g. Harvey 2003, 205) by frightening everyone with a gunshot at their direction. Whether it was "a man, a child or an old lady," as he told me. If the orders to evict all invaders were not complied with, the guards would be fired. Plantation guards shooting at or beating up people for entering

plantations for firewood, water or fishing was a well-known action everywhere. Poor people in need of resources entering palm oil plantations were treated as criminals, and it seemed as if their lives did not matter much either. Although guards for plantations were often from poor families or indigenous communities themselves, they were often assumed to be malicious. News about corpses found inside plantations may manifest the disputes between the guards and people that occurred when dire need of resources clashed with the strict orders from palm oil company bosses.³⁰

When common goods were limited or their supply inadequate because of palm companies, people became hopeless, as an organization worker and the municipal authority from the Franja explained:

It is the intention of the businessmen to tire people, to demoralize them, to drive people into a dead end, where there's no way out. One pays their debt, health and everything...the whole family leaves...and they emigrate.

When I asked where dispossessed people had gone, nobody knew. The *Central American exodus*³¹ or numerous tabloids reports of extortion, *narcos*, and endless crime as a means to make money started to make more sense after hearing descriptions of families losing everything, either gradually or all at once.

It appeared that the loss or lack of resources such as water and firewood had as far-reaching impacts as the loss of land, regardless of whether tracts of land were yet physically lost. The markedly sly and gradual appropriation of assets appeared to have detrimental effects, since people had been dispossessed of control over essential resources and the right to make any decisions regarding them. In fact, the general view throughout was that rich

³⁰ E.g. <http://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/san-marcos/identifican-cadaver-encontrado-en-finca-de-pajapita>. Accessed Nov 30, 2015; <http://www.prensalibre.com/san-marcos/Matan-balazos-guardian-africana-Pajapita-0-812918887>. Accessed December 8, 2015. Moreover, deaths occurring because of innocent people “interrupted” illegal activities or were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time does not seem impossible either, vis-à-vis the reported interplay between drug-trafficking and the oil palm industry (Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 512, 525, 526; Hernández 2012). Some interviewees on the Franja frequently hinted towards the “hidden” presence of drug-trade.

³¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/30/us-usa-immigration-centralamerica-idUSKBN0F51LS20140630#J3m0IkFqPdQVYIFE.97>. Accessed June 20, 2016.

people had the authority to implement policies regarding the poor, as well as the power to decide for them.

Commodification of nature and its repercussions

While the Guatemalan peasants and especially indigenous peoples seemed to experience dispossession of public areas and resources in conjunction with the expansion of industries like that of oil palm, “indirect” dispossessions also took place, occurring alongside with the ‘commodification of nature’ (e.g. Harvey 2003, 148). That is, when businesses dispossessed people of land, they often “indirectly” dispossessed them from myriad other things (way of life, heritage, livelihoods, and so on). Thus, the indirect dispossessions are here the repercussions of treating nature as a commodity with no other relevance as the source of profit for some. As for the oil palm companies the environment serves only the purpose of making profit, but at the same time, the dispossession of nature leads to complications with health and deprivation from enjoyment of nature in the Mayan communities. It is thus an (indirect) dispossession of even health, heritage, culture and local knowledge among other things.

A Mayan spiritual guide from the Fray area summed up what all research participants lamented in different ways: "the company doesn't have respect for the nature." Since the interviewed Mayan people sought to benefit from nature in its entirety, by attempting to use resources frugally, the companies' use of local natural resources was frowned upon. While the spiritual guide also said, "[the company] disturbs the spirits of our ancestors", many were especially upset about the visible devastation oil palm left behind.

The palm business seemed to be negligent of the environment everywhere. The cause of contamination or destruction was so explicit, that there was no question about it. Interviewees frequently bemoaned how "the company destroyed everything," referring to

the immense amount of forest that had been cleared out due to the emerging plantations. With the disappearance of the forests, people also noticed that animals had vanished:

The animals, they leave because of the palm. There are none. The parrots, the monkeys, the pacas, the iguanas, they left – they’re finished! And the way the company got rid of the mountains! At the river shore, they knocked down the trees and now the area doesn’t provide for the animals so they left. Before...there was food to eat – *before*, yeah! But now, not any more, now... not anymore. (García, 38, bus driver, Fray)

A ladino livestock trader on the Franja noted that if the current development of land grabbing continued, "in ten, twenty, twenty-five years the area that is green now...it will be a desert. That's the way it is." A municipal authority from another town along the Franja feared the same thing would happen there. According to a survey in an earlier study, even over 90 percent of the oil palm workers did *not* think the plantation was the same thing as a forest (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 97). However, businesses often imply it is ‘nature’ and they have their brand-names to ‘prove’ it (e.g. www.naturaceites.com).

The palm expansion seemed to be a Pandora’s box. The commodification of nature was even more devastating vis-à-vis the ways in which the interviewees, often Maya Q’eqchi’ people, honoured the nature: the indigenous peasants would also feel the consequences most strongly. In addition to the physical invasion by plantations or lack of access to resources, there was also another issue to cause distress: pollution.

Water contamination was a special worry in areas where oil palm dominated the landscape (Prensa Libre 2016; CMI-G 2014ab; Caracol producciones 2014; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 46–7; Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 89–94). In Fray, Chisec, and the Polochic area, all interviewees described the already appalling state of water resources. In both areas, the oil palm refineries contaminated the most important sources, reportedly discharging effluents into the waterways and smaller creeks. In addition, apparently palm oil factories frequently discarded used oil palm fruit in rivers or creeks or did not otherwise properly manage it. This was said to be a common practice in Polochic Valley, Fray and Sayaxché. Various news sources (e.g. Prensa Libre 2016) report water pollution by palm plantations

on the South Coast as well. Moreover, Claudia, the community worker in Chisec area (which also has a palm oil extraction plant) depicted situations farmers had reported regarding contaminated water:

All the dirt and everything they do with the palm they leave there without management! So when it rains, when the water flows, the stream brings it over. It passes through the area of the community, and all the men's crops in the community are affected. The crops won't give a good harvest!

For instance, the strong herbicide, *Round-Up*, is commonly used in oil palm plantations of at least *PALIX* and *NaturAceites*, also seeping into the surroundings of the plantations (Alonso-Fradejas 2011, 91).

In Fray, too, people voiced distress about natural resources. "The land isn't working anymore," a farmer exclaimed in an isolated community in the middle of palm during a field work visit. Their crops did not grow. The municipal authority in Northern Alta Verapaz illuminated identical situations all along the FTN from Raxruhá until Chahal as well as the Petén side of the border. Seemingly, when rivers had become contaminated, also land could get contaminated and ultimately become uncultivable. Even if people had been able to keep their plots, contamination would be the final nail to dispossess them. This could also be a result of not only contamination, but the changes caused by massive plantations in the local water cycle (e.g. Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011, 89–94). The damaging effect to fresh water has been already recognized in other places with extensive cultivation (Jordan 2014).

Many also believed their health to have been affected by the practices of the palm companies³². For instance, in the same visited community in isolation and surrounded by palm near Fray, the children in particular had begun to experience severe rashes after the introduction of palm. They believed this was due to contaminated water, as they retrieved

³² Most interviewees had experience of *NaturAceites*, and only a few of *Palmas de Ixcan* or *REPSA*.

their water from springs and creeks close to their homes, in an area with oil palm operations.

People everywhere were certain of a hike in illnesses and diseases after the arrival of palm or a palm oil refinery. The nurse from Fray said:

The situation here in the municipality is, in fact, really sad. It was about some five years ago when we started to notice the scarcity of trees and mountains...because this we can feel. And the river, when it's summer, it dries out excessively, and it remains so, so dry! A tiny river! Before, the river didn't dry out that much. It dried out a bit but it was still beautiful and all blue. Nowadays, it looks muddy, with all the filth you can see in the river. Then, because of the contaminated river, the environment is contaminated. That is where the sickness comes from. And the diarrhoea is completely caused by the contamination of the water!

Contamination of water due to the oil palm industry of Guatemala received international media attention in the summer of 2015 when a palm oil refinery of *REPSA* in Sayaxché contaminated over 100 kilometres of the river of La Pasión, in Petén. La Pasión is not, however, the only waterway in Guatemala to suffer, allegedly, from pollution as a result of the oil palm industry. It is reported also of Río Jute and Río Chixoy as well as numerous other rivers on the South Coast (e.g. TeleSUR 2013, 2014b, 2016; Curruchich 2015).

According to the interviewees, all areas visited during field research had the very same problems (e.g. diarrhoea, fever and flies) as the ones the guard had reported to me about the river at Sayaxché, which ended up exposed in mainstream media (see also TeleSUR 2015a). The most shocking information given in interviews was that in all areas the wastewater of oil palm refineries was flowing directly into rivers (see also: Curruchich 2015; TeleSUR 2014ab, 2013; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 47) – exactly like in Petén before the exposure of the *ecocide*³³.

³³ TeleSUR July 22, 2015.

