**The Impact of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on Dutch Palm Oil Policy and Regulation**

International Relations In Historical Perspective

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# Introduction

Palm oil is one of the most utilized intermediate goods of the 21st century. Used in food, cosmetic products, biodiesel and many other products, palm oil is in high demand across the globe despite only being produced in Indonesia and Malaysia. Even though the production of palm oil is a relatively localized affair, the growing demand for palm oil is showing to have adverse effects on the global environment, raising alarm bells for widespread human rights violations and animal cruelty.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, the growing production of palm oil is posing a double threat to climate change. Deforestation is the largest contributor to emissions of greenhouse gases in palm oil producing countries.[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, by cutting down the rainforest, one destroys the Earth’s natural system to absorb the same gases from the atmosphere.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, the loss of biodiversity is disrupting ecosystems that make life on earth possible.[[4]](#footnote-4) The seriousness of the environmental hazards posed by palm oil production is supported by a recent study that notes that environmental degradation is one of the root causes of social and economic conflict in the region.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, there is a debate on the implications of this oil on people’s health.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although the first alarms were already raised before the start of the 21st century, the global demand for palm oil is still increasing. In 1990, about 11 million metric tons of palm oil was produced. In 2004, this number had more than tripled to 37 million metric tons whereas the production of 2016/17 is estimated at 64,5 million metric tons.[[7]](#footnote-7) Market trends predict a doubling of output that would result in 130 million metric tons being produced in 2022.[[8]](#footnote-8) Since 1990, Indonesia has lost rainforests compared to the size of Germany.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In an ideal scenario, one would simply reduce the production of palm oil. The issue is, unfortunately, more complex, as palm oil is the cheapest and highest-yielding vegetable crop available. Moreover, both Indonesia and Malaysia heavily rely upon its production as it serves as the cornerstone of both national economies. Without a proper alternative for palm oil and an alternative business model for the industry, one can question how to overcome this dilemma between economic growth and environmental protection, in a capitalist world with a vastly growing population. Nevertheless, fortunately, state and non-state actors are looking to find a solution towards the ‘sustainable development’ of the contested palm oil industry.

One of the ways in which they have tried to do this is through the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (hereafter RSPO). This multi-stakeholder organization is a private sector initiative, which has aimed to transform the palm oil industry in collaboration with the global supply chain and put it on a sustainable path since 2004. Its primary objective is to “transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Its main instrument is the certification of palm oil complying with the sustainability criteria set by the RSPO.[[11]](#footnote-11) At present, 21% of the palm oil is RSPO certified (labeled CSPO).[[12]](#footnote-12) As of this year, the multi-stakeholder organization has over 3000 members from all sectors of the palm oil industry (which consists of): producers, processors, traders, manufacturers, supermarkets, banks/investors and environmental organizations. Some state actors support the non-state actor initiative, as illustrated by the signing of the ‘Amsterdam Declaration to Sustainable Palm Oil’ by the national governments of the Netherlands, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Norway.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Netherlands and other European countries aim for the use of 100% sustainable palm oil by 2020.

Nevertheless, the extent to which the ‘sustainable’ production of palm oil, according to RSPO standards can, in fact, be labeled as such, has been a topic of heated public debates. According to Greenpeace, the numbers show that the pace of deforestation has picked up significantly pointing to the limited impact the RSPO has had thus far.[[14]](#footnote-14) Amnesty International has criticized the RSPO for halting progress in the attempts to defend human rights,[[15]](#footnote-15)and the European Parliament observes with regret that the RSPO does not currently prevent their members from converting rainforests into palm plantation. Furthermore, the RSPO is said to fail to limit greenhouse gas emissions and have been unable to avoid massive forest and peat fires. The European Parliament has called to cut down on 50% of Europe’s palm oil consumption, by phasing out its use as biofuel in 2020.[[16]](#footnote-16) Also among consumers, many believe that besides an improvement in the sector, the reduction of palm oil consumption is vital to save the rainforests.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This case shows an existing consensus among a variety of actors about the general aim - the sustainable development of the palm oil industry. However, in practice, diverse and conflicting objectives have led to different interpretations of this idea. The extent to which the RSPO has had a positive impact on the palm oil industry is debatable, as the present controversy reveals. This leads to the question, how effective is the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil in effectuating fundamental change?

Within the scholarly debate on which tools of environmental governance work best, there is a serious debate about the desired effect of multi-stakeholder voluntary certification schemes. The discussion is briefly described below. An extensive elaboration of the discourse follows in the theoretical framework. When looking at the desired environmental outcome of the voluntary certification scheme itself, there are those who are more optimistic and those who are more critical. Multi-stakeholder governance is considered to provide forums intended to promote dialogue, learning, and best practices and as an efficient manner for the sector to improve itself without government interference.[[18]](#footnote-18) On the other hand, others question their functionality and effectiveness and stress the possibility that such a scheme might result in corporate greenwashing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Most research on private governance arrangements thus far has focused on the functioning of the voluntary certification scheme itself. There is a lesser discussion on the influence voluntary certification schemes exert on national governments. Henceforth, a better understanding of their embeddedness in a broader governance context is crucial.[[20]](#footnote-20) Fortunately, some scholars address this matter. There are those who think schemes can be an excuse for governments not to act,[[21]](#footnote-21) while others have a more positive view and believe that governments may develop an additional framework in response to the lack of effectiveness of the voluntary certification scheme.[[22]](#footnote-22) Furthermore, it is believed that state-actors remain central actors in the process, regardless the effectiveness of the scheme. [[23]](#footnote-23)

As the possibility exists that voluntary certification schemes refrain state-actors from taking (far-reaching) action, this research examines this impact of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on government acting. Therefore, this thesis will try to answer the following question:

*What has been the impact of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on Dutch palm oil policy and regulation and how can we explain this?*

When taking Dutch policy as an example, one can see that the RSPO has exerted influence on the position of the cabinet. There is a consensus that the RSPO is not a perfect organization, but does that undermine its ability to improve the palm oil sector and take steps in environmental governance? And how is this related to the choices of the Dutch government?

To investigate the influence of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm oil on the palm oil policy and regulation of the Netherlands, three sub questions need to be answered. *1. How and why has the RSPO been established?* 2. *To what extent can the RSPO be considered as a legitimate and effective organization? 3.* *In what way does the Dutch government act upon on the palm oil issue and how can we explain this?*

This thesis will focus on the Netherlands because this country is the largest palm oil consumer per capita in the world. The Netherlands is economically heavily strongly involved, playing a significant role in the global palm oil industry. [[24]](#footnote-24) This thesis will focus on the position of the respective governments in the period of 2002-2017, particularly in governmental departments dealing with foreign trade and agriculture.

The historical analysis will be based on a variety of primary sources, including government policy documents, documents from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, NGO reports, trusted media and scholarly literature form the basis of sources that were consulted to perform the presented analysis. The documents from the Dutch Parliament (Second Chamber) contain motions, policy documents, letters and answers to official questions. The RSPO documents include the RPSO statutes, principles, national commitment documents, impact reports and summary reports of her yearly summits. Reports of Amnesty International, WWF, and Greenpeace provide insights on the functioning and effectiveness of the RSPO. Also, media articles were used to find information about the relationship between the RSPO and the Dutch government, which has committed itself to the RSPO. All above-named sources can provide information on the relationship, the effectiveness of the RSPO and Dutch policy choices. Nevertheless, these sources need to be assessed with a critical eye, as all parties have interests. Furthermore, the reasoning behind decisions cannot be fully grasped by these sources, as the given information is knowingly made public. Therefore, efforts that did not make it to public sources cannot be incorporated in this research. Nevertheless, the available sources suffice as a basis to analyze the effectiveness of the RSPO and the Dutch government’s response to this initiative.

This thesis starts by providing a theoretical overview of the different views on voluntary certification schemes, the influence they exert on governments acting and introduces the used methods. In the second chapter, a historical overview is given of the establishment, structure, and goals of the RSPO as well as the relationship with national governments. Karen Bäckstrand, a political scientist at Stockholm University, developed a framework that allows us to measure the input legitimacy and output effectiveness of the RSPO in the third chapter.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the fourth chapter, the effect of the functioning of the RSPO on the Dutch policy will be examined. In the last part of this thesis, an effort is made to explain the acting of the Dutch cabinet. This is followed by a conclusion, which summarizes the findings of the research and reviews whether more general conclusions can be made on the impact of voluntary certification schemes on government acting, based on this case study on the RSPO.

Altogether, this thesis hopes to contribute to the understanding of the effect of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on Dutch palm oil policy and regulation. Critical research on the functioning of the RSPO and the Dutch performance allows us to better understanding the complexity of the palm oil problem, the development of the RSPO and the efficacy of voluntary certification schemes. Furthermore, it gives more insight into the position the Dutch government has taken on environmental governance. Overall, this can focus the debate on voluntary certification schemes and provide improvements for current and future policy and regulation. Ultimately, this thesis can give more insight into the struggles and efficacy of the policy by which state and non-state actors try to find a balance between economic growth and sustainable development.

# Chapter 1 - Theoretical Discussion

Before analyzing the effect of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on Dutch palm oil policy and regulation, it is essential to better understand the different scholarly views with regard to voluntary certification schemes. This chapter will provide an overview of the academic debate and presents a way to assess the effectiveness of voluntary certification schemes based on the work of Karen Bäckstrand.

