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Selling out for sustainability? Neoliberal governance, agency and professional careers in the sustainable palm oil sector

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Abstract

In response to high-profile activist campaigns raising public awareness of the destructive effects of large-scale oil palm plantations on tropical rainforests, wildlife and local communities, the palm oil sector has put considerable effort and resources into ensuring "sustainable", "deforestation-free" palm oil production (and thereby countering negative publicity) over the last 15 years or so. The corporate sustainability drive – with the palm oil sector significantly leading other tropical commodities – has involved the direct employment of many professionals with backgrounds in conservation, anthropology or activism by the private palm oil sector. Based on long term participant observation as well as interviews with "sustainability professionals" about their career choices, this article shows that there is more nuance, agency and positive change than the existing political ecology literature attributes to the sustainable palm oil drive. It also shows how neoliberal governance structures and individual professional careers and values intersect and mutually reinforce each other. This dual, seemingly paradoxical analysis is informed by and situated in the wider context that the sustainability professionals we interviewed and we ourselves, as academics, share: growing academic precarity, the climate and ecological emergency, and the challenges and questions posed by both.

Key words: neoliberal governance, agency, careers, professionals, sustainable palm oil

Résumé

En réponse aux grandes campagnes militantes sensibilisant le public aux effets destructeurs des plantations à grande échelle d'huile de palme sur les forêts tropicales, la faune et les communautés locales, l'industrie de l'huile de palme a déployé des efforts et des ressources considérables pour assurer une production d'huile « durable » et « zéro déforestation » (contrecarrant ainsi la publicité négative) au cours des 15 dernières années. L'effort de développement durable des entreprises, dans lequel le secteur de l'huile de palme est au premier rang des produits tropicaux, a engendré le recrutement de nombreux professionnels avec un parcours professionnel en conservation, en anthropologie ou de militant par le secteur privé de l'huile de palme. S'appuyant sur de longues périodes d'observation participantes, ainsi que sur des entretiens avec des "professionnels de la durabilité", sur leurs choix de carrière, cet article met en évidence des nuances, formes d'agentivité et changements positifs dans cet élan vers une huile de palme durable encore peu documentés par la littérature existante en *political ecology*. Il montre également comment les structures de gouvernance néolibérale et les carrières et valeurs professionnelles d'individus se croisent et se renforcent mutuellement. Cette double analyse,

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apparemment paradoxale, est informée et située dans un contexte plus large partagé à la fois par les professionnels de la durabilité que nous avons interrogés, et nous-mêmes, en tant qu'universitaires : une précarité académique croissante, l'urgence climatique et écologique, et les défis et questions que ceux-ci posent.

Mots-clés: gouvernance néolibérale, agence, carrières, professionnels, huile de palme durable

Resumen

En respuesta a las campañas de activistas de alto perfil que sensibilizan a la conciencia pública sobre los efectos destructivos de las plantaciones de palma aceitera a gran escala en las selvas tropicales, a la fauna y las comunidades locales, el sector del aceite de palma ha dedicado esfuerzos y recursos considerables a garantizar una producción de aceite de palma "sostenible" y "libre de deforestación" (y contrarrestar así la publicidad negativa) en los últimos 15 años más o menos. La campaña de sostenibilidad de las empresas, en la que el sector del aceite de palma se sitúa a la cabeza de otros productos tropicales, ha implicado la contratación directa de muchos profesionales con formación en conservación, antropología o activismo por parte del sector privado del aceite de palma. Basándose en la observación participante a largo plazo, así como en entrevistas con "profesionales de la sostenibilidad" sobre sus decisiones profesionales, este artículo muestra que hay más matices, agencia y cambio positivo de lo que la literatura existente sobre ecología política atribuye al impulso sostenible del aceite de palma. También muestra cómo las estructuras de gobierno neoliberales y las carreras y valores profesionales individuales se entrecruzan y refuerzan mutuamente. Este análisis dual, aparentemente paradójico, está informado y situado en el contexto más amplio que los profesionales de la sostenibilidad que entrevistamos y nosotras mismas, como académicas, compartimos: la creciente precariedad académica, la emergencia climática y ecológica, y los desafíos y preguntas que ambas plantean.

Palabras claves: gobierno neoliberal, agencia, carreras, profesionales, aceite de palma sostenible

1. Introduction

Global palm oil production has risen exponentially over the last six decades, from 1.5 million metric tons in 1961 to 75 million metric tons in 2021.² There has been an enormous ecological and social fall-out of this boom: large-scale forest conversion (Curtis *et al.*, 2018) and associated wildfires resulting in carbon emissions, air pollution and biodiversity loss (Vijay *et al.*, 2016); child labor and other labor abuses and impoverishment (Pye, 2017); and loss of Indigenous land and incomes through plantation expansion (Gellert, 2015). These impacts have long attracted vociferous criticism from local and transnational environmental NGOs, from the WWF 1998 "Lipstick from the rainforest" report (Glastra *et al.*, 2002) to the "Rang-tan in my bedroom" Iceland/Greenpeace advert that went viral in November 2018 (Fair, 2021; Greenpeace, 2018). The palm oil industry has been responding with a sustained "sustainability drive": in 2004, retailers (Unilever, Sainsbury's and Migros), producers (e.g. Golden Hope, Malaysian MPOA) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) set up the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a "multi-stakeholder initiative" that seeks to ensure sustainable palm oil production through certification and agreed standards (RSPO, 2022). Since then, not just the RSPO itself, but the wider sustainable palm oil network, involving corporations, consultancies, investment banks, NGOs, trade associations and zoos, has grown significantly. Taking RSPO membership as a rough indicator, there are currently around 5,000 sustainable palm oil professionals employed by corporations, consultancies, investors and NGOs to promote and ensure sustainable palm oil production (RSPO, 2022).

As "one of the most successful stakeholder initiatives of all times" (Pye, 2013, p. 187) and a prominent example of neoliberal governance, the RSPO has been the subject of much critical attention from political ecology and political sciences, examining the neoliberal values and assumptions informing it, the power dynamics and conflicts shaping it, and its limited effectiveness in ensuring sustainability (e.g. Dauvergne, 2018; Hamilton-Hart, 2015; Pichler, 2013; Ponte & Cheyns, 2013; Pye, 2013; 2016; 2019). This article builds on and contributes to this literature through an ethnographic, people-centered study of the wider sustainable palm oil network, consisting of two elements: firstly, drawing on a series of interviews, we explore how sustainable palm oil professionals themselves think and talk about their jobs, their motivations and trajectories – the narratives

² <https://ourworldindata.org/palm-oil> for 1961-2015, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/274127/world-palm-oil-usage-distribution/> for 2020-2021.

(Wright *et al.*, 2012) they tell about themselves to justify and explain their career choices. Secondly, based on longer-term participant observation in the field as well as our interviews, we map out and analyze the sustainable palm oil network as a whole, both the roles of different organizations and how they work together in various initiatives, and as a social world of personal relationships, friendships, sociality and familiarity. Mapping out and clarifying the roles and relationships of different entities, in particular consultancies and NGOs, really helps in understanding how neoliberal governance in general and how the "palm oil sustainability network" specifically – an "assemblage of actors, objects, procedures and relations coalescing around addressing or managing social and/or environmental aspects of commodity production, processing, exchange and consumption" (Ponte & Cheyns, 2013, p. 460) – works in practice.