An interesting element surfacing in this research is that *NaturAceites*, which is at issue in the majority of cases, is in fact a producer of sustainable palm oil³⁴, certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), and for some months, the business flaunted its association with the *Rainforest Alliance*³⁵. Nevertheless, the company was still reported to have unethical and unsustainable practices, such as the aforementioned mortgaging of a part of Fray, as well as the contamination of water (Verité 2014, 70; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 47; CMI-G 2014ab). The nurse from Fray made numerous other claims about water pollution:

The company throws their garbage in the river! They have us as experts. We have been told that the residue of the [palm] oil is causing sickness. It is possible that it's causing a lot of sickness.

In fact, oil palm waste, palm oil effluents and their reutilization appear to be largely researched so as to find ways in reducing the impacts on environment, water bodies and human health (e.g. Sridhar and AdeOluwa 2009).

In spite of the RSPO membership of *NaturAceites*, it is possible that all the practices of the business are not necessarily environmentally waterproof. To attain an RSPO membership (does not equal certification) producers can merely pay a rather trivial sum of \$2,000 annually (RSPO 2016c). Furthermore, a palm oil business can vaguely state it is certified, although only a fraction of its product has an allegedly sustainable origin; there is no requirement for how big a percentage of a company's production should be sourced from "sustainable" plantations (RSPO 2016ab; WWF 2013a). Palm oil mills are, in fact, certified one by one (RSPO 2016a, WWF 2013a), and only two *NaturAceites* refineries in El Estor and Escuintla have been RSPO certified, whereas the plants in Fray and Panzós are not (NaturAceites 2016a; RSPO 2016b).

The results of the RSPO certification have been largely questioned, also in other Latin American countries. Studies from Colombia and Ecuador have in fact shown

³⁴ <http://www.naturaceites.com/en/active-member-rspo>. Accessed Dec 10, 2015.

³⁵ <http://www.naturaceites.com/en/rainforest-alliance>. Accessed Dec 10, 2015.

“asymmetrical” power relations in the decision-making of the RSPO certified palm oil (V. Marin-Burgos et al. 2015; Johnson 2014). Using RSPO’s option of “national interpretation”, the processes have helped “legitimize a controversial industry and conceal its many problems under the cloak of social and environmental improvement” (Johnson 2014, 198–99). In this way, the process could maintain or even strengthen underlying social and environmental inequalities, mostly benefiting the oil palm industries, while the interests of for instance rural peoples were overlooked in the process of the widely-approved, market-based sustainability approach (V. Marin-Burgos et al. 2015, 311; Johnson 2014, 198–99).

Palmas de Ixcán (PALIX) has also been a member of the RSPO but has failed to meet the rather lax voluntary standards in the past (WWF 2013b; Johnson 2014, 184). As of May 2016, neither *PALIX* nor *REPSA* could be found in the list of *RSPO* members (RSPO 2016b). As mentioned in Chapter 2, (agro)industries including oil palm businesses in Guatemala are very intertwined. In fact, a palm oil extraction plant of *NaturAceites* in Fray has been reported to manufacture the palm oil for *PALIX* (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 47). In light of *NaturAceites*’ pledge of a “[c]areful selection of responsible suppliers in the supply chain” (RSPO 2015), using the palm kernels of *Palmas of Ixcán* in its palm oil production of Fray is odd, since *PALIX* has been accused of contamination amongst other issues numerous times (e.g. Véliz 2015; TeleSUR 2014b, 2013; Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 46–47). Although the *NaturAceites* plant in Fray is not certified, the enterprise seems to pride itself on “sustainable production” (www.naturaceites.com, accessed May 11, 2016). This may question the origins and extraction of the certified palm oil of *NaturAceites*, as well as the publicly uncertified production of most other companies in Guatemala – especially as shortcomings are found even in the processing of the “ethical” kind.

A plague of flies

All interviewees deplored the increasing number of flies, which had followed the arrival of oil palm; it seemed that the “plague”³⁶ of flies had emerged in conjunction with the palm oil refineries (e.g. Escalón 2014). All interviewees from the regions with palm oil refineries of Chisec, Fray and Polochic Valley – even the guard from Sayaxché, Petén – confirmed a connection between oil palm and the pestilence of flies. The problem of flies in accordance with the production of African palm has been reported not only in Guatemala but also in other countries with oil palm plantations or palm oil refineries (e.g. Véliz 2015; Escalón 2014; Fundación del Río 2010, 11–12; El Tiempo 2001; Aguilar R. 1995).

During daily activities, swarms of flies would infest everything. People claimed insects would cause health issues: for instance, diarrhoea and fever or a severely inflamed skin. Interviewees reported they had increasing hardship in keeping animals, such as pigs, hens or cows, as they would die because of the blight of flies. An indigenous cattle keeper from the Fray area was extremely worried about the future of his 13-member family. His income from cows was becoming very precarious, as the animals were dying allegedly due to the flies when the cows’ skin got severely inflamed. According to other cattle keepers (four others interviewed), the nuisance of flies would drive the cows into water for hours, preventing them from eating, allegedly exposing them to contaminated water and gradual emaciation. The cowboys and a cattle trader told me the trade and their income had plummeted since the palm oil refinery had started. According to all interviewees in palm areas, the flies were born amongst the discarded used palm fruit, breeding in the moist and warm surroundings. A study conducted amongst *NaturAceites* oil palm operations in Fray (Gálvez Aguilar 2015) has confirmed that the plantations, the palm oil refinery and the rotting parts of oil palm attracts flies and acts as a breeding ground for them (7, 11, 18–20). The African palm also attracts other pests that carry diseases, such as rats (Gálvez Aguilar 2015, 5–6), which some interviewees mentioned as ruining their *milpa*.

³⁶ Locals called the flies “la plaga”.

The plague of flies had resulted in a public outcry in Fray, and what made it all the more interesting was the response of *NaturAceites*'s employees. During field research in July 2014, we came across infuriated *ganaderos*, cattle keepers, who blocked a road which carried a constant traffic of large, palm-fruit trucks, some minutes away from the Fray town centre. The cow owners, both *ladino* and indigenous, were jaded: their animals were dying, allegedly, owing to the pestilence of flies. After the cattle keepers had been waiting for hours, representatives of the palm oil company finally arrived. People had put flypaper in the middle of the road to indicate the immense amount of the flies, and now the frustrated cow owners were sharing their problems with the company, expecting answers or solutions. As the situation got heated, one *ranchero* accused the company of "not losing a single cent" (comment by *ladino* rancher at the protest) while the cattle keepers' income experienced a steep decline because the company's actions bred flies. To this, a young, white, female worker with a *Capullo*-shirt³⁷ merely reiterated, "you have no proof" – regardless of some hundred infuriated cattle owners being present. The whole incident seemed to be swept under the carpet, no matter what the people presented as their proof: dying animals, infected skin sores, photos, and so on. In other countries, problems with flies that have arisen from the emergence of oil palm plantations have been acknowledged and often attributed to palm – in one way or another (e.g. Fundación del Río 2010; El Tiempo 2001, 1995).

The connection between the fly problem and oil palm operations began to make sense at the end of field research. Simple internet searches gave rise to numerous results with accounts of 'plagues of flies' from e.g. Nicaragua and Colombia, or the "biological control" of pests like flies in plantation areas (Fundación del Río 2010, El Tiempo 2001, Aguilar R. 1995). Further reinforcing the possible relationship between flies and palm, was the attitude of the palm oil company representatives: the female worker seemed angry at the turnout: "We agreed to meet You," she said pointing at a white, wealthy *ranchero*, "not all *these* people," she said referring to the other cow owners, amongst whom were

³⁷ *Capullo* is a vegetable oil brand of *NaturAceites*. Also a Mexican vegetable oil brand.

numerous indigenous men. In a later university publication from 2015, it is clear that the fly problem of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas has, indeed, originated from the operations of *NaturAceites* (Galvéz Aguilar 2015, 19).

As the situation at the roadblock got to the point of an agreement being made upon another meeting the next day to "find a solution", I later found out no such meeting was arranged – at least not for *all* the people. This, however, was consistent with other actions reported in interviews: a dialogue with palm oil companies (including *NaturAceites*) seemed to be impossible to attain. Nearly all interviewees pointed out the disregard shown by the companies, their partners and associates, when they were contacted regarding problems with land, resources or related rights. An old indigenous woman from Fray exclaimed:

For them, we don't mean anything! We don't mean *anything*. But like we said, we are worth more than them, because *they* are stealing the land, not us!

The emergence of the oil palm plantations and oil refineries stirred a lot of emotions, as the commodification of nature had seemingly resulted in the dispossession of resources, health and the right to have any control over the environment. In addition, it appeared the expression of opposing thoughts to the beneficiaries or supporters of palm would not result in any solution – but rather more problems.

The suppression of traditional agriculture and proletarianization

In the areas of field work, the traditional production of food was severely threatened while oil palm production blossomed. In the whole of Guatemala, less land was at hand for a growing population and the quality of accessible soil was often poor (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 514). Also water resources were restricted, as the field research showed. "Every day we are worse off than before," a man from Sayaxché said in an NGO-organized meeting against the operations of oil palm companies. Interviewees everywhere seemed genuinely worried about food security: "There's always less and less food," a woman near Fray area

bemoaned, while in Polochic, the sentiment was, "some days we have food – on others, we don't." Dürr (2016) has pointed out the problem of flex crop invasion of the Guatemalan countryside as sugar cane and palm oil displace more people from traditional agriculture than the flex crops employ (11, 12–13). Moreover, in doing so, he argues the regional economy suffers as important value chains related to traditional agriculture are cut. For instance, when there is less maize there will be fewer people needed for harvesting corn, fewer mills to ground it, fewer tortilla makers and so on. Instead, the imported corn or readymade corn flour (*Maseca* from Mexico) will fill the gap. Meanwhile, the wealth and profits of the less labour-intensive flex crops flee the region, whereas the forward linkages (to later processing of these crops) are often far from the site of production, even abroad (Dürr 2016).