The idea that there can be 'governance without government' and that states are just one type of actor among many that can endorse change on a global scale has now become common currency. [[26]](#footnote-26) This has led to the emergence of new kinds of regulatory policies, such as multi-stakeholder voluntary agreements.[[27]](#footnote-27) Within the scholarly debate on which environmental tools work best, there is a serious discussion about the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder voluntary certification schemes. On the one hand, scholars like political scientist Kate O’Neill and others see voluntary certification schemes as a chance and effective way for the sector to improve itself without government interference. [[28]](#footnote-28) Multi-stakeholder governance is considered to provide forums intended to promote dialogue, learning and best practices.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is often taken as an example to show the positive results, which non-state actors can accomplish through a certification scheme.[[30]](#footnote-30) John Ruggie, Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, states this is the positive re-emergence of “embedded liberalism.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Ruggie sees embedded liberalism as a compromise between the desire to retain as many as possible of the advantages of the free market system, while also allowing states the autonomy to pursue interventionist and welfare based policies.[[32]](#footnote-32) Today, however, embedded liberalism means addressing challenges that were not central to mid-20th century embedded liberalism, namely, in this case, the need for an industrial or growth model that does not destroy the environment.[[33]](#footnote-33) On the other hand, the same scholars and those more critical also question the legitimacy and effectiveness of these schemes in practice. Karen Bäckstrand states that the required balanced representation of stakeholders and transparency is not guaranteed.[[34]](#footnote-34) Melanie Pichler, of the Political Department of the University of Vienna, reports that an equal voice of all stakeholders is in the decision-making process can be unsatisfactory.[[35]](#footnote-35) Also, O’Neill and others stress the possible weaknesses of a voluntary certification scheme, such as a lack of transparency and formal reporting requirements.[[36]](#footnote-36) Furthermore, Peter Utting, affiliated to the UN Research Institute for Social Development, stresses that there is a possibility that such a scheme results in corporate greenwashing.[[37]](#footnote-37) Greenwashing can be defined as ‘making people believe that you are doing more to protect the environment than you really are.’ [[38]](#footnote-38) Improvement of the sector in his view not guaranteed and this could ultimately result in a bigger environmental footprint.[[39]](#footnote-39) Nevertheless, multi-stakeholder private initiatives, roundtables, and voluntary certification schemes are considered by many as a legitimate and effective tool, and their usage has increased. [[40]](#footnote-40)

 Karen Bäckstrand, Political Scientist at Stockholm University, has developed a framework to assess the legitimacy and effectiveness of environmental multi-stakeholder partnerships.[[41]](#footnote-41) Legitimacy can be conceived as ‘the acceptance and justification of shared rule by the global community’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Effectiveness revolves around the ‘problem-solving capacity’ of an organization. [[43]](#footnote-43) This framework is developed for broader environmental multi-stakeholder partnerships, of which a multi-stakeholder voluntary certification scheme such as the RSPO is one example. Although this framework was not specifically designed to test voluntary certification schemes, it nevertheless provides the perfect analytical framework for this research. According to Bäckstrand, the legitimacy and effectiveness can be captured by asking two questions. *Are these partnerships open, representative and inclusive of different stakeholder’s interests? And do they deliver the promised results?* [[44]](#footnote-44)The first question considers the input, which is the functioning and procedural demands of the scheme itself. Examples are the balanced representation of different stakeholder groups and the degree of support in politics, society and the private sector. Who are included and excluded? And do all who are included have an equal voice? Furthermore, the extent of transparency and accountability reporting mechanisms also determine the internal legitimacy. Are there objective criteria and targets and can they be guaranteed? And what are sanctions if the criteria are not met? The second question focuses on the output effectiveness, which is the extent to which goals are reached. Examples of such goals are poverty eradication, biodiversity protection, countering deforestation etc. To what extent are those criteria met? Altogether, answers to these questions can determine the legitimacy and effectiveness of a voluntary certification scheme, in this case, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. By using Bäckstrand’s method, we are able to measure the internal functioning and the extent in which internal goals are reached. However, it cannot assess beyond an organization’s targets. If, for example, the objective of organization X would be to reduce greenhouse gases by 10% and they would be able to accomplish this, the method would consequently conclude the scheme to be effective. However, if a target of 50% greenhouse gas reduction would be necessary to combat the particular problem, the organization can also be considered ineffective, despite the fact it functioned properly and reached its internal goals. Bäckstrand’s method will be used for this research, as well as the question if the goals set reach far enough to combat the specific environmental problem.

Most research on private governance arrangements thus far focuses on the functioning of the voluntary certification scheme itself. A perspective that understands the working they exert on national governance is crucial and can answer the main question.[[45]](#footnote-45) However, this field is quite new, and there is no serious discussion on the factors that explain the influence of the functioning of the scheme on government acting. Only a few scholars who have addressed this matter this far. There are those who believe it can result in leaving all responsibility to the private sector, which would be an unfortunate case if a scheme does not function properly. Greetje Schouten, a researcher of partnerships between NGOs, businesses, and governments in the field of sustainable food and agriculture at various universities in the Netherlands, explains that several critics believe these schemes can be an excuse for governments not to act. [[46]](#footnote-46) Peter Utting admits that the ‘embedded liberalism’ is indeed a risk if such a scheme does not function properly.[[47]](#footnote-47) A second group of scholars has a more positive view of the benefits of voluntary certification schemes. Peter Oosterveer, Betty Adjei, and Sietze Vellema & Maja Slingerland, researchers at Wageningen University & Research, on the other hand, believe that it is possible that governments will develop an additional framework to the certification scheme, in case it does not work effectively.[[48]](#footnote-48) A third group states more generally that governments will remain active. Robert Falkner, Professor International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, believes that non-state actors can help enhance the field of global environmental governance, but that state-actors will remain involved in the process. [[49]](#footnote-49) John Ruggie, states that private governance is only part of the solution and that it is important for state actors to remain active.[[50]](#footnote-50) How they see the role of the state remains unclear. For this research, it is essential to understand the acting of the Dutch government. Research is presented on the question if, the government of the Netherlands leaves the responsibility to the RSPO, or takes an active role. If the government remains active, this question can after that be divided in acting within the framework of the RSPO, or in taking steps on palm oil that go beyond the RSPO.

# Chapter 2 - Development of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil was established in 2004 and rapidly gained support within the private and the public sector of both the Netherlands and across Europe. In this chapter, the establishment and structure of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil will be described, as well as its members and the targets that were set. Furthermore, the possible relationship with national governments will be explained and described.

## 2.1 The Establishment of the RSPO

The positive experience of the establishment of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 1994, paved the way for future Roundtables.[[51]](#footnote-51) The WWF thereafter founded seven other schemes that aim to promote a more sustainable production of cotton, soy, sugarcane, biofuels, farmed salmon, as well as shrimp, beef, and palm oil. These schemes are part of a broader strategy[[52]](#footnote-52) based on the trends in environmental governance, which is about the improvement of the sector from within the sector. It was in 2001 that the WWF started exploring the possibilities of improving the industry through the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, at which all palm oil involved stakeholders could find an equal voice. The result was an informal co-operation among Aarhus United UK Ltd, Migros, Malaysian Palm Oil Association and Unilever together with WWF in 2002.[[53]](#footnote-53) This idea became concrete through the official establishment of the RSPO in April 2004.[[54]](#footnote-54) In 2005, the RSPO started a pilot with 14 companies.[[55]](#footnote-55) In 2006, an office was established in Jakarta, and it was in 2008, that certification criteria for sustainable palm oil were finalized. [[56]](#footnote-56) Thereafter, the standards were sharpened several times, the number of members has grown fast as well as the amount of certified palm oil.[[57]](#footnote-57) In 2014, RSPO Certified Sustainable Palm Oil for biofuels (RSPO-RED) entered the European market.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The primary purpose of the RSPO is to transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm.[[59]](#footnote-59) It is important to mark that the overall goal of the RSPO is defined as realizing an uptake in demand for sustainable palm oil. A reduction of palm oil consumption may, according to the RSPO, not be seen as a sustainable solution, merely stating that rapeseed and other oils use more agricultural soil and therefore would have a larger environmental impact. [[60]](#footnote-60) However, this approach at the same time condemns the cut down of unnecessarily used oil. Nevertheless, the aim of the Roundtable is to advance the production, procurement, finance and use of sustainable palm oil products. Furthermore, the RSPO wants to develop, implement, verify, assure and periodically review credible global standards for the entire supply chain of sustainable palm oil. Also, they aim to monitor and evaluate the economic, environmental and social impacts of the uptake of sustainable palm oil in the market. All above should be legitimized by the aim to engage and commit all stakeholders throughout the supply chain.

