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Original title: [So will die ETH Lebensmittelkonzerne mit Greenpeace und WWF versöhnen – aber kann das gelingen?](#) (Translation: This is how ETH wants to reconcile food companies with Greenpeace and WWF – But can it work?)

Are NGO-representatives turning into capitalists when playing the palm oil Monopoly?

by Xenia Klaus

Palm oil is a hot topic. A research group at ETH chooses a new approach: for one morning, we should become palm oil farmers. Here my experience.

Oh how I hated these rounds of Monopoly with my fanatic brother, who was always able to grab the “Paradeplatz”, my cheating sister and my mother, who did frankly not care about all that unfairness. I am not a person who likes to play board games. Nevertheless, I agreed to play one for a whole morning. I told myself that if Greenpeace, WWF and the Embassy of Cameroon could make time, so could I, and represent *das Lamm* at this game session. The topic was going to be palm oil. My attention was caught.

Smallholder no. 3 spills her coffee at the First Secretary’s feet

I regret my choice quite quickly: while the representative from the Luc Hoffmann Institute, an offshoot of WWF, takes the seat to my right, the First Secretary of the Embassy of Cameroon takes the one to my left. The problem: he wants to chat. In French. I take a big sip of coffee to cope with the stress, burn myself and almost splutter the Cappuccino on to his perfectly white shirt. He finds the situation funny, I don’t. Therefore I am very happy that the game is about to start; my French is just so rusty.

The game, developed by researchers at ETH and their partners, is called CoPalCam and simulates the oil palm supply-chain in Cameroon. We are 18 players and about 9 game masters gathered this morning in what is probably the prettiest meeting room at ETH, high up in the tower of the CHN-building with a view over the whole city of Zurich.

We are distributed over two “valleys” without communication between them. So actually, we are going to play two separate games. Each valley has one big, one middle-sized and five smallholder farmers. I belong to the last group: I am Smallholder no. 3. Additionally two players run together the industrial mill. And a game master runs the local artisanal mill.

What am I supposed to do? Good question. We are not given a specific goal, but I’m pretty sure that surviving might be a good start. Each player gets an ID-card, which states the seasonal cost of living of his family. These costs are to be paid twice a year, once after the high season and once after the low season. The seasons are so named because the Oil Palm produces a lot during the high season, and much less in the low season.

After harvesting, we have two options: the local artisanal mill or the larger “industrial” mill. NGO-representatives at my table sneer at the sheer mention of the word “industrial”. Well, this is going to be fun. The local mill pays a fixed price, announced at the beginning of the season. The industrial mill is far away, and even though I could touch it from my seat, delivery is only possible with a truck. The players running the industrial mill are free to fix their prices.

We do not receive more information. Neither do the real farmers in Cameroon, we are told; and life is full of surprises anyways. I’m getting more and more nervous.

Well at least I’m not the only one. I catch quite some perplexed looks. Even for people who are familiar with palm oil issues, this is an unfamiliar situation. Later on, the leader of the research group will tell me that this is one of the goals: make people leave their usual roles with their usual points of view and their predefined opinions. Is he going to succeed? Are the NGO-representatives going to become greedy capitalists very soon?

Year 1 or the struggle is real

My self-perception as a quite lousy player gets confirmed as soon as round one ends: I’m close to bankruptcy. Though I have signed a contract with the industrial mill when I delivered my fresh fruit bunches, I haven’t received any cash for it yet. We found out that this is how the industrial mill works: a contract at delivery, cash sometime later. I should probably join the group of loud NGO-representatives.

Another problem: I have to pay my costs of living before I see this cash. A quick check at my balance shows that this is impossible. I panic. I don’t want my kids to starve. Especially not in round one. And even though they are just fictional kids. Luckily, the game masters come to the rescue. They open up a bank, which is willing to buy my contracts for cash. At a significantly lower value of course. Pigs.

Well there is another option. Ivo, the big farmer from across the table, has money piling up in front of him (I’m sure, if my brother was here, he’d be the big farmer). The piles are more than big enough to feed his kids. I think jealously of all the feasts he is having and never inviting me to. I remind myself, that the game doesn’t offer the possibility to have parties and that it is his Monopoly cash I’m being jealous of. I put my pride aside and ask Ivo for money. Ivo is a nice big farmer: he grants me a loan that is a lot cheaper for me than a deal with the bank. I’m grateful for Ivo’s help, my kids owe him their lives – or at least their education.

The members of the research group are observing and taking notes, but never intervene. We start to understand that there is no predefined rulebook that we should follow, and realizing this increases the fun factor by a lot - at least for myself.

Unpredictability is annoying

We learned it the hard way, but now in the second round, we understand how this works. Or at least we think so. I and the First Secretary – which is playing a middle-sized farmer and always typing numbers into the huge calculator – share a truck and undertake the long and difficult journey to the industrial mill. Yet our speculations were wrong. The industrial mill doesn’t pay enough to cover our transportation costs. The local mill would have been the better decision.