In Fray, the decreasing amount of crops and foodstuffs was a very tangible problem, as the local food market had diminished from an every-day event to a weekly one, at best. The peasant, José, whom I interviewed with nearly the whole community present, told me the local market had so little food it was "not enough for everyone." The current situation seemed dire, with no way out:

There is no land...or where there is, it is already taken! It already has owners... The land is for the rich people.

The father of seven children, had to buy everything from the *Despensa Familiar* (that is, *Walmart* in Guatemala) like many others. *Walmart* imported most of its products, apparently often from Mexico, though many food items, even some fresh produce, were from the United States. Since nearly all interviewees and other people in Guatemala had reported inflation and the rising prices of especially staple foods like maize and beans, providing food for a family seemed increasingly hard. This was true especially in places where land and affordable food were scarce. Prices in *Walmarts* seemed considerably higher than at street markets for staple items in the Guatemalan diet. Therefore, the supermarket being the only possible place for buying food was far from ideal for a poor household. All interviewees in Fray reported a shortage of food, sometimes also

malnutrition or hunger. Claudia the community worker in Chisec stated, "there is a lot of malnutrition in here," due to "the lack of proper food." While there may have been malnutrition before the oil palm expansion, Claudia stated that "since the arrival of palm, there is less food [in Chisec]." According to her, less land is cultivated because the land for food crops is often sold or there is none available; it is possibly under a new cultivation of flex crops. The new diet, in turn, contained plenty of packaged and processed food – cheaper, less nutritious and quite possibly made with palm oil.

Also in Polochic Valley, in municipalities like El Estor and Telemán, the oil palm expansion seemed to endanger the traditional forms of production as well as conventional ways of *life*. The interviewees reported cases of malnutrition and hunger, which could have been thought not possible before the expansion of the plantation; the people had expected development that was promised by the company. The state of food insecurity in all four communities interviewed from Polochic Valley was not surprising: the palm plantation of *NaturAceites* had slowly extended over the land which the Maya Q'eqchi' people had assumed to be theirs after living there for over 500 years (see also CMI-G 2015, 2014b). The population was growing but the land for the *milpa* was getting smaller.

Santiago from Polochic reported that even though plantation farming has existed in the area for decades, the shortage of land had never been as palpable:

The majority of the land, almost all of the area, some 90 per cent is owned by the company. And before, it owned about 50 percent. The amount of land for us has decreased – a lot! And this, in ten months, later on... There will be shortage of food, because there's nowhere to sow and we will not eat palm. We cultivate beans and maize so that there wouldn't be hunger, so that there would be food.

Despite Santiago's worry for the future, there were people in Polochic Valley already in extreme poverty and the ones under severe threat of it were the ones by the shore of lake Izabal, completely enclosed by the plantations. The ones who had already lost the fight, and resided some kilometres before the communities on the shore, persisted in fighting and stayed under tarpaulins on formerly inhabited areas, now cleared for new plantations.

People said others from the close by communities took food for them, they could not stay there without eating.

Communities resisting the expansion of the plantations had been accused of "backwardness" and being "against development". Normally, the communities would grow spatially as their populations expanded, but the ones surrounded by palm had nowhere to grow. Some communities in the area had gotten at odds with the company when they attempted to cultivate more land which used to be a part of the age-old community. Diego, a young man from the shore of Lake Izabal told me:

We see it, there are families and all of them are growing – *all* are growing... Every year and every day. But where are we going to have more parcels for our children? We are fighting. This terrain is for our children; it is for the future. Because our grandparents told us that it is theirs and we started to take that land.

For the rural people, especially indigenous peasants, land meant wealth, such as it is:

Sometimes we are hungry. We don't have wealth, and because of all these problems with palm, sometimes there is not enough food, because we don't have anything to buy it with... Nor do we have anywhere to live either.

This thought of the modest and smiling young father and husband Diego summarizes the sentiment in most of the observed and interviewed communities: wealth was derived from the earth and the oil palm expansion seemed to be suppressing this source of income. Maybe even threatening to end the whole existence of their way of life.

When the amount of land, the trusted source of subsistence, was disappearing, people often found themselves cornered. As observed in Chapter 2, despite the oil palm industry having exploded in only a few decades, agricultural employment had been decreasing (INE 2014; Larios 2014, Appendix C), and oil palm offered less work than all traditional food crops (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 521). People who had ever protested against the actions of oil palm businesses were mostly "blacklisted" from getting work with the plantations, one of the very few options for work in the area, other than subsistence

agriculture. Blacklisting was a common practice in both the Fray and Polochic area, but widely reported elsewhere – from Southern Guatemala to Petén (CMI-G 2014a; Verité 2013, 54–5).

"We are abandoned by the company," said Diego, referring to the fact that it was impossible to be employed by the company after disagreements over land with the business, even if only residing in a community whose members had protested. Moreover, arguments frequently flared up in communities, which led into bitter disputes between neighbours, over whether a company was good or bad. People in all communities reported corruption as it was widespread that bribing was used to silence opposition or change minds of the leaders of communities or towns.

The few people, usually men, who did end up receiving work with oil palm could not necessarily, however, assume affluence or even a stable income. Diego, who had worked at a *NaturAceites* oil palm nursery in Polochic Valley some years back, confirmed what other people also told me. The work was precarious, only offered for few months (or even weeks at a time), it did not include health care or insurance and only provided a minimum wage, about Q74 per day. Diego was paid 85 quetzals for a twelve-hour day and his job was short-term, lasting for two months.

Only some jobs were permanent – or *more* permanent – but these were mostly the jobs for the skilled or perhaps semiskilled in supervision or refineries (Verité 2013, 31–33). Most research participants would not, however, qualify for those jobs since they were mainly from poor families with little or no education. It seemed as if the neoliberal tradition had brought an end to (more) permanent jobs at *fincas*, and turned work into only seasonal or short-term; often work was 15 days at work and 15 days off-work, and if a worker got sick he was forced to go to work just to not lose their job (see also Mingorría et al. 2013, 863, 866). The work with oil palm was also physically and mentally demanding: it required a daily commitment of some 12 hours as the 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. day at a plantation usually demanded extra time for commuting to, from and inside the massive plantations. Hence, the main alternative to traditional subsistence farming was *proletarianization* by the oil

palm company. If the household did not have land to cultivate on, income for a family was more precarious than before, for neither subsistence nor the position was secure (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 57; Hurtado and Sánchez 2011, 70). And as Mingorría et al. (2014) stated in their research, even people employed by oil palm plantations and cultivating land experienced higher levels of food insecurity than the ones relying only on subsistence crops and not working on plantations (863). Furthermore, Alonso-Fradejas (2012) has argued “[p]easant-farmed crops generate up to 10 times more “local wealth” than corporate sugar cane and oil palm” (517), and this wealth stays in the region, unlike flex crop profits (Dürr 2016; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 517).

According to field observations, a day’s pay at a plantation may hardly suffice for buying food *and* covering all other costs for a whole family of even just five people (most rural families encountered had closer to ten or more members). Assuming that the breadwinner of the family got a minimum wage of 74 quetzals³⁸, feeding a family of five (which in the Guatemalan scenario is a very small family) amongst all other costs (e.g. school, medication) could be challenging, especially if one’s hometown did not have a street market for locally produced food. Due to the higher rates of imported food and the vulnerability to world commodity price changes, food costs had increased. Less money to spend on foodstuffs for families had often brought about cuts to costs like health care or the children’s schooling³⁹ to secure food on the table at the very least (Hurtado and Sánchez 2011, 70).

³⁸ As previously mentioned, this was often disputed. Most jobs on plantations allegedly paid less, between 50-60 quetzals, and sometimes work was paid by the quantity or performance, which mostly only favoured the healthy, young men (Verité 2014, 55–57).

³⁹ During field research (summer 2014), the high expense of just over-the-counter medication was noted: a package of antihistamine, cough syrup and ibuprofen cost approximately 550 quetzals.

Diets appeared unbalanced as people mostly afforded to eat corn tortillas and *frijoles*⁴⁰, poorer families often only ate tortillas and chili (field notes from Alta Verapaz). Eggs (Q1-1.5/egg), dairy (Q15–17/litre) and meat (Q15–25/pound) were generally not parts of a rural diet (MAGA 2014; field work 2014), unless the household produced them. Even in this case, often they were sold rather than eaten – for instance a chicken was reported to be worth between 75 and up to 150 quetzals, depending on the location⁴¹. Growing chicken from fledglings to adults takes months, however, and requires an initial investment. In addition, keeping domestic animals in the areas of field research seemed more like a nuisance rather than benefit, as they were reported often dying due to the plague of flies in oil palm plantation areas (field notes, May-July 2014). The general opinion seemed to be that food security had decreased since the arrival of oil palm. Interviewees emphasized that before the plantations emerged they could still cultivate for subsistence, but the increasing shortage or losses of land and the need to buy food rather than grow it has posed additional difficulties for many families. Whether or not memories have grown sweeter with time, it seemed food security was at least somewhat granted prior to this wave of proletarianization combined with the rise of food imports (see also Figures 2 and 5 and Appendices C and D).