The RSPO has developed a set of environmental and social criteria that growers must comply with to produce Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO). When they are properly applied, these criteria can help to minimize the negative impact of palm oil cultivation on the environment and communities in palm oil-producing regions.[[61]](#footnote-61) First, growers are obliged to have a commitment to transparency and to have an environmental responsibility through the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. Furthermore, they are responsible for the consideration of employees and of individuals and communities who are affected by growers. Also, they are responsible for the development of new plantings and a commitment to continuous improvement in key areas of activity. Next, they need to follow applicable laws and regulations and need to have a commitment to long-term economic and financial stability. And at last, they need to have an appropriate use of best practices by growers and millers.[[62]](#footnote-62) Summing up these principles provides little concreteness on what sustainable palm oil exactly is. However, 39 more specific criteria and 100 indicators elaborate these principles. In sum, these call for an inclusion of environmental and social standards (e.g., the separation of high conservation value forest within palm oil plantations, the prohibition of fire use for the preparation of plantation land, and the payment of minimum wages for plantation workers).[[63]](#footnote-63) The principles and criteria are further evaluated in the following chapter.

The RSPO has over 3,000 members worldwide, who represent all links along the palm oil supply chain. They have committed to produce, source and/or use sustainable palm oil certified by the RSPO (CSPO). In order to understand the structure of the RSPO, it is important to make a distinction between ordinary membership and national private and public support of the RSPO. Only individual stakeholders of the seven different sectors involved in the palm oil industry can gain ordinary membership. These are the oil palm producers, processors or traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks/investors, and environmental and social non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[[64]](#footnote-64) As members, they have a say in the RSPO’s decision-making, shaping efforts to make sustainable palm oil the norm.[[65]](#footnote-65) A balanced representation of these stakeholders is vital, as all parties concerned have different objectives and to improve the sector, all voices need to be heard. The decision-making process and whether this is equally represented will be examined in the next chapter.

## 2.2 Governments and the RSPO

Officially, governments and national private sector commitments cannot get the status of ordinary members of the RSPO. Nevertheless, the website of the RSPO illustrates national commitments. The RSPO states that these initiatives aim at forge alliances towards Certified Sustainable Palm Oil commitments[[66]](#footnote-66), with the goal to result in a global uptake of CSPO.[[67]](#footnote-67) First, it is important to understand that the RSPO states these national initiatives are a combination of actors that have officially been established independently of the RSPO and later committed to certified palm oil. [[68]](#footnote-68) Second, it is important to understand that these are the commitments of the private sector and non-state actors, and should not be misunderstood for government promises.[[69]](#footnote-69) To understand the relationship between state and non-state policy, it is essential to keep this distinction in mind. States can in their turn support and stimulate the commitments of the private sector, or support the RSPO in public, financially or in diplomatic relations. Membership or any official legal relationship between the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and governments do and cannot exist.

As Dutch companies play a significant role in the global palm oil industry, the Netherlands was the first country to establish a national commitment (Dutch Task Force for Sustainable Palm Oil) in 2010. [[70]](#footnote-70) Other European national private sector commitment followed,[[71]](#footnote-71) as well as support from the public sector.[[72]](#footnote-72) Later in this research, this study aims to show whether this means that the Dutch government leaves the responsibility up to the private sector, actively promotes the RSPO or takes steps on palm oil that may even go beyond this roundtable. First, research is presented about the effectiveness of the RSPO, which then can form the base to draw conclusions about the actual result of the government acting.

# Chapter 3 - The Effectiveness of the RSPO

Before evaluating the Dutch government’s palm oil policy, it is essential to draw conclusions about the performance of the RSPO. There are many scholars who address and evaluate the legitimacy and effectiveness of the RSPO. Nevertheless, these scholars discuss and assess different aspects of the RSPO and do not assess the functioning of the organization as a whole. By using Bäckstrand’s method, it is possible to combine the different research and to evaluate the RSPO’s effectiveness in a complete overview. Evaluating the input legitimacy of the RSPO can be undertaken by asking two questions. *Is the Roundtable on Sustainable open to and representative and inclusive of different stakeholders’ interests? To what extent is the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil transparent and (how) can members be held accountable?* The output effectiveness can be measured by asking the question: *To what extent are the desired developmental and environmental goals of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil met?* These questions are not scored on every aspect in a table, but by assessing the overall room for improvement. In due course, by also questioning whether the goals set by the RSPO are sufficiently ambitious according to various interested parties to tackle the environmental problems, this research can place the RSPO in the discussion on the voluntary certification schemes described in the theoretical framework.

## 3.1 Input Legitimacy

The first part of the chapter analysis focuses on the input effectiveness, which is the functioning and procedural demand of the scheme itself. This entails the balanced representation of different stakeholder groups. Who are included and excluded? And do all who are included have an equal voice? Furthermore, the degree of transparency and accountability reporting mechanisms also determine the internal effectiveness. Are the criteria and targets objective and can the implementation be guaranteed? And what are the sanctions if the criteria are not met?

### Balanced Representation of Various Stakeholders

Representativeness concerns the extent to which partnerships incorporate various stakeholders’ interests.[[73]](#footnote-73) A balanced representation is important as it legitimizes the decisions that are made by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil on the principles and criteria to improve the palm oil sector. If all stakeholders are equally represented and heard, this will increase the legitimacy, functionality and ultimately effectiveness of the scheme. If not, one may question the ability of the certification scheme to improve the sector. In the case of the oil palm industry, stakeholders can be divided by those in the supply chain and those affected by the industry. The supply chain stakeholders involve the palm oil producers, plantation workers, processors and traders, consumer goods manufacturers, banks/investors, and consumers. Stakeholders not in the supply chain are the local communities, indigenous people and the flora and fauna.

Melanie Pichler published the article ‘People, Planet, Profit’: Consumer-Oriented Hegemony and Power Relations in Palm Oil and Agrofuel Certification’ in 2013, in which she concludes that the RSPO privileges business interests in general, whereas smallholders’, plantation workers’, and indigenous peoples’ interests are marginalized.[[74]](#footnote-74) Her research was presented in October 2013. Almost four years later, it is important to analyze if her claims are still valid for today’s situation. Therefore, it is important to first look at the current decision-making process.



**Figure 1.** **Decision-making structure of the RSPO [[75]](#footnote-75)**

Figure 1. represents the decision-making structure of the RSPO and needs some elaboration. Supply chain associates consist of organizations that have business activities in the palm oil sector along the supply chain, but process no more than 500 metric tons of palm oil annually. This category has no rights.[[76]](#footnote-76) Affiliate members are those who are not directly involved in the palm oil supply chain. They can participate in the General Assembly, but have no voting rights and limited access to information.[[77]](#footnote-77) Most important are the ordinary members, as they have the right to vote at each meeting of the General Assembly, access to RSPO information and their representatives are eligible for election to the Board of Governors.[[78]](#footnote-78) The ordinary members consist of the seven categories described earlier: The Palm Oil Growers, Processors and/or Traders, Consumer Goods Manufacturers, Retailers, Banks/Investors, Environmental/Nature conservation NGOs and Social/Developmental NGOs. The Board of Governors is elected by the ordinary members through the General Assembly and consists of sixteen seats divided among each of the seven ordinary member’s categories. These seats are divided as shown in Figure 2. Palm Oil Processors and/or Traders, Consumer Goods Manufacturers, Retailers, Banks/Investors, Environmental/Nature conservation NGOs and Social/Developmental NGOs have two seats. Only the Palm Oil Grower category has four seats, which are divided over Indonesia, Malaysia, ‘the rest of the world’ and smallholders. Also, the Working Groups of Figure 1. consist of representatives of all sectors. The CEO block in Figure 1. represents the secretariat responsible for the day-to-day running of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. The daily management of the RSPO is primarily based on the decisions made together with the Board of Governors and the Working Groups. Within the decision-making, the balance is therefore defined by the distribution of seats given per interest group**. [[79]](#footnote-79)**

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**Figure 2. Seats divided amongst stakeholder categories [[80]](#footnote-80)**

*The quantity inside the bar represents the number of members represented by the seat.*

First, the actors whose interests are marginalized according to Pichler are examined. These are smallholders, plantation workers, and indigenous peoples. Smallholders are farmers who grow palm oil, where the family provides the majority of labor and the farm provides the principal source of income, and the area used for palm oil is less than 50 hectares.[[81]](#footnote-81) Smallholders produce approximately 40% of the global palm oil volume. This same number is applicable on the RSPO, of which 133,363 smallholders together produce 40% of the 21% CSPO share.[[82]](#footnote-82) Before, smallholders were left behind in the decision-making process. Currently, the smallholders are represented by the seat they have on the Board of Governors. One could, however, argue that a few number of larger companies still hold the majority of seats for palm oil growers. In numbers, this means that 113,363 growers are represented by one seat, whereas 174 growers receive three seats. It could be argued that a few powerful members hold a disproportionate capacity to decide on issues considering many. On the other hand, one could say that smallholders have a relatively fair share of representation. Plantation workers’ and indigenous people’s voices are not represented in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. There is no possibility for them to apply formally to the RSPO, which means that their interests are -if at all - represented by environmental or social NGO or palm oil companies, but not by themselves.[[83]](#footnote-83) The same goes for indigenous people, who experience their culture and habitat disappearing by the industry [[84]](#footnote-84) but are unable to have a direct say to the improvement of the sector and therefore their own rights and living standards.