The Secretary complains to the owners of the mill. I assume from the uncomprehending looks he gets that I am not the only one with rusty French. We are outraged but don't have a choice, but to accept the loss.

No time to improve my French. The next problem is knocking at the door: now of course everybody wants to deliver to the local mill, which has – unfortunately – only a limited capacity. Our negotiations about who should be allowed to deliver at which mill escalate until everybody is screaming. We manage as a village to be social enough to let Smallholder no. 2/Luc Hoffmann Institute, who's absolutely broke and could not possibly make it to the city, go first. After that, it's anarchy and the law of the strongest. And because the fruits rot in case of non-delivery and the clock is ticking, everybody just panics and runs to the mill. My mood significantly increases at the sight of people in a suit running to a fictional mill to save their fictional fruits. Me laughing doesn't mean that I'm not running there myself either.

Just catching my breath and the second industry, represented by the game master Claude Garcia is complaining that we are not producing efficiently enough. Let the god damned second industry feed my kids.

Playing for mutual understanding

Claude Garcia/game master/second industry leads the research group at ETH responsible for this session. He is in his early forties, half Spanish, half French and his English is sometimes hard to understand. Charisma and probably some communication workshops made him a good speaker anyway. He is wearing jeans with a V-neck sweater and one notices quickly that he loves games. He welcomed us with: «You are here because we believe that you have knowledge and ideas that we don't have. And we want to know about them».

He explains that he and his game are not here to praise nor demonize palm oil. The game enables to better understand the preoccupations of the farmers and find out which measures lead to which decisions. In the case of today, he wants Swiss stakeholders, at least the ones that joined, to see for once the issue from a different point of view than their own and to cope with the challenges that have been described by the farmers in the field. Finally, he wants to know how we would change the situation.

Fertilizer is evil, deforestation is even worse

The third year welcomes us with a complete new option, giving us both hope and discord: fertilizer! The Greenpeace-representative, or Smallholder no. 1, is desperately trying to get attention: fertilizer is evil, nobody should fertilize. Ivo, the big farmer from across the table, doesn't care. Ivo has enough cash, so he buys fertilizer. I chip in that we don't really know what kind of fertilizer it is. It is maybe a "less evil" organic fertilizer. Smallholder no. 1 chooses to ignore me. The Secretary considers fertilizer a good idea but too expensive. From my perspective as a farmer and with a glance at my bank account, I have to agree with him: I can't afford fertilizer, at least not yet. Right now, Ivo is the only one to use fertilizer and is earning dark eye glances from Smallholder no. 1 for it. Ivo doesn't care, he is busy counting his cash.

Finally, the game masters add the option to convert forest to plantations and now – of course – all hell breaks loose. The Greenpeace-Representative/Smallholder no. 1 turns white as chalk and tries to hold a village meeting. She fails and reacts with demanding an audience at the environmental ministry. Garcia turns himself into the minister and agrees to meet with her.

Smallholder no. 1 wants ecosystem payments for not deforesting. The environmental ministry replies that it is broke. Discussion over. Greenpeace/Smallholder no. 1 returns quite frustrated to the village.

In the meantime, Ivo is trying to find out, how much deforestation would cost. Most of us are still thinking about what we want to do with that information, when the round is already over. Ivo wasn't successful in his negotiations with the industry and the rest of us weren't organized well enough to even start them. It is therefore mainly due to time pressure that our rain forest remains untouched. The other valley presents a different picture. There, someone managed to plant a new field on the former rainforest.

I'm wondering whether the game master would have interfered if I had just taken some rainforest for myself. Based on my experience with the game so far I guess not. I regret that I didn't. Of course I'm not for clearing forest. But right now I'm Smallholder no. 3, who has done some bad business in the last round and is now in money trouble once again. Unfortunately, there are no more rounds where I could grab some forest. The game master ends the game at this point.

Debriefing

We are all a bit frustrated. Almost everybody mentions in the debriefing that there was too little time for discussions. The group leader Claude Garcia repeats one time after another that the model is reflecting the main concerns of the Cameroonian farmers, with whom the model was developed, and they simply are under pressure.

I agree that we didn't have enough time, but rather considering the amount of rounds played. The game is usually played over a whole day, and that would probably be more revealing.

A critique that pops up several times as well: the game offers too few incentives to act environmentally friendly. I don't fully understand this criticism. Well I do, but it should be the actual situation being criticized, not the game depicting the real situation.

If a room full of Western Europeans is seriously upset about the fact that as a farmer one is exposed to the fluctuations of prices and is stressed all the time because the kids are hungry and can therefore not hold meetings about the protection of rainforest, well then something has been accomplished. But if then the blame is put on the game, it might be that the key message hasn't gotten across too well.

It strikes me as stunning how undifferentiated some of these very well educated and informed people argue. One gets the feeling that they have come to recite their predefined opinion on palm oil. And they are defiant they were not (yet) allowed to do so. To make people leave their usual roles seems to be more difficult than I thought.

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The views set out in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the OPAL project.