Although communities in Polochic and also elsewhere had been led to believe that the appearance of the plantations would bring wealth and work to everyone, the development that was promised years, even decades ago, was still yet to arrive: “They are liars!” The amount of locally produced food was decreasing, more food imported, the

⁴⁰ A pound of beans was Q7-10, dry corn was about Q40 for 25 pounds. Depending on the price and availability of other foodstuffs, the daily amount of corn per person was roughly one to four pounds; that is, a family of five would consume up an average of 12 pounds a day. Therefore, 25 pounds of corn may only suffice for two days of food, one pound of dry beans on the other hand could be easily consumed by just a family of five in a day. This would already take Q30 of the Q74 daily wage of a job that is only short term and/or temporary: a normal duration of a work period was 15 days of work and 15 days off (e.g. Mingorría et al. 2014, 856). Families from Fray estimated their daily food expenditure as 100 quetzals (field notes May–July 2014). As mentioned in Chapter 2, it has been argued that in the northern lowlands of Guatemala, minimum wage will no longer suffice for the essential food items (Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 516).

⁴¹ In Fray, Alta Verapaz, food in general appeared to be far more costly than for instance on the highlands of Guatemala (e.g. Quetzaltenango).

prices rising, and diet changing (fieldwork May-July 2014). “There is no development!” A mayor from the Franja had given a statement regarding the developmental programmes of *NaturAceites* to the Guatemalan newspaper *Plaza Pública*:

I have told them: I will talk about you nicely when you put up a school or a health center or a project of potable water for a community. But what {the company does} is painting our schools and town halls with their colours. That is not social assistance...their participation in [programmes of social enabling] is very superficial, very cosmetic. There is nothing real, nothing concrete. (Escalón 2014, translated by author)

The growing production of oil palm and its derivatives, has seemed to bring along the "suppression of alternative forms of production and consumption" (Harvey 2003, 145), challenging the Mayan culture, livelihoods and even diet. This has frequently resulted in proletarianization by the palm oil companies, as people have been compelled to seek work from them (Verité 2013, 27; 42–3). If one is fortunate enough to get a job (ibid. 42–3), the low wage makes supporting a large family barely easier, especially when there is no land under cultivation. Without any land for subsistence, coupled with the disappearance of local food markets and the emergence of supermarkets, poor peasants and rural people face increasing food insecurity or malnutrition and even exacerbated poverty (e.g. Dürr 2016, 4, 11, 12–13; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, 516–518; Hurtado 2009).

Policing the new enclosures and the dispossession of rights

A man with sad eyes had a slumped posture, as if it had been despair that sunk it. For three months, the former entrepreneur and father of five had been unemployed: one day, the bank would no longer mortgage his plot for credit.

The plot was no longer his.

Although he had once bought it and had the deed for it, it did not matter anymore. From then on, the owner of his house and his plot was the company, *NaturAceites*.

The whole truth had begun to quickly unveil in the town since the beginning of 2013. The company now owned half of the whole town, without any

financial transactions taking place in the vast majority of the cases. Only in the case of bigger *fincas* or bigger grasslands, often owned by wealthy ranchers, a nominal amount of money had changed hands. Thereafter, the former owners of those plots were usually implicated with palm. They were often the ones to speak highly of the business.

The man was distraught. He did not know what to do and that is what he reiterated.

As he could not get credit, he was unable to work.

"I barely got to fifth grade. I don't have a job and our poor kids are suffering. Now, they are starving."

Without any education, no credit from the bank, and no land, he had *nothing*.

This kind of appropriation of land, land grabbing, did not go without opposition from the people, who were losing their lands and homes. Regardless, the parties concerned with palm tended to have something up their sleeve, making protesting against the emergence of more palm not an option to most, because of the fear they instilled.

"It is like a war. Now they say that if we will resist more, more than this, they will appoint hitmen. So, they will come and kill the people – the guys who are fighting [the palm]. And they have threatened to kill. Therefore, the land organizations will not help much either, because they might get assassinated...on behalf of the company."

In December 2013, a reputedly peaceful protest⁴² to demand their lands back from the palm company led to the riot police violently suppressing the opposition and sending numerous men to jail.

"Together with the mayor, the governor of Cobán, Alta Verapaz, sends the riot police so that they beat up the people, so that they won't demonstrate. So that we would not protest or ask for our rights. That's what they do here. What will we do? We can't do anything anymore!"

Being an opponent of palm had led to the man being blacklisted among many others; this had resulted in the job opportunities for many completely disappearing in town. Townspeople told me about the list the mayor and the company had. Some had even seen it⁴³.

⁴² Sam 2013.

⁴³ An article by *Centro de Medios Independientes* refers to this list (CMI-G 2014a). Also a Verité (2014) report on the Guatemalan oil palm industry labour refers to similar blacklisting (34, 39, 54, 87, 88).

As people had only recently heard the mayor publically announce any action against *NaturAceites* would result in prison and eventually hitmen, the fear and hopelessness was obvious.

You have very little reason to live, a close affiliate of the mayor had even told the man.

It was evident that there were very few people or entities to turn to for help. Fondo de Tierras would not help with land, banks would not give loans, governmental institutions were slow or useless and most administrative personnel were corrupt. Only the non-governmental organizations were there, and often even their hands were tied.

"What can we do?" the man repeated throughout the interview.

The people were cornered.

(Based on field notes in Fray, on July 13th 2015)

During the first weeks of Guatemala, the late Don Miguel, a former civil war activist and Spanish teacher recited a poem that seemed to reflect the stories told:

*En este lugar maldito
donde reina la tristeza
no se castiga el delito
se castiga la pobreza⁴⁴*

(José Revueltas n.d.)

Going through field notes and interviews, it had increasingly started to seem that the "real" criminals were in high up positions, among the tycoons and the political "elite", while the people either in prison or otherwise heavily persecuted and dispossessed, were the poor people, often of indigenous origin⁴⁵. "There are no rights for the poor, only for the rich," said a former tradesman in Fray.

⁴⁴ Translated by author: "In this damned place where sadness reigns it is not crime that is punished but poverty."

⁴⁵ See also TeleSUR 2015b.

People had seen it over and over again. Oil palm companies had arrived, promised development and possibly bribed local administrative authorities⁴⁶ either with large sums of money or new cars. "There are no laws for the companies!" This utterance was understandable: authorities seemed to just look the other way, or even pave the way for the operations of the companies, making them an attractive destination for foreign investment.

A common way of especially the state to assist the oil palm expansion was to instill a 'climate of fear' (e.g. Harvey 2003, 205) by placing security forces around plantations; this was to prevent the public from using or entering the new enclosures (Buck 2013, 52–69), facilitating the ongoing dispossessions and land control grabbing, and by attempting to make the public too scared to protest. "It is not the president that orders, it is the rich who do so," said the 30-year old tradesman, who had also lost everything to the emergence of palm in Fray.

In Polochic Valley, the people from centuries-old communities were treated as "invaders" and criminals while the company, *NaturAceites*, was expanding its control over their lands and dispossessing people of resources; that is, 'appropriating the assets' (Harvey 2003, 145). Similarly, the other companies like *Palmas de Ixcan* (in Chisec) and *REPSA* (in Petén, Northern border of Alta Verapaz) appeared to be guilty of dispossession. Polochic was riddled with armed troops and plantations were guarded excessively; the people in Fray told the same story – even though it could clearly be seen.

"The army is against us," many interviewees exclaimed. Santiago from Polochic Valley noted:

The presence of the army here in the communities is discrimination. They discriminate the poor a lot because [the soldiers] are more on the side of the

⁴⁶ According to the interviewees (including people in municipal posts), the governors of several municipalities in Alta Verapaz and on the Franja Transversal del Norte were allegedly corrupt and pro-palm. This does not seem impossible, as government authorities have been strongly connected to peasant dispossession, even facilitating it (see also CICIG 2016; Juarez 2016).

rich than the poor. That is, the poor they have treated...like animals. They have not given us the respect they should. Like the constitution would state.

Four of his friends were under house arrest, unable to leave their communities, because the result would have been incarceration. They were the leaders of the ancient communities resisting the entrance of palm. The development once promised had never arrived, and now the people were invaders and criminals on their own land. As an indigenous woman summed the situation before palm in a land rights conference: "our biggest crime is to defend our life!" For the vast majority of Guatemalans, especially the indigenous people, land equalled life.

People in dire need of firewood, or entering plantations or their roads for other reasons, were frightened by gunshots or assaults, even killed. As the interviewees disclosed, in Fray and Polochic Valley especially, protesting against the emergence of palm plantations or the companies in general was deemed as either resisting development or even as a crime. Yet usually, people seemed to have a legitimate reason for their opposition. Often, it was a resource issue, since land grabbing or land *control* grabbing had produced difficulties for the mere existence of many communities and their livelihoods.