Through this ethnographic approach, our article shows that there is more nuance, agency and positive change than the existing literature attributes to the sustainable palm oil drive, but it also, simultaneously – and somewhat paradoxically – adds to and strengthens the critique of the RSPO. It does this by showing how neoliberal governance structures and individual professional careers and values intersect and mutually reinforce each other in a self-referential world. In the wake of Covid-19, neoliberalism may have been declared "over" (Meadway, 2021; Tooze, 2021), but it very much lives on in the people and institutions it created.

Whilst we interviewed professionals in different positions across the sustainable palm oil network and with a range of academic backgrounds and qualifications, our analysis focuses on the experiences and voices of those with backgrounds in conservation, ecological sciences, anthropology and geography now working in the corporate sector. "Background" here means both people with just undergraduate degrees in these disciplines and those who initially embarked on academic careers. We did so because this focus brought out most sharply and clearly both sides of our argument – more nuance, complexity and agency as well as mechanisms of consensus-building and homogenization. But we also did so because this article serves a second purpose, namely to speak to career questions asked by recent graduates in our own disciplines, and that academics themselves, too, increasingly face: how best to apply and develop academic knowledge and make a living, in a world of growing academic precarity and marketization and in ecological and climate crisis? By showing the potentials, but also limitations on what committed "change makers" can achieve by working for corporations, we hope this study provides more politically informed and critical insights than traditional career advice – something, we feel, many political ecologists may welcome at the moment. In turn, "thinking-through" our study from the perspective of challenges and choices we all face as political ecologists adds more emotional depth and understanding to our analysis of sustainable palm oil professionals, and to answering the question of whether working for the corporate sector inevitably means "selling out" for those starting in these disciplines and wishing to "make a difference" in the world.

2. The political ecology of sustainable palm oil

We have identified three key themes in the existing political ecology and political science literature on the sustainable palm oil drive: the neoliberal values and assumptions informing it; the power dynamics, strategies and conflicts shaping it; and a critique of the kind of "sustainability" RSPO certification ensures. In the following, we briefly summarize each of these themes and our respective contributions.

Neoliberal values and assumptions

In 1998, the prominent sustainability consultant John Elkington – inventor of the famous "triple bottom line" (people, planet, profit) underlying the UN Sustainable Development Goals and indeed the RSPO's theory of change – claimed that we were witnessing a shift of "the center of gravity from the world of government to the world of business" (1998, p. 100; quoted in Pye, 2016, p. 413; see also Pichler, 2013). The critical political ecology literature explores how the RSPO is both a manifestation of this core belief of neoliberal governance and in itself reinforces it. It discusses how roundtables are private arrangements with the aim of improving the sustainability of global commodity chains, through voluntary certification systems (Ponte, 2014), and how within such platforms, only private parties (business and NGOs) have decision-making power; governmental agencies and scientists are only able to participate as observing members or advisors (Schouten & Glasbergen,

2011). In this context of neoliberal governance, political problems are presented as technical or system problems, thereby disallowing underlying value conflicts (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011).

To Oliver Pye, the RSPO represents a clear example of neoliberal governance that operates beyond-the-state (Swyngedouw, 2005); it is, as he puts it, "very much a child of its age" (Pye, 2016, p. 411). He goes further in exploring key underlying neoliberal values and beliefs. Consumer or commodity fetishism, the belief that the commodity itself will bring solutions, where "sustainability becomes a commodity, something that you can buy, rather than a social and political question" (Pye, 2019, p. 220), and belief in techno-managerial solutions – planning, expert management, regulation – that Swyngedouw (2010) defines as a quintessential part of the "post-political" regime (Pye, 2019, p. 221). In the context of a different global commodity, tea, Archer (2021) explores how such core beliefs – in the power of the market and in techno-managerial solutions – are held by and manifest in the practices of sustainability professionals themselves; how these "weak elites" genuinely believe that the intersection of western scientific expertise with market dynamics is the most effective way to promote sustainability in global supply chains.

In this article, we similarly explore how the values shaping the RSPO as a whole, are also held by and reproduced by our interviewees, such as the belief in corporate power and in techno-managerial solutions. We go a little further, in fact, by starting with the more fundamental values and ideas shaping neoliberal ideas of personhood, such as "passion." Sustainability professionals are, of course, far from alone in having absorbed and reproducing neoliberal forms of power – we are all part of this manifestation of what Foucault (1988) describes as "technologies of the self" – governing ourselves. But at the same time, we take our interviewees' commitment and decision-making seriously and recognize, along with Visser and Crane (2010), that there is not always smooth alignment between individual and corporate values, and that individuals *can* shape corporation values and overall policies.

Power dynamics, strategies and conflict

Political ecologists have analyzed not just the dominance of corporations within the sustainable palm oil drive, but also power dynamics, strategies, and conflict, and how they shape outcomes. Schouten and Glasbergen (2011) examine how the RSPO (and other private governance arrangements) seek to create legitimacy, through legality, moral justifications, consent and acceptance, whilst Pichler explores how "the emphasis on consensus and multistakeholder composition masks power relations and exclusion mechanisms" (Pichler, 2013, p. 372). Hamilton-Hart (2015) argues that the competing interests between stakeholders of very different wealth and power result in governance failures; mis-governance is not unintended, but built directly into the RSPO's system of multilevel governance.

We contribute to these analyses through a detailed exploration and mapping out of the roles of relations between different types of organizations within the sustainable palm oil network, including social relations and individual trajectories. This network has grown as a very large extension of established palm oil trade networks within traditional supply chains, almost outgrowing it in size and complexity, with many new jobs and institutions created in the name of "sustainability." The network is, in fact, quite complex and, for the uninitiated, somewhat bewildering at first. In brief, it includes smallholders, producing and consuming governments, plantation companies (e.g. Wilmar, Sime Darby, Musim Mas), refiners (e.g. AAK), traders (e.g. Felda Global Ventures, Cargill), consumer goods manufacturers (e.g. Unilever, Nestle, Ahold), retailers (e.g. Tesco, Waitrose, Sainsbury's), investors and banks (e.g. Aviva, Robeco, NNIP), consultancies (e.g. Efeca, Earthwork, 3Keel), NGOs (e.g. WWF, Greenpeace, Global Canopy), zoos (e.g. the Zoological Society of London, ZSL, and Chester Zoo), associations and boards (e.g. the Malaysian Palm Oil Board, MPOB), and of course the RSPO itself. The scene is further complicated by a whole "alphabet soup" of different collaborative initiatives, frameworks and platforms: the High Carbon Stock Approach (HCSA), the High Conservation Values (HCV) Network, Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA), the Palm Oil Transparency Coalition, the Accountability Framework initiative (AFi), the ZSL's Sustainability Policy Transparency Toolkit (SPOTT), and the No-deforestation, No-peat and No-exploitation (NDPE) Implementation Reporting Framework (NDPE-IRF). Some of these initiatives have become quite large, significant networks in themselves: the HCSA, for example (a methodology that distinguishes forest areas for protection from degraded lands with low carbon and

biodiversity values that may be developed), is now established as a membership organization in its own right with its own secretariat, steering committee, working groups and task forces.

