

[AIPSN Position Paper on recently announced Mission on Oil Palm](#)

No to Oil Palm plantations in India's Bio-diversity hotspots

The [Union Government recently approved](#) a new, poorly conceived and socio-economically skewed Rs.11,040 crore National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) with an ecologically damaging focus on promotion of large-scale cultivation of Oil Palm in the North-East and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands given favorable rainfall and temperature conditions in these regions. It is proposed to bring an additional 6.5 lakh hectares (ha) under Oil Palm by 2025-26 reaching totally 1 million ha, with production of Crude Palm Oil (CPO) expected to reach 1.12 million tonnes by 2025-26 and 2.8 million tonnes by 2029-30. The Mission seeks to reduce edible oil imports and boost domestic production, supposedly benefiting farmers and processing industries.

However, the Mission's heavy tilt towards the ecologically fragile and bio-diversity hotspots of the NE and the A&N Islands is highly problematic. Oil Palm plantations, especially in the world's major producing areas of Indonesia and Malaysia, have been [observed to be a major driver of biodiversity losses and damage to endangered and vulnerable species](#). This is of course mostly linked to the deforestation that has characterized Oil Palm plantation in South East Asia and Africa, and some may argue that the same may not be directly involved in India. It must be noted, though, that deforestation including clearing of grasslands would certainly be involved in the Andamans, as indeed [happened during the earlier Oil Palm plantation](#) there in the mid-1970s, which was objected to by Forest authorities. The Andamans also witnessed displacement of many of India's last remaining isolated, endangered and most vulnerable indigenous tribes such as the Jarawa and Onge.

In the NE, while [government spokespersons claim](#) that plantation will take place only in lands identified for agriculture, past experience shows that given shortage of cultivable land and tribal rather than personal ownership of forest lands in the region, fresh plantations would inevitably lead to deforestation or conversion of forest fringe areas. Further, Oil Palm plantations in forest-fringe areas, and so-called degraded and waste lands near forests, also tend to drive encroachment into forest lands and subsequent deforestation [as witnessed earlier in India](#).

Other impacts of extensive Oil Palm cultivation in tropical forest regions, even more than other forest monoculture or farm plantations include greenhouse gas emissions related to deforestation or land use change, negative impact on sub-soil water and water quality, invasive species associated with oil palm, pest spillover effects and so on, all of which have [historically been observed elsewhere](#).

Precisely these very real dangers have been repeatedly highlighted by specialist Institutions over several decades, [as revealed by investigative reports](#) accessing official documents. In 2002, in response to a petition moved by NGOs, the Supreme Court constituted an Expert Committee and, based on its recommendations, imposed a stay on commercial and monoculture plantations, as well as on introduction of exotic species, in the A&N Islands. Recently, the Niti Aayog initiated a push for a review of the SC decision, including through a feasibility study by ICAR's Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research (ICAR-IIOPR), based on whose December 2018 report, the Union Government called for a detailed report from the apex Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE). In January 2020, ICFRE's Report

[recommended that introduction of Oil Palm should be avoided in biodiversity rich areas](#), including grasslands, without detailed studies on its ecological impact. In August 2020, the Union Ministry of Environment (MoEFCC) asked ICFRE to study the ecological impact of Oil Palm cultivation and different plantation models, for which a proposal was submitted. Without waiting for this, however, the Secretaries of the Agriculture and Environment Ministries apparently decided that studies had already been conducted by ICAR and, therefore, ICFRE and IOPR would jointly prepare a report for submission to SC towards a new Oil Palm Mission in the A&N Is.

Despite this strong push, the affidavit submitted to SC by ICFRE, along with its Report which is still not available in the public domain, noted that there was no data from India to support the claims of ICAR-IOPR, and reiterated that comprehensive and detailed studies be undertaken to assess the impact of Oil Palm on native flora, fauna and biodiversity in the A&N and as regards its invasiveness.

It is clear from the above that the Union Government's decision to now launch the Mission with a focus on the A&N Islands and the NE, has been taken in the face of consistent and repeated opposition by ICFRE, and has also brushed aside the call for prior studies. In what is now emerging as a consistent pattern, the Union Government has decided to push what can only be termed a political decision, rather than be guided by evidence and expert or scientific opinion.