In the whole country, the people who were implicated in land disputes or had protested or worked against palm in any way, frequently received death threats. Along the Franja, people in two communities refused to be interviewed for this research, due to an earlier situation, where *Palmas de Ixcán* had sent people to "spy" on the communities, masquerading as researchers. Apparently, the consequences had been disadvantageous, as the communities thought I was only another spy for a palm company. On the other hand, an organization on the FTN that had worked on a campaign to convince people not to sell their subsistence plots for palm companies, had their headquarters shattered with machine gun fire, in a clear attempt to scare them away.

Other people had not been lucky to miss the bullet. Reportedly, some had already gone to prison or even died for their implication in disputes with the companies. In September 2015, a Petén teacher-activist was assassinated some two months after he had

succeeded in bringing about the shutdown of a REPSA palm oil plant, which had severely contaminated La Pasión river.⁴⁷

In Fray, my contact was to take me to photograph the pollution of the river, where also the flies were allegedly born. Our plan, however, was halted due to the risk of getting caught, for the company was working on the land next to the waste pipe. Reputedly, the contamination had gone on from 2011 (Guereña and Zepeda 2013, 47), when the Fray palm oil extracting plant had started⁴⁸, and was continuing at the time of the field research, in summer 2014. At the same time, the potable water was running low as the municipality restricted the supply. It is noteworthy, however, that the people of Fray could do very little about this, as the municipal administration was corrupt. Dissidents faced death threats if they made a noise about the oil palm operations, although the interviewees asserted they "*never* bring weapons to the meetings," when I asked if they were armed at the Fray demonstrations. The police forces were, however, sure to suppress protests with violent measures⁴⁹ and certain media sources regularly portrayed protesters of “megaprojects” as violent or aggressive (field notes summer 2014). Other sources of media outlets portrayed a very different picture, however (field notes summer 2014).

Summary

After conducting the fieldwork, the Guatemalan oil palm expansion appeared to exhibit what David Harvey (2003) had labelled as *accumulation by dispossession* under the title of *new imperialism* (esp. 145–82), placed in this thesis within the *neoliberal food regime* (Pechlaner and Otero 2008; 2010). The principal denominator showing a manifest connection between the aforementioned theoretical concepts was the critical role of state

⁴⁷ http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150918_guatemala_homicidio_activista_ab. Accessed Nov 23, 2015.

⁴⁸ <http://www.estrategiaynegocios.net/empresasymangement/empresas/458927-330/naturaceites-inaugura-planta-extractora>. Accessed Nov 23, 2015.

⁴⁹ <http://www.prensalibre.com/alta-verapaz/manifestantes-desalojados-causan-disturbios-mercado-Fray-Bartolome-de-las-Casas-0-1045095694>. Accessed Dec 1, 2015.

actions in the oil palm expansion. Due to Guatemala's chronic power inequality between creole descendants vis-à-vis the indigenous or mestizos, and the creole influence over state decisions, the rural population is easy dispossess or oppress in the face of a growing oil palm industry. Hence, the abuse of power and state interventions, including the MALR, appear to be the main instruments in carrying out the dispossessions. What I have done here is to put some flesh and blood into these theoretical concepts, based on the actual lived experiences of people in rural Guatemala.

There were certain chief factors that would frequently emerge in the interviews. First, large-scale capitalist projects, such as those of oil palm plantations, were executed with constant assistance from the state. In this case, even state institutions such as Fondo De Tierras (a pivotal part of the MALR policy framework) and administrative authorities, such as mayors, were frequently implicated, seemingly smoothing the way for the expansion of oil palm.

Second, as a form of state assistance or intervention, the oil palm expansion had the state's "monopoly of violence and definitions of legality" (Harvey 2003, 89, 145) on its side to carry out the projects⁵⁰. That is, with the presence of heavily armed personnel, military and police forces as well as private security guards, the state and companies were cultivating fear and curbing actions against the operations. Many scholars, including David Harvey (2003, 205), have referred to the climate of fear as a vehicle for implementing things otherwise hard to execute at risk of public opposition: policies, wars, or, as in this case, large-scale enterprises threatening the livelihoods of many. Hence, fostering the fear to protest, disagree, enter or claim resources would prove to be a rather efficient tool in the case of the Guatemalan oil palm expansion.

With its security forces, the state was ready to dispossess, castigate or eliminate opponents – even people, who legally owned the land oil palm companies had recently

⁵⁰ Also pertinent to other forms of export capitalism, or industries in which foreign investment is essentially involved; for instance sugar cane and ethanol production, mines, and hydroelectricity.

seized. As the state and tycoons mostly held the power also over the institutions that 'define legality', it appeared irrelevant if the operations of companies were illegal. Furthermore, people were often too afraid to act against the expansion, as well as too poor for the often required judicial assistance. Thus, the dispossessed are often reduced to being spectators as the 'definitions of legality' become blurred for the profit of the companies, the small upper class, or the "elite".

The evident suppression of dissidence in pursuance of the production of oil palm would thus also appear to involve dispossession of rights (Harvey 2005, 178). In addition, the involvement of the state and the restricted upper class of criollos (or other wealthy foreigners), and their use of security forces in "policing [their] new enclosures⁵¹" (Buck 2013) as well as maintaining the status quo are certainly typical characteristics of accumulation by dispossession. Guatemala's case of this amid the growing oil palm industry shows that the phenomenon does indeed take varying forms as Harvey has argued (2003, 149). Furthermore, its repercussions are not merely limited to the losses of land; rather, accumulation by dispossession appears to strongly impact numerous aspects of life, including (the fulfilment of) human rights.

⁵¹ Here, the fenced in areas of oil palm.

Chapter 4.

Conclusions

Besides using FAOSTAT macrodata to contextualize this research, along with the use of existing secondary sources, the key part of this research was the fieldwork in summer 2014, conducted in the Franja Transversal del Norte region, an important area of the blooming oil palm industry. By means of participant observation and interviews, this thesis has sought to capture the voice of the people affected, and especially, those dispossessed.

Contrary to the vast amount of literature on land grabbing for food, feed, fuel or other purposes, there is much to the phenomenon that is often missed in research. As argued in critical agrarian studies, focusing only on the dispossession of *land* may lead to the failure to observe the other integral factors (Borras et al. 2012). This thesis explored some of the missing dimensions and dispossessions of especially (land) *control grabbing*. It also examined the involvement of state intervention and political power relations in an effort to analyze the new imperialism (Harvey 2003) in the form of agricultural extractivism and in the midst of the neoliberal food regime.

Skewed power relations – the state and the henchmen

The issue in Guatemala appeared to be not necessarily the general *lack* of land; rather, it was about who had *control* over it. The inequality of this control meant the dispossession of land and other resources which brought about a convoy of other socio-economic and ecological issues. In fact, according to the field research, land *control* grabbing resulted in the dispossessions of livelihoods and assets; peasant agriculture and food; clean nature and its resources; health, safety and freedom.

The main reasons for the markedly successful land control grabbing and the resulting dispossessions were the support of state – to some extent, even international entities – and the considerable inequalities in political power. The conditions for

accumulation by dispossession seemed ideal as it was shadowed by the climate of fear and the authorities' threat of retaliation. One of the most important conditions for land control grabs was the state's facilitation or maintenance of land inequality and the supposed legality of land grabs. As Harvey (2003) argued: "the state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes [of accumulation by dispossession]" (145). That is, in this case, the market-assisted land reform (MALR) (e.g. FONTIERRAS), and other forms of state intervention, were major aides in the oil palm expansion (see also Granovsky-Larsen 2013; Alonso-Fradejas 2012, Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2011; Grandia 2012; Pechlaner and Otero 2010).

In addition to the inadequate actions – obscure or lacking responses and processes of FONTIERRAS amid land battles – participants also insinuated the corruption of at least some land fund employees. This does not seem impossible, especially in light of the dispossessions of rural people orchestrated by organized crime and land fund authorities, exposed in spring 2016 (CICIG 2016; Juarez 2016; Palma 2016). Guatemalan oil palm businesses appear to carry out similar dispossessions or land grabs yet they are not sanctioned, perhaps because the business owners belong to the same circles with the political and economic "elite" (see e.g. Palencia Prado 2014; Solano 2013). Regardless of the loose threads, it seems fair to argue that the coercive state and the distinctive political power relations, which have formed since the colonial ages, play a critical role in the development and forceful expansion of the palm industry in Guatemala.

New imperialism in the neoliberal food regime

The global food-feed-fuel complex and the world-wide growth of flex crop production (Borras et al. 2012) have resulted in the striking increase of oil palm cultivation in Guatemala. As this thesis showed, the oil palm expansion has been nurtured by political power discrepancies and the MALR, a part of the neoregulation of the agricultural sector of the country (see also Pechlaner and Otero 2008; 2010). The neoliberal food regime and its state intervention, influenced by supranational institutions, have forwarded and supplemented the processes of accumulation by dispossession, bringing about losses of

land, livelihoods, access to resources, locally produced food, and so forth. The notable decreases in Guatemalan foodstuff production resulting from the dispossessions have led to a steadily growing demand for especially basic food staples such as corn, primarily imported from the United States (FAOSTAT 2016; see also Figures 2, 3 and 5, and Appendices C and D). As the basic staple foods are increasingly imported, particularly the rural poor (see Appendix B) are susceptible to the effects of food price volatility while possibly working for the export-industry which caters to the needs of northern trading partners. The value-added products of multinational giants (such as *Unilever* in cosmetics, chemicals and processed food) made with palm oil are sold to other foreign giants (such as *Walmart*), further advancing the neoliberal food regime (e.g. Otero et al. 2013, 273).