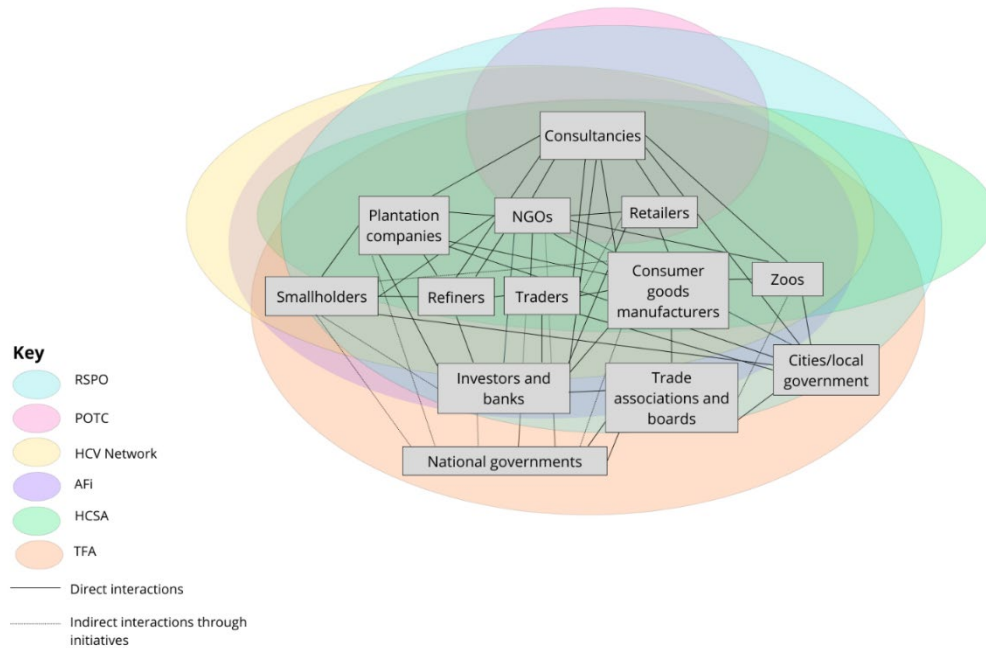


Figure 1: Interactions and initiatives in the sustainable palm oil network. This image shows the actors involved in the sustainable palm oil network including smallholders, plantation companies, NGOs, refiners, traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, investors and banks, trade associations and boards, local government, national governments and consultancies. We present the network in a non-hierarchical way, to show the interactions between actors that are (1) direct (collaboration, meetings, partnerships), and (2) indirect (through initiatives and coalitions related to sustainable palm oil). These actors are involved in a range of different initiatives including the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the Palm Oil Transparency Coalition (POTC), HCV (High Conservation Value) Network, AFI (Accountability Framework initiative), HCSA (High Carbon Stock Approach) and TFA (Tropical Forest Alliance). Source: Authors.

Through looking in more detail at the role of consultancies, NGOs and investors as well as a few key initiatives, entering the "social world" of the sustainable palm oil drive and paying attention to individual trajectories, this article provides more insights into how overall consensus is built, whilst also allowing more scope to explore the individual agency of those working within the network.

Sustainability

The political ecology literature is highly skeptical of the RSPO's ability and effectiveness in actually promoting sustainability in the palm oil sector. Pye points out that the voluntary nature of the RSPO considerably weakens its ability to sanction members who breach its "Principles and criteria" (Pye, 2016, p. 435), and that, crucially, sustainability criteria largely apply only to a plantation itself, ignoring wider local or regional impacts and dynamics (Pye, 2019, p. 220). This is a serious omission as wider ecological and social impacts of palm oil production can be significant. At an oil palm plantation in Nigeria, for example, many plantation workers also grow food crops to subsidize their wages, increasing the overall deforestation impact

of the plantation (von Hellermann, 2007). Dauvergne reminds us that palm oil's highly diverse market, with many different end users, means that even if one region or product sector demands sustainability, producers can "quickly deflect sales into new uses and jurisdictions" (Dauvergne, 2018, p. 38). Most fundamentally, the RSPO, like all corporate sustainability schemes, is firmly vested in the idea of "green growth." Hickel and Kallis (2020) have shown at a general level how "green growth" can never be compatible with real, long-term planetary sustainability, and it is very obviously a problematic principle for a tropical plantation industry that seeks to become sustainable. In practice, the framework consensus, which aims to "promote the growth and use of sustainable palm oil", means that the RSPO basically accepts expansion of the overall sector, including the use of palm oil for biofuel as an additional market for "sustainable palm oil" (Pye, 2013, p. 190). As Dauvergne (2018, p. 36) puts it, "a narrative advocating for the development advantages of producing and trading even more palm oil – though now calling it 'sustainable' – has come to dominate mainstream institutions and policy circles." In this article, we provide nuance to this critique in listening to professionals' own accounts of their own efforts and the larger sustainability drive and appreciating the changes that *are* happening, but we also strengthen this critique by showing how, through close individual and institutional collaboration, the narrow, corporate confines of "sustainability" are ensured.

3. Academia, pragmatism and career choices in the 2020s

For a long time, it has seemed relatively easy to be a "good" political ecologist, indeed academic: both easy in the sense that there has been a general consensus (our own consensus!) that the role of academia is to analyze and critique from the outside, along the lines of the political ecology literature described above; but also easy in the sense that academic jobs were reasonably secure and well-paid. Having said this, it has always been a bit more complicated than this, and the purity of the academic position questioned in two key ways. On the one hand, many individual researchers, research projects and research institutions have in fact been paid by industry, often very controversially so. On the other hand, some academics have also been making a moral case for more practical engagement with the world we are studying. Amongst political ecologists, Piers Blaikie in particular was wary of using "theory for theory's sake" and aimed at "better [development] practice" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 1034). This pragmatic rather than dogmatic position, Bryant and Goodman (2008) argue, was linked to Blaikie's extensive field experience and consultancy work in development. Blaikie as a pragmatist saw the potential of scholarship as opening up "new spaces and possibilities for 'doing development' in different ways" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 1040). Beyond Blaikie's pragmatism, there are also multiple established traditions of engaged research practice in political ecology disciplines along a wide political spectrum, including policy-oriented (McCusker, 2021), applied,³ participatory-action (Demeritt, 2015; Osborne, 2017) and militant (Halvorsen, 2015; Taylor, 2014).

Today, in the 2020s, the question of how to be a "good" academic – how best to apply and use one's academic training whilst earning a living – is more open, complicated and challenging than ever. For one, it is increasingly apparent that academia itself is not a "pure space", free from neoliberal logics (Raaper, 2016), far from it. It is no longer just about corporate funding of specific research projects (though this very much continues).⁴ Many universities in the global North are viewed and governed by university managers essentially as corporate entities, making the differences between academia and private sector increasingly unclear. In this context, high workload, low salaries and pensions, and job insecurity mean that precarity is commonplace (Ivancheva *et al.*, 2019), making an academic career increasingly, once more, only possible for those with privileged backgrounds. At the same time, the climate and ecological crises are so overwhelmingly urgent that a growing number of academics feel that writing and teaching alone are no longer effective or fast enough to help contribute to climate action, that academic knowledge and forms of learning are no longer sufficient to understanding and participating in the world (Green, 2020; Gardner *et al.*, 2021; Power, 2021). For both of these reasons, recent graduates, early-career researchers and even long-established academics are increasingly

³ See, for example, <https://www.appliedanthro.org/>. Accessed June 30, 2022.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/11/uk-universities-took-89m-from-oil-firms-in-last-four-years> Accessed Oct 22, 2023

considering and moving into other sectors, including the private sector, such as the sustainable palm oil professionals we are focusing on here have done.

