

# Saving the world with Christmas cookies?

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Global growth is achieved at the expense of human beings and nature. It exacerbates inequalities between rich and poor countries. Credit: UNDP/GCP

Despite all warnings, people continue to ruthlessly exploit land resources around the world, planting monocultures and setting up large-scale infrastructure. Social ecologist Anke Schaffartzik analyses the political and economic interests that precede these developments and their impact

on society. The snapshots of global material and energy flows, but also the power gradient of which they are a symptom, reveal that thoughtful consumption in Austria alone stands little chances against oil palm plantations in Indonesia.

Every year, Austrians produce and buy tons of Christmas cookies. Depending on the individual budget and mind-set, more and more people opt for the product on the shelf that claims to be "palm-oil free." For today, many people know: Palm oil plantations are being operated on a large scale in countries such as Indonesia, crowding out orangutans living in the tropical rainforests. Anke Schaffartzik, Hertha Firnberg Fellow of the Austrian Science Fund FWF, can well understand that people want to improve the world. Unfortunately, unequal participation in the economy, unequal access to resources and to political co-determination already have an impact on [land use](#) even before the consumers can choose a suitable cookie brand in Austria.

In the context of her project at the Institute of Social Ecology in the University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences in Vienna, Schaffartzik analyses worldwide material and energy flows in order to explore the dual nature of inequality: "Inequality as cause and effect of non-sustainable development is easy to observe wherever nature is being exploited to make commercial use of land and resources," she explains. "Some countries ensure high consumption and economic growth while preserving their resource base or having long since exhausted it. But others are using up more and more land for the export of raw materials or energy sources, thereby making socio-ecologically [sustainable development](#) impossible."

## **Who decides on land use?**

After the first year of her research, Schaffartzik understands that global inequality cannot be quantified exclusively in terms of money. It is

informed a great deal by how processes are designed, and the imbalance is already apparent in terms of access to land and decision-making processes. The global data analysis along a time series from 1960 to 2010 suggests to Schaffartzik that the "valorisation" of land is a key process in this growing and deepening use of resources: what counts is the desired economic development, not the needs and voices of the local population. The above-mentioned cultivation of oil palms in Indonesia is one case in point. Before the plantations could be exploited on a large scale, the land first had to be re-zoned accordingly. Palm oil can be used for cooking, as a lubricant and animal feed, for biodiesel or highly processed foods such as Christmas cookies and chocolate. Nowadays, almost the entire volume of crude palm oil is exported from Indonesia, but the processing that generates added value takes place elsewhere.

## Cheap and diverse

In the 1980s, palm oil production began to take off in Indonesia, a vast nation of many islands. This not only encroached on the rain forests, but also crowded out other crops and areas used for subsistence farming. "The progressive land grabbing that we are witnessing was initially based on political decisions: There was a wish to see the resources being used in a way that yields money and [political control](#) over remote islands," Anke Schaffartzik notes. Hence, [political decisions](#) about land use had to be taken before various big corporations could buy palm oil cheaply as a basis for goods of higher value and before local land was exposed to land grabbing. The "valorisation" of land that previously contributed nothing to the national GDP is the first step in the process. "Countries increasingly look to agricultural goods for economic growth and they consider that to be more important than the food supply for their own population," explains Anke Schaffartzik. In this context, one can observe that commodities that use up a lot of land for their cultivation or extraction are not generating more money than those that require little land. Today, the local population work either on the plantations or in

nickel mining, and meanwhile cooking oil has to be imported.

For her further research, Anke Schaffartzik is cooperating with various institutes in Europe. Together with Julia Steinberger from the University of Lausanne she is working on the relationship between infrastructure, its social status and how infrastructure decisions are being taken. At the Universidad Rovira y Virgili in Spain, she is collaborating on a case study of the construction boom during the Spanish economic crisis, and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona maintains a global atlas of environmental conflicts that provides a tangible picture of the processes leading up to a critical decision.

## **Approaches to improving the world**

Hence, it is not enough, unfortunately, to read the small print and spend a little more money on palm-oil free biscuits. There are always many factors at local level that cannot be influenced downstream by ecologically minded consumers. Once the path to unsustainable development has been taken, there is hardly a way to retrace it. While consumer responsibility is something that people call for, they actually have very little influence.

The focus should therefore be on political processes and decisions that lead to social and ecological inequality and thus promote destructive land use. This is the case not only in Southeast Asia and Latin America, but also on our own doorstep. Where do we see the privatisation of land that was previously subject to shared use? Where is land being re-zoned to build infrastructure? What changes in legislation will affect who gets to decide on land? Who are the beneficiaries? These are important questions. Whose needs are served by the third runway at Vienna Airport, one may wonder, when the actual priority is an expansion of the railway network? Projects such as urban gardening or the sharing economy gain importance if they are understood as a counter-movement



to these processes.

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