In addition to the World Bank-promoted MALR, the international realm has been involved in the country's agricultural development in also other ways. The threatened plantation agriculture of Guatemala was earlier supported by the United States as it induced a reverse to the revolutionary Agrarian Reform in the 1950s. Since then, the dispossessions of peasants in the wake of flex crop plantations have been conducted with the assistance of Guatemala's state security apparatus, receiving financial assistance from abroad – for instance, the United States and CARSI dollars in the 21st century (e.g. U.S. Department of State 2015). Also large regional and international banks continue to endorse and give loans to the oil palm industry. On the other hand, combined with the flex crop expansion, DR-CAFTA maintains the “uneven and combined dependency” (Otero et al. 2013) between Guatemala and the United States while the American funds facilitate the dispossessions of the expansion. This feeds the food-import dependency by reducing the local food production and, in some cases, pushing dispossessed peasants to the proletarianization in export agriculture.

Future research

Guatemala's persistent problem of malnutrition and poverty in an era of decreasing employment in traditional agriculture during the growth of flex crops demands further investigation. It is thus integral to examine to what extent the emergence of the neoliberal

food regime, rising flex crop production and DR-CAFTA have affected or induced the aforementioned developments. Also the specific implications of the neoliberal food regime on the Guatemalan diet during the flex crop expansion require more research, especially regarding the poor majority. This thesis has indicated dispossessions may cause poverty and unemployment, but the exact causes of hunger and malnutrition are still unclear. Furthermore, the socio-economic standing and opinions of oil palm workers and their families have received little research, yet it has been suggested the industry offers minimum wage at best, job insecurity is high, and landless oil palm workers face a risk of poverty and hunger (Hurtado and Sánchez 2011; Verité 2014). The expansion of flex crops has also been argued to be detrimental to peasant agriculture and regional economies in Guatemala (e.g. Dürr 2016).

Finally, field research raised questions about the socio-ecological sustainability of palm oil production. As oil palm is one of the most important flex crops globally and its sustainable production primarily relies on the RSPO legitimization, it is essential to lift the “cloak of social and environmental improvement” (Johnson 2014, 198) and further study the industry. The clear socio-economic and environmental concerns that surface from research have often been disregarded along with the fostering of market-based sustainability approaches which have largely benefited the businesses (see also Marin-Burgos et al. 2015; Johnson 2014). The widespread distress of especially rural people raises concerns of local governance while also pointing at a possibly flawed global commodity chain in which Western consumers, manufacturers, trading partners, and societies are all involved.

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Appendix A. Major transportation routes in Central America



Figure A1 Guatemala and the Central American “PPP transportation corridors” (Grandia 2013, 241).

Source: IDB in Grandia 2013, 241; used with permission from author.

Appendix B. Poverty in Guatemala

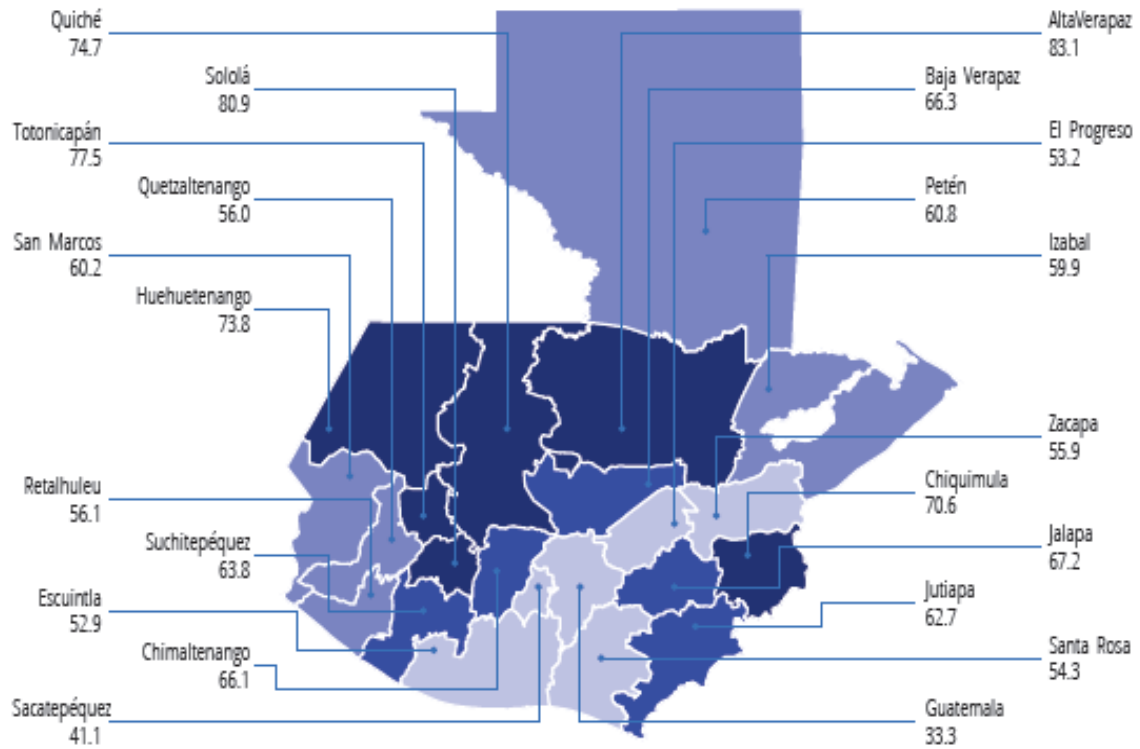


Figure B1 Poverty, by department (%).

Stronger color indicates higher percentage.

Source: INE 2015b, 6.

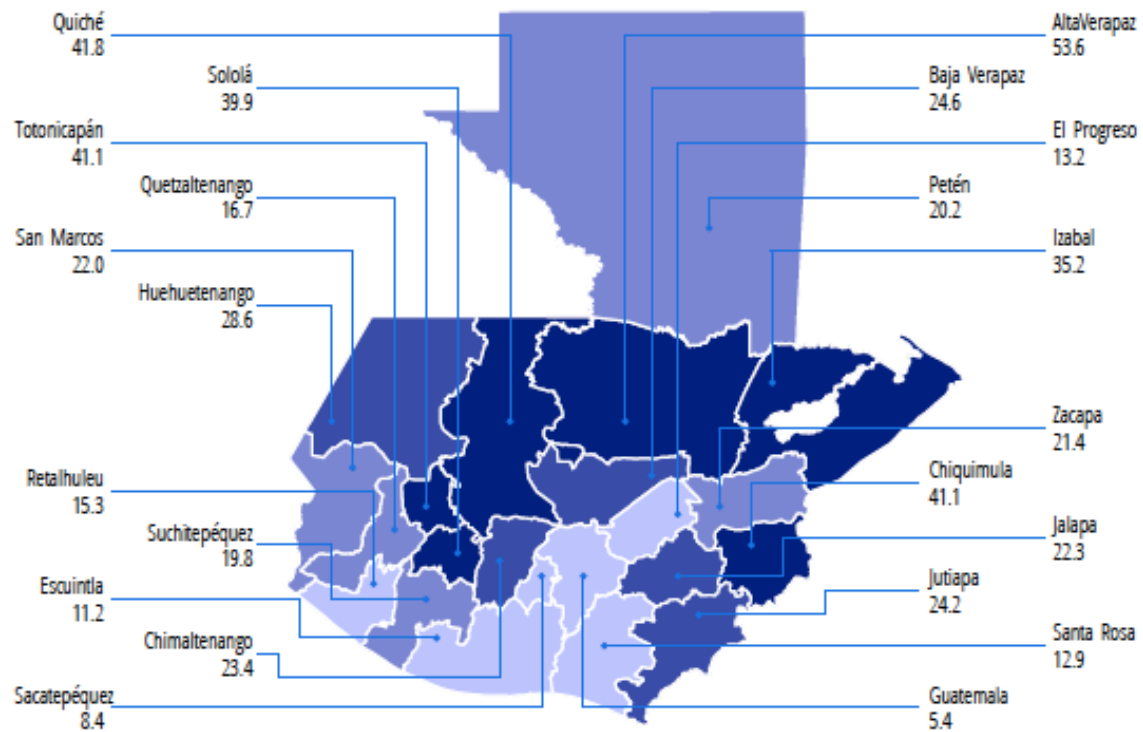


Figure B2 Extreme poverty, by department (%).

Stronger colour indicates higher percentage.

Source: INE 2015b, 10.