Pichler states that the business interests are privileged and overrepresented since, in 2013, 96% of the then 638 members are private companies whereas only 4% were environmental and developmental NGO.[[85]](#footnote-85) A calculation made on above numbers show that this percentage has currently even dropped to 3,3%.[[86]](#footnote-86) Nevertheless, given the fact that each sector - except the growers - has an equal number of seats, regardless of their number of members, makes this argument negligible. However, her argument that only two of seven categories represent non-business stakeholders remains valid. Business interested categories will have twelve seats, whereas the environmental and social only have four seats. An equal balance between people, planet, and profit cannot be seen on the Board of Governors as business representatives are provided with disproportionate influence to define sustainability.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Although the Roundtable has slightly improved its structure, it can be concluded that the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil cannot be considered as an organization that is representative and inclusive of different stakeholder’s interests and foremost represents business interests and the most powerful along the supply chain. This leads to question the validity of whether the principles and criteria set up by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil are truly balanced.

### 3.1.2 Accountability and Transparency

Accountability is the obligation of an organization to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. [[88]](#footnote-88) Transparency and accountability reporting mechanisms are important for the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. Consumers need to be assured that they buy a product that contains palm oil that applies to the CSPO principles and criteria. If this cannot be guaranteed due to a lack of transparency and accountability, this has serious negative implications for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the multi-stakeholder partnership. Can these criteria be guaranteed by the RSPO? And what are the sanctions if the criteria are not met? In sum, what is the commitment to certified sustainable palm oil worth?

To gain insight into the level of transparency and accountability, it is interesting to look at Unilever. This company is the world’s largest palm oil consumer goods manufacturer and amongst the founders of the RSPO. The company aimed to switch to CSPO entirely in 2012. Nevertheless, Unilever failed to meet its 2012 claims and still has not been able to transfer to sustainable palm oil fully. Furthermore, Unilever’s traceability of the purchased palm oil in 2015 was just 73%.[[89]](#footnote-89) Unilever now promises to reach 100% CSPO in 2020.[[90]](#footnote-90) Recent accusations against Unilever and Wilmar International furthermore demonstrate that it is not guaranteed that consumers buy products that contain sustainable palm oil.[[91]](#footnote-91) The Sawit Sumbermas Sarana (hereafter SSMS), is a palm oil growing company that does not comply with the sustainable criteria of the RSPO and Unilever’s policy[[92]](#footnote-92), as they illegally clear forests to enlarge their plantations.[[93]](#footnote-93) Unilever and Wilmar International stopped buying from this company in 2015. However, at the same time, Unilever opened a subsidiary firm called Unilever Oleochemical Indonesia (UOI) to start their own palm oil processing. One of the palm oil farmers where UOI since then has directly bought palm oil from is the SSMS. Although Wilmar International has disengaged with SSMS, they have bought palm oil from a company which scores even worse than SSMS on sustainability criteria.[[94]](#footnote-94) The fact that Unilever and Wilmar willingly buy palm oil that does not meet the RSPO principles and criteria and hide this is alarming. Are their practices representative for all stakeholders or can Unilever and Wilmar be seen as the few bad apples? Nonetheless, above examples that show the lack of transparency and guarantee of sustainable palm oil and raise the question how such practices are possible? This is even more worrisome given the fact that the RSPO has established transparencies and accountability mechanisms to prevent and penalize such failures.

When examining the existing transparency and accountability mechanisms of the RSPO, one can see that the implementation of standards starts at the level of the palm oil growers, who are certified by the Accreditation Body. If certified, growers are annually assessed for continued compliance. After five years, the primary assessment is repeated. [[95]](#footnote-95) If producers fail to comply, there is a chance they get suspended or lose their membership.[[96]](#footnote-96) Nevertheless, some voices believe that the accountability of growers is insufficient. Denis Ruysscheart, a political ecologist from the French National Centre for Scientific Research, states that in practice various growers do not comply with the standards, however, due to the lack of an effective control system they are not accounted for.[[97]](#footnote-97) Also from within the RSPO, there are voices that state that the monitoring mechanisms for growers are largely inadequate.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Apart from the criteria for growers, other members along the supply chain are expected to buy certified palm oil. Within their first year of membership, they need to present a plan in which they transfer within the foreseeable future to CSPO.[[99]](#footnote-99) Since 2010, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm oil requires an annual report of their members. Members measure their progress towards 100% RSPO-certified sustainable palm oil. The reporting system makes it possible to see how much palm oil they are using and makes it possible to rank companies by their actual usage and not their promises. These reports are mandatory for Ordinary and Affiliate members, and are submitted each year. [[100]](#footnote-100) In 2015, the RSPO eliminated 15 and suspended 62 companies that failed to report.[[101]](#footnote-101) Although this transparent system reduces the opportunities for greenwashing, it does not eliminate them. This is because within this reporting system members cannot be held accountable for the failure of their promises on the transfer to sustainable palm oil. Unilever, for example, is still far from transferring to sustainable palm oil fully after fifteen years of involvement and is not held accountable for this in any way.

Besides the reporting system, a passive accountability system exists. This system was established in 2009, called the Complaints System. It provides a framework to address complaints against any RSPO member or the RSPO system itself. It aims to ensure that any breaches of the statutes, by-laws, motions approved by the General Assembly, or any other approved articles such as the principles and criteria and the code of conduct are fair, impartially and transparently resolved. [[102]](#footnote-102)The Complaints System can be used by RSPO members as well as non-members and needs a filed complaint to start a procedure. The Complaints Panel has closed 44 cases, of which some cases were dismissed whereas in other cases members were held accountable and an action plan followed.[[103]](#footnote-103) Some accused have lost their memberships such as Duta Palma[[104]](#footnote-104), and others members such as the IOI group have been suspended.[[105]](#footnote-105) The system has proven to handle several breaches successful in the past. Nevertheless, others believe the Complaint System often to be reluctant. The Forest Peoples Programme, an organization representing the rights of local and indigenous communities, argues that the Complaint System frequently appears to be unable or unwilling to make decisions that stand up to major companies and is “content to sit on its hands.” [[106]](#footnote-106) One example is the Golden Agri-Resource case in Liberia, which shows the continued mistakes of this vast company and the lack of decisiveness and accountability of the RSPO.[[107]](#footnote-107) Reason for this may be that the thirteen people who oversee the Complaints System and the sanctions given, are RSPO members.[[108]](#footnote-108) The system and its ruling, therefore, is not independent, as they are in the difficult position to file sanctions against other members and the above organization they promote. David Rothshield, Executive Director of Golden Veroleum Liberia, one of Liberia’s largest palm oil producers, RSPO member and also accused of land grabbing, confirms and perfectly explains the irony of this system. “The fact that there are industry-driven initiatives to address the deforestation issue – with many RSPO members participating or driving them perhaps illustrates the deficiencies in the current RSPO processes and activities.”[[109]](#footnote-109)This speaks to the wider question of whether such conglomerates are capable of improving the sector without comprising their blatant conflict of interest?

Although the RSPO has established several mechanisms to guarantee the transparency and accountability, these tools are currently insufficient in practice. The RSPO is in the end not able to ensure that consumers buy a product that contains palm oil that complies with the RSPO standards. The legitimacy and effectiveness can, therefore, be questioned.

## 3.2 Output Effectiveness

The effectiveness of an organization can be defined by its problem-solving capacity.[[110]](#footnote-110) In this case, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil aims to help solve developmental and environmental problems of the palm oil industry. It is of particular importance for the RSPO to be effective, as this is fundamental to justify the existence of the scheme itself. The RSPO’s developmental and environmental goals can be found in the principles and criteria, which have last been revised in 2013. The developmental goals are located under principle 6 *Responsible consideration of employees and of individuals and communities affected by growers and millers.* The environmental goals are located under principle 5 *Environmental Responsibility and Conservation of Natural Resources and Biodiversity.[[111]](#footnote-111)*

By examining the extent to which the set goals are reached, it is possible to conclude on the effectiveness of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. Given the scope of this research, it is impossible to check the extent of every single sub goal and criteria and rate them. Also, the fact that none of the goals have been formulated using measurable targets makes it difficult to evaluate them and suggests poor guidance. However, the research of organizations and scholars that address the main failures of these goals can give insight in what way there is room for improvement and therefore give insight into the ‘problem-solving capacity.’ Nevertheless, while analyzing the sources of NGOs, one must keep their interests in mind. Therefore, in order to shape a balanced nonbiased view of the extent to which the goals are reached, it is essential to take other types of sources into consideration as well, such as the RSPO impact report.