This study thus speaks, we hope, to political ecologists, anthropologists, geographers and others currently grappling with these questions. It does so in a very different way to standard career advice, which tends to be technical, neutral and apolitical (arguably an interesting manifestation of neoliberal governance in itself)⁵. It thereby contributes to an important, but somewhat underdeveloped area of applied anthropology. Applied anthropology grapples with how the discipline engages with other sectors and explores difficult ethical issues such as the use of ethnographic knowledge (and employment of anthropologists) for military purposes (Albro, 2010), in government policy or with NGOs. However, there is less reflexive literature on the ethics involved in anthropologists joining the private sector and ethnographic research advancing corporate interests (though see Cefkin, 2010) – all the more necessary so as to counterbalance a different, somewhat niche, business-friendly corner of the discipline that is enthusiastic about promoting the ways in which anthropology lends itself to the corporate world – a prominent example being Gillian Tett's recent "Anthrovision" (2021).

Here, we explore the moral ambiguities and complexities involved in working for the private sector. We listen deeply (Staddon *et al.*, 2021; Koch, 2020) to the anthropologists, geographers, conservation scientists we interviewed, explaining how they ended up working in the private sector, and we learn from them, taking their points of view, decisions and accounts seriously (see also Kiik, 2019). Like them, we are open to embracing many different kinds of learning. "Deep listening" involves "a critical reflexivity about our subject positions as researchers, as well as a suspicion of metanarratives that prevail in the media and academic debates, and a willingness to question our complicity in reproducing those narratives through our choice of research topics and methods. Deep listening is ultimately a way of practicing intellectual humility" (Koch, 2000, p. 52). As Bickford (1996, p. 129) argues, "listening opens up possibilities – for learning and connection, but also for challenge, conflict, dissonance and persuasion." We also remain alert to practitioners really learning from the inside, though they may experience what the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (1991) calls "interpretive drift": that repeated everyday practice and the social world in which people move gradually change their world views, and that "selling out for sustainability" remains a risk for anyone who becomes part of the sustainable palm oil network, high corporate salaries and all.

4. Methodology

This article is based on interviews, as well as longer-term participant observation. One of us (Izabela) worked herself as a sustainability professional in a UK-based conservation NGO, and we have both been researching palm oil and specifically the sustainable palm oil drive for several years. In the process, we have, between us, attended many RSPO meetings and events: Izabela the RT12 in Kuala Lumpur (2014), RT14 in Bangkok (2016), RT15 in Bali (2017) and the European roundtables in London (2017) and Paris (2018), and Pauline the RSPO Dialogue Event in Utrecht 2019. During these events, we actively participated, but also observed and took notes, learning about the key initiatives through which actors in the sustainable palm oil network interact directly, indirectly, bilaterally, multilaterally or through coalitions (Figure 1).

Interviews were conducted between February 2020 and August 2021. Research participants mentioned the "key" initiatives they were involved in related to sustainable palm oil, and discussed the ways in which they "engaged" with other organizations (also presented in Figure 1). Purposive sampling was used to select professionals working in the palm oil sustainability network, through an internet search (e.g. LinkedIn, desk research) and through links to existing contacts. Research participants were approached by email. Snowball sampling was also used to identify and invite further participants (Miles *et al.*, 2018). We conducted interviews remotely (using Zoom, MS Teams and Skype) with 28 professionals working on sustainability in the palm oil sector. Of the 28 professionals interviewed, six were from palm oil-producing countries, compared to 22 from palm oil-consuming countries. This bias is reflective of the sustainable palm oil industry, as many consumer

⁵ See, for example, <https://targetcareers.co.uk/careers-advice/choosing-your-career/894159-environmental-careers-and-how-to-get-them>. Accessed June 30, 2022.

goods manufacturers, NGOs, retailers, consultancies and investor companies are well-resourced to work on sustainable palm oil and are based in palm oil-consuming countries.

Pseudonym	Job title	Sector	Organization pseudonym	Work location	Biography
Maya	Head of Environment	Consumer Goods/ Retail	Retailer 1	UK	Originally studied Anthropology. Previously worked in a large manufacturing company, in international development and sustainability consultancy.
Robert	Senior Manager Engagement	Investment	Investment 1	Netherlands	Previously at NGO for several years, background in sustainable business, entrepreneurship & consultancy. BSc and postgraduate study in Environmental Sciences.
Celeste	Environmental, social and governance analyst	Investment	Investment company 2	UK	Previously worked on corporate sustainability at consulting company and at a large "campaigning" NGO.
Max	Sustainable Sourcing Manager	Consumer Goods/ Retail	Retailer 2	UK	Had moved from charities to a UK retailer.
Matt	Program Director	Consultancy	Consultancy 1	Indonesia	Previously worked at conservation NGOs, had studied anthropology and conservation.
Aeni	Conservation Advisor	Palm oil company	Palm oil company 1	Malaysia	Trained in conservation. Previously worked in NGOs and public sector. Specialist in conservation and sustainable development.
Charlotte	Manager, Environment and Conservation	Palm oil company	Palm oil company 2	Indonesia	Agronomist by training, GIS work then worked for palm oil companies since 2015 in a sustainability role.
Claire	Policy Director	NGO	NGO 1	UK	Background in natural sciences. Worked at NGO 1 (a small environmental NGO) for 10 years, working internationally on projects, mainly focused on supply chain and financing sustainability.
David	Consultant, previously sustainability officer at palm oil company 3	Consultancy, previously palm oil company	Consultancy 2	UK	David did a PhD in environmental micro-biology before working in research and sustainability in the oil palm sector.

Table 1: Biographies of primary research participants

In our analysis we ended up focusing on nine primary research participants. Reflecting our prime interest, they were those who started studying conservation sciences, anthropology or geography and who worked in academic or activist NGOs before joining the private sector or NGOs working very closely with the private sector (Table 1). However, we were also informed by, and drew on, our other interviews with those of different backgrounds and working in different positions in the wider sustainable palm oil network (Appendix i). Undertaking interviews remotely allowed us to gain access to informants dispersed geographically. Each one lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guideline with questions related to participants' motivations for undertaking their roles in their organizations. In addition, we conducted a review of the professionals' careers using online biographies (such as on LinkedIn, personal websites, and biographies on the participants' organizations' websites and speaker biographies for industry events). Online meetings were deemed appropriate for the interviews (and necessary in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic), as all the professionals we interviewed were experienced and comfortable with communicating through this medium, often with international "stakeholders."

Our experience of working in and with the palm oil sector ensured a good level of access to professionals, through initial existing contacts, and added nuance to our analysis from experiences of observing professionals and interactions. We ensured informed consent by explaining clearly the research aims of our interviews, including with the minority of interviewees we knew personally. In addition, the names, organizations and, in several cases, the title of positions held by research participants were changed to ensure anonymity. We did this so that neither participants nor organizations would have any direct negative repercussions from this study, and so that participants felt able to discuss personal values that were not necessarily representative of the views of their organizations. In practice, the views they expressed were mostly closely aligned with their employers, something we will discuss more below.