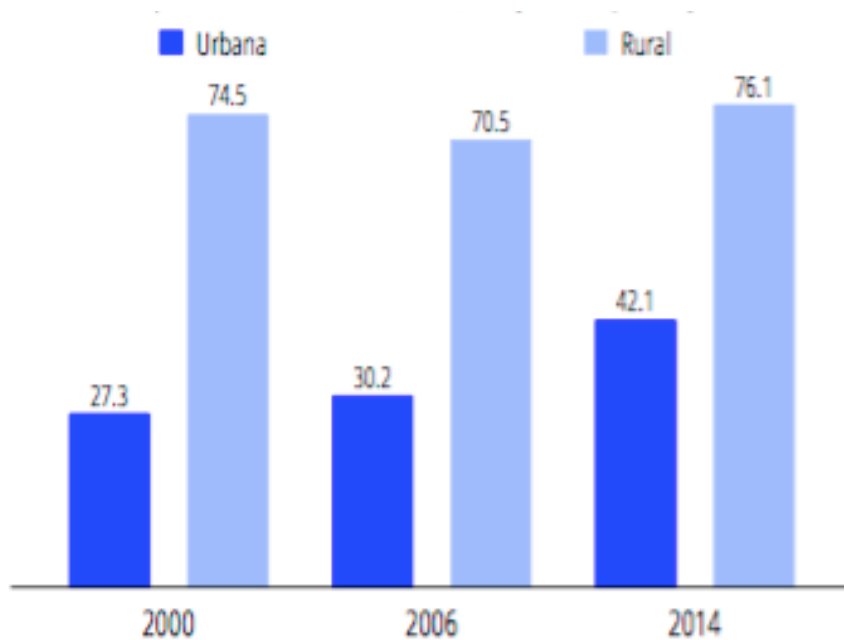


Figure B3 Poverty by area of residence (%).

Source: INE 2015b, 4.

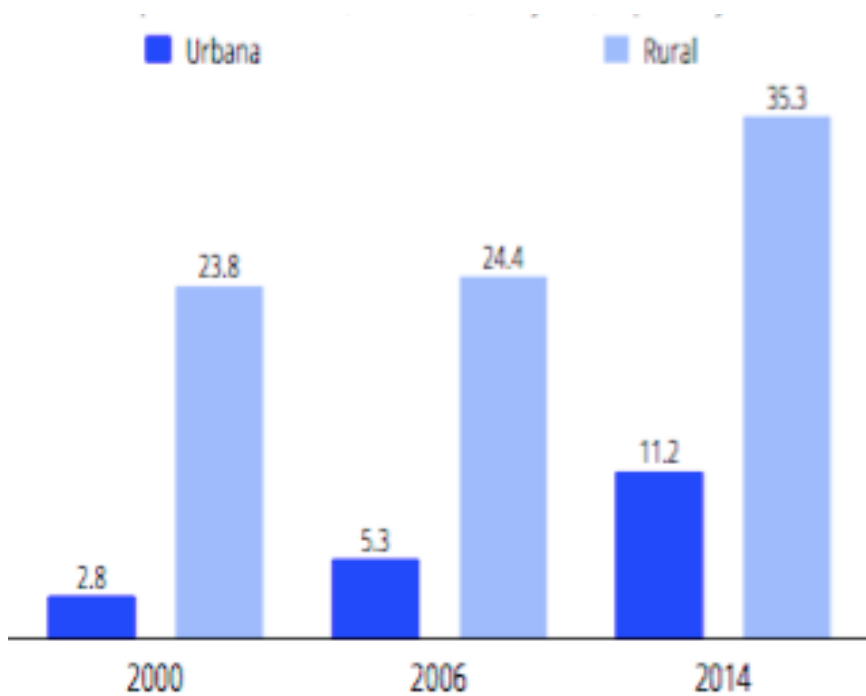


Figure B4 Extreme poverty by area of residence (%).

Source: INE 2015b, 9.

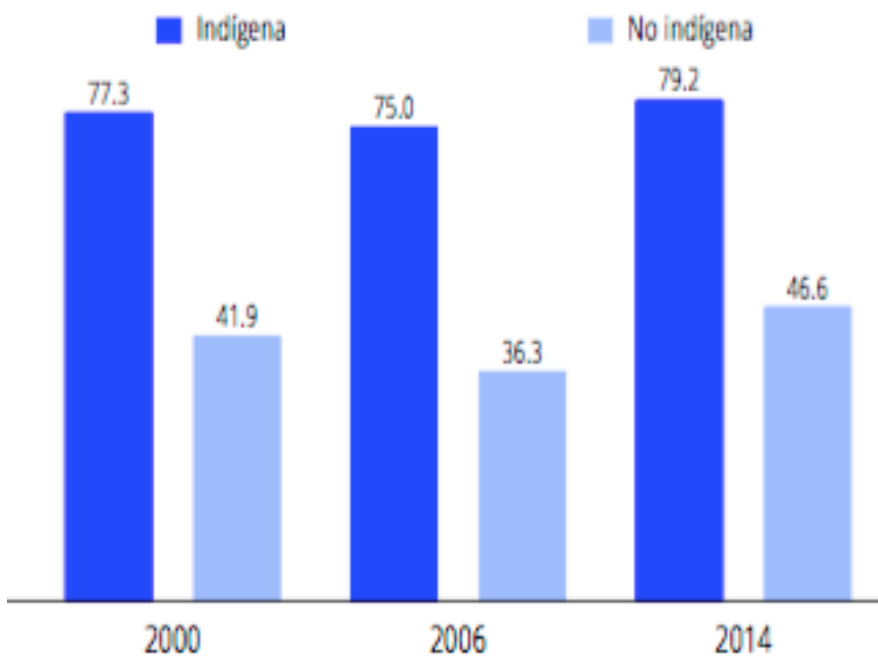


Figure B5 Poverty by ethnicity (%).

Source: INE 2015b, 4.

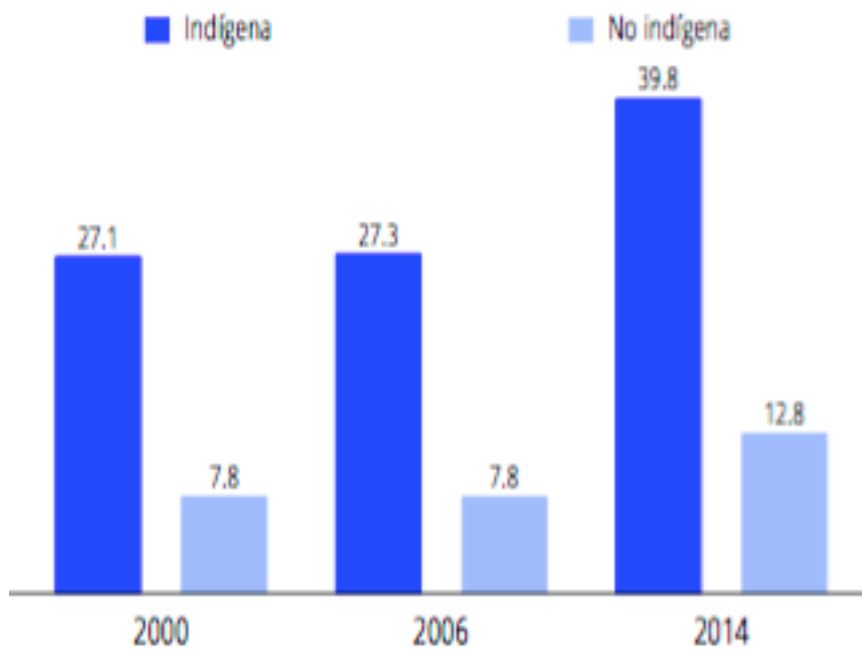


Figure B6 Extreme poverty by ethnicity (%).

Source: INE 2015b, 9.

Appendix C. Decreasing agricultural employment in Guatemala



Figure C1 “Jobs reduced in agriculture”

Source: Larios in *Prensa Libre*, May 25th, 2014

The article by Roxana Larios draws from the ENA (national investigation on agriculture) of 2013 and interviews with personnel of the national institute of statistics (INE).

Chart, top left. “Increase in area”: the cultivated area of oil palm has grown 271 per cent in ten years, more than other top agri-exports, having surpassed both cardamom and rubber tree in hectareage.

Chart, top right, bottom right. During the ten years from 2003 to 2013, the hectarage of traditional food (e.g. bean, maize, rice and vegetables) has decreased whereas the hectarage of the major agri-exports (including oil palm) has grown.

The introducing sentence of the article states the agricultural employment has decreased from being 70 per cent in the year 1950, to 31 percent in 2013.

Moreover, according to the second paragraph of the article, the employment in agriculture went from 42 percent of the population in 2003 to 31 percent in 2013, that is, 26 percent in 10 years.

