CHAPTER 5

The Strategies and Effectiveness of Conservation NGOs in the Global Voluntary Standards: The Case of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

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Introduction

Tropical forest biodiversity is declining at an alarming rate of more than 1% per year, largely because of agricultural expansion into forests (WWF et al. 2014). Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, follow this trend because of the recent surge of the palm oil industries that are subsidised by their respective governments (Pye and Bhattacharya 2013; USDA 2014). Once a marginal crop in the 1980s, large-scale oil palm plantations are transforming the low land forest landscape in both the countries. In Indonesia alone, plantations cover 110 thousand square kilometres

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(sq. km), including 60% for large-scale plantations of several thousand hectares each (DGEC 2014). An additional 150 to 270 thousand sq. km are under permits for further oil palm plantations (Colchester and Chao 2011). Peat land forest areas in both countries are particularly threatened. In 2010, plantations covered more than 31,000 sq. km of peat land, with projections of between 60,000 and 90,000 sq. km by 2020 (Miettinen et al. 2012).

Large-scale oil palm plantations greatly impact wild species. The plantations host 65% less biodiversity than natural forests. They also contribute to forest fragmentation and create an ecological barrier for species (Fitzhebert et al. 2008). Mammals are particularly vulnerable because they require large territories of several square kilometres for a viable population. Mainly because of recent oil palm expansion, orangutan, tiger, elephant and rhinoceros in Southeast Asia have been classified as 'endangered' or 'critically endangered'on the IUCN Red List (IUCN 2015). For instance, the critically endangered Sumatran Orangutan (*Pongo abelli*), with a current population of 6600 and a habitat of around 8000 sq. km, has lost an estimated 90% of its original habitat during the twentieth century. This species still is losing about 50 sq. km of its forest habitat each year mainly as a result of oil palm plantations (Wich et al. 2011; Ruysschaert and Salles 2014). The rise of palm oil production also resulted in 3500 land conflicts about palm plantations with local communities in Indonesia between 1997 and 2009 (Jiwan 2013).

It is within this context that the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) promoted the establishment of the multi-stakeholder private association, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the aim of which is to produce socially and environmental responsible palm oil. In 2001, the WWF approached Western firms with a history of operating in Southeast Asia, primarily those based in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (RSPO 2002). Banks and agrobusiness firms in those countries were seeking to secure their long-term supply and to protect themselves from possible negative environmental campaigns (RSPO 2002). Indeed, their major financial institutions (e.g., Rabobank, Standard Chartered) were financing the firms converting forest into large-scale oil palm plantations. Their main agrobusiness firms were also buying large quantities of palm oil from Southeast Asia (RSPO 2002). This included processors (e.g., AarhusKarlshamn, AAK), consumer goods' manufacturers (e.g., Unilever) and retailers (e.g., Mark and Spencer and Sainsbury's). As a prominent example, Unilever is the biggest single user of palm oil in the world.

In 2004, the RSPO was established as an association comprised of all private stakeholders within the palm oil supply chain (RSPO 2004). It was divided into seven membership categories: (1) palm oil growers, (2) palm oil processors, (3) consumer goods' manufacturers, (4) environmental NGOs, (5) social NGOs, (6) banks and/or investors, and (7) retailers. In 2007, the members agreed on a standard of production, including social and environmental principles and criteria (RSPO 2007). As the first global standard in agriculture in the tropics, it has been replicated for other commodities such as aquaculture, agrofuels, cotton, sugar cane and soy.[1] As of June 2015, the RSPO has more than 1,200 ordinary members (RSPO 2015a) and certifies 20% of the globally produced palm oil as sustainable (RSPO 2015b).

Despite the rising number of RSPO members and the volume produced according the standard, lowland natural forest loss is still increasing in Indonesia, with 84,000 sq. km in 2012. Between 2001 and 2012, Indonesia lost an average 56,000 sq. km of forest per year. Of this loss 40% is attributable to large-scale oil palm plantations on peatland (Margono et al. 2014). Overall, the RSPO has not been effective in curbing deforestation because of oil palm plantations (McCarthy 2012; Ruysschaert and Salles 2014; Ruysschaert 2016).

At the same time, the number of conservation NGO members joining the RSPO has continuously risen, with a total of 30 conservation NGO members at the end of June 2015 (RSPO 2015a). Therefore, this study seeks to understand this growing contradiction between an apparently ineffective RSPO and the continuous, and even increasing, interest of conservation NGOs in this scheme. By understanding the roles and effectiveness of conservation NGOs with respect to the RSPO standard, the research seeks to make sense of this inconsistency.

This chapter takes the position of considering the diversity of conservation NGOs engaged with the RSPO. It formulates the hypothesis that NGOs are strategic players with clear conservation goals that mobilise their scarce resources to achieve these goals (Friedberg 1991). Based on what the resources and goals are, NGOs adopt several different roles. NGOs can mobilise four broad types of resources to influence the terms of the relationships to their advantage: (1) expertise, (2) affiliations outside the system (e.g., media, government), (3) communication and information, and (4) institutional rules within the system (Crozier and Frieberg 1977).

The RSPO's construction could limit the NGOs' ability to have an impact in three complementary ways. The initial reason would be that the institutionalisation forces each individual NGO to adopt a specific strategy as their resources are decreasing while RSPO is structuring.

Then, the institutionalisation may impede collaboration between NGOs using various strategies, whereas this collaboration in fact would be a key to getting leverage. Finally, some NGOs may be structurally excluded because of their incompatibility with the prevalent capitalistic discourse within the RSPO, although their participation is fundamental, both in terms of long-term conservation gains and social justice (Fouilleux 2013; Pye 2013; Cheyns 2014; Ruysschaert 2016).

The Importance of the NGO Effectiveness Question to Research

So far researchers have demonstrated that the emergence of certifications for global commodities, such as those of the RSPO, can be qualified as a new capitalist instrument (Fouilleux and Goulet 2012), promoted by dominant economic players (Fouilleux 2013; Oosterveer 2014) and major NGOs (Cheyns 2012; Escobar and Cheyns 2012; Pye 2013), and operating at the expense of local people (Ponte et al. 2011; Fouilleux 2013; Cheyns 2014).

