

The last five years have seen a growing number of initiatives focused on increasing demand for sustainable palm oil in emerging economy markets. This series of case studies illustrates the activities and strategies civil society organisations and other initiatives are undertaking to strengthen demand for sustainable palm oil in Asia, and what we can learn from them.

PUTTING POWER IN THE HANDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth engagement in China, India and Indonesia to increase demand for sustainable palm oil

FACT FILE

Countries involved:
China, India, Indonesia



Target audience:
Young people, students, next-gen consumers



Hashtags:
**#YouthForSustainability
#YouthLeaders
#Changemakers
#ForNature**

Example lead organisations:
Centre for Responsible Business, GIZ Thailand, PM Haze, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, Wildbound, WWF, Youth for Sustainability

THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSUMERS

Consumer pressure has a key role to play in shifting business behaviour and holding corporates to account. Consumers are in a position to put pressure on companies to change their policies and sourcing practices. In the context of palm oil, raising awareness amongst consumers of the presence of palm oil in the products they consume, as well as the issues associated with non-sustainable palm oil production such as deforestation and biodiversity loss, is a key avenue for driving up demand for sustainable palm oil.

For many organisations working in this space, young people in urban middle class and higher tier cities in China, India and Indonesia hold the key to transforming consumer awareness on sustainable consumption in general and palm oil specifically. Their strong network influence among family and friends, social media presence, and future spending power ensure they are a demographic that companies care about and will listen to – they are the next generation of consumers. Engaging young people has therefore been a critical strategy in putting pressure on companies to increase their uptake of certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO).

This has never been more important. The domestic consumption of palm oil is growing in China, India and Indonesia. Over the last five years, these countries have seen increases of 41 per cent, 9 per cent and 63 per cent respectively.¹ As demand for palm oil grows, civil society organisations are increasingly focusing on youth engagement strategies to strengthen demand for CSPO.

Key activities:

- > Education and empowerment
- > Social media campaigns
- > Youth conferences

EMPOWERING A GROUP OF CHANGE-MAKERS

Among the world's 1.2 billion young people, aged 15 to 24 years, awareness of sustainability issues is growing globally due to climate justice campaigns led by youth activists Greta Thunberg, Nina Gualinga, Leah Namugerwa and many others.² Young people are being inspired to engage and take action on the issues they care about. Educating young people about broad sustainability issues and sustainability as a lifestyle, including the presence of palm oil in products and sustainable palm oil production, has often been the starting point for activities in the region. Youth programmes in China, India and Indonesia provide platforms for education and exchange, running social media campaigns, university seminars and events.

Initiatives such as Youth for Sustainability Alliance and Youth Fellowship for Sustainable Palm Oil Programme in India, Youth Leader in Sustainability Programme in Indonesia and RSPO and Wildbound's Changemakers for Nature in China are empowering young people to bring about the change they want to see. It is up to them to be critical consumers and challenge companies to change their policies and sourcing practices.

The Asian Youth for Sustainable Palm Oil Summit co-organised by RSPO, the People's Movement to Stop Haze (PM Haze), and GIZ Thailand in November 2019 was a key moment in bringing together young people from across the region on the topic of sustainable palm oil. Fifty youth advocates from China, India and Indonesia, as well as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand convened in Bangkok to discuss opportunities to increase the adoption of sustainable palm oil. The Summit culminated in four youth representatives taking the stage at RSPO's annual Roundtable Conference to speak to 500 businesses about their commitment towards a shared responsibility for making sustainable palm oil the norm. They called on businesses to commit to and deliver on their environmental promises, and to be transparent about their progress. This was followed up with the 2020 Asian Youth for Sustainable Palm Oil Summit, which was held virtually with 300 youth influencers from the same countries.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR IMPACT

Although the majority of the youth engagement work with a palm oil focus has only kicked off in the last couple of years, it has already started to gain momentum, with the 2019 Asian Youth for Sustainable Palm Oil Summit acting as a catalyst for other engagement work in the region. Equipped with awareness and understanding of palm oil related issues, young people are being empowered to take action and start their own initiatives to strengthen demand for CSPO.

Social media has been key with mobiles phones increasingly used as a tool to make an impact. In India, greater awareness among young people and students about sustainability means they are becoming more conscious of the products they are buying. They have seen growing numbers of young people being empowered to write to their favourite brands on social media to ask about their use of sustainable palm oil.

In Indonesia, youth engagement work is reaching wider across the country. The Youth Leader in Sustainability Programme now has more than 500 youth ambassadors with a big social media presence including some 'influencers' with access to huge followings. The next step is to connect them with businesses so they can ask them to start using sustainable palm oil.



“ To move the government over the next five years, we need to move all other voices first. Consumers and youth voices for sustainability will be part of this. There is good awareness with youth, and they are the most active. ”

Indian stakeholder

In China, an increase in awareness about deforestation and palm oil issues is leading young people to want to do something about it. Videos, social media campaigns and other projects all led by young people and students are attracting the attention of government, businesses and other stakeholders.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: KEY CHALLENGES TO DRIVING CHANGE

Whilst progress is promising, it is not without its challenges. Overall, consumers still have low awareness about the relevance of CSPO. They are also looking for more cost-effective products. With youth engagement activities in their early stages, companies are not yet feeling the pressure from consumers to change their sourcing practices, which could increase the prices of their products through the higher costs associated with CSPO.

There is also an increasing trend of activism from civil society groups that says that it is better to not use palm oil at all, without a conversation about sustainable palm oil. This makes it challenging for youth engagement activities to change negative perceptions about palm oil and move the narrative towards a nuanced conversation about the issues associated with bad palm oil production practices.

In China and India, there is also the challenge that companies suspect their stakeholders are not interested in deforestation happening elsewhere in the countries producing the palm oil. There is seemingly a lack of willingness for companies to accept responsibility even in the face of consumer campaigns.

Furthermore, a lack of strong policy requirements and government support across the region means that, in combination with low consumer demand and higher costs, companies are not being incentivised to increase their uptake of sustainable palm oil.

CROSS-CUTTING LEARNING AND INSIGHT

Despite the challenges, there is plenty to learn from these youth engagement initiatives. Across the region, it is becoming clear that young people make up a sizeable group of change makers who can contribute to a significant cultural shift. There is recognition that it is best to start shaping the mind and knowledge of consumers early, since it is harder to change fixed consumption behaviour. As companies are interested in engaging young people as target consumers, youth engagement is an important stepping-stone towards companies increasing demand for CSPO.

Combining forces with other organisations is important to make a campaign more powerful and has led to bigger engagement. Capitalising on aligned activities by organisations working on climate change with shared goals both locally and around the world provides further momentum to activities. Events such as the UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15) in China in 2021 provide moments where public awareness of climate change is high that can be taken advantage of.

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up the conversation about the interconnectedness of nature and what and how we consume. It has provided an opportunity to engage more and wider by mobilising young people virtually.

Finally, it is clear that one strategy is not enough. Youth engagement work cannot stand alone. Other strategies like capacity building with companies, government engagement and finance sector engagement must run alongside in order to see companies increasing their uptake of sustainable palm oil.



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1. Foreign Agricultural Service/USDA, 2020. Oilseeds: World Markets and Trade – September 2020 Global Market Analysis. 2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018. World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Page 1 photo © RSPO. Page 2 photo courtesy of Pexels.