

Blog: First trial of food security criteria in Sabah/Malaysia

March 2018. The FSS I project team (ZEF, Welthungerhilfe and WWF) traveled together with the consulting firm, Meo Carbon Solutions, to Malaysia to learn how food security aspects can be addressed within sustainable certified oil palm production.

Though Malaysia has no major issues with food insecurity, national data still indicates that food insecurity has not entirely been solved. Also the oil palm sector has been internationally criticized given environmental and labour concerns. Voluntary sustainability certifications were introduced



to address these issues, though the aspect of food security is typically neglected.

In 2015, ZEF, with support of the Welthungerhilfe, has developed food security criteria which can be integrated in sustainability standards for different crops (see [ESSZert project](#) and [Article on Food Security Criteria](#)). By doing so, a sustainability standard could ensure that the human right to food at local level is not violated and the European buyer of palm oil or other crops is complying with good purchasing practices required by international bodies (UN, OECD, EU) and national governments. The FSS I project aims

to field test and implement the previously developed criteria (see [FSS I Project](#)).

In Malaysia, mostly large plantations are sustainably certified while usually smallholders and smaller plantations are not yet following a voluntary sustainability standard. However, by 2019, Malaysia plans to introduce an own obligatory sustainability standard, so producers need to change their agricultural and social practices. We visited the first voluntarily certified smallholders and medium sized growers which produce oil palm. They are organized in a group certification

scheme which is run by a social enterprise. Our trip provided a great occasion to see what is going on at smaller production scales and how food security can be better addressed in oil palm production.

We started our trip with a day-long meeting at the group manager of the certified producers and went through our criteria for food security. We had in-depth discussions about available documents, obtained feed-back on our ideas and got an impression about the possibilities to implement our criteria. Next, we had a large stakeholder workshop with participants from different governmental departments, oil palm producers and mills, NGOs and researchers. We introduced the concept of food and nutrition security and the Food Security Standard. The participants highlighted different elements of who are food insecure people – especially the illegal migrant work-

ers but also the income benefits, palm oil production has brought for the communities and smallholders. It was highlighted that in conventional production human and labour right abuses as well as environmental pollution continue to persist. In certified palm oil production some non-compliance may occur but, in general, there was common agreement that it benefitted the workers and the environment.

The next three days we spent in the field talking to different certified smallholders and one medium-sized grower and his workers. Though all farmers were comparatively small, we found differences among them. Farmers with around 7 hectares were living in decent houses and owning cars, especially when they had additional income opportunities. Farmers with only 1-2ha were struggling to get along. They had lower yields, partly due to the small farm size, lack of money to buy fertilizer and lack of knowledge on good agricultural practices. Consequently, the income and the standard of living were low. We were surprised, that none of the visited farms produced food crops, not even for own consumption. This seems to be related to the high-income opportunities from the oil palm production and the high workload needed for oil palms but also to a lack of markets for other crops.

Whenever we raised the topic of food security, the first reaction was that this is not an issue in Malaysia. However, when explaining the full concept of food and nutrition security as well as the human right to adequate food, the general perception changed. Food security is still an issue though not among all farmers or workers. The interviewed stakeholders mentioned that food security is especially an issue on non-certified plantations which employ many illegal migrant workers (mainly from Indonesia and Philippines) and casual workers. It is also a problem with very small farmers with no or insufficient other income sources and having little more than one hectare of land. These farmers were worried

about not having enough food, depended on external support by relatives, ate less nutritious and diversified food or reduced the food quantity.

Sustainability certification was commonly mentioned by stakeholders to have improved living and working conditions on plantations and among smallholders. External support to create awareness and for implementing the certification system is needed. Trainings on good agricultural practices, health, safety, human and worker rights etc. are especially crucial for smaller producers as low levels of knowledge and low awareness of laws were frequently mentioned. This also helps to increase their palm oil yields.

For food security, we obtained the impression that a certification system would need to distinguish between food-secure and food-insecure smallholders in strictness, requirements and time frames to implement the criteria. As a general question remains, how a decent living income can be obtained from very small plots. Here, certification systems reach their limits and governmental support for these farmers – ideally through job creation but also by implementing social security schemes - is needed to help them escape the poverty trap.

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The FSS I Project is a cooperation between the [Center for Development Research](#) (University of Bonn, Germany) and the NGOs [Welthungerhilfe](#) (Bonn, Germany) and [WWF](#) (Berlin, Germany), funded by the German Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture (BMEL) via the agency “Fachagentur Nachwachsende Rohstoffe” (FNR). The trip to Malaysia took place within the [FONAP](#) initiative of the BMEL and was coordinated by the WWF.

Photo: Pilot Audit Sabah, Malaysia (FSS I Project)

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