Should palm oil be banned?

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Ban palm oil from the food supply? It's not so easy! First of all because on the market there is a lack of substitute products, claimed to be better for health, or which do not offer the same technological qualities. Then because the impact on the environment of other crops could be just as harmful. And what if the genuine solution was found in both certified palm oil - CSPO, not very well known - and a voluntary improvement in terms of what is on our plates?

For three or four years now there has been no longer a simple volley of criticisms aimed at palm oil but a genuine barrage of them. The world number 1 vegetable oil (ahead of soya and, above all, rapeseed and sunflower) is in effect being accused of every evil, as much environmental (deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions) as health wise (abundance of saturated fatty acids contributing to cardiovascular diseases) or even in social terms (destabilisation of small peasant concerns, above all in Asia). Justified criticisms? To a large extent, yes. But from there to solving the problems by a pure and simple boycott of the product there is a step which a growing number of actors - including consumer associations - are not necessarily ready to take.

Are there alternatives? With her team, Marianne Sindic, head of the Agrofood Products Quality and Safety Laboratory at the University of Liège's Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech, has thrown herself into the heart of the controversy. 'In the framework of the European Interreg IV project 'Nutrisens', we got down to a study situated at the crossroads of several disciplines (technology, nutrition, socio-economics, food security, sensory quality, etc.). It in fact involved responding to the questions posed by agrofood businesses - often quite abruptly - faced with the demands of distributors wanting to significantly reduce the use of palm oil or even do without it altogether. Was such a shift realistic on a technical level? Were the environmental benefits real? Who, in the end, wanted what in this domain? Were consumers being correctly informed? So many questions we tried to provide answers to.' (1)

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More nuanced attitudes

The Laboratory's researchers looked into the alternatives offered by manufacturers, but also the impressions the distributors and consumers had. 'At the highest peak of the media storm unleashed by palm oil, in other words around 2009-2010, the demands mass retailers were making of their suppliers were pretty radical,' recallese Sophie Delacharlerie, the study's co-ordinator: 'they aimed at the total eradication of palm oil. But, today, more nuanced attitudes are coming to the fore.' This reversal can be easily explained: the technological constraints linked to substituting palm oil are enormous. One cannot, in effect, replace this fat by other fats and at the same time ensure that the finished products have an organoleptic quality - flavour, odour, texture, appearance, etc. - perfectly identical to current products. Because if palm oil has hauled itself up to such a level of success over so many years (its production has increased tenfold in thirty years) it is not by chance! The oil palm in effect offers not only a yield ten times higher than that of rapeseed (in other words an average of 4 tons per hectare, rising to 6 and even 8). It also enables an almost ideal oil to be obtained because besides having good stability on oxidation (it is thus preserved very well) and good plasticity, it is also very polyvalent, serving both as cooking oil and frying oil but also as a convenient ingredient with a thousand applications: the bakery and confectionary sectors, sandwich spreads, ready made meals, etc.

Needless to say, despite its major nutritional defect (its richness in saturated fatty acids greatly increases the risks of cardiovascular diseases), such a product is not easily replaced. Let's have a look at some of the main alternatives. Using other plant based oils? Sometimes this is possible, but for the majority of applications the solid aspect of palm oil is indispensable. In addition, despite the negative impact in terms of deforestation, the oil palm often demands less pesticides and fertilizers than other more or less similar crops (rapeseed, soya, etc.). Using animal fats (from the dairy)? The finished product's sensorial qualities would be modified, not to mention a more unpredictable preservation. On a nutritional level the disadvantage would be identical to the current situation: animal fats also contain saturated fatty acids. A third possible pathway: using hydrogenated fats. Such a scenario would involve carrying out a radical U turn: rich in trans fatty acids, highly detrimental to health, a high proportion of these hydrogenated fats has been banned by distributors, under consumer pressure. In addition, the areas of land for cultivation in this case (rapeseed, soya, etc.) would increase significantly, to the detriment of natural ecosystems.

Reducing all fats

The conclusion seems crystal clear: no matter the way the problem is addressed, the consumption of fats needs to be reduced. All fats. 'It is not only palm oil which needs to be reduced, but the ensemble of processed products which contain large quantities of fats, and notably saturated fats,' points out Sophie Delacharlerie. 'The consumer cannot demand the end of palm oil in the name of a series of general principles whilst continuing at the same time to use sophisticated food preparations and chocolate spreads. Education and awareness raising initiatives have proved to be vital.'

Yet there is the rub. When interviewing face to face 210 consumers chosen at random in 7 large Belgian cities, the Agrofood Products Quality and Safety Laboratory researchers made the following discovery: whilst 32% of the people questioned were suspicious of saturated and hydrogenated fats for health reasons, not far from half of them based their arguments on erroneous scientific reasoning. The most surprising aspect is that this observation concerns not only 'the general public' but circles judged a priori to be more 'informed.' Marianne Sindic's team in effect also checked the knowledge of 35 people with researcher or student profiles in the fields of chemistry, biology, agronomy, etc. If, amongst this group, the environmental issues of palm cultivation...
are grasped better than the 'catch-all' public, the nutritional aspects don’t seem to be better mastered for all that: a third of the arguments used by this more 'scientific' public as regards the nutritional aspects proved mistaken. 'It seems that in the supermarket, scientists or otherwise, we are all consumers first or foremost,' explains Sophie Delacharlerie. 'In this aspect we are influenced by a sum of advertising and media information which goes every which way. When the time comes to buy, the price and the organoleptic qualities remain determining factors.'