Appendix D. Agricultural trade of Guatemala

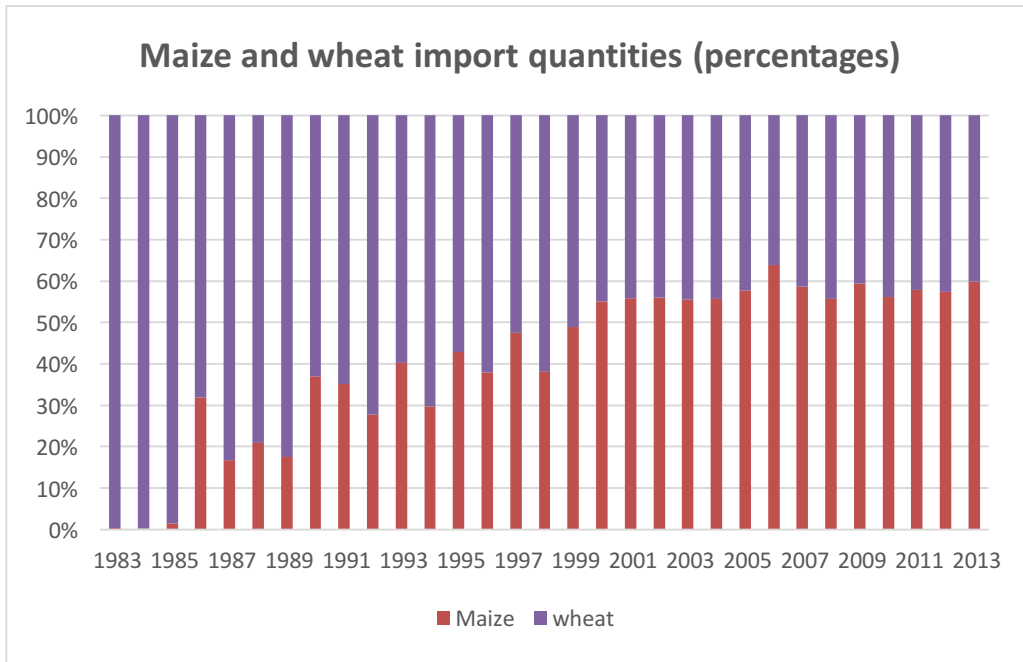


Figure D1 Imports of two staple grains.

Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

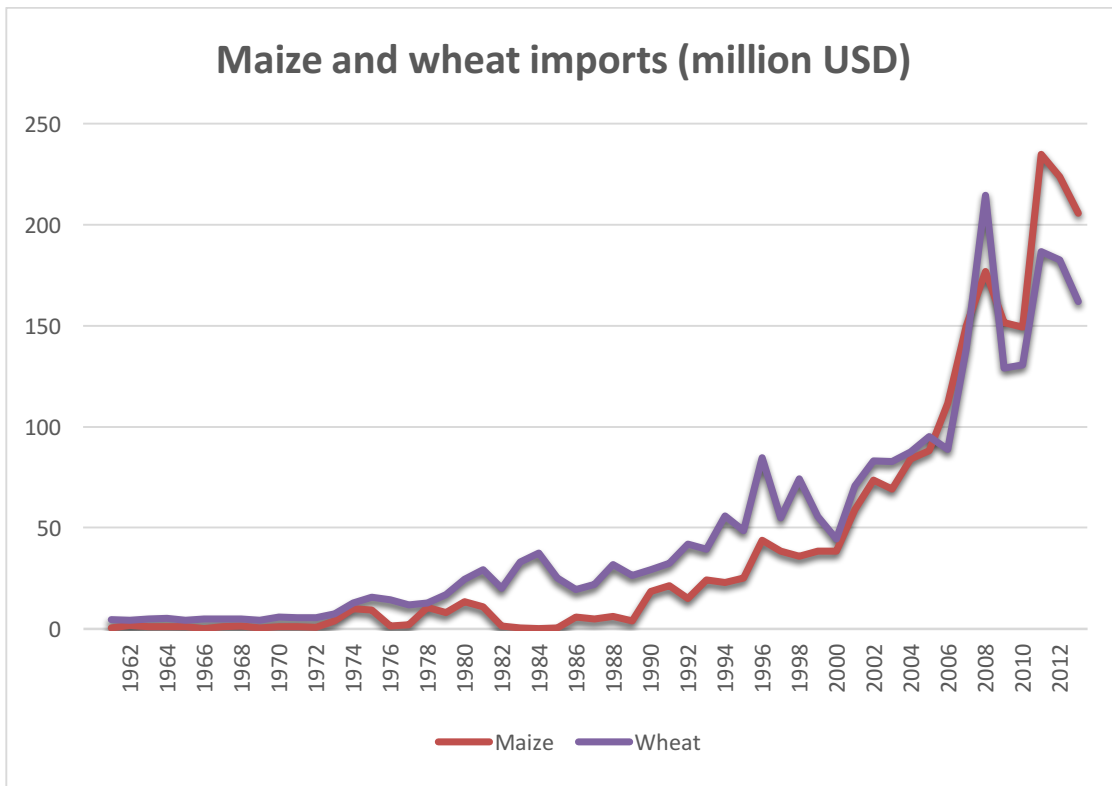


Figure D2 Maize and wheat imports in US dollars, since 1961.
 Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

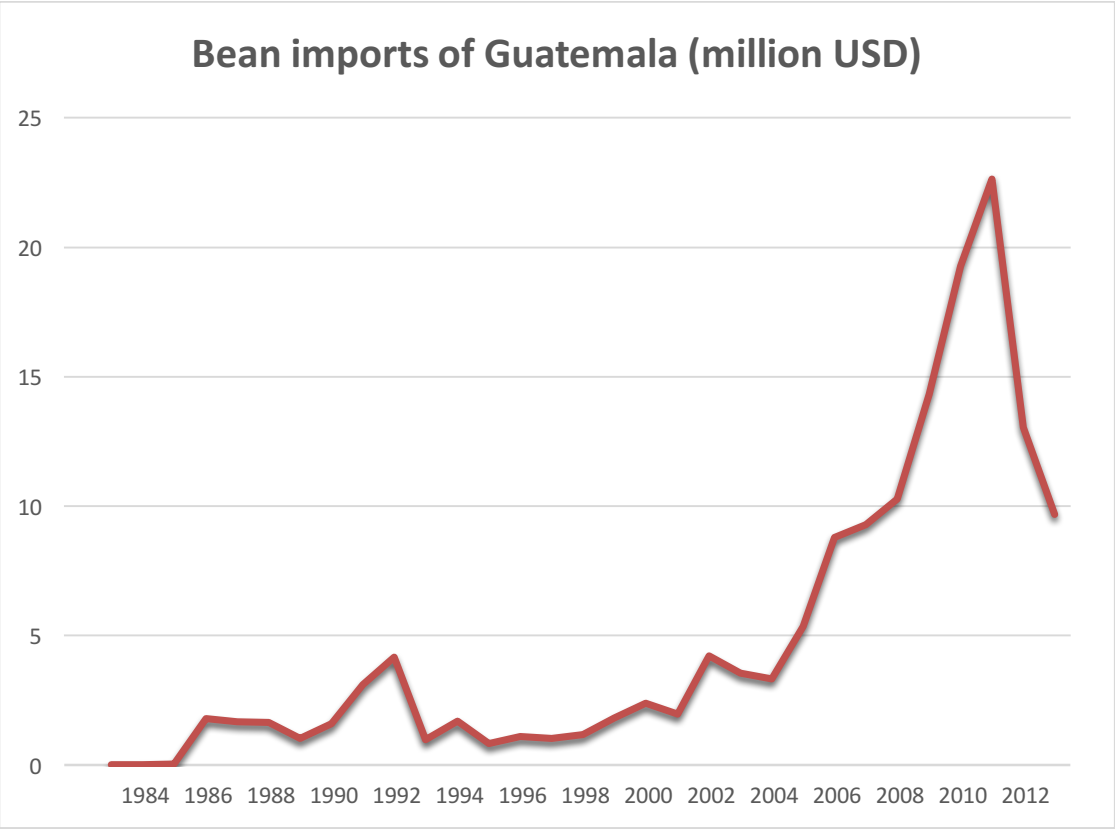


Figure D3 Bean imports of Guatemala.
Source: FAOSTAT 2016.

Appendix E. Translation of Fondo de Tierras press release

Comunicado de Prensa



Figure E1 Fondo de Tierras press release regarding internal investigation.

Source: www.fontierras.gt. April 15, 2016. Accessed June 28, 2016.

Press Release

The directing council and the administration of the land fund

In relation to the complaints presented by the Public Ministry and the CICIG before the corresponding judge, in which the use of anomalous procedures is reported in regards to the regularization of lands of the State with the intervention of some former employees of Fondo de Tierras:

We declare that

1. We recognize the work of the Public Ministry and the CICIG in its legal mandate by initiating the investigation of the reported acts before the corresponding authority.
2. The Directive Council of FONTIERRAS in completion of its tasks, and especially in its vigilance of the correct application of the law that governs it, has collaborated with the

Public Ministry (MP) and the CICIG over the course of the investigation of this case, providing the necessary information. It has also unanimously decided to continue cooperating with the authorities of justice, so that within the parameters of the due process it facilitates all the information that might be solicited in line with the investigation, in light that as the corresponding body it is the one primarily concerned in establishing the culpability of those implicated.

3. Finally, we publically recognize that in relation to these repudiating reports, we have commissioned a series of internal audits of the programs of regularization and adjudication of lands of the State in different regions of the country. If any anomaly were to be reported, the corresponding reports will be presented to the Public Ministry, as it has been done in the past.

(Literal translation by Katya Quintanilla)