After conducting the interviews, we analysed transcripts, and, taking an inductive approach, identified key terms and topics that emerged from the interview material. We then grouped these into three broad themes, a process which was informed both by our existing interests in key neoliberal concepts and terms (e.g. the idea of "passion", or techno-managerialism) that we wanted to explore further, as well as from the material itself.

5. Listening to sustainability professionals

We begin by examining how sustainable palm oil professionals themselves talked about their career choices, and how they ended up working in the private sustainable palm oil sector. In the manner described above, we identified three main themes:

- passion, drive and interest;
- challenge, learning and complexity;
- impact, change and leverage.

Even though these overlap and are linked, we present them separately, before a broader discussion and analysis of their accounts as a whole.

Passion, drive, interest

Many of our interviewees spoke of how "passion" and interest in environmental issues motivated them to work in this field. Celeste, for example, who worked at a large environmental NGO and a consultancy before becoming a Senior Analyst at an investment company, said:

It's a very interesting job and I enjoy it. I have spent almost my entire career trying to improve the environmental sustainability of companies and I've done it from many different angles at [a consultancy company], [an NGO] and now I'm at [investment company 2] from a third angle and that's what I'm passionate about.

Claire, policy director at a rainforest protection NGO that works closely with companies on certification, said that, ultimately, her motivation is "passion for the outdoors and the environment." Matt, who works for a specialist sustainability consultancy in Indonesia, described how it is ultimately his love of animals that 'drives' him:

What always drives me is the ways that we can protect forest...and it is really the sort of conservation aspect of it that I really like. For other people it's probably like, community and community issues or smallholders, or indigenous things. But for me, it was always just the animals.

Max, who has a background in environmental policy, had recently started working for a UK retailer, after several years of working for conservation charities. He described how he was driven by climate change concerns:

It's kind of that "oh shit" moment when, you know, you realize ... when you really understand what climate change means ... It's one of those things where you can't unlearn it and it's like, "okay, well, this is gonna affect the rest of my life" and you're at that time, when you're trying to create meaning for yourself, and your life.

Challenge, complexity, learning

Interviewees also spoke a lot about how they liked the challenges and complexity of working in sustainable palm oil. Maya, an anthropology graduate who worked at a large manufacturing company and is now Head of Environment at a large UK retailer, described this well:

The average person doesn't really understand [...] the complexity of what's going on. And so, then there's the challenge about how do you engage with society, with consumers, who are not a homogenous group in themselves, but how do you engage in different ways that's meaningful to them ... It's fascinating because it's so complex.

Similarly, Claire spoke of how she enjoyed the "exposure to different motivations, different individuals, different challenges" and "the complexity of the fact that it's not a simple answer and there's different winners and losers, and having to navigate that." Some interviewees specifically mentioned "systems thinking" here, bringing this from their academic training into their current jobs, in different ways. Robert, for example, an investor with a background in sustainable business and consultancy and earth sciences, told us:

What I really like of my role is it's bridging on the one hand, a very clear global focus on how earth system science works and how also economic systems interact with each other and have an impact on the environment, ... combined with making sense of that for investors ... while at the same time also looking for changes that actors in any systems can make.

And Maya:

So having an academic background in anthropology, I'm really interested in culture, in organizations, in systems thinking, but also the role of humans, and you know, what is our role and how do we interact and help shape and change the system.

The move into the private sector was also often explained by a desire to learn, both in a general sense of it being good to work in different sectors, adding these experiences to their "portfolio", but also because

interviewees wanted to learn how corporations work from the inside. Aeni, who worked for a large environmental NGO and UNDP before joining one of the big palm oil producers, explained that "essentially the motivation for this role was to see ... how the private sector is actually addressing conservation." Maya, too, accounted for her move from a manufacturing company to a retail company in terms of learning:

So having spent nearly five years in manufacturing and getting to grips with what the supply chains look like, what the levers were that you could pull and influence the role of the brand - corporate and product, and that sphere of influence, [I] ... was keen to get a different perspective. And so, retail [was] the next link in the value chain, closer to the consumer [which] was quite interesting.

Max was similarly motivated by a desire to learn how the corporate sector actually works, and for this reason decided to work for retail company 2 despite ethical concerns over joining the private sector:

The big black box in my head is I knew nothing about how business works on a really fundamental level and that's where the action is in terms of understanding the nuts and bolts of how will change happen? So that's really what made me want to go into it. And then also [retailer 2] as a company, a brand that I respected, [that I] thought had the right intentions in terms of wanting to do the right thing. So I didn't feel too ethically compromised in making the jump.

Charlotte, an agronomist who had moved from a technical GIS consultancy role to palm oil companies in 2015, also thought about the ethics of moving into sustainable palm oil. Working in consultancy already, her concerns were not so much about joining the private sector, but about the controversies around palm oil. But again, the desire to learn "what it's really like" motivated her to take the plunge:

When I changed to go to the palm oil industry, at first I was ... a little bit wondering "OK, is that actually a good choice? I mean, what I've heard so far about [the] palm oil industry is not really nice." So my motivation were two things. Actually the first one... well I needed to look by myself how it is for real ... behind the curtain and behind the media coverage and how narratives of the palm oil industry [are] given to the public. I told myself "OK, if it is actually like what the media [are] saying, you know, I'm just going to walk away from that."

Impact, change, leverage

Several interviewees spoke about an overall desire to make a difference. Max described how he realized that the climate emergency meant that "lots of things need to change, and I want to be a part of that change." But in particular, interviewees talked about how they started working for the private sector because it was here that they felt they could make the biggest difference. As Maya recounted:

I became really interested in understanding how could I play a role as a change agent working with or within companies to actually be better corporate citizens. And kind of leveraging the boundaries of responsibility and influence that companies have across their value chain. [...] So joining [a consumer goods manufacturer], the world's [largest] food and beverage manufacturer present in nearly [100] countries ... with huge global supply chains and really strong agricultural supply chains as well ... It's about impact and influence.

Scale, the sheer size of impact that any change a large business makes can have, as described by Maya here, was also mentioned by several other interviewees, as a key reason why more could be achieved in the private sector. As Charlotte put it:

I wanted to have an impact and I think working for an industry we actually can have an impact because they are so big and ... the hectareage is so huge that if you can be sustainable in that way, then you will have a huge impact, way more than actually working for a very small-scale action.

Those who had originally worked for NGOs or the public sector also described a certain disillusion with what is possible to achieve there:

Originally I wanted to go into international development and I did some work in Southeast Asia and South Asia and became quite quickly disillusioned by the effectiveness of the system and, in particular, aid disbursement and the models basically of development in bringing about ... positive sustained change and which is how I found myself kind of reorienting towards sustainability; the role that companies can play in having a positive impact and obviously a less negative impact. (Maya)

I've been [...] working on the edge of research and policy and campaigning for most of my career, but when you do that, you realize, to be honest, the biggest lever is international trade and business, especially when it comes to like, forest protection, but also seas. (Max)

Working within the conservation field for 20 years, we were trying very hard to engage with companies at the government level to change land use and then at the company level to improve their practices. As an NGO, you don't really have a lot of leverage. But here in this company I mean, we're talking to suppliers [who] have no inkling at all about conservation, no inkling about sustainability at all. But then [...] they actually sit up and they listen to you. [...] And that's quite interesting. [...] Yeah, we are having these conversations with suppliers that we would never be able to get to as government agencies or as NGOs. (Aeni)