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**A certified palm oil**

This vagueness, or even ignorance, also bears on a little known aspect of the palm oil 'question': CSPO. Yet this aspect could constitute one of the main routes to salvation in the face of the above mentioned difficulties.
CSPO is Certified Sustainable Palm Oil. On the market since 2008, this oil comes from palm trees cultivated in compliance with 8 principles and 39 criteria developed by all the sector's actors, as well as financial institutions and NGOs (and not just any: WWF, Oxfam, etc.). These guidelines aim not only to slow down or even prevent deforestation and the emission of greenhouse gases. They also aspire to ensure decent incomes for farmers and to develop respect for their social rights.

Currently, only 4 to 5% of the palm oil produced worldwide respects the CSPO criteria, developed by the RSPO (Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil). It's not much, notably due to the initiative's youth and the time lapse required (four years) before the first certified plantations produce their fruits. Sophie Delacharlerie and Marianne Sindic note, nevertheless, that 5 out of the 6 Belgian and French distributors contacted by them nowadays consider this sustainable oil as an acceptable alternative from an environmental perspective.

That is encouraging. There again, however, there seems to be a shortfall in information on the consumer side of things. Thus, whilst one out of three of the people in the 'general public' group consulted by the researchers are in favour of the principle of a sustainable oil, only 7 out of the 210 respondents really know about CSPO! As for the 'scientific' public questioned, only 2 respondents out of 35 state that they know CSPO. And...none of them recognise the logo, which is all the more glaring in that the majority of those polled recognise the FSC label (Forest Steward Council), affixed to products derived from wood and pretty similar philosophically speaking. 'Much more than a boycott of palm oil, CSPO - or an equivalent system - currently seems the best possible path to promote the sustainability of the palm oil sector,' states Marianne Sindic. 'But there is a lack of proactive communication concerning this type of alternative.' This promotion drive promises to be difficult, because the CSPO sector is currently subject to a paradox: whilst there is obviously not enough certified oil on the global market to meet even the demands of European agrofood producers (in the hypothesis that they would make use of it for the whole ensemble of their products), the CSPO oil currently available is not finding buyers. In 2010, for example, less than half of the oil certified according to this methodology could be sold. If a certain speculation could explain this paradox, there is another factor which enables the slow development of certified oil to be understood: in offering consumers several levels of certification - and thus guarantees - the RSPO sins by a lack of transparency and readability. And that is something the most critical NGOs do not hesitate to condemn.
Thus the least demanding level demanded by the RSPO - the 'Book and Claim', based on a certificate system - allows the business company to mention its participation in the system of certified sustainable oil, whilst in reality a proportion (sometimes quite significant) of its products contain classic palm oil! On the other hand, the most demanding level - called 'Segregated' - genuinely constitutes, for its part, a totally independent sector, leaning on integral traceability and sophisticated monitoring. 'For the consumer, this reading of several levels of the CSPO sector is a source of confusion, and even discredits it,' points out Sophie Delacharlerie. 'There is an obvious need for the transparency of the established criteria, but also of the monitoring carried out and the results obtained.' No premature undiluted praise for CSPO then. The Gembloux researchers also point out that even if this pathway seems the best method to establish the environmental and social sustainability of palm oil, it solves none of the nutritional problems. And that on a macro-economic level Europe and the United States by themselves represent about 25% of the global consumption of palm oil, the Asian market at this stage being not very open to 'sustainability' arguments (NB: as is also the case for the certification of tropical wood). But no doubt that has to be a beginning to everything. 'Once the CSPO label becomes better known, the greater the demand for certified oil will be; and there will be greater market pressure in favour of plantations which respect the environment and the peasants,' states Sophie Delacharlerie. If greater transparency is ensured, one might reasonably expect the consumer to agree to pay a little more for his or her palm oil. But they will also have to expect that certain products in their supermarket trolleys are subject to evolutions in taste and appearance when other fats or combinations of them are used (3). After all it
would be very beneficial to their health. As for the industry, the researchers estimate, it will also have to pitch in and stop hiding behind the argument that ‘it is consumers who dictate their choices on us.’ ‘It is also in part responsible for the choices of the greater number, for example when it places on the market products which are dubious on a nutritional level, without thinking over the long term about ‘civilisation diseases’ such as obesity.’

(2) Certain studies today yield results which are more indulgent as regards certain fatty acid profiles, which has for example enabled their authors to rehabilitate butter.

(3) Currently producers are not obliged to place on their products the exact nature of the plant based fatty acid(s) used. They will be obliged to do so from 2014 following the coming into force of a European regulation. Nutritional labelling will also touch upon the exact contents in terms of saturated fatty acids.