These researchers meet the growing political ecologists' consensus on synergistic relationships between the protection of nature and neoliberalism, where the largest conservation NGOs in terms of staff and turn over—for example, the WWF or Conservation International (CI)—would directly support market expansion (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2010; Igoe et al. 2010a, b; Büscher et al. 2014). The main reason being that the conservation NGOs and capitalist agendas are driven by the convergence of networks of interests (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Barker 2009; Brockington and Duffy 2010; Igoe et al. 2010b). This limits the NGOs' effectiveness because they tend to overlook local communities (Chaplin 2004; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Tumusiime and Svarstad 2011) while maintaining that cultural diversity is inseparable from biodiversity conservation (Igoe 2005; Peluso 2012).

Why the NGOs are behaving in such a negative manner from a conservation perspective remains a subject for discussion. One reason seems to be the need for fresh financial resources, as these large NGOs are ever-expanding in terms of budget and human resources (Chaplin 2004; Barker 2009; Sachedina et al. 2010). As such, the NGOs tend to behave as a collection of projects without any clear overarching purpose because of a lack of accountability mechanisms (Sachedina et al. 2010) or, worse, being enslaved to their donors' priorities (Chaplin 2004; Barker 2009) and their neoliberal agenda (Brockington and Duffy 2010).

If these findings are to be relevant for the biggest NGOs, it tends to overlook the whole range of conservation NGOs (Brockington 2011), even though NGOs' performance in reaching their conservation goals can vary considerably depending on the NGO and the region in which it operates (Igoe et al. 2010b). As a main consequence, studies tend to fall short of solutions aside from the rather populist recommendations to decentralize conservation and its finance to the locals (McCarthy 2002; Barker 2009) and join the fight against neoliberalism (Barker 2009; Sachedina et al. 2010). Despite that, what can NGOs do to better achieve conservation outcomes?

Methodology

To analyse the roles and effectiveness of conservation NGOs in the RSPO, this research takes a political ecology approach. In other words, it is the conjunction of a pattern of interactions made of economic interests (i.e., expansion of oil palm plantations for agribusiness), ecological changes (i.e., destruction of orangutan rainforest habitat), and political battles (i.e., designation of land use and deprivation of local communities of their territories) (Gautier and Benjaminsen 2012). As such, the study is firmly rooted in an acute conflict on land use allocation between conservation NGOs and oil palm growers because of orangutan habitat conversion into plantations in the lowland forests of Malaysia and Indonesia. This conflict between conservationists and growers takes place against the background of the broader issue of denial of forested land of local communities in those countries (Peluso 2012). This approach has the advantage of limiting the scope of the study and maintaining a common thread from the global context of the RSPO to the local tangible ecological reality and social conflict in Southeast Asia.

This study involves access to a wide range of materials. The research benefits from in situ observation of the NGOs engaging with the RSPO. Indeed, from October 2006 to October 2011, one of the authors was a staff member of a conservation NGO that is an RSPO member. This provided direct access to information on the specific objectives and the resources of the NGOs involved during the RSPO annual meetings, General Assembly (GA) and RSPO bodies linked to biodiversity conservation—for example, the Biodiversity and High Conservation Values Working Group (BHCV WG). This provided firsthand information to detail the 'playing field', which is how the RSPO functions, and categories (or roles or engagement regimes or strategies) of NGOs based on the resources they mobilise and their conservation goals.

The effectiveness and structural constraints of each of these engagement regimes were investigated by conducting 49 semistructured interviews from November 2011 to July 2013, which represented 33 institutions, including 11 NGOs—that is, Birdlife, the CI, PanEco, Greenpeace Indonesia, Greenpeace International, Leuser International Foundation, the Sumatran Orangutan Society (SOS), the World Conservation Society (WCS), the WWF, Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari and Yayasan Pulau Banyak—dealing with palm oil. In addition, Internet-based research was undertaken to obtain publicly available information (e.g., reports, press releases and web pages) between 2001 and June 2015 on the RSPO and on all the main conservation NGOs engaged with it. This research was complemented by field observations during the European RSPO meeting in London in June 2014 and the RSPO annual meeting in November 2014.

Argument

The argument is developed in three parts. First, it describes the 'playing field'—how the RSPO functions formally as an institution. Second, it details the four strategies (or roles) of NGOs based on the resources they mobilise and their conservation goals: the collaborative, the opposing, the opportunistic, and the sceptics. Third, it explains the relationship of each of these NGO strategies with the RSPO institutionalising, and how it limits their impact.

How the RSPO Is Formally Functioning

The RSPO's objective is to promote the growth and use of sustainable palm oil (RSPO 2004). Sustainability application is defined in the 50-page guidance document called *Principles and Criteria for the Production of Sustainable Palm Oil*; it details eight principles,[2] along with the associated criteria and indicators—that is, 5.2 and 7.3, which specifically deal with biodiversity conservation. Criterion 5.2 requires growers to conserve rare species, habitats and control hunting (RSPO 2013: 27). Criterion 7.3 requires that new palm plantings starting from November 2005 onward do not replace primary forest or high conservation value (HCV) areas. The HCV areas are designated as such because of their importance for biodiversity conservation or for the local community's well-being (RSPO 2013: 50).

The choice of criteria and its related indicators resulted from extensive negotiations among members with respect to three fundamental rules:

(1) inclusive participation from each member category, (2) consensus-building in reaching agreements, and (3) transparency during the negotiation process and the decision making. In addition to these rules, debates among members were structured by a scientific research-based managerial discourse so as to depoliticise any deliberation among them (Cheyns 2012).

Approved at the RSPO General Assembly (GA) of 2007 (RSPO 2007) the guidance document was revised in 2013 (RSPO 2013) to strengthen its environmental criteria and indicators. Sustainability, therefore, has been an evolving concept in which each member category defends its own interests. Following the approval of the guidance document, the RSPO introduced the category of certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) to the market in 2008. This enabled downstream firms to label the final product with a distinctive CSPO trademark.