### 3.2.1 Developmental Goals

Principle 6, ‘The responsible consideration of employees, individuals, and communities affected by growers’, consists of 13 more specific criteria. In sum, these are about respecting human rights (no child labor, forced labor, discrimination, abuses, etc.) and open and equal communication with smallholders and local communities.[[112]](#footnote-112) The RSPO Impact Report of 2016, states that developmental problems around these issues are not yet solved, and improvement is necessary to reach these goals. [[113]](#footnote-113) This statement is a direct response to the severe amount of criticism written in recent NGO reports, such as the one of Amnesty International, elaborated below. The RSPO, however, states that the Complaint System ensures that companies are held accountable for any breaches.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Amnesty International has published a report in 2016 in which they investigate the human rights on major palm oil plantations. The report is called: ‘The great palm oil scandal: Labour abuses behind big brand names’ and investigates the palm oil produced by Wilmar International. Three of the five palm growers that Amnesty International has investigated are certified as producing “sustainable” palm oil under the RSPO; nevertheless, Amnesty researchers found evidence of severe abuse on all five plantations. In short, Amnesty International states that workers are regularly abused, paid under minimum wage and that the workers required their children to work with them to reach their unrealistic high targets. Also, gender discrimination and forced labor are frequently found practices. Amnesty International concludes that the implementation and monitoring of the RSPO criteria are extremely weak and based on a superficial assessment system. While large consumer goods companies claim that the palm oil used in their products is “sustainable”, Amnesty International’s investigation contradicts this claim.[[115]](#footnote-115) A counterargument could be that Amnesty only researched three RSPO plantations of one supplier and that improvement of human rights can be seen on the other non-researched plantations. On the other hand, one could also argue these investigations are the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, the lack of transparency poses difficulties in quantifying the true impact of the RSPO on these issues. Nonetheless, the report makes clear that plantations of a large company with an exemplary role are far from reaching the desired developmental goals. Also, the report confirms the previous conclusion that the accountability mechanisms for growers are weak. Apart from workers rights, the contact with local communities cannot yet be called open and equal. The report of the Forest Peoples Programme and the Complaint System Meeting Minutes, make clear there have been several cases, also in 2016 and 2017, where local communities filed complaints against large RSPO palm oil companies who forcefully leased land.[[116]](#footnote-116) In some cases, the Complaints Panel is accused of performing poor judgment, whereas in other cases the Complaint System has ruled in favor of local communities. [[117]](#footnote-117) Nonetheless, the fact that communications with local communities must go to court after their land was illegally taken, instead of equally dealing with the issue in the first place, shows that progress has been made, but that forms of maladministration take place and the problems are far from solved.

### 3.2.2 Environmental Goals

Principle 5, the ‘Environmental Responsibility and Conservation of Natural Resources and Biodiversity’ consists of 6 more specific criteria. In sum, these are about ‘doing the best’ to protect rare or endangered species or other High Conservation Habitats, to reduce waste and emissions and to avoid the use of fire for preparing land or replanting.[[118]](#footnote-118)The RSPO furthermore states that it is working with its members to plan development in such a way to minimize net emissions towards a goal of low carbon development. Key developments during the current reporting period include the update of the New Planting Procedures (NPP), endorsed by the RSPO Board in November 2015, as well as the launch of RSPO NEXT.[[119]](#footnote-119) It is important to mark that the word ‘deforestation’ or ‘rainforest’ cannot be found in the principles and criteria of the RSPO. Although the RSPO aims to minimize deforestation, the CSPO criteria do not prohibit deforestation. The WWF’s response to the 2013 revision of the RSPO Principle's and Criteria stated that they did not ensure that companies were acting responsibly and suggested that companies needed to take further actions.[[120]](#footnote-120) In February 2016, the RSPO launched this so-called RSPO NEXT, a set of additional and advanced criteria for sustainable palm oil production to assist companies who wish to exceed current RSPO criteria and implement zero deforestation commitments.[[121]](#footnote-121) Nevertheless, these criteria are voluntary. The RSPO standard does not follow a zero-deforestation policy, resulting in the fact that RSPO members are still involved in deforestation.[[122]](#footnote-122) Furthermore, the criteria only ask ‘to best ensure’ the protection of endangered species and High Conservation Value habitats. An aloof word choice, not obliging growers to protect the area or any species.

A committee of the European Parliament stated in 2017 that they acknowledge the positive contribution made by the RSPO, but observe with regret that the organization does not successfully prohibit their members from converting rainforests or peatlands into palm plantations, fails to limit greenhouse gas emissions, and has been unable to limit massive forests and peat fires.[[123]](#footnote-123) Also, Denis Ruysscheart has researched how effective the RSPO has been in attaining its conservation goals, specifically regarding the protection of the endangered orangutans. His study shows poor results in protecting the forest area and in particular the Orangutan habitat.[[124]](#footnote-124) A study by Borneo Futures confirms this claim by proving that the relative loss of Orangutans in RSPO certified estate is equal to the non-RSPO certified estate.[[125]](#footnote-125) RSPO member David Rothshield states there is a lack of consistency in the application of the RSPO principles and criteria due to a lack of clear definitions, operational guidelines, and measurement methodologies.[[126]](#footnote-126) Ruysschaert explains the poor conservation management not only by too much room in the guidance document but also by too little financial compensation, the lack of external control system and non-integration of the RSPO in the socio-politico-legal Indonesian context.[[127]](#footnote-127)

As the environmental achievements are considered too limited by core some RSPO members, several have chosen to take imitative to accelerate improvements. WWF joined forces with Greenpeace to form the Palm Oil Innovation Group (POIG), together with producer companies. The POIG was established in 2013 and aims to go beyond the RSPO standards, principles and commitments.[[128]](#footnote-128) Large corporations such as Ferrero and Danone, but also Unilever and Wilmar have joined the POIG.[[129]](#footnote-129) On the legitimization and effectiveness of the POIG cannot be concluded. The establishment of this organization does, however, show that even within the RSPO, members believe the achievements of the RSPO are too limited.

Although the RSPO has forms of positive impact, it can be concluded that the environmental goals and principles are poorly formulated and poorly managed in practice. This is a conclusion that is shared by RSPO members, like the WWF but also producers like Golden Veroleum Liberia. The ‘problem-solving capacity’ or effectiveness on an environmental level is therefore considered to be low.

## 3.3 Conclusion

The palm oil that the RSPO calls sustainable is often linked to human rights abuse, land grabbing and illegal rainforest destruction.[[130]](#footnote-130)All shortcomings complement each other. The unbalanced representation of stakeholders and the lack of accountability results in poorly stated and managed principles and criteria and put a brake on fundamental change. When the RSPO is not able to guarantee that the production is as socially and environmentally responsible as claimed, the scheme follows the risk to result in corporate greenwashing and an ultimately bigger footprint, as Peter Utting states. Furthermore, apart from the fact that the sustainable palm oil production fails to meet the RSPO’s criteria, the criteria are poorly formulated and too limited to achieve fundamental change. The RSPO fails to oblige growers to protect endangered species and does not formally prohibit deforestation, the core of the environmental problem.

The lack of progress of an organization that looks good in the first place raises the question whether an organization such as the RSPO has an influence on limiting the ambitions of governments, strengthening the brake on fundamental change. Or can the RSPO be seen as the first step in the process and is the organization’s influence marginalized? This question is assessed in the next chapter by examining if the Dutch government leaves the responsibility up to the private sector, actively promotes the RSPO or takes steps on palm oil that go beyond this roundtable.

# Chapter 4 - Dutch Palm Oil Policy Beyond RSPO?

In the previous section, it was concluded that the RSPO has yet been unable to effectuate success and fundamental change. The low level of legitimacy and effectiveness leads to the risk Utting addresses; the embedded liberalism of the scheme ultimately could lead to corporate greenwashing and a larger environmental footprint. However, Oosterveer, Adjei, and Vellema & Slingerland state that ineffectiveness does not necessarily have to lead to problems if governments develop an additional framework beyond the certification scheme. In that case, the scheme might be seen as an essential first step in the process. Ruggie and Falkner argue that state actors will always remain active; their specific role remains unclear. They claim that responsibility is not handed over to the private sector, as states remain active. Given the low level of legitimacy and effectiveness, it is essential to understand the steps undertaken by the Dutch government with regard to palm oil. As the scholarly debate provides little concreteness, the different views of scholars are translated in three scenarios on how the Dutch government might act in relation to the RSPO. First, research is presented on whether or not the Dutch government defaults to take an active role and leaves the responsibility to the RSPO. If the result of this first question is that the government does act, this leads to the question if this acting is within the framework of the RSPO or sets aims with regard to palm oil that goes beyond the standards as set by the RSPO, i.e. policy that holds more ambitious goals than those of the RSPO. Evaluating the extent of the Cabinet’s ambitions can be undertaken by answering two sub questions. The first sub question is: To what extent does the government of the Netherlands use other tools to improve the palm oil industry or regulate consumption? These include international treaties, legislation, diplomacy and the initiation of policy within the EU. The second sub question is: how does the Dutch government respond to criticism on the RSPO? These sub questions can together answer if this acting of the government of the Netherlands is within the framework of the RSPO or sets aims with regard to palm oil that goes beyond the standards as set by the RSPO. Furthermore, potential explanations for the government acting are assessed in this chapter. Altogether, this research is able to place the RSPO in the discussion on the impact of voluntary certification schemes on government acting.

## 4.1 Shifting Responsibility?

In the first part of this chapter, research is presented on whether or not the Dutch government omits from assuming an active role, thereby leaving the palm oil problem to the RSPO. This can be examined by analyzing whether or not the Dutch government financially supports the RSPO, stimulates business sector to opt for sustainable palm oil and/or actively supports of the RSPO in diplomatic relations with other countries. If above-described actions are not found, this may lead to the conclusion that the government has used the RSPO as an excuse not to act. If the government does act, one can refute the scenario that the government defaults to take an active role. This research is widely based on Parliamentary records and governmental publications. A distinction is made between four different cabinets with a focus on the specific people who are responsible. This is the period of 2002-2007, with a focus on Cees Veerman. Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. Hereafter it is the period of 2007-2010, in which Gerda Verburg was the successor of Cees Veerman and the period of 2010-2012, with the state secretary of Economic Business, Agriculture, and Innovation, Henk Bleker. Lastly, there is the current demissionary cabinet (2012-2017), with a focus on the Minister Lilianne Ploumen for Foreign Trade and Development.