It was quite a big, big decision for me to move into a consultancy, because I wasn't completely comfortable with working so closely with the companies. But really, I sometimes feel that you can make the biggest change working with companies because often the NGOs, they do a campaign and they will raise an issue, but they expect the companies to sort it out, but they [the company] have no idea [how to do this]. They need people to help them. And if you're working for the organization that offers that service, you can really make a change. And I talk to companies about their sourcing policies and say that "you shouldn't be buying from this company and you're buying from a company that has a concession [that] is full of orangutans." You can really work with them and implement policies to protect that forest [...] and that's really, really rewarding. (Matt)

Here, Matt here talks about how consultancies can help companies that would not be able to introduce changes on their own. Indeed, several interviewees stressed that the extent of changes that can be made within a corporation depended on the approach and in particular the CEO, that they chose to work for the specific companies they are at precisely because they are "better", the leaders in sustainable palm oil: "I was curious to continue and see what was the level of impact as a private sector. [...] Here within [palm oil company 1] it's essentially private sector motivations of trade and it's been quite an eye opener. " (Aeni)

[Retail company 1] has quite a strong sustainability agenda. It's being driven by strong CEO leadership. So I look for ... senior leadership within companies on these kind of agendas. [It] is a really good indicator of how effective ultimately you will be as an individual within the organization. And so, yeah, that's kind of why I moved over. (Maya)

Overall, the sustainable palm oil professionals we interviewed showed genuine motivation and commitment to environmental action, such as forest protection (Matt) and addressing the climate crisis (Max). They also showed genuine curiosity, intellectual interest, real engagement and a willingness to keep on learning. Maya and Robert (as they pointed out themselves) had an excellent grasp of the complex challenges involved in attempting to make palm oil supply chains "sustainable." Indeed, as an anthropologist and a geographer, we fully concur with Aeni, Max and others that it's important to understand the "nooks and crannies" of actually implementing changes, and that it is through working in corporations that one gains these insights – the classic tenet of participant observation, after all. It is also evident that our participants did not make these choices lightly. Charlotte, Max, Aeni and others were thoughtful and clearly aware of the ethical dilemmas involved in going over to "the dark side", as Aeni put it.

Although neoliberal governance appeared to transcend perspectives beyond social identities, we are mindful here also of other factors beyond the desire to "make a difference" influencing professionals' choices, even if they did not talk about these explicitly. Although our interviewees had all achieved a level of higher education and could be considered to be in relatively comfortable socio-economic positions, job security concerns cannot be disentangled from peoples' career choices. Indeed, "choices" may not always be the right word. Both academia and NGOs offer fewer and fewer positions, and the ones available are increasingly short-term contracts and badly paid. In non-western countries, government and higher education may be even less well-funded; Aeni, for example, described how choosing a career in academia or a job in the Malaysian government would have been to "choose poverty." Whilst of course others do go for these jobs regardless of salaries, in an age of widespread precarity as well as corporatism in academia and NGOs, we must acknowledge the need for individual-level pragmatism in difficult circumstances, too.

And, of course, as they recounted it, our interviewees *did* help improve corporate sustainability policy and practice. Aeni was key in creating and implementing palm oil company 1's sustainability policy, raising environmental awareness amongst suppliers. Matt changed sourcing policies as a consultant. David set up palm oil company 3's Sustainability program. And it is undeniable that the sheer scale and reach of multinational corporations means that any small change in policy and practice does, indeed, potentially have a large impact. We recognize the need for corporations to change practices and policies, and the positive differences their actions *can* make, and therefore appreciate and share our interviewees' (and Blaikie's) pragmatism in doing the work they do.

At the same time, these professionals' accounts show how they share key neoliberal ideas of personhood and governance. Take, for example, how several of our interviewees used the word "passion" in explaining their motivation. "Passion" talk – so ubiquitous these days: we all must declare our passion for things, do the things we are passionate about and "follow our passion" in choosing our career – is symptomatic of neoliberal ideas of personhood in several ways. For one, it is rooted in a highly individualized and self-centered way of looking at the world; about the "enterprising self" realizing his, her or their potential (Bonner & du Gay, 1992; Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 197). But the emphasis on passion legitimizes and individualizes extractive labor by organizations, creating a culture that may be particularly exploitative of certain individuals, such as those at an early career stage and looking for job stability, in particular professions that many are attracted to for reasons other than financial reward, such as the arts, fashion, and indeed academia (Cannizzo, 2015; Petersson McIntyre, 2014; Tokumitsu, 2014). As the "inspirational speaker" Simon Sinek [put it](#): "Working hard for something we don't care about is called stress; working hard for something we love is called passion."

In line with our comments about academia not being a pure space, we note here that, of course, the academic system equally relies on "passion" for research and teaching. This individualizes the "acceptance of what is endured in the name of what is desired" (Cannizzo, 2015, p. 37), with academics working long hours and expected to be "flexible" with their time (and continuously available). As Marc Bousquet (2009, p. 148) noted, academia is remarkably successful at extracting voluntary labor, and emulated by corporations keen to find out how they, too, can get "employees to swoon over their desks, murmuring 'I love what I do' in response to greater workloads and smaller paychecks." Moreover, "passion" is profoundly depoliticizing in the context of neoliberal governance, that is, it is politically mute and socially neutral. The problem of overwork is defused, without tackling more fundamental political tensions (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011). Reference to "passion" equates all interests and motivations to something practitioners just want to do, and takes out

political and other reasons for wanting to do those things. As many climate justice activists have pointed out on social media: "climate change is not my passion!"⁶

The emphasis on complexity and systems thinking is also depoliticizing; it has a lot of affinity with, indeed has become part and parcel of, neoliberal techno-managerialism. The notion of "complex systems thinking", based on the study of nonlinear dynamic systems (originally developed in the context of physical/ecological sciences), has been adopted and operationalized in business settings (Levy, 2000). As exemplified by Maya and Max, this does encourage more holistic perspectives of problems, but is taken up through a managerial lens, again restricted to pragmatism that precludes more radical conceptions of change. Complex systems need to be studied to understand where and when levers can be pulled, but they do not need to be challenged politically. These different aspects of neoliberal thinking merge when professionals emphasize that they are "curious" and passionate about the "complexity" of the problem of deforestation in the palm oil sector, which is problematic as they are charged with addressing complex, global, structural problems through an individualization of their "passion."

Moreover, in describing how they learned over time that real leverage and power does not lie with NGOs but with the private sector, our interviewees of course very much echo and reproduce the very core of neoliberal governance thinking, i.e. John Elkington (1998, p. 100) and others saying that business is where "it's at." Indeed, with all these intelligent, highly capable people joining the private sector, they are helping to make this true. By working for the private sector, they themselves are making it the place where indeed "things are at." There is no doubt that higher salaries play a role in this. Whilst we are sympathetic to difficult economic circumstances, there is also no denying that the private sector is simply more "lucrative", as one – but only one – of our interviewees mentioned.