The RSPO is a system formed with three distinct governing bodies: the GA, the Board of Governors (BG) and the Secretariat. In between the GAs, the BG provides strategic and operational direction. The BG is comprised of 16 members, 4 growers and 2 members each from other 7 membership categories. The BG members are elected from their specific categories during the GA for a two-year term, and there is great stability in those BG roles. Since the beginning, a manufacturer of consumer goods, Unilever, is the president, the processor AAK-UK is the treasurer, and the environmental NGO WWF is the vice president.

The GA is an annual meeting where members can propose new resolutions. Resolutions often seek to interpret the implementation of the guidance document to favour a specific interest, which, for the environmental NGOs, is conservation. The GA decision-making process is undertaken by casting votes and making endorsements by a simple majority. As a result, to pass any resolution, a member must garner support from downstream firms (i.e., palm oil processors, consumer goods' manufacturers and retailers) because they represent about 80% of the RSPO membership (RSPO 2015a).

To implement these decisions, the BG establishes working groups or task forces; they are made up of members and function according to RSPO core principles. Working groups provide recommendations to the BG on how to implement the GA decisions. With a growing number of working groups, the RSPO has adopted a formal operational structure, which consists of four permanent standing committees: Standards and Certification, Trade and Traceability, Communication and Claims and Finance. Under each of these committees, the working groups deal with long-term issues and task forces deal with short-term issues.

The Secretariat manages the logistical aspects of the RSPO, organises the yearly roundtable meetings associated with the GA, promotes the RSPO worldwide, facilitates the work of the standing committees, and implements the GA's decisions under BG guidance.

The Various Strategies of the NGOs

This study found that conservation NGOs adopt four main forms of engagement with the RSPO based on two main criteria: the resources they are allocated and the specific objectives they pursue. These categories are: collaborative, opposing, opportunistic and sceptic. The criteria to develop each of the categories are detailed in Table 5.1.

Collaborative NGOs' Strategies and Their Limitations

Collaborative NGOs are RSPO members aiming to protect tropical forests through collaboration with the business sector. Usually, these are powerful international Western NGOs with headquarters in Europe (e.g., the WWF, Zoological Society of London, Wetlands International) or the United States (e.g., CI, the World Resources Institute). They abide by the RSPO's overall vision to 'transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm' (RSPO 2012: 8). This vision is similar to the WWF's Market Transformation Initiative Strategy, which showcases how NGOs can influence the overall communication strategy of the RSPO (WWF 2012).

This type of NGO invests a considerable amount of human and financial resources, working within the RSPO system to reform the oil palm sector. The programme director of one of these international NGOs mentioned that 'we have a number of people working full time on palm oil in Singapore on finance, in Indonesia and Malaysia on producers, in China and India, and across Europe and in the US on [pursuing] … business and industry engagement'.[3]

These resources are channelised toward four broad lines of actions to influence the RSPO system and reach conservation goals. First, they aim to create rules in the RSPO that support their conservation goals. In practise, this means putting forward the RSPO GA's decisions that force growers to implement the guidance document to the benefit of conservation (see section later about analysing of GA decisions regarding biodiversity and greenhouse gases). Even though conservation NGOs makeup less than 3% (or 30 individual members) of all RSPO members, the RSPO GA adopted most of their decisions because of the support from several downstream firms. These

Table 5.1 Typology of engagements of environmental NGOs with the RSPO

Form of engagement	*Examples of conservation NGOs*	*Resources allocated to the RSPO*	*Main objective pursued with the RSPO*
Collaborative	Generalist on environment: Conservation International, World Resource Institute, WWF	RSPO members: • Actively participate in it. Executive Board and various commissions • Engage systemically within it	Reform the palm oil sector by influencing the RSPO from within
Opposing	Generalist on environment: Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace	Not RSPO members: • Explain files against RSPO growers • Selected strategically • Use the RSPO as a forum to protest	Radically criticise RSPO members, and therefore RSPO in its legitimacy to reform the palm oil sector from within Seek to get a global moratorium on deforestation and reform the palm oil sector
Opportunistic	Organisation focussing on orangutans: Borneo Orangutan Survival, Hutan, PanEco and Sumatran Orangutan Society	RSPO members: • Exclusively participate to annual meetings and GAs • Use the RSPO as a tribune	Get specific decisions to protect specific forests to save various habitats for orangutans (Tripa, Bukit Tigah Puluh, degraded forest)
Sceptic	Generalist on environment with human rights-based approach: Most environment and social associations in the producing countries—Forest Peoples Programme, Sawit Watch	Usually not RSPO members: • No resources allocated • No participation If RSPO member, participate on the BG and commissions, but participation decreases over time	Seek community rights recognition, question the production model Overtime, tend to avoid links with the RSPO because of their inability to influence it. RSPO tends to become secondary in their strategy, distrusting this initiative that diverts resources that could be better used elsewhere

firms support the NGOs' decisions not only because they reduce reputation risks but also because they do not bear the cost of implementing decisions that are supported by growers alone.

Second, they take strategic positions within the RSPO. They are a part of the RSPO GB (i.e., CI, then World Resources Institute and WWF) to influence RSPO functioning. They also participate in the working groups and task forces. In those working groups, they hold strategic positions as cochairs—for example, the World Resources Institute for Biodiversity and Global Environmental Centre for the working group on peat. This internal lobbying by collaborative NGOs is often overlooked because such political manoeuvring happens far from the focus of public attention. As explained by a former BG member: 'WWF being inside the organisation was very critical, as I perceived them when I was a member of the board. They were not at all not criticising the companies, … but are very critical inside the organisation, pushing for criteria'.[4]

Third, the NGOs commonly use scientific facts. Because collaborative conservation NGOs are made up of scientists, they value the science-based arguments within the RSPO. As an example, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) states that it is important 'to ensure that emerging policies and good practice guidelines aiming to promote sustainable production are based on the best possible science' (Persey et al. 2011: 6). As such, they provide scientific expertise on topics such as biodiversity (e.g., ZSL), satellite mapping (e.g., World Resources Institute) and greenhouse gases (e.g., CI and Wetlands International).