The cabinet in which Cornelis Veerman oversaw the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, supported the establishment of the RSPO by providing an amount of €45.000 to the RSPO Satellite Office in Jakarta in 2006. In June 2008, his successor Gerda Verburg openly expressed the support of the Netherlands for the RSPO and her aim to improve the sector in cooperation with Indonesia and Malaysia.[[131]](#footnote-131) When the RSPO in 2008 shaped the standards for certification and verification, the Dutch government financially supported this process as well.[[132]](#footnote-132) Another project, on the certification of smallholders of the RSPO, was supported by an aid amount of €350.000.[[133]](#footnote-133) It can be concluded, that the Dutch government actively supported the establishment and growth of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, in public and with additional financial means.

One can also see active communication between the Dutch government and private sector initiatives and furthermore effort is taken to make other countries support the RSPO. In 2010, several actors in the private sector founded the Dutch Task Force for Sustainable Palm Oil (DASPO).[[134]](#footnote-134) The DASPO invited all Netherlands-based players in the palm oil supply chain to promote the production and the use of sustainable palm oil. The day the DASPO was established, Henk Bleker, secretary of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation, officially received their manifest and showed his support. Bleker stated that he was confident that CSPO would not contribute to the reduction of Orangutan habitat in any way. The only ‘problem’, he said, was that too little palm oil was certified. Through the ‘Action plan Sustainable Trade 2011-2015,’ his Ministry actively supported the Task Force and the RSPO. In practice, this was done by promoting CSPO in the private sector and by instigating a dialogue with European and other countries like China and India.[[135]](#footnote-135) Belgium launched a similar private sector national initiative in 2011, the UK in 2012,[[136]](#footnote-136) followed by France, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, and Germany. Also, in the current demissionary cabinet, active governmental support for private sector initiatives and efforts to commit other countries to support the RSPO are evident. On December 7th, 2015, above named countries private sector initiatives officially signed the “Commitment to support: 100% sustainable palm oil in 2020”. Following the private sector commitment, the public sector signed the “The Amsterdam Declaration in Support of Fully Sustainable Palm Oil Supply Chain by 2020” on the initiative of Dutch minister Lilianne Ploumen on December 15th, 2015. This declaration, signed by Ministers of the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and in 2016 endorsed by Norway, was a direct response to the private sector commitment one week earlier. “As European countries and as member states of the European Union, we take note and declare ourselves supportive of the private sector-driven “Commitment to Support 100% Sustainable Palm Oil in Europe” [[137]](#footnote-137).

The Dutch cabinets have officially spoken their support to the RSPO and have shown this with financial matters and in diplomatic relations. The connection with the RSPO has been strong from the start and has not weakened over time. It can furthermore be concluded that the Dutch private and public support for the RSPO has inspired or activated other countries to follow the line of sustainable palm oil. Palm oil is certainly an important topic for the Dutch government, and they have not neglected to act. Therefore, the argument that the government of the Netherlands has used the RSPO as an excuse not to act on the palm oil problem can be refuted. All the four cabinets have actively acted around the issue of palm oil, and therefore Falkner and Ruggie’s arguing can be confirmed. This leads to the question if this acting stays within the framework of the RSPO or sets aims with regard to palm oil that holds more ambitious goals than those of the RSPO. In order to draw conclusions on above question, the potential use of other tools of environmental governance and response to criticism by the Dutch government are examined below.

## 4.2. The Use of Other Tools

There are different tools available for governments to reduce or regulate the production of palm oil. One way is through the support of a private sector certification scheme; other examples are lawmaking, international treaties, and diplomacy. The national government can also perform a role in the initiation of supranational EU legislation. This segment of the research examines the ways in which the Dutch government has initiated on the use of these tools in a way that does not involve handing responsibility to the private sector. The last and current demissionary cabinet is most important to examine, as most public criticism has been expressed during their reign and therefore most opportunities to step beyond the RSPO have emerged in this period. The document: ‘Sustainable development and policy; Letter government; Impact of the import of palm oil on deforestation and the sustainability of palm oil’ published by Minister Ploumen in February 2017 reflects what policy on palm oil is currently followed.[[138]](#footnote-138) This letter is used as the main source for the analysis of legislation, international treaties, and diplomacy. To analyze the potential initiation of EU legislation, this research focuses on the role the Dutch government may have played in the proposed EU resolution which ambitions exceed those of the RSPO. Direct influence on EU-level might be difficult to measure, but the last question is about a possible hindering effect that the RSPO had in pursuing more ambitious goals.

### 4.2.1. International Treaties and National Law-making

The analysis shows that the Dutch government has not proposed any additional national lawmaking and has not initiated or been involved in international treaties to regulate the palm oil industry. There are two countries in the world whose governments have proposed and taken serious steps to regulate palm oil on a legislative level, with the goal to cut down consumption; Norway and France. In Norway, palm oil consumption was reduced by two-thirds in 2012, however, this was the result of a campaign that was initiated by NGOs without government interference.[[139]](#footnote-139) On June 13th, 2017, a majority of the Norwegian parliament has voted to ban the public procurement and use of biofuel based on palm oil.[[140]](#footnote-140) As for France, Senator Yves Daudigny sought to quadruple the tax on palm oil in 2012.[[141]](#footnote-141) A firestorm of critique, including diplomatic pressure, broke out.[[142]](#footnote-142) French food producers strongly opposed,[[143]](#footnote-143) as well as Malaysia and Indonesia since this law would endanger their business model.[[144]](#footnote-144) Perhaps consequently, the French senate rejected the proposal. In 2016, a new form of the ‘Nutella tax’ as it became known to the public, was proposed. Although the later proposal imposed a 90-euro tax instead of a 300-euro tax, the pressure did not recline. The tax that was part of a wider biodiversity bill was called discriminatory and unfair by Indonesia and Malaysia. [[145]](#footnote-145) Yet again, the Senate rejected this bill. According to press bureau Reuters, France failed to follow through on both laws, because of the pressure of palm oil producing countries. [[146]](#footnote-146) On July 7th, 2017, France managed to pass a bill to restrict the use of palm oil in biofuels. French Environment Minister Hulot wants to stop ‘imported deforestation’ and encourages other countries to follow the French example.[[147]](#footnote-147) Unsurprisingly, Malaysia has called this move discriminatory and added that it would review its trade with France.[[148]](#footnote-148) Minister Ploumen responded to the question as to why the Netherlands has not proposed additional laws by stating that a legal ban on palm oil derived from plantations that are involved in conflicts about land rights or are related to fires, is currently internationally unfeasible. Voluntary agreements would provide more scope for wider involvement of all parties than legally imposed prohibitions.’ [[149]](#footnote-149)

The primary sources provide a limited base to exactly find out what motivated Ploumen in her choices and why there are no international treaties on palm oil. Nevertheless, the work of Kate O’ Neill, professor International Environmental Politics at Berkeley, offers suggestions that can provide an explanation for the lack of international treaties and (Dutch) additional national lawmaking. She identifies different types of environmental issues, which would require different approaches. She also explains the role history plays in environmental governance.[[150]](#footnote-150) The palm oil industry can be placed under so-called “local-cumulative problems.” While the effects of local-cumulative environmental problems tend to be felt most immediately within national borders, their ultimate impact is cumulative, or global, often affecting global processes, such as climate change. [[151]](#footnote-151) The palm oil industry causes biodiversity loss and deforestation, both issues felt most immediately in the palm oil producing countries, ultimately affecting the global climate. O’Neill states that issues such as deforestation and biodiversity loss, have proven far less amenable to standard treaty-making approaches, for the primary reason that states are unwilling to cede their sovereign rights over managing and developing these resources.[[152]](#footnote-152) Another point that O’Neill addresses is the influence of colonialization on environmental governance. European countries extracted materials from African and Asian countries to drive their own economies. After asserting independence, industries of former colonies have rapidly grown, gaining economic growth as well as resource depletion and pollution generation.[[153]](#footnote-153) The failed attempt of France to regulate the palm oil industry by imposing a tax and above conclusions of O’Neill can give an explanation why the Netherlands has chosen not to do so. French tax law was called discriminatory by Indonesia and Malaysia. Given the fact that both countries have been colonized for centuries and the palm oil industry is their economic backbone, one can understand their comments. States that recently gained sovereignty over their resources are told by those who took possession of those resources for centuries that they are not allowed to exploit their resources and/or develop economically, as it would contribute negatively to something abstract as climate change. The Dutch have colonized the Indonesian archipelago for centuries, which remains a somewhat sensitive topic for both parties. One might therefore suggest that it would be too problematic for the Netherlands to ‘punish’ Indonesia, her former colony, with laws and regulations that would negatively affect the economy.