"Impact" and "change agent", too, are neoliberal concepts, in that they are rooted in an individualized understanding of the world and again have depoliticizing functions. Both can be used in very vague terms, with almost any kind of impact or change seen as positive. Moreover, there was a general, unspoken acceptance amongst our interviewees that it is possible to decouple environmental harm from economic growth: that "green growth" is achievable, an acceptance that is indeed widely shared in sustainable development research, policy and practice, even though this decoupling has been shown to be elusive (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). The "change" and "impact" that the interviewees aim for is therefore confined to a context of neoliberal governance, as business is seen as a force for good, at scale. Through their statements, the interviewees demonstrate an embedded neoliberal depoliticized stance, where "change is needed", but structural change is not seen as possible or realistic. Other than reflection by some interviewees about whether or not to join the private sector and work in, or with, the particularly controversial palm oil industry, the interviews contained little critique about the wider power and politics at work in the palm oil sector.

6. The sustainable palm oil network

As briefly mapped out above, the sustainable palm oil network consists of a bewildering array of different organizations and initiatives, and it takes some time to work out what they all do and how they relate to each other. To complement our focus on individuals working for companies, we start here by exploring in some more depth the role of consultancies, finance, and NGOs, and how they interact with each other and with companies in different initiatives. This provides insight into how governance of sustainable palm oil, and neoliberal governance more generally, works, also highlighting how hard it is to shift current systems.

Consultancies

Consultancies are tasked with meeting the requirements of sustainability standards, mitigating reputational harm from NGO campaigns, and providing technical and strategic expertise to support the

⁶ An example is a thread started by climate justice activist Mary Annaïse Heglar on Twitter 27/09/2020, @MaryHeglar: "I'm not 'passionate' about climate change. I'm just in survival mode." Responses included: "Decent life for my kids and others is my 'passion'," and "Would people tell victims of a fire as their [sic] fleeing a building or the fire fighters rushing to put the inferno out that they're 'passionate'?"

implementation of corporate commitments to sustainable palm oil. The RSPO has enrolled a whole new market of consultants with their own particular forms of "private" and expert knowledge, shaping norms and practices in the sustainable palm oil space, at multiple levels (Delabre & Okereke, 2020). For example, consultancies play a role in convening workshops where certification standards are set, thereby helping to shape the boundaries of "participatory spaces" and influencing what is possible within them, who may enter, and which interests, identities and discourses are considered legitimate (Gaventa, 2006).

Consultancies are also involved in training auditors who undertake third-party verification of companies' compliance with palm oil sustainability standards (at the production level and across the supply chain), checking the quality of assessments required for certification, as well as developing tools and guidance for implementation of company commitments, including many of the joint initiatives listed above. Thus, the HCSA was originally developed by the consultancy The Forest Trust (now rebranded as Earthworm) together with the palm oil plantation company Golden Agri Resources (GAR) (Cheyins *et al.*, 2020), whilst UK-based consultancy 3Keel facilitates the "Palm Oil Transparency Initiative." Efeca, another UK-based consultancy, led the "Global Resource Initiative", which involved a task force made up of 20 sustainability thought-leaders from across finance, supply chains, and civil society and resulted in a report proposing measures for a new strategic approach to tackling deforestation and land conversion linked to UK supply chains.

Finance

The financial sector (investors and banks), meanwhile, is growing more conscious of the role it can play in steering the course of environmental action, with NGOs increasingly highlighting the role of investment in financing companies linked to deforestation (e.g. Greenpeace's *Dirty bankers* report in 2017 and Rainforest Action Network's Forests and Finance platform exposing the links between financiers and high-deforestation risk companies). In response, investors and banks that are keen to ensure ethical investments have started relying increasingly on NGOs and other activists, in order to ensure their money does not contribute to deforestation. A key initiative here is the Zoological Society of London's Sustainability Policy Transparency Toolkit (SPOTT), which tracks the transparency of sustainability reporting of palm oil companies and traders, with the information aimed at feeding into investors' screening processes (i.e. which companies should they invest in, or engage with further to improve companies' practices). A "strange alliance" has thus emerged between investors and activist NGOs. As Celeste (who had previously worked for a campaigning NGO) put it: "The NGOs are great. Campaigning NGOs know where their expertise is and they are realizing the power that investors have."

NGOs

NGOs themselves use a variety of strategies in interacting with the corporate sector, and target their strategies according to particular audiences (e.g. investors, palm oil companies themselves). On the one hand, NGOs seek to "shock" companies into taking action through exposés. On the other they use a pragmatic approach informed by the desire to change the private sector as swiftly as possible – they explicitly seek to support financiers and palm oil supply chain stakeholders to address environmental, social and governance (ESG) risks. Some NGOs thus participate actively in the RSPO as members, and advocate for "sustainable palm oil", while others are more oppositional, yet still engage in the palm oil sustainability network to drive improvements (Ruysschaert & Salles, 2016). Indeed sometimes, the same NGOs simultaneously support and hold to account private-sector actors producing and buying palm oil.

Government bodies and officials are not entirely absent in these networks. The Tropical Forest Alliance (TFA), for example – a World Economic Forum-hosted multi-stakeholder partnership platform initiated to support the implementation of private-sector commitments to remove deforestation from palm oil, beef, soy and pulp/paper supply chains – includes state actors and positions itself as a public-private sector multi-stakeholder initiative (see Figure 1). Actors in the network do interact with palm oil-producing and consuming country governments, beyond the remit of the RSPO, and indeed the indirect influence and power of governments is greater than the rhetoric of the disappearing state suggests. Dominant palm oil corporations are closely linked to the national state in Malaysia (Pye, 2016, p. 430): Sime Darby, for example, is a government-linked company (GLC) and state-owned enterprise (SOE). There is also state funding for NGOs' involvement

in the RSPO (e.g. The UK Government Department for International Development funded ZSL's work).⁷ However, officially, government bodies feature as marginal in these networks and initiatives, and in professionals' careers.

Mapping out some of the different roles and relationships reveals how closely linked these different organizations are and how much they collaborate. These close relationships are consolidated by the annual European RSPO conference (the "European roundtable"), and the annual RSPO conference in grand hotels of major Southeast Asian cities (the "RT"). Both are important events for interaction between professionals. The RSPO also hosts Working Group meetings and Standing Committees, in which RSPO members address implementation of RSPO requirements in more depth. Participating in some of these ourselves – Izabela quite regularly – we were both struck by what lively, friendly, social events these were (pre-Covid), where many people from different sectors have come to know each other very well. There are different and changing relationships and constellations within this network; for instance, the "strange alliance" between investors and more radical NGOs, who seek to increase stringency of certification criteria and auditing processes, versus companies and consultancies. But corporations and consultancies too work closely with NGOs and value their input. NGOs may be seen as a "critical voice" in the palm oil sector, but are still valued by corporate professionals.

Furthermore, as we have seen, professionals routinely move between organizations, taking with them individual knowledge and experiences from previous institutions as well as contacts, and thereby increasing familiarity, shared knowledge and friendships between organizations. The rise of managerial rationalities and sometimes quite corporate outlooks within NGOs also contributes to shared practices and approaches. A job move is therefore not necessarily a point of rupture, crisis or transformation as may have been expected. Rather, a smooth transition is encountered by professionals.

Close interaction, familiarity and routine transitions between organizations and the professionals constituting the sustainable palm oil network have many advantages. Good working relationships help to ensure new and better sustainability policies are actually being adopted and implemented by corporations. Moreover, the system is reasonably open, in that different voices and diverse knowledge sources are listened to and valued and, over time, can make their way into official policies. In all this, as Aeni for example pointed out, several of the large corporations have changed significantly in recent decades; there has been real learning and existing structures encourage ongoing improvement and learning. In many ways, what has been created is quite impressive. Our interviewees are evidence of a new caliber of environmentally oriented, highly knowledgeable and experienced people now employed in the private sector where they have real influence. Even though all this is still within neoliberal limits, arguably progress is being made in "closing off alternative paths to the future" (Busch, 2014, p. 513): preventing negative environmental outcomes of corporate activity without any sustainability efforts at all.