Fourth, NGOs widely campaign to raise public awareness, creating external pressure for RSPO members to fulfil their commitments. To avoid name and shame tactics, they use collaborative techniques consisting of benchmarking diverse RSPO members, comparing commitments and encouraging them to get certified (WWF 2013). As developed later, the mobilisation of these four resources has been an effective technique to challenge RSPO norms, but it also has led to some structural constraints.

Limitation of the Collaborative Approach to Conserve Biodiversity Areas

The RSPO has developed the HCV concept to conserve areas the most important to biodiversity or human well-being. Its definition and application are subject to intense discussion between growers and conservationists that have opposite opinions regarding land use. For growers, conservation areas are thought to be underutilised profit spaces. They seek to limit the

size of required conserved areas within their concessions. In contrast, the NGOs consider low land areas as rich in exceptional tropical biodiversity. According to this interpretation, oil palm plantation extensions must take place in already degraded areas because 'there is enough non-forested land suitable for plantation development to allow large increases in production' (Fitzherbert et al. 2008: 545; Persey et al. 2011; Ruysschaert et al. 2011). Conservationists tend to maximise the designated conservation areas well beyond primary forests, including degraded land (RSPO 2010).

To implement the HCV concept, in other words to define the criteria and indicators attached to it, the RSPO Biodiversity and Technical Committee (BTC) was created in 2009. It quickly became clear, however, that this committee had significant scientific information gaps on tropical biology. A representative from this committee summarises the situation: '[S]ometimes, it is not clear at all. Frankly, why is biodiversity important? It is not at all obvious to demonstrate. A lot of science is needed'.[5] Indeed, research remains inconclusive about tropical biodiversity conservation. Results depend on the species and the level of organisation (e.g., genetic, species or ecosystem) studied. Some reports show the importance of fragmented forests, others of the continuous forest (Benedick et al. 2006; Struebig et al. 2008; Edwards et al. 2010; Struebig et al. 2011).

As a result, this temporary committee was institutionalised as the Biodiversity and HCV (BHCV) working groups. Its aim now is 'to provide strategic and technical support' to the RSPO (RSPO 2015f: 1), underlining the lasting nature of knowledge gaps. It met 25 times between April 2009 and January 2015. The BHCV's formal structure is comprised of 12 RSPO members. Two environmental NGOs hold seats in the group, one of them being cochair (ZSL, then World Resources Institute), and a grower holds the other seat. In addition, many other NGO members participate as observers at each meeting, accounting for more than a quarter of the participants (10–20).

The institutionalisation of the BTC into a permanent working group reflects the ongoing and irreducible tensions between conservationists and growers. There are constant information gaps in science and the illusion that full scientific knowledge could arbitrate the divergent interests is sustained. As a result, on one hand, collaborative NGOs seek to consolidate information to support conservation; on the other hand, growers decide which areas can be conserved on their concessions in a pragmatic manner, stating that full knowledge is not yet available. Paid by the grower, evaluators tend to designate the HCV areas in a 'subjective' and 'arbitrary'

manner (HCV 2007: 2), reducing the areas to conserve to the most valuable biodiversity areas. In particular, this dependency can lead the auditors to omit secondary or degraded areas because '… the value and performance of these kinds of forest have little meaning in terms of wildlife and [the] environment' (RSPO 2010: 16). This is the type of reasoning that the Sumatran Orangutan Society and the grower PT Sisirau opposes. As explained by an SOS's representative, 'this member was clearing orangutan habitat, … but claimed it wasn't good quality forest'.[6]

Limitation of the Collaborative Approach to Conserving Primary Forests

With the structural knowledge gap on biodiversity impeding conservation NGOs to mobilise scientific information effectively, they turned their attention to the implementation of Criterion 7.3. This criterion requires preserving primary forest or HCV within the plantations after November 2005. The criterion reduces growers' room for interpretation because it gives a clear-cut end date and specifies which type of forest to conserve.

Nevertheless, primary forest areas are difficult to delineate in practise. In addition, the 2005 date was subject to interpretation. Indeed, the criterion was agreed to at the RSPO GA in 2007 as part of the overall agreement on the guidance document for members who seek to certify plantations. Growers consider that date relevant only when certification is foreseen. They argue that the RSPO founding members were not requested to follow these requirements in the beginning. They also add that some RSPO growers could have taken over other non-RSPO growers who may have clear-cut primary forest.

As one grower explained: 'We had understood that this 2005 rule applies to existing plantations, when we were starting something, we are responsible from the moment where we manage the plantation, not before'.[7] To clarify these points, the RSPO GA decision endorsed the WWF's proposal of 'New Planting Procedures' in 2008, jointly tabled with New Britain Palm Oil, one of the largest oil palm growers in the world.[8] The decision requested growers to preserve primary forest regardless of whether it is seeking certification or not. It came into force in January 2010, despite growers attempts at the 2009 GA to postpone it on the grounds of practical feasibility.

To consider growers' liability, the RSPO BG set up a Compensation Task Force in 2010 as a subunit of the BHCV WG for an initial period of one year, with the aim of providing guidance to the Board of Governors. Four years later, in May 2014, the task force provided a 'voluntary' guidance document

(RSPO 2014: 12). This document seeks the 'continuous improvement' of each grower's particular situation, refusing to expel or suspend them (RSPO 2014: 1).

At these meetings, the NGOs put forward arguments based on scientific evidence. They utilised satellite technology as a method of measuring destroyed primary forests or those of HCV. Still, NGOs were unable to impose their findings for two main reasons. Science-based decisions continue to be problematic. A grower at this task force meeting summarises the issue by stating: 'There is still a lot of work. Coming up with a satellite imagery analysis method that can be implemented and credible is difficult'.[9]

Equally important, the negotiating rules (e.g., inclusive participation and consensus-building) must be respected, which means that the application needs to be for all growers and adapted to each. This in turn has two implications: growers' liability should increase overtime, reflecting the changing rules within the RSPO; and the mechanism needs to give enough incentive for the grower to participate. In other words, the grower would take actions to rehabilitate the forest and not to clear-cut it and pay for its destruction.