### 4.2.2 Diplomacy

Although national legislation and international treaties cannot be found, a focus on the use of diplomacy with palm oil producing countries can be seen. To understand whether this diplomacy goes beyond the RSPO, it is important to critically look at this policy through the statements made by Minister Ploumen. A critical analysis can give insights in whether or not the Dutch government has RSPO exceeding ambitions. Minister Ploumen states that an effort on the RSPO certification is not a solution to all sustainability issues surrounding palm oil, [[154]](#footnote-154) pointing at the palm oil producing countries, stating that they are essential in maintaining the RSPO standard. Minister Ploumen indicates that palm oil producing countries play an important role in the introduction and maintenance of legislation for sustainable palm oil and forest conservation. Denis Schuyaert stated that non-integration of the RSPO in the socio-politico-legal Indonesian context is one of the reasons that nature conservation is currently failing.[[155]](#footnote-155) Ploumen’s policy seems to be in line the theories of Schuyaert and O’Neill; rather than ‘punishing’ them, she aims for collaboration with palm oil producing countries to tackle the problem together.[[156]](#footnote-156) The cabinet uses economic diplomacy to start a dialogue with these governments, as was done during the recent trade mission to Indonesia at the end of 2016.[[157]](#footnote-157) These efforts on improving legislation and diplomatic relations mean that the Dutch government actively tries to take steps to improve the socio-political-legal context. Furthermore, the government also finances NGOs such as Solidaridad, the Environment and International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which are both working in producing countries for better legislation on deforestation, land rights, and working conditions.[[158]](#footnote-158) Both have ultimately positive results for the implementation of the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil principles and criteria. Furthermore, improved legislation and enforcement might also improve the non-RSPO palm oil production. This case shows that the Cabinet acts beyond just supporting the RSPO but also uses government specific tools to help improve the palm oil industry. Nevertheless, this does not yet mean the Dutch government’s ambitions exceed the RSPO. The ambition level of the Netherlands can be questioned by the comment that serious consideration should be given to the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) and Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO).[[159]](#footnote-159) The ISPO and MSPO sustainability standards lay below those of the RSPO since they contain fewer criteria than the RSPO.[[160]](#footnote-160) To the contrary, a connection with the RSPO exceeding standards of the POIG cannot be found. The strategic choice to involve palm oil producing countries in the conversation is essential for improvement, however, in this case, it means at the same time a choice to lower ambitions and sustainability standards.

### 4.3.2 Activity on EU Level

Apart from national law-making and international treaties and diplomacy, countries within the European Union have an extra tool, which is the initiation of lawmaking within the supranational body of the European Union. On an EU-level, more steps to regulate the palm oil sector can be found. In this part of the research is examined what role the Netherlands has played on a EU-level and whether or not the RSPO might have had an obstructive effect. In 2012, the Netherlands has actively lobbied in the EU to phase down the import tax on CSPO to 0%. Nevertheless, they failed to gain support for this proposal.[[161]](#footnote-161) This proposal does however not go beyond the RSPO but is solely focused on strengthening the position of the RSPO.

It was in 2016, that the European Parliament initiated a resolution on deforestation, in which the production and use of palm oil are a major concern and which includes steps that go beyond the RSPO. The majority of MEP’s call for the Commission to take measures to phase out the use of vegetable oils that drive deforestation, including palm oil, as a component of biofuels, preferably by 2020. The EU estimates that biofuels based on palm oil are twice as polluting as ordinary petrol, and biodiesel up to three times as much as normal diesel. This is mainly due to land use.[[162]](#footnote-162) Currently, half of all European imported palm oil is used for biodiesel.[[163]](#footnote-163) Furthermore, they propose one single European certification scheme to guarantee that only sustainably produced palm oil enters the EU market. They also call on the EU to introduce sustainability criteria for palm oil and products containing palm oil entering the EU market. The Commission should improve the traceability of palm oil imported into the EU and should consider applying different customs duty schemes that reflect real costs more accurately until the single certification scheme takes effect.[[164]](#footnote-164) The resolution must still be adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Union and if agreed upon, it would require an estimated implementation period of approximately two years. There have been very few votes against the resolution[[165]](#footnote-165) and the chance that this will come into existence is consequently plausible. The gradual phasing out of palm oil as a component for biodiesel amongst the EU’s member states, would be a significant step. Furthermore, a certification scheme established and controlled by the EU could improve the objectives, transparency, accountability mechanisms and ultimately the legitimization and effectiveness. However, the exact content of the resolution might change in the process. Also, Indonesia and Malaysia announced they will take the ‘discriminatory’ issue to the World Trade Organisation.[[166]](#footnote-166) Therefore, it is impossible to make any predictions on the impact of the proposed EU regulation.

For this research, it is important to understand if the Netherlands continued to actively play a lead role in this proposal and the adoption. It can, however, be argued that the Dutch government has not been of any direct influence on the proposal. The reason for this is that the resolution was drafted by own-initiative (INI), which means that it was drafted on the initiative of the committee.[[167]](#footnote-167) None of the MEP’s in the involved committee carries Dutch nationality.[[168]](#footnote-168) Furthermore, a recently proposed bill by Sharon Dijksma, State Secretary of Infrastructure and Environment, that aims for the exact opposite of the European Parliament, shows that the Dutch cabinet has not been of direct influence on the resolution. Although above has been concluded that the Netherlands has not proposed any additional lawmaking regarding regulation the palm oil industry, Dijksma has proposed a bill regarding the increase of biofuels. In the Netherlands, current rules are that one may mix up to 1,4 percent palm oil or other biofuel derived from food. The proposal of Dijksma is to increase this amount to 5 percent.[[169]](#footnote-169) Nevertheless, one may state the Netherlands has had more indirect impact on the EU resolution, as it opens with ‘*Having regard to*…’ followed by 19 different statements. The resolution was drawn having *regard to the Amsterdam Declaration of 7 December 2015 entitled ‘Towards Eliminating Deforestation from Agricultural Commodity Chains with European Countries’, in support of a fully sustainable palm oil supply chain by 2020 and in support of an end to illegal deforestation by 2020.* Furthermore, *having regard to the promise of government support for the scheme to make the palm oil industry 100 % sustainable by 2020, made by the five Member States and signatories to the Amsterdam Declaration: Denmark, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands*.[[170]](#footnote-170) Although direct influence on the proposal cannot be found, the active ambitions for sustainable palm oil of the Dutch government did serve as one of the reasons for launching the proposal, as these actions have raised the urgency for the initiation of the resolution. This could be in the form of recurrently addressing the palm oil topic, however, one could also argue, that the Amsterdam Declaration and other policy evolving around the (ineffective) RSPO standards, has raised the necessity and ambitions for better certification standards.

On April 4th,2017, the European Parliament adopted the resolution by 640 votes to 18, with 28 abstentions.[[171]](#footnote-171) Although it remains unclear what the behind the scene role of the Netherlands has been, it can be concluded that the Netherlands has not initiated on the EU exceeding ambitions, but might (un)intendedly have played a stimulating role.

## 4.3. Response to Criticism

The analysis on the use of environmental governance tools by the Dutch government suggest ambitions stay limited, nevertheless, could use more arguments in order to conclude whether or not the government sets aims with regard to palm oil that holds more ambitious goals than those of the RSPO. To further conclude on the ambitions of the government, one can look at the response of Minister Ploumen and State Secretary Dijksma to criticism regarding the low-level effectiveness of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. The response to criticism on the RSPO is essential to understand if the government is willing to step beyond the RSPO. Therefore, documents of the Parliament in which Ploumen and Dijksma make statements about the RSPO are examined.

An important document is a letter from Ploumen answering critical questions on the forest fires in Indonesia of two members of the Parliament, Van Laar and Vos (PVDA), in February 2016. These questions are specifically about the report ‘Up in smoke: failures in Wilmar’s promise to clean up the palm oil business’ which states that palm oil producers Wilmar International and Bimutama Agri fail to follow the RSPO standards and Indonesian law.[[172]](#footnote-172) Critical questions also came from thousands of worried civilians.[[173]](#footnote-173) Ploumen states this report is worrying, yet, no reason to doubt the reliability of the RSPO, as the accountability mechanisms such as the Complaints System, guarantee the standards.[[174]](#footnote-174) In the answers to the questions, one can see that Ploumen believes most violations to come from smallholders and the lack of execution and enforcement of the Indonesian law.[[175]](#footnote-175) Furthermore, it is stated that any violations of the agreements must be taken seriously, but do not undermine the ambitions and concrete actions in this area. The ambition of the Netherlands to come to a 100% sustainable palm oil chain by 2020 remains.[[176]](#footnote-176) The overall carried out message is that the Cabinet believes that the RSPO functions properly and is able to guarantee sustainability. Furthermore, in the parliamentary discussion on biofuels, one can see that Dijksma believes certified palm oil to be sustainably produced and therefore sees the increase of palm oil as a component of biofuel as a sustainable alternative to ordinary oils.[[177]](#footnote-177) The remaining aim for sustainable palm oil is important; however, it is worrying that Ploumen and Dijksma keep referring to the contested certified palm oil as sustainable. Without exceeding ambitions or binding agreements, this aim continues to promote an organization whose standards should be seriously questioned and follows the risk of greenwashing.

