
Gabon: Communities Facing OLAM's "Zero Deforestation" Pledges

What are the experiences of communities living inside or adjacent to the plantation areas of companies with "zero deforestation" pledges? How can these companies continue expanding without deforesting in densely forested countries?

"Zero deforestation" is one more idea in the list of voluntary initiatives created in the last 10-15 years to supposedly address the negative impacts of industrial agriculture commodity crops on forests. The name certainly gives the impression that companies committing to "zero deforestation" practices would stop cutting down and/or damaging forests. In the case of densely forested countries, the question then is, what loopholes have been created around the "zero deforestation" commitment to enable companies to continue expanding? How can oil palm, timber or soy plantation companies continue expanding without deforesting?

In September 2019, the Gabonese organization Muyissi Environnement and the World Rainforest Movement [wrote an article for the WRM bulletin exposing some of the tactics being used by the agribusiness company OLAM](#) to enable its business to continue while claiming "zero deforestation" practices. 89% of Gabon's territory is forest, and OLAM is currently Gabon's biggest industrial oil palm and rubber plantation company. It committed to "zero deforestation" in 2017 and it is viewed by the Gabonese government as a key corporate partner. The company reconfirmed its pledge when it declared in October 2019 that it was on track to have all its plantations certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in 2021. RSPO reinforced its criteria about deforestation in November 2018, adopting also a "zero deforestation" policy.

In spite of the striking volume of documents, policies, criteria, plans and recommendations about "zero deforestation", what is largely absent is information on the experiences of communities living inside or adjacent to the plantation areas of companies with "zero deforestation" pledges. In response to this, a field visit was carried out in April-May 2019 by Muyissi Environnement and the WRM in 18 villages in and around four concession areas used by OLAM in the province of Ngounié, Gabon. [A report has recently been published with the findings and analysis.](#)

Corporate Operations in Forest Areas with "Zero Deforestation"?

Three main tactics have been identified that are part of OLAM's "Zero Deforestation" strategy and which together create the conditions for OLAM to expand its plantations in Gabon:

— OLAM is in practice adopting **"Zero net deforestation"** practices. The word "net" is crucial to understand this loophole. It means that the total forest area within a given geography remains unchanged. This could be achieved by not destroying any more forest, but also by planting trees to compensate for any deforestation. In this way, a company can continue deforesting as long as it "restores" other "comparable" areas by planting trees. The idea of "zero net" is also at the heart of a mechanism called ["biodiversity offsetting"](#). However, it does not consider that each place is unique, has its own diversity, is rooted in a specific time and space, and coexists with and sustains the livelihoods of local communities. Hence, forests cannot be compared to or replaced by other forest

areas.

— OLAM emphasizes that “Zero Deforestation” is about **conserving and creating more High Conservation Value (HCV) forests, including “High Carbon Stock” forests**. Creating more HCV areas ignores the importance of these forests for local communities, which confront severe restrictions on using these areas and constant surveillance. One major impact frequently mentioned in the field visits is the growing number of restrictions and obstacles imposed on people, making it difficult for them to access their own territory. Villagers say that this started around 2015 when OLAM created the HCV areas inside village territories – these represent 50% of OLAM’s concession areas. It became worse, they say, from 2017 onwards, when OLAM adopted its “zero deforestation” policy. According to women from the Mboukou village, the guards supervising OLAM’s concession said: “this forest no longer belongs to you, it belongs to the State and we [OLAM] are the State!”

The communities visited did not report any significant destruction of forest areas by OLAM since the company committed to “zero deforestation” in 2017. They did, however, explain that OLAM has continued to expand its destruction of savannah areas in Lot 3 and in Lot Sotrader and that this is also putting their livelihoods at risk. The current RSPO rules allow destruction of vegetation types defined as “scrub” and “cleared/open land”– which includes the savannahs in Gabon - for industrial oil palm plantations, as these are not considered valuable enough to be protected. Conversely, researcher Boussou Bouassa G. revealed the importance of savannahs and stressed that the soil is a key water reservoir during dry seasons and the conservation of humidity allows for the fast re-growth of grassland, which is crucial for some fauna, such as the buffalo. Besides, women customarily use the savannahs to find and produce food.

— The Gabonese government (OLAM’s business partner) proposed in 2018 to **modify the forest definition in Gabon**, which would create a dangerous precedent. While the current definition, guided by [FAO’s forest definition](#), only considers tree coverage, the proposed definition would set a parameter of a minimum quantity of carbon that a forest area must contain. This would simply exclude secondary forests and those forests in a state of regeneration. OLAM could then convert those areas into plantations, claim “zero deforestation” and thus be able to maintain its RSPO certification. It would even allow the company to maintain its plans to obtain RSPO certification of all of its plantations.

In a press release from 2019, OLAM stated that “Our plantations are located only on areas of land that have been identified and mapped as grassland, secondary regrowth or degraded logging areas”. But communities living where OLAM is active in the Ngounié province claim that the company hired a logging company to cut the timber with commercial value inside the concessions, thus turning them into “degraded logging areas”. The revenues were shared among the logging company, the government and the communities. In the case of the communities, these revenues were shared in the form of community projects. After the logging, OLAM prepared the land to plant oil palm trees.

The Communities’ Voices: Surveillance, Pollution and Destruction of Water Basins and Livelihoods

When OLAM Palm Gabon arrived in the province of Ngounié in 2012, local consultations were carried out, but OLAM was able to strongly influence the process, knowing that the decision to implement the project was already taken by the Gabonese government - OLAM’s business partner.

During the consultations, communities were allowed to make a list of grievances, which resulted in “social contracts” signed by community chiefs from one particular lot or concession area and OLAM

Palm Gabon. In practice, these are projects that the company promised to carry out in exchange for the communities' territories, forests and savannahs.

Some of these projects were fulfilled. Others are still pending or are not functioning. A few examples: the dispensary in the Rembo community does not function because there is no staff or medicines available; the majority of the solar panels installed are defective; the water from the two water pumps in the Moutambe Sane Foumou village is undrinkable; and the list goes on.

OLAM has not even respected the sites identified as important for the communities' livelihood or for their sacred status, even though the company promised to respect them in the "social contracts". Villagers in Rembo, Doubou and Guidoma also report that the promised distances (buffer zones) between OLAM's plantations and important sites for the physical and cultural survival of communities have not been respected either.

Representatives of departmental and municipal authorities disclosed that the oil palm plantations are being imposed by the government and OLAM, and that there is little or nothing they could do about the problems that communities face. Remarkably, they also have no information about OLAM's project, not even an impact assessment.

Strangers in their own territories

For several years OLAM has been requesting people to carry a permit, issued by the company, for entering the concessions. Several villagers complain that they still do not have such permit and thus cannot access their own territory. And those that did get a permit complain that they can no longer pursue their activities inside their territory during OLAM's working hours (08:00-16:00), including fishing in the few lakes that remain.

Villagers of Kanana and Ferra are also forced to use the only road available – the one crossing OLAM's plantations. This road has a checkpoint controlled by OLAM. Only people with permits can pass. The guards also search people's bags. Even though the Gabonese forest code allows people to exercise their customary rights, including the right to hunt, one villager comments that: "if a security agent of OLAM finds you carrying something you hunted or tools used for fishing, they will confiscate the meat or expel us from the places we traditionally use to fish".

OLAM also has a damaging impact on the region's water basins, including rivers and lakes. According to one villager of the Nanga village, most of their lakes are now "closed off" to them. Women also complain about the water pollution caused by the run-off of agrotoxins as well as plantation workers defecating in the small lakes where women traditionally fish. They say that after OLAM workers finish applying the chemical products, they empty what's left into the lakes.

According to one woman from the village of Bounougoua, "the water is not good quality anymore, the body itches and we do not eat [the fish] any longer just like this; we prepare it by boiling it and when we fish, the fish [caught] has no flavour or a nice taste anymore, and this has been happening since OLAM's activities started on our lands".

In consequence, women need to walk longer distances to find drinkable water. To make things worse, the company now plans to irrigate its plantations due to the ever-longer dry periods that affect the region. In Bemboudie village, women complain that OLAM wants to set up irrigation reservoirs for its plantations along the Ovigui river, which flows through a dozen villages.

Above all, in the villages most impacted by OLAM's plantations, the only way to cultivate food is in small plots located around the houses. The soil is usually far less fertile than in the fields they used before OLAM arrived. A woman from Mboukou village, one of the most heavily affected communities, said: "All the forest has been destroyed; they built their accommodation facilities inside our forest and destroyed our lands". Women in Kanana and Sanga complain that if and when the crops mature, the harvested products rot more quickly. They attribute this to soil pollution.

Women. When everything changed...

Before OLAM arrived, women could find food and plants in the forest to care for the health of their families. The sale of products from their farming plots, along with what they hunted and gathered in the forests and savannahs, allowed people to keep their children in school. Children were also taught traditional activities. The forest and savannahs enabled villagers to reproduce the way of life on which they base their culture. The soil was fertile. Women note that they did not need a refrigerator because food was fresh and diverse.

After OLAM arrived, everything changed. Now, almost all the food is purchased. The food quality and diversity has drastically reduced to basically chicken, rice and canned food. Food prices are increasing, which makes things even more difficult. The money comes from those employed by OLAM, whose wages, according to the women, are miserable.

"Zero deforestation" pledges have facilitated the advance of industrial plantations over the savannahs, imposing more access restrictions on villagers, which in turn make traditional activities unfeasible. OLAM's industrial plantations onto savannahs infringes even more on the ability of families to sustain themselves and maintain their mode of living.

The major conservation NGOs, banks and consumers need to wake up to the loopholes that companies and their allies are creating to continue expanding their business and profits. Policies such as "zero deforestation" are often defended with arguments such as protecting tigers, elephants, gorillas and other animals. But when these policies hit the ground, they make communities more vulnerable. Peasant agriculture is blamed for deforestation, and thus, it is argued that these forest areas need to be protected. This takes the attention away from the fact that it is the companies in the first place that are driving large-scale forest destruction.

What is urgently needed is that communities get back the control over their territories. This is crucial to ensure that both, communities and the forest can survive, now and in the future.

[This is a summary of a publication recently released by Muyissi Environnement, Gabon, and WRM. Download the publication here.](#)