It may also be noted that Government claims and projections of much higher productivity and oil yield of Oil Palm compared to other cultivated oilseeds in order to justify the Mission, are likely grossly over-estimated for India. Even the Mission end-point goals show an average yield of 2.8 Tons/ha! [The Mission projects](#) production of "10-46 times more oil per hectare compared to other oilseed crops and has yield of around 4 tons Oil per hectare," or around 4 times the average oil yield/ha of other cultivated oil seeds. However, such comparatively high yields are mostly based on the [Indonesian/Malaysian scenario](#) where oil yield is 36% of global production in only 6% of the land. [FAO suggests that for good yields](#), Oil Palm should have ample, regular and year-round rainfall (the Indo-Malayan region gets over 2700mm of rain annually), moderately hot conditions around the year, and flat, deep, well-drained and rich soil, conditions that are not available everywhere, even in the NE or A&N Is.

[The Mission uses IOPR estimates](#) of around 2.8 million ha of land in India being suitable for Oil Palm cultivation. Some experts assess that about 40% of such lands are outside biodiversity-rich areas, mostly under paddy cultivation and have argued [Srinivasan U et al, "Oil palm cultivation can be expanded while sparing biodiversity in India," *Nature Food*, 2(6), 442-447] that, instead of bio-diversity hotspots, [India could try Oil Palm cultivation](#) in well-irrigated paddy fields. Others have suggested that areas currently under coconut, rubber or banana plantations could also be suitable.

However, Oil Palm plantations tried elsewhere in India under earlier avatars of Oilseeds and Oil Palm Missions, [have had mixed results](#) not only in terms of yields but also in terms of equity, sustainability and other socio-economic effects. Unified Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu were among the major plantation areas, with maximum acreage in AP but with average oil yield of only around 1.4 T/ha between 2006-7 and 2016-17. Other notable trends, [as documented through field surveys](#), include heavy dependence on groundwater, lower yields and returns than promised despite substantial subsidies, long gestation periods of 4-5 or more years, considerable encroachment of village commons and forest/ tribal lands, and substantial uptake mainly among farmers with large land holdings (since oil palm demands considerable inputs and productivity is

known to be higher with scale). In 2017, the [present Government even relaxed land ceiling limits](#), granted permission for leasing-in of so-called wastelands including by corporates, and tweaked regulations on corporate and FDI investments in Palm Oil plantations.

[Many experts have therefore suggested](#) that promotion of Oil Palm among small farmers would yield more equitable socio-economic benefits and increased sustainability. Other experts have [suggested](#) that, if similar subsidies as provided in NMEO-OP are extended to conventional oilseed cultivators, their productivity too could be boosted substantially [as also indicated in earlier Oilseed Mission reports](#). Even [industry leaders have said](#) that the goals of raising domestic oil production and reducing imports could be met by focusing on groundnut, soyabean and mustard along with Oil Palm.

In sum, the stated goals for substantial expansion of Oil Palm plantation in India require a research and evidence based, locale-specific and multi-dimensional plan to expand Oil Palm acreage wherever economically feasible and ecologically suitable. Meanwhile, Oil Palm cultivation in the most ecologically sensitive and vulnerable regions of the A&N Islands, in violation of earlier Supreme Court directions and without any rigorous studies as recommended by ICFRE, should be ruled out. Mission activities in the biodiversity rich and ecologically sensitive NE should proceed only in a limited area with the greatest caution, and based on prior studies as recommended by ICFRE. In other areas, NMEO-OP should again be promoted through small farmers in ecologically suitable areas not dependent on groundwater and again based on studies and rigorous review of previous efforts. NMEO-OP therefore needs to be thoroughly re-imagined and re-cast, in conjunction with efforts to boost productivity of other oilseeds.

For clarifications contact:

P. Rajamanickam, General Secretary, AIPSN
gsaipsn@gmail.com, 9442915101 @gsaipsn