The primary sources and O’Neill’s theory still provide a limited base to exactly find out what motivates the Cabinet to continue to promote the RSPO. Nevertheless, when looking at the work of Hospes and Falkner, it might be suggested that the ongoing appreciation for the RSPO can also be explained by the political economic climate of the Netherlands. As mentioned before, palm oil is important to the Dutch economy, as the Dutch are the largest importer of palm oil per capita in the world.[[178]](#footnote-178) Furthermore, the Dutch government has an appreciation for multi-stakeholder models and especially the last two cabinets (2010-2017) have followed a liberal economic policy. [[179]](#footnote-179) Dutch politicians have successfully used the ‘polder model’ (a social economic concertation model involving multi-stakeholders) to solve issues in the labor market since the 80’s.[[180]](#footnote-180) Otto Hospes, of the Wageningen University & Research, states that this explains the Dutch appreciation for the multistakeholder model of the RSPO.[[181]](#footnote-181) Second, he believes the government is hesitant to develop or support initiatives that can be seen as trade barriers.[[182]](#footnote-182) Two plausible assumptions. The ideation of the ‘governance without government’, that Falkner also describes [[183]](#footnote-183), is something that can be spotted in the polder model and policy of the Netherlands. Furthermore, according to Falkner, corporate actors benefit from regimes that prioritize policy objectives such as free trade and investment flows over others such as sustainability. Dutch originated companies like Unilever, which purchases around 3% of the global palm oil,[[184]](#footnote-184) Shell (estimated at 0,6% of the global production in 2015)[[185]](#footnote-185), and FrieslandCampina (estimated at 0,2% of the global production)[[186]](#footnote-186), play a major role in the economy of the Netherlands. These three companies, accountable for purchasing almost 4% of the global palm oil produced, would suffer from taxing, prohibiting or reducing palm oil, but benefit from free trade. If these companies would suffer such losses, so too would the Dutch economy. Nevertheless, all three companies would also benefit from an improvement in the sector, as the negative image of palm oil harms their image. Unilever was among the founders of the RSPO, and Shell and FrieslandCampina are RSPO members.[[187]](#footnote-187) Furthermore, Minister Ploumen and Unilever boss Paul Polman signed a ‘strategic partnership’ in April 2015 to sustain the palm oil industry together.[[188]](#footnote-188) An article in ‘De Groene Amsterdammer’ states that this explains why Ploumen keeps defending Unilever and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil when critical questions are asked.[[189]](#footnote-189) Leaving aside the issue whether Dutch politicians were influenced by severe lobbying of above named influential companies, relied on their own political views or a combination of both, a continued choice for support of the RSPO is a way in which they can support improvement of the palm oil sector through a free market model and therefore does not harm the Dutch economy.

## 4.4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil has not obstructed the Dutch government to remain active on the palm oil issue. Falkner and Ruggie’s theories are plausible, as the government remains active on the issue and does not leave the responsibility to the private sector. The government has even taken steps beyond the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, however, not through international treaties or additional legislation, but within diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, the government lacks initiating ambitions that exceed those of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. Oosterveer, Adjei & Vellema and Slingerland’s argument that states may develop an additional framework in case a scheme is ineffective, can, in this case, be defused. The Netherlands has developed additional policy; nevertheless, this has not been developed to correct the mistakes of the voluntary certification scheme, since the acknowledgment of lacking effectiveness is missing. The risk that Peter Utting addresses of corporate greenwash through the embedded liberalism remains valid, as the Netherlands has kept actively promoting the little effective standard. The high economic relevance of palm oil for the Dutch economy strengthens his theory. However, when looking at the downsides of legislation and international treaties, one can suggest that voluntary agreements are to be the best tool available to improve the sector without harming diplomatic relations, the weakest in the supply chain and the economy. It can furthermore be argued that, by the active role the government has played in the private sector and diplomacy, the Dutch have gained a severe amount of attention for the subject and possibly stimulated others to take further action on this topic, including the committee that initiated the EU resolution. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the Netherlands remains caught up with an organization whose effectiveness and objectivity are to be seriously questioned. The damage that is done by promoting a standard that can be considered ineffective, instead of following a policy that would involve higher standards or also aim for a reduction of palm oil consumption, cannot be measured.

# Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Voluntary certification schemes take an increased central place in environmental governance; as such private sector initiatives provide a multi stakeholder approach to combat complex environmental issues, without the need of government interference. Their effectiveness is highly researched and debated, whereas an understanding of their effect in a wider governmental context is too moderate, yet crucial. The same goes for the certification of the contested Roundtable of Sustainable Palm oil, of which an understanding of its impact on a wider political context is currently missing. Therefore, within this thesis, an answer and explanation have been found on what the effect of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil has been on Dutch palm oil policy and regulation.The RSPO was established in 2004 with its primary goal to transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm through voluntary certification in accordance with the RSPO’s principles and criteria. A reduction of palm oil, according to the RSPO, is not considered a sustainable solution. Within this research, it has however been concluded that the palm oil the RSPO calls sustainable is often linked to human rights abuse, land robbery and illegal rainforest destruction. Theaim of sustaining the industry is essential to achieve fundamental change. Nevertheless, the standards must be effective and be effectuated in practice. The lack of progress can be explained by the fact that the RSPO suffers from shortcomings on its input legitimacy and output effectiveness, which complement each other. The unbalanced representation of stakeholders and the lack of accountability results in poorly stated and managed principles and criteria that put a brake on fundamental change.

The analysis has shown that the Dutch government has not neglected to act on palm oil due to the RSPO. State actors remain active in the process as Falkner and Ruggie argue; the Netherlands has actively acted upon the palm oil issue. The government has even acted beyond the RSPO using diplomacy to involve palm oil producing countries to enforce standards. An obstructive effect of the RSPO on Dutch palm oil policy and regulations seems absent. However, at the same time, the government fails to acknowledge that the effectiveness of the RSPO is to be seriously questioned and does not seem to carry out the ambition to exceed standards. The government has not acted according to the prognoses of Oosterveer, Adjei & Vellema, and Slingerland, as the government has not developed an additional framework to correct the lack of effectiveness of the RSPO. Instead, the government promotes the standards of the RSPO, and Indonesia and Malaysia’s even less effective sustainability standards. Furthermore, State Secretary Dijksma aims to increase the amount of palm oil that can be added as a component to biofuel, the exact opposite aim of the new proposed EU resolution. The EU argues that current certification standards are insufficient and wishes to phase out palm oil as component for biofuels by 2020, since these fuels release at least twice the amount of emissions. Dijksma aims an opposite policy, which supports the RSPO and stimulates to further increase its market share. This leads to a contradiction of the earlier conclusion, namely, that there might be an obstructive effect to develop more ambitious policy. The Dutch government, however, believes that voluntary agreements and cooperation with palm oil producing countries are the best tools available. In contrast, international treaties and a ban on palm oil as a component of biofuel, such as countries as Norway and France adopted, are seen as less effective in effectuating fundamental change. The significance of palm oil for the Dutch economy, the Dutch appreciation for ‘governing without governance’ and sensitive historic relations with Indonesia might provide an explanation for the government’s choices. Nonetheless, the congruence of the effectiveness of the RSPO and the policy of the Dutch government shows that however complex the situation and the search for the best tools available may be, it is extremely important to stay critical on voluntary certification schemes as their success may not be guaranteed. The risk that Peter Utting addresses of greenwash through the re-emergence of embedded liberalism has become reality, is worrisome and is crucial to take into account in future situations. This research has also shown that change can most effectuate be accelerated by the European Union and therefore it would be interesting to further research the active role that this supranational organization could play in combatting environmental issues.

 The aim of this research has been to critically assess the problem-solving capacity of the RSPO and the effect on Dutch palm oil policy and regulation. This focus furthermore offers opportunities for future research on different approaches that could result in fundamental change. There are for example many voices who believe that a dual approach, which entails effectuating sustaining plantations and additionally aiming for an essential reduction of consumption, is essential. Hereby is stated that– given the prospects that the palm oil demand doubles within five years and the complexities that the aim of sustaining the industry faces– a dual approach is vital to combat deforestation, biodiversity loss, climate change and social and problems in the region. How complex it might be, the issue is so urgent that we must combat the palm oil problem through sustaining and reducing the demand for palm oil. We cannot afford to lose another amount of rainforest comparable to the size of Cambodia due to the palm oil industry. The initiatives that are already set in motion by Norway, France, and the new proposed EU resolution show possibilities for the twofold approach. Furthermore, business models have been developed which prove that locals can earn twice as much through the use of the rainforest’s natural resources instead of opting for converting rainforest into palm oil plantations.[[190]](#footnote-190) Such possibilities do not only dismiss the economic discriminatory argument, but also provide the opportunity to distribute wealth more equally among the local population and could reduce the chance of human rights abuse on major plantations at the same time. Moreover, to solve the demand question, the University of Bath has found a way to produce an oil droplet that contains the exact same physical properties as palm oil has. No rainforest needs to make way for this oil, as it is able to grow from yeast in a lab.[[191]](#footnote-191) Furthermore, transparency of remaining palm oil can be guaranteed by the implementation of blockchain-technology; the system behind bit coins that gives the customer direct information of every step of the process through a peer-to-peer system.[[192]](#footnote-192) Above initiatives and opportunities deserve further research, as they have the potential to achieve fundamental change. The palm oil industry should be seen as a leading example for pressing environmental issues, for which more binding rules and innovative solutions are needed. A policy that finds a right balance between economic growth and sustainable development ànd adapts to disruptive ideas, is a challenge for every single national government when it comes to environmental governance. Therefore, an extensive collaboration between communities, science, the private and the public sector is essential to find and implement balanced and effective solutions.

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