The discussions over Criterion 7.3 demonstrate irreconcilable views. For the growers, 'November 2005 is absolute rubbish in the long-term and for the moment it is carved in stone'[10]; for the conservation NGOs, this date was indeed a nonnegotiable. Conservation NGOs have heavily invested in task force meetings by providing scientific evidence and participating physically. They seek to establish an adequate compensation mechanism that would definitively forbid primary forest conversion after 2005. On the opposite side, few growers have participated, blocking advance on the principles fundamental to RSPO's functioning. This leads to the paradoxical situation, in which primary forests can still be cut, even if their preservation is mentioned in the RSPO guidance document.

Limitations of the Collaborative Approach to Mobilise Climate Arguments

Experiencing difficulty mobilising scientific arguments to preserve biodiversity and primary forests, the NGOs sought to protect biodiversity by advancing the climate change agenda. They have been able to do so because of the massive release of greenhouse gases (GHG) from the trees and peat when establishing oil palm plantations within tropical forests. Destruction of these forests to establish plantations releases massive amounts of greenhouse gases. The first research on greenhouse gas emissions from peat in Indonesia revealed striking figures: Indonesia is third in greenhouse gas emissions

globally, behind China and the United States (Hooijer et al. 2006). An RSPO member explains that the climate agenda is a powerful argument to save peat land areas from destruction: 'When you hear about the greenhouse gas emissions' study by Deltares, this is an exemplary study, in my view. This proves by A to B that we really cannot do anything on peat lands'.[11]

The large amount of GHG comes from two sources: the trees and the peat. Regarding the trees, the conversion of tropical natural forests into oil palm plantations releases carbon dioxide because tropical forests store above ground around 190,000 kg of carbon per hectare, while oil palm plantations store only around 40,000 kg per hectare; this means that the difference, or about 150,000 kg of carbon per hectare, is released as GHG when natural tropical forest is converted into an oil palm plantation. Even more important is the carbon dioxide released from the peat. This comes from the fires to prepare the land and the oxidation from the dry peat resulting from establishing the necessary drainage channels for the plantations (Agus et al. 2013).

At the RSPO GA in 2008, Wetlands International put forward the decision 'A Moratorium on Palm Oil from Tropical Peat Lands' that requested the 'cessation on any further development of palm oil on tropical peat lands/ (Wetlands International 2008: 1). The RSPO BG refused this submission arguing that it had been modified at the last minute after the due date for submission. It also prevented the submission of the original decision saying that: 'The RSPO [should] adopt that palm oil produced on peat lands be henceforth considered unsustainable until proven otherwise' (RSPO 2008: 33). Using procedural rules, the RSPO BG had found a way to avoid clashes between growers and conservation NGOs.

Instead of the decision, the RSPO BG put forward the core collaborative rules within the RSPO and established the Working Group on Greenhouse Gases. The working group, composed of the different members' categories, had the goal of finding a practical means to reduce GHG emissions by the next GA in November 2009. Facilitated by a Dutch consultant, the group was not able to conclude its work because there was no agreement on greenhouse gas emissions, and because the process was felt to be a kind of neocolonialism.

During the next RSPO GA in 2009, Wetlands International put forward a new proposal, the 'Establishment of a Working Group to Provide Recommendations on How to Deal with Existing Plantations on Peat Lands'. Growers were initially against it. The representative from the Malaysian Palm Oil Association felt that 'the resolution is just to get

growers to stop planting oil palm on peat after one or two cycles [which is 25 or 50 years]' (RSPO 2010: 27). Only after Wetlands International ascertained that this would not be the case, a large majority of the growers adopted the decision.[12]

To implement the decision, the RSPO BG established Working Group II on Greenhouse Gases, which met six times between March 2010 and May 2011. It is composed of 30 members (12 from the Executive Board and 18 other RSPO members) and is cochaired by an environmental NGO (Conservation International, then the WWF) and one grower, the Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA), then Wilmar. On paper, this body brings together all the RSPO membership categories. In reality, environmental NGOs (i.e., CI, the Global Environmental Centre, Wetlands International and the WWF) and growers[13] from Indonesia and Malaysia dominate the working group. It established the Working Group on Peat to specifically deal with the tremendous impact of peat on oil palm plantation. The working group is cochaired by an environmental NGO (Global Environment Centre) and a research institution (Indonesian Palm Oil Commission) linked to the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture. It gathered six growers from Indonesia and Malaysia,[14] five environmental NGOs,[15] four research centres,[16] the HBSC Bank, and the Finnish agrofuel company, Neste Oil.

Working Groups I and II on Greenhouse Gases and the Working Group on Peat have been subject to intense debate between conservation NGOs and growers. This reflects their fierce opposition to each other's conservation goals. Conservation NGOs advanced scientific published research on greenhouse gases. Growers challenged them on the grounds that they are generalities, far from describing the specific realities at the plantation level. Indeed, at the local level, GHG emissions depend on at three parameters: drainage canal depth, number of years of operation and fertiliser dosage.

As one scientist summarised: 'We find a relationship with the depth of the canal and the carbon emission, but it changes over time. In the first few years you have high emissions, and with time it settles on different relationships. In the long term, it settles with low emission with a peat depth of 40 cm or lower'.[17] To fill this scientific knowledge gap on GHG emissions linked to oil palm, NGOs, especially Conservation International, have undertaken some research from the RSPO. In 2013, the RSPO published its findings. But, they are not authoritative as some results are contradictory as a result of the various methodologies used (Killeen and Goon 2013). Therefore, the conservation NGO leading the publication has put out a call for more research instead of advocating for immediate action (Killeen and Goon 2013).

Additionally, growers argued that management principles at the core of RSPO functioning must be respected. Each grower needs to establish its GHG reduction initiatives on a voluntary basis to ensure long-term economic viability of the plantation. Indeed, each grower faces specific circumstances—that is, the state of development of its 25-year plantation, the prospect to extend it onto new peat land areas, the relative area of the plantation on peat compared to the total oil palm plantation area, and the plan for its conservation efforts.

After four years of negotiations, during their April 2013 GA, the RSPO agreed on a new guidance document that takes into account a specific focus on GHG. The document mentions 'to reduce' (RSPO 2013: 32, Criterion 5.6) and 'to minimise' (RSPO 2013: 56, Criterion 7.8) greenhouse gases emissions. Collaborative NGOs that were heavily involved in this process expressed their satisfaction with the results of these negotiations because they were able 'to strengthen wording on GHG and peat lands and avoid … high carbon stock land'.[18] The reality, however, is that without tangible objectives and a clear deadline, producers can postpone any effort in the name of feasibility. Consequently, to implement these new GHG criteria, RSPO established yet another working group—the Emission Reduction Working Group.

Opponent NGOs' Strategies and Their Limitations

Opponent NGOs seek to protect tropical forests though a no deforestation commitment. These are powerful Western NGOs, among them Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. They do not consider the RSPO as a credible means to produce sustainably. As an example, the Greenpeace report, *Certifying Destruction*, explains why companies need to go beyond the RSPO commitment (Greenpeace 2013). Opponent NGOs use the RSPO as a platform to expose bad practises in the supply chain. They are not RSPO members to avoid legitimising the organisation.

Opponent NGOs mobilise considerable resources to influence the RSPO to their advantage. First, they can mobilise (scientific) expertise, by investigating and establishing evidence against prominent growers who breach RSPO rules (e.g., Wilmar, Golden-Agri Resources). Second, with their close relationship to the media and the public, they can undertake aggressive campaigning that targets key RSPO members using a wide range of media tools (e.g., the video *Nestlé Killer*) or fact sheets such as 'How Unilever Suppliers Are Burning up Borneo'. Because they are not RSPO members, opponents cannot create RSPO rules or take strategic

positions within it. For that reason, opponent NGOs benefit from the work of collaborative NGOs that can put forward decisions and hold strategic positions within the RSPO.

The strategic collaboration between the opponent and the collaborative NGOs began when Greenpeace made a public case against the Malaysian grower United Plantation that had breached the rules to implement the RSPO guidance document (Greenpeace 2008). In response to the case, the WWF put forward a resolution on new planting procedures at the 2008 GA. The decision forces growers to engage in public consultation for all new plantation permits, which are the state authorisations to plant oil palm on long-term governmental lease. Growers must publish the key information on their plantations' plan on the RSPO website for a duration of 30 days and need to include a map with the coordinates, a summary of the environmental impact assessment, and a summary of the development plan. With this resolution, opponent NGOs have had access to far more information on the RSPO growers. Accordingly, they could file many more cases against RSPO growers; as of April 2015, 50 cases had been brought to the RSPO (RSPO 2015c). The rising number of cases were new opportunities for the collaborative NGOs, especially Oxfam Novib and Sawit Watch. They could influence the RSPO to set up a formal grievance system open to members and nonmembers.

At first glance, collaborative and opponent NGO strategies generated a virtuous circle that strengthened the grievance system, facilitating the work of the opponent NGOs to identify new cases. Nevertheless, the system puts the burden on opponent NGOs, as they must sustain their claim through the slow procedure, often lasting for about two years for each case, because of the participatory and consensual approach within the RSPO. In addition, these NGOs can only focus on some specific cases, pooling their resources where it will have the greatest political impact. Indeed, growers are powerful actors with wide technical, financial and political resources.

Growers can turn low-income local communities against NGOs by compensating them for the land loss. They also can use comprehensive marketing strategies with a dedicated communications department (Wilmar 2011; GAR 2011). This can discredit an NGO-led international campaign. As a result of these constraints, opponent NGOs acknowledge: 'We are targeting the big one to make that big move. You know that we have been campaigning on XXX … and it's because they are the biggest one, and then the biggest threat'.[19]

Opportunistic NGOs' Strategies and Their Limitations

The opportunistic NGOs are those RSPO members that seek to protect specific species and their habitat. Operating in Indonesia and Malaysia, they mainly focus on the Sumatran Orangutan (e.g., PanEco and SOS) and the Borneo Orangutan (e.g., Borneo Orangutan Society, Hutan and Orangutan Land Trust). Their financial and human resources are rather limited, but they benefit from a long-term scientific expertise with comprehensive knowledge about the field.

Initially, the opportunistic NGOs were rather unpredictable in the RSPO because they adopted opponent or collaborative strategies depending on the situation. Behaving as collaborative NGOs, they put forward several decisions during the RSPO GA to preserve specific territories, including cultivating palm oil on degraded land (PanEco in 2006), conserving the Tripa peat swamp forest (PanEco in 2008), conserving the Bukit Tigah Puluh ecosystem (SOS in 2009), and conserving nonprimary forest (SOS in 2010). In the GAs, opportunistic NGOs can be very hard on the RSPO system. PanEco's resolution on Tripa stated that 'we request the RSPO to adhere to the credibility of its role and drastically improve its efficiency by implementing an effective mechanism to control bad practices of the palm oil industry' (RSPO 2008: 39).

Remarkably, opportunistic NGOs also have put forward GA decisions of a much boarder scope than the SOS decision of 'Transparency in Plantations Concession Boundaries' adopted in 2013. This decision requests growers to provide the coordinates of each of its concessions, allowing NGOs to monitor what is happening on the ground in real time through remote sensing. They also actively participate on the various bodies that the RSPO has established to deal with biodiversity-related decisions (e.g., the BHCV WG and Compensation Task Force). Unlike the collaborative NGOs, however, they do not take strategic positions as cochairs but provide more scientific research-based evidence as participants. Behaving as opponent NGOs, so-called opportunistic NGOs also file complaint cases against RSPO members, produce fact-finding evidence and seek media exposure.

Changing their role to get the most impact, opportunistic NGOs are unpredictable within the RSPO. By institutionalising, the RSPO dramatically reduced the possibility for opportunistic NGOs to change roles. Growers successfully submitted the decision, 'Preserving the Integrity of the Standard Setting Process in RSPO', at the 2010 General Assembly. This decision forbids opportunistic NGOs from putting forward decisions that support their specific agenda. In addition, the RSPO created the codes

of conduct, one for all their members and another for the BHCV WG members; these codes limit opportunistic strategies (RSPO 2015d, e). The BHCV WG Code of Conduct requests that the member's 'participation reinforces positive public image of the RSPO' (RSPO 2015e: 1), and it details a section about confidentiality for members in the working group. In other words, the Code of Conduct prevents opportunistic NGOs from adopting an opponent strategy or from collaborating with opponent NGOs, if the discussions as collaborative NGOs within the BHCV WG do not veer to their advantage.

As a result of the RSPO's institutionalisation, opportunistic NGOs have to choose between a collaborative and an opponent strategy, both limiting their impact on the RSPO. Involved with the RSPO for more than 10 years, most of these NGOs tend to adopt a collaborative strategy, sometimes reluctantly. For example, SOS continued its membership despite announcing their departure from the RSPO in November 2014.

Sceptic NGOs' Strategies and Their Limitations

Sceptic NGOs seek recognition of the communities' right to land and therefore conserve biodiversity and forests. Indeed, local communities have sustainably managed those biodiversity rich forest areas that are now threatened by oil palm plantations (Putri 2010). These sceptics are mostly operating in the producing countries with long-term social and environmental agendas (e.g., the WCS, the Leuser International Foundation, Sawit Watch, Whali, Forest Peoples Programme). Most of them are not RSPO members, expect for Forest Peoples Programme and Sawit Watch, which is a network of 40 social and environmental Indonesian NGOs (Jiwan 2013).

As the main sceptic NGO, the RSPO member, Sawit Watch, used three main avenues in the RSPO to reach its goals. First, it put forward GA decisions, such as 'The Need for a Task Force on Smallholders', at the GA2, cosigning them with international NGOs, producers and downstream firms. Second, it held the strategic position of representative of the social NGOs at the Executive Board to influence the implementation of these decisions. Third, it maintained strategic relationships at the grassroots level, facilitating the participation of the locals in the RSPO. Local participation took three forms: They brought violation cases of the RSPO standard against growers to the complaint's panel, they expressed their views at the RSPO annual meeting, and they organised mass protests during the annual meetings for those weak on RSPO standards for social issues (Parker 2013).

Despite the anecdotal achievements of getting the minority voice heard during the roundtable meetings, this strategy did not achieve its goals. The prevalent management discourse within the RSPO process discredited this land rights-based argument (Cheyns 2014). The RSPO's institutionalisation strengthened this structural problem over time by widening the discursive gap. By adopting this discourse, collaborative and opponent NGOs also marginalised the sceptic NGOs and their conservation agenda within the RSPO system.

It is, therefore, not a surprise that Sawit Watch gradually lost interest in the RSPO scheme. As a main consequence, it left the RSPO Biodiversity Group in 2012. Only Forest Peoples Programme has remained firmly active, focussing on the Free, Prior and Informed Concerned (FPIC) indicator of the guidance document (Cholchester and Chao 2014). If applied, the sceptic NGOs believe that the FPIC could be a powerful tool to get locals their rights to land recognised as on oil palm areas.

In conclusion, sceptics tend to avoid links with the RSPO because of their inability to influence it to truly include land rights issues. The RSPO tends to become secondary in their overall strategy. The sceptics distrust this initiative that diverts their limited resources. Working closely in the field, sceptics do not believe the RSPO can deal with the underlining sociopolitical–economic roots of forest destruction such as the lack of local land rights recognition, the high short-term economic return, the lack of law enforcement, and the promotion of the large-scale agricultural model. They remain highly sceptical in regard to the sudden conversion to the sustainability agenda by all the big producers. A representative of one of the NGOs summarises the general feeling: 'I have told you since the beginning. It's a waste of time [the RSPO]. It's pure brain washing. I haven't seen any of these oil palm people taken to court'.[20]

Concluding Remarks and Perspectives

The research discussed in this chapter demonstrates the importance of taking a political ecology approach and considering the diversity of NGOs' engagement with the RSPO. As strategic players with clear goals mobilising their limited resources, conservation NGOs use four broad strategies (or roles) to make conservation gains: Collaborative approaches seek to change the system from within by providing scientific research-based information, holding strategic positions and creating rules; opponent NGOs remain outside the RSPO while using it as a platform for public campaigns; opportunistic strategies focus on conserving geographical areas, adopting either

collaborative or opponent strategies to reach their goals; finally, those adopting the role of the 'sceptic' take a rights-based approach to conservation by working with local communities to stop oil palm plantation expansion.

Within these strategies, conservation NGOs play a vital role in strengthening biodiversity conservation within the RSPO. This includes the adoption of many GA decisions; the creation of a comprehensive complaints system; and the BHCV WG, a Compensation Task Force and a Working Group on Greenhouse Gases. All these rules and entities help to strengthen the RSPO standard and the provisions for its implementation.

Nevertheless, the RSPO system has largely failed to support NGOs in reaching their initial conservation goals. The ongoing mobilisation of NGO resources and responses from other players, especially growers and downstream actors (e.g., processors, manufacturers, retailers), has co-constructed and institutionalised the RSPO in such a way that it constrains NGOs. This limits NGOs' options, preventing them from reaching their initial goals. As such, NGOs have obtained only some very minor conservation outcomes. Three additional reasons for this were found. The initial reason is that institutionalisation forces each individual NGO to keep to a specific strategy while their resources are decreasing whereas the RSPO is structuring. Then, the institutionalisation impedes collaboration between NGOs using various strategies, while this collaboration is key to getting leverage. Finally, sceptic NGOs are structurally excluded because of their incompatibility with the prevalent capitalistic discourse within the RSPO, while their participation is fundamental both in terms of long-term conservation gains and social justice.

Conservation NGOs are directly responsible for this situation. Indeed, the RSPO system tends to promote a collaborative strategy that uses scientific research-based managerial discourses with a focus on technologies such as remote sensing. Collaborative NGOs fully engage in providing scientifically based information on biodiversity loss, deforestation or climate change. Still, those NGOs are never able to provide all the needed information. There are always some measurement uncertainties at the local level. In addition, the fundamental consensus-building rule itself promotes the market logic (Büscher 2008). Indeed, each agreement in a working group is incomplete with ongoing adjustments of the means and goals (McCarthy 2012).

As such, the working groups that conservation NGOs have succeeded in establishing evolved into long-term institutions. They digest NGO criticism through a science-based management process (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). As a result, the RSPO still allows biodiversity loss, deforestation and

GHG emissions. Having contributed to reinforcing the RSPO system for more than 10 years, collaborative NGOs seem to have no other option than to unconditionally promote the RSPO. For instance, in 2013, an NGO advocated in favour of the RSPO guidance document endorsed at the 2013 GA despite its flaws: 'On balance the new P&Cs [Principles & Criteria] are not the end point but a step on the way to transforming the industry and as such, I think we should support the revisions [of the guidance document] and encourage others to do so'.[21]

Opponent NGOs initially cooperate with collaborative NGOs to expose bad practises of RSPO members and to reinforce the RSPO complaints system. Nonetheless, opponent NGOs can focus only on specific cases against the largest RSPO growers by pooling their limited resources where it will have the greatest political impact. As a result, opponent NGOs can only play the role of external supervisor, a role normally given to the state, without having the financial and coercive power of the state. Opportunistic NGOs initially use collaborative or opponent strategies within the RSPO to protect specific geographical areas. With the RSPO's institutionalisation, however, they are forced to choose between the two strategies because new RSPO rules force all members to promote it. Reluctantly, the NGOs tend to select the collaborative strategy.

Finally, NGOs adopting the role of the sceptic seek recognition of local land rights but their requests are marginalised and not taken into consideration within the RSPO system. They tend to leave the RSPO, even though land rights, and more broadly local issues, are a fundamental matter of concern for biodiversity conservation. The NGOs are also unable to get leverage on the RSPO from developing collaborative strategies between different NGO categories. This is because the RSPO has adopted two formal codes of conduct, one for its members and one for the BHCV WG, that force all RSPO members to adopt only collaborative strategies.

In summary, by analysing NGO strategies relative to the RSPO and the main actors' agendas, and how NGOs participate or oppose based on their own motivations, this research expands our understanding of why conservation NGOs obtain meagre conservation outcomes. In the case of the RSPO, it results from the growing gap between the intent (the initial goal of NGOs) and the allowed actions in an always more constrained environment. What appear as 'alliances' (Igoe et al. 2010a: 486) between growing markets and conservation may be experienced by the NGOs as their only possible choice, or at least the most feasible one.

Yet, what can the NGOs do to get better conservation outcomes? One option would be for NGOs to clearly focus on their initial conservation

objective by mobilising additional resources in a constrained system. Another option would be to collaborate on a collective conservation or human rights objective with other NGOs using diverse strategies in order to get some leverage (Ruysschaert 2013). At the field level, sceptic NGOs could support local communities to regain recognition of their land rights. Along the supply chain, collaborative NGOs could focus on transparency and traceability. The World Resources Institute with its Global Forest Watch and ZSL with its Sustainable Palm Oil Platform (ZSL 2015) are already actively participating in this. At the consumer level, opponent NGOs could expose the bad practises of main players (e.g., producers, traders, financial institutions) by using information that has been made available by collaborative NGOs. Finally, opportunistic NGOs could benefit from the work of the other NGOs and apply it to specific territories.

To test whether the NGOs would benefit more from focussing on their specific objective or from collaborative strategies to get an impact, researchers should conduct a more detailed institutional ethnographic study of a selection of NGOs (Larsen 2016), which is beyond the scope of this chapter. An ethnographic analysis of the NGOs involved in the Palm Oil Innovative Group (POIG) may be a promising avenue (POIG 2013). The POIG brings together several proactive RSPO growers and NGOs from the four engagement strategies: the WWF (collaborative), Greenpeace (opponent), Forest Peoples Programmes (sceptics) and SOS (opportunistic). The POIG members commit to respecting both human rights and to 'no deforestation', which includes the preservation of all peat lands and forests above a certain carbon stock threshold.

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Notes

1. Aquaculture Stewardship Council, Better Cotton Initiative—BCI, Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels—RSB, Better Sugar Cane Initiative—Bonsucro, Roundtable on Responsible Soy—RTRS.
2. (1) Commitment to transparency, (2) compliance with applicable laws and regulations, (3) commitment to long-term economic and financial viability, (4) use of appropriate best practises by growers and millers, (5) environmental responsibility and conservation of natural resources and

biodiversity, (6) responsible consideration of employees and of individuals and communities affected by growers and mills, (7) responsible development of new plantings, and (8) commitment to continuous improvement in key areas of activity.

3. Environmental NGO interview, 20 April 2012.
4. Retailer funding member RSPO, 10 December 2012.
5. Interview, 28 November 2011.
6. SOS interview, 18 March 2012.
7. Grower interview, 13 February 2012.
8. Sime Darby, the largest oil palm grower in the world, bought New Britain Oil Palm in March 2016.
9. Grower interview, 13 February 2012.
10. Grower interview, 13 February 2012.
11. Interview, 18 November 2011.
12. Votes were 95 for, 4 against, 22 abstentions.
13. Three growers from Indonesia (PT Smart, Musim Mas, Gapki) and three from Malaysia (IOI, Kulim Bernhard, Sime Darby, Wilmar).
14. Indonesian growers (PT Indonesia Plantations, Asian Agri Group, GAPKI, PT Smart) and Malaysian growers (United Plantations, Sime Darby).
15. Conservation International, Wetlands International, WWF International, WWF Malaysia, and WWF Indonesia.
16. Palanka Raya Indonesia University, Parum Agricultural Soil Survey, Delft Hydraulics, Leicester University.
17. Research Institute interview, 10 November 2011.
18. Interview, 28 November 2011.
19. Interview, 23 November 2011.
20. Interview, 19 November 2011.
21. E-mail to all NGOs regarding RSPO vote on the new P&C, 9 April 2013.

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