

Report for the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship: Re-Building Small-Scale Livelihoods from Palm Oil Walls

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Image Source: Ong-Abdullah, Meilina. No Title. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/bad-karma-can-ruin-palm-oil-crops>

Rows of oil palm crops look like walls. And, indeed, palm oil crops represent important divisions. For instance, they work as gatekeepers of the type of development that will unfold in Colombia in the aftermath of an armed conflict that lasted over 60 years and that is still prevalent in many regions of the country. In 2016, the government signed a peace agreement with the largest guerilla, and many are expectant about what will come next for former conflict afflicted regions, like the northeastern area of Magdalena Medio. In this context, palm oil has been synonymous with peace. At least that is what prime time commercials tell viewers at night. But palm oil is also synonymous with violence. That's what the report from the national center for historical memory shows. And in between these struggles to set the publicly accepted discourse, there are farmers, farmworkers, and entire towns in Magdalena Medio, whose lives at one point or another have depended on palm. Their lives unfold between the two narratives. And the line separating these narratives in the field, is the one I'm about to cross. That is the line that the research I have conducted with support of the Scott-Kloeck Jenson (SKJ) fellowship, has prepared me to traverse.

This fellowship allowed me to live in Bogota, Colombia for two months. During this time, I interviewed government officials, employees at the national federation of oil palm growers, NGO members, and academics. Bogota represents on side of the debates about the role of the palm oil industry in Colombia's armed conflict. I would say Bogota is the fort of the "palm is synonymous with development" front. It is from an office in downtown Bogota that government institutions have decided to provide -and later take away- subsidies for small-scale farmers who want to substitute drug crops for oil palm. It was in Bogota that a renowned advertising agency told the national federation of oil palm growers that they should be the ones telling the whole country the story of palm through frequent tv and radio commercials—rather than letting social movements, unions, journalists, and academics alone to narrate the story of palm oil crops and rural development (or lack thereof). It's in a hotel on trendy 93 Park in the northeast side of Bogota, that the team of a US conservation agency-funded project meets to decide next steps in their efforts to prevent deforestation from oil palm plantations. It is in a university about five miles south from that hotel, that researchers gather to analyze the most effective measures to protect monkeys around oil palm plantations.

Those offices, hotel, and university campus are the locations where I have conducted the interviews for my dissertation research. These accounts have something in common: a defense of oil palm crops as important, one way or another, for rural development and sustainable agriculture in Colombia. Because, that's the crop that has pacified the formerly conflict afflicted region of Magdalena Medio, one of my interviewees mentioned. It's palm oil what has enabled small-scale farmers in the region to substitute drug crops and cut ties with the armed groups that used to operate in this area. And yes, not all the farmers have been successful, another interviewee said. But that's because some of them want easy money. Palm, on the other hand, requires hard work. And that is what the oil palm industry is taking to Magdalena Medio: the culture of hard work that has brought economic development and will continue to do so. Those are some of the palm-praising accounts that interview participants have shared with me so far.

Others, of course, are less enthusiastic about palm oil, because palm crops require cleared lands planted with foreign seeds, which then need large amounts of pesticides and fertilizers to flourish on this soil. So, palm is partly responsible for deforestation and habitat loss for endemic species, two of my interviewees working for conservation NGOs explained. So, yes palm is not great, but they must work with what they have, they say. And what they have is an organized industry that cares about its reputation. So, no, palm growers are not willing to drastically change ecologically-harmful practices, but they are willing to collaborate. And that is already step-forward.

So, to different degrees, the people I have interviewed support or collaborate with the oil palm industry. Most of their discourses contrast with the stories in the previously mentioned report from the national center on historical memory about systemic violence to unionized workers in oil palm plantations. Their discourses contrast with stories about relationships between paramilitaries and plantation owners. They contrast with what researchers and journalists who have visited Magdalena Medio have reported. After two months in Bogota, gathering accounts from different organizations involved with the oil palm industry, I will now head to Magdalena Medio. The accounts I have gathered have allowed me to trace the connections between palm oil production, on one hand, and a development and peacebuilding model that is supported by the government, organized private sector, and several national and international NGOs, on the other. Those accounts will allow me to connect any stories I collect in Magdalena Medio, with the operations of global markets and national politics. The portion of my research that I am about to start will be much more place-based, in Magdalena Medio, right on oil palm plantations and surrounding areas. That portion of my research will only make sense in conjunction with the more global character of the accounts I have been able to gather in Bogota, thanks to the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship.

By conducting interviews with different people in the oil palm industry, and working together with small-scale farmers, I hope to contribute to better understand the current risks and opportunities that small-scale farmers growing oil palm face. I also hope to build with these farmers tools to help them address those risks and make use of the available opportunities in order to improve their quality of life and work. With this research, I hope to dismantle part of the wall that is separating palm as a source peace from palm as a source of violence. I hope to build on the opportunities brought by this crop to go beyond a type of agriculture that threatens small-scale farmers' livelihoods. Smallholder farmers growing oil palm have access to higher incomes but are also exposed to more risks than other small-scale farmers. Growing oil palm has long-lasting ecological and economic consequences for farmers. It transforms soil quality and exposes farmers to the price fluctuations of distant markets. The small-scale farmers I am collaborating with as part of my research, are working towards diversifying their crops. The farmers who have managed to improve their quality of life using earnings from palm oil are looking to grow other profitable crops. Those who have lost part of their small plantation to pests or have gone bankrupt, due to high costs and fluctuating palm oil prices, are trying to go back to growing a variety of food and cash crops. Perhaps we will be able to use some of the bricks from the wall dividing palm oil worlds to build a new structure. This structure could support more resilient agricultural ecosystems and livelihood sources in Magdalena Medio and other palm oil producing regions.