OPAL Workshop in Bogotá, Colombia
(2 March 2016)

The first OPAL Colombia workshop was held in March in Bogotá in conjunction with Javeriana University, WWF Colombia and NES Naturaleza.

The participants were:
- Oil Palm Research Center - Cenipalma
- National Federation of Biofuels - Fedebiocombustibles
- National Agricultural Rural Planning Unit - UPRA
- Palmeras Santana
- Agropecuaria Santa Maria
- CORPOICA
- Instituto Humboldt (IAvH)
- and others.

The workshop was developed using Companion Modelling (COMMOD), as a useful tool for simulation of interactions and decision-making process on socio-ecological palm oil systems, which also involve the collective resources use.

The main objective of the workshop was to contribute to the understanding of the resources dynamics in the Orinoquia Region. The participation of interested parties was very valuable to determine the main aspects that might influence the future expansion of oil palm in the territory. The participants discussed aspects related to integral and responsible planning of the palm ecosystem. Using the “Problem Tree” analysis, we could identify context elements of ecosystem territory services, as well as the relation and interaction between actors and relevant resources of palm landscape.

The main opportunity for improvement found by the group was the lack of comprehensive and responsible planning for the oil palm socio-ecosystem in the Orinoquía. Read the full summary report here.

Presentation at the European Geosience Union General Assembly
Vienna, Austria (10 April 2016)

On 19 April 2016, Thomas Guillaume (our Postdoc at EPFL, Switzerland) participated in the European Geoscience Union General Assembly in Vienna, Austria. He made a presentation on his former research on soil fertility in Indonesia and how they will be carried on within the OPAL project. The presentation focused on a new approach developed to assess the sensitivity or resistance of soil fertility indicators to carbon losses resulting from land-use intensification in the tropics. The take home message was that assessing the dynamics of these indicators by this approach enables the selection of appropriate management practices and sustainable levels of agricultural intensity.
The OPAL team welcomes **Gabriele Manoli** as a new postdoc joining Simone Fatichi and Paolo Burlando’s group at ETH Zurich. Gabriele, started on 1 June 2016, and will be working on ecohydrological modelling studying the effects of climate, soil, and management on water, carbon, and energy fluxes in oil palm landscapes.

**Mariana Tafur Rueda** has also just joined the WWF Colombia team. She will support the development of project activities, mainly supporting the ComMod building and implementation process, facilitating the dialogue with key stakeholders and the decision-making processes.

**New in the OPAL Team**

**Game session at the highest level in Cameroon** *(Yaoundé, April 2016)*

A special game session was organized early April in Yaoundé with the members of the Interministerial Commission on oil palm, a commission bringing together high level civil servants from the ministry of Commerce, the ministry of Finance, the ministry of Agriculture, agro-industries, second processing industries, and producers’ unions. The game was a huge success!

**WWF Cooperative Governance workshop for Oil Palm Smallholders Cooperatives in Cameroon** *(Buea, 31 May 2016)*

The OPAL Cameroon team organized a game session during the workshop. Players were representatives from the government (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), 6 Smallholder cooperatives in the South West Region, agro industries (CDC) and Civil Society Organisations (CSO). The whole afternoon session was used to play the ComMod game. The main aim was for the participants to visualize some realities in the oil palm sector. The game was further adapted to suit the Cameroonian context like using our banknotes. There was a debriefing meeting after the game where the participants were asked to give feedback on the game and their lessons learnt. The report will be made available soon.

**OPAL Game at the Lycée Francais Marie Curie de Zurich** *(24 May 2016)*

Back to school: our models can also be used for teaching. The students of the Lycée français de Zurich (17 years old, Science Major) had lectures on the challenges and opportunities of Oil Palm cultivation in the tropics... before playing the role of small growers and the agribusiness in Cameroon. Competition, aggressive selling techniques, environmental lobbying, and lots of fun.

In the final debriefing, students expressed they were satisfied with their individual outcomes (more money in their bank account), yet dissatisfied with the collective result (due to deforestation and the tensions felt across the supply chain). They highlighted trust as a major element to consider in their strategies.

OPAL Team overview

Are you sometimes also a bit lost with whom is currently working on the OPAL project, for which institution and in what role?

Have a look at this [OPAL Team overview](https://www.opal-project.org) and help complete it with entering your function and a description of your role (max. 1 line).

Thanks!
Other Project News

The Montpellier Declaration on sustainable palm oil
(Annual Meeting of the ATBC (Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation), Montpellier, France, 19-23 June 2016)

This year’s ATBC Conference led to a Declaration to put pressure on Europe for 100% sustainable palm oil commitments. The Declaration gives a series of recommendations to the European retail and manufacturer sectors, the European governments as well as financial institutions. Transparency of supply chains, responsible sources, certifications and stronger smallholder engagement are the key points.

The main authors of the Declaration are Jaboury Ghazoul, Claude Garcia and Patrice Levang from the OPAL Team. Read here the Montpellier Declaration : “Europe’s central role in advancing sustainable palm oil”.

WWF Indonesia became an OPAL Partner

Thanks to the help of the Luc Hoffman Institute, WWF Indonesia is now an official partner of the OPAL Project. WWF Indonesia is currently recruiting a researcher to focus on smallholders. He or she will be reporting directly to Putra Agung, Palm Oil Manager of WWF Indonesia. More info here.

Working paper published in Indonesia

The OPAL Team at the Bogor Agricultural University, led by Arya Hadi Dharmawan, just published its first Project Working Paper, called :

"Expansion of oil palm plantation and changes in social, economic and rural ecology: a case study in Kutai Kartanegara."

This working paper is part of the effort to publish the results of the Indonesian OPAL activities containing academic values and findings in other fields. A 2nd Paper will be published soon.

OPAL Indonesian Team meeting

How to integrate information across research activities and sites, how to generate comparative lessons and how to use them as the basis for Companion Modelling processes? All these topics were discussed during a get-together on 10 May 2016. The team also discussed the project’s theory of change and strategies for communicating findings and pathways by which expected outcomes are to be achieved.

Two special guests joined the meeting: the secretary to the Head of District Estate Crops Office of Kutai Kartanegara and the Head of Bioma, a local NGO who was also CIFOR’s partner previous project. They provided the group with useful insights into the current development regarding oil palm and the local government’s policy on the protection of peatlands and implications for oil palm development. The team members were pleased to see the project receiving endorsement from the local authority.

Read the full report here.
Nora Zoller just completed a master thesis with the title: "How do different stakeholders perceive palm oil in food and its impact on the environment?". She was supervised by Anne Dray from the OPAL Team and Ms. Vivianne Visschers, a lecturer at ETH on Food and Consumer Behavior.

Nora interviewed the general public, catering companies, manufacturers and retailers in Switzerland.

OPAL Newsletter: Nora, what were your main findings?

Nora: The general public does not seem to know about the comparatively low land use of palm oil. In addition, many of them are unable to estimate their own palm oil consumption. Several consumers also intentionally try to lower their palm oil consumption out of sustainability considerations.

Two catering companies are working to eliminate palm oil from their supply chain without publicly communicating about this. However, the remainder of the catering companies does not include palm oil in their sustainability efforts.

The two retailers I interviewed almost exclusively use RSPO certified segregated palm oil. Furthermore, they are actively working on further improving their palm oil use in terms of sustainability. (ed. One of the retailers “Migros” is a founding member of RSPO).

The Swiss food manufacturers I interviewed use RSPO certified palm oil to varying extents. They complained that certain specific palm oil fractions are not available on the market in sustainable versions.

Have you been surprised by your findings?

I was surprised to learn that many companies do not communicate their efforts to the public. Two caterers are making a considerable effort to eliminate palm oil from their food. On the one hand, they are doing this without ever having received any customer inquiries about palm oil. On the other hand, they are not communicating their palm oil exit strategies to the customers.

The retailers and manufacturers I interviewed do receive significant customer feedback on palm oil. These companies use mostly certified palm oil. However, they often do not print palm oil labels on food products. Informed consumers thus often assume that the palm oil contained in such a product is badly sourced.

Why are retailers and manufacturers reluctant to print labels?

They don’t want to attract consumers’ attention on palm oil, because palm oil is often negatively perceived.

Have you personally changed your perception or behavior on palm oil?

Learning more about the high(er) land use of palm oil alternatives made me realise that replacing palm oil’s industrial use with other oils might not be a more sustainable answer to the environmental issues of palm oil. Before writing my thesis, I was also unaware about the significant share of smallholders in oil palm cultivation.

In my personal shopping behavior, I now read labels even more closely to check the sources of palm oil. However, as my research showed, no label does not necessarily mean the palm oil is not certified!

Was it easy to approach stakeholders?

Members of the general public were generally willing to participate and answer my questions because they wanted to help me with my master thesis. For the companies, it was sometimes much more difficult to get in touch with the suitable person to conduct an interview with and to convince them to participate. Several companies never replied or sent me a general statement with regards to palm oil and did not want to be interviewed.

Do you have suggestions for future research or follow-up study?

My research about stakeholder perception of palm oil in Switzerland was qualitative in nature. To learn more about consumer perception, I suggest surveying a bigger sample of consumers with standardised questions. My interviews focused on the two biggest Swiss retailers, which are also the most sustainable ones. Future research should also investigate other retailers more in depth. Furthermore, it is crucial to include the two Swiss palm oil importers when conducting further research on palm oil perception and use in Switzerland.

Thank you Nora!

You’re welcome!
My first field visit to Kutai Kartanegara, East Kalimantan

Currently located for 4 months at CIFOR (Bogor, Indonesia), I did my first field visit to Kutai Kartanegara (or Kukar in short) end of May. After flying for a couple of hours to the city of Balikpapan, there was still an 8-hour drive to reach the site.

The aim of my visit there was to get more insight into the area by exploring the site profile as well as understanding the current issues connected to palm oil development, including stakeholders mapping and ecosystem services in the area.

After exploration and discussion with several local people and key informants, I considered to select four villages (Hambau, Kehala, Buluqsen, and Pulau Pinang) as potential research sites. The reasons are as follows:

- The villages are all located along the Belayan river, where all stakeholders (e.g. communities and 3 palm oil plantations) rely on its services.
- Villagers have different level of dependency to the palm oil business. For example, 60% of the Hambau village population works on the palm oil plantations, while in Kehala village only 2.5%.
- There are existing conflicts between indigenous people (Dayak) and the biggest company in the area (PT Rea Kaltim). This is important to consider as it relates to cultural services and HCV* no 4, 5 and 6.

During my visit, I met some key informants such as the head of the villages, the secretary of Kembang Janggut district, local NGOs and local authorities (Plantation and Forestry Agency of Kukar) to get a better understanding of the situation on the research sites. The trip was also used to make appointments for interviews, questionnaires and FGD**. These are planned to be conducted between June and July this year.

Luckily, I did not encounter significant difficulties or obstacles. The key informants were unhesitant to be interviewed and expressed their readiness to facilitate the FGD and questionnaire as long as it was in line with the content of the permit letters***.

I look forward to continuing my work over there.

* High Conservation Value. “HCVs are biological, ecological, social or cultural values which are considered outstandingly significant or critically important, at the national, regional or global level” (HCV Network). There are 6 HCVs and palm oil will get certified if all HCVs (1-6) are fulfilled. HCV no 4, 5 and 6 are about indigenous people and critical ecosystem services.

** Forum Group Discussion. A FGD is conducted to understand current problems at community level, and to organize participatory mapping on ecosystem services in the relevant areas.

*** A permit letter is a research permit. Oil palm being a sensitive issue, Nur Hasanah needs documents to backup her research. The Bogor Agricultural University (IPB) helps her with that.