Yet all these close relationships, and all that collaboration inevitably result in homogenization, consensus building (Pichler, 2013) and the quietening down of more radical voices, at institutional as well as individual levels. As already discussed, NGOs reorient their position to one aligned with "managerial rationality", whereby the rationalities and practices of corporate management spread into NGOs who increasingly incorporate concepts from accounting (e.g. accountability, transparency) into their operations (Djama *et al.*, 2011).

This managerial trend is also evident in the case of traditionally more dissenting voices. For example, Greenpeace is frequently perceived as a "campaigning NGO" that emphasizes the unsustainability of the palm oil sector (such as with the [Rang-tan campaign video](#)), and it is no longer a member of the RSPO. But it is also

⁷ This article focuses on the private sector (and to a lesser extent NGOs), but national and local governments are, of course, important actors in the wider Palm Oil Sustainability Network in different ways. Sometimes, a government can act in opposition to the RSPO's approach to sustainability. For example, if a company operating in Indonesia leaves areas of land as 'set-asides' for conservation, following a requirement by the RSPO's standard, this can lead to plantation concession licenses being revoked as the land is no longer considered 'productive' in terms of agriculture. There are also attempts to regain sovereignty; for example, the Indonesian and Malaysian governments have implemented state-led ISPO and MSPO standards. At other times, state governments act to promote certain sustainability norms, e.g. the UK's Due Diligence Regulation – which also risks strengthening a particular view based on certification (therefore strengthening/supporting a neoliberal mode of governance), or a 'global/Global North view of 'legality.'

involved in developing techno-managerial solutions through corporate and multi-stakeholder engagement, such as the promotion of the HCSA methodology. In the whole way it operates, the sustainable palm oil network promotes the homogenization of norms, which amount to "techno-managerial solutions", through connectivity, emphasis on multi-stakeholder spaces, and consensus, a set-up in which corporations still ultimately wield the most power. Moreover, the sheer volume of work involved in all these initiatives – the many hours spent in meetings and writing reports, all circulating knowledge and ideas amongst likeminded fellow professionals who all largely share the same outlook – is also something of a distraction. Professionals are active and busy, but not necessarily implementing real changes. The proliferation of initiatives in the sustainable palm oil network in itself means that many of these are under-resourced and not very effective – indeed, they may be more about the (neoliberal) creation of new markets and jobs, rather than actual outcomes.

7. Conclusion

Listening to sustainable palm oil professionals' own accounts of their work and careers and exploring the sustainable palm oil network as a social world has enabled us to contribute to the existing political ecology literature on the RSPO in two, somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand, we have shown how this world is more nuanced and open than the existing literature suggests, with more individual agency as well as structural openness to ensure recommendations from environmental NGOs finding their way into corporate policy and practices, resulting in some significant improvements. We appreciate our interviewees' high level of motivation, intellectual curiosity, knowledge and expertise, as well as their pragmatism in choosing to work with and for corporations. We are aware that not everyone has the privilege of choosing careers in low-paid and insecure academia or NGOs – sectors that are increasingly corporate in outlook themselves, anyway.

On the other hand, our research has shown how neoliberal governance structures like the sustainable palm oil network are recreated and maintained at individual and inter-personal level. Interviewees uncritically use the depoliticized language of neoliberal individualism. Through their recognition of corporate leverage and consequent career trajectories in the quest for a part of that power (and money), they themselves help to bolster corporate dominance. The proliferation of different initiatives creates an ever growing close-knit, self-referential world (as well as distraction). These as well as career trajectories between sectors ensure homogenization and, ultimately, the perpetuation of corporate power as well as a consolidation of an understanding of sustainability that is firmly lodged within a corporate world view: people and planet, yes, but also always profit. "Green growth" reigns supreme, which means that, whilst the ecological and social fallout of the corporate plantation sector might be reined in a little, its very existence and expansion is consolidated.

The two approaches highlighted in our article – pragmatic engagement versus fundamental critique of a system as a whole – of course do not apply to sustainable palm oil alone. They mirror larger and ongoing debates within environmental and climate movements, thrown into all the sharper relief by the urgency of the need for action, with so little time left to make the changes we need to make. Most eco-socialist, political ecologist critics argue that this makes complete system change all the more crucial, as there is simply not enough time for the slow, incremental changes of "sustainability" policies; that capitalism and growth are the real problem and need to be tackled. Others argue the opposite: as Noam Chomsky put it in a recent interview, "we don't have time to totally overturn capitalism" (Chomsky the pragmatist here!).⁸ Whilst they seem to head in opposite directions, to us, both of these positions or strategies are correct and necessary. Sustainability professionals need to continue working within corporations and changing practices and approaches from within. And this may yet go further still – David claimed that, due to pressure from him, [Palm Oil Company 3] removed "growth" as a KPI; a claim that we still need to verify. Simultaneously others need to keep up critique from without and challenge corporate power in every way they can.

⁸<https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/21446383/noam-chomsky-robert-pollin-climate-change-book-green-new-deal>

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Appendix i. Full list of research participants

Pseudonym	Job title	Sector	Gender	Workplace
Matt	Programme Director	Consultancy	Male	Indonesia
Peter	Partner	Consultancy	Male	UK
Wallace	Managing Director	Consultancy	Female	UK
Alex	Responsible Sourcing Manager	Consumer Goods/Retail	Male	UK
Maya	Head of Environment	Consumer Goods/Retail	Female	UK
Max	Sustainable Sourcing Manager	Consumer Goods/Retail	Male	UK
Fred	Vice President of Products	Consumer Goods/Retail	Male	Netherlands
Robert	Senior Manager Engagement	Investment	Male	Netherlands
Celeste	Senior ESG Analyst	Investment	Female	UK
Cynthia	Senior Responsible Investment Specialist	Investment	Female	Netherlands
Mara	Associate Director	Investment	Female	UK
Ashley	Engagement Equity Ownership Services	Investment	Male	UK
Lucas	Associate Director, Engagement	Investment	Male	UK
Felicity	Stewardship & ESG Engagement	Investment	Female	UK
Claire	Policy Director	NGO	Female	UK
Jane	Conservation Director	NGO	Female	Singapore
Joseph	Global Palm Oil Lead	NGO	Male	Singapore
Amy	Forests Campaigner	NGO	Female	UK
Gemma	Director of Engagement	NGO	Female	UK
Emma	Sustainable Finance Specialist	NGO	Female	UK
Karen	Senior Manager, Company Network	NGO	Female	USA
Aeni	Conservation Advisor	Palm oil company	Female	Malaysia
Charlotte	Manager, Environment & Conservation	Palm oil company	Female	Indonesia
Sajit	Senior Manager Sustainability Communications	Palm oil company	Male	Malaysia
Tan	Conservation Lead	Palm oil company	Female	Malaysia

Patricia	Deputy Director Sustainable Development	Palm oil company	Female	DRC
Maria	Managing Director	Palm oil company	Female	UK
David	Consultant	Consultancy	Male	UK