
Resistance