Press release

Palm oil leads to land grabbing

Berne / Lucerne, 4th September 2017 – The massive growth of the palm oil industry has led to land grabbing, as ever more plantations are established to meet burgeoning demand. In the process, human rights are violated and habitats destroyed. Even within the framework of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, palm oil as currently produced is not in any way sustainable. In response, Bread for all and the Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund call on retailers and manufacturers in Switzerland to reduce their use of palm oil.

Due to the expansion of palm oil plantations, more than 190,000 square kilometres of rainforest and peat lands have disappeared worldwide - an area more than four and a half times the size of Switzerland. A consequence is that local inhabitants are left without the means to earn a living. Moreover, the use of palm oil is widespread – for example, in food, detergents, cosmetics, and in fuels abroad. Swiss customs statistics alone indicate that over the past twenty years imports of unprocessed palm oil have more than tripled. A study in 2015 by the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment also found that similarly large quantities of palm oil are imported as processed products. This is borne out by information provided by major Swiss retailers that about one-sixth of all their products include palm oil. Bread for all and the Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund urge major Swiss distributors to also reduce their use of palm oil.

Human rights violated – despite sustainability certification
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have long warned of the dire consequences of cultivating palm oil plantations. The conversion of forestlands to plantations has been identified by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as one of the main causes of deforestation. In the span of just a few years, Indonesia's palm oil trees have supplanted the country's diverse rainforests in more than half of the area where the forests previously existed. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was founded in 2004 to counter trends like this. RSPO established the Certified Sustainable Palm Oil standard for plantation operators, traders and processors to ensure that the voices and rights of people in the cultivated areas of the tropics are respected. However, the reality on the ground is different, as the example of Indonesia demonstrates. In 2013, the National Land Office registered 3000 land conflicts between palm oil firms, including numerous RSPO members, and local communities in Indonesia. Serious problems were found on four RSPO certified plantations belonging to the Indonesian DSN Dharma Satya Nusantara Group - an RSPO member since 2012. The relevant communities were either not informed or consulted, or were given insufficient information about the land allocated to the Group. Access to their fields was limited; primary forest areas were threatened by the Group’s activities; and there has been massive deterioration in both the amount of water and the quality of river water. There are also uncertainties with regards to the amount and extent of compensation payments.

More “greenwashing” than noticeable improvements
«We don't see any difference between RSPO-certified plantations and others», said Anton Widjaya, director of the Indonesian Forum for Environmental Enquiries (Walhi), one of the most prominent environmental organisations in the country. Further research by Walhi, a partner organisation of Bread for all, confirmed «RSPO-certified companies in the Kapuas Hulu and Sintang regions have violated basic RSPO rules». Individual complaints include local inhabitants not being informed in a timely or comprehensive manner about visits to the villages, and not being free to decide on planned projects on their soil. Plantations have also been made directly by rivers, within protected forests, or on steep slopes without terracing to
protect against erosion. «RSPO is mainly ‘greenwashing’ to ease the consciences of
European buyers and processors of palm oil, as well as the banks and financial institutions
that are involved», said Widjaya.

Call for less consumption
Nonetheless, during the fifteen years of the RSPO’s existence, the growth of plantation areas
has slowed. In 2014 the area devoted to plantations reached 19.7 million hectares (197,000
square kilometres), roughly 50 percent more as before the RSPO standard was established.
Research by Bread for all and the Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund in spring 2017 showed that the
economic interests of large financial investors, including some from Switzerland, are behind
these plantations. The only way to deflate some of the damaging pressure this puts on the
local populations and the environment is to reduce consumption. This is why the Swiss
Catholic Lenten Fund and Bread for all are calling on major Swiss distributors to use less
palm oil, and on consumers to support us in this effort.

Further information:
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Bread for all – We encourage change
Bread for all is the Swiss Protestant churches’ development organisation. We promote new models of
food production and economic exchange both in the global North and South on the basis of cooperation
between people and the respect for natural resources. We empower people to partake in this change
through awareness-raising and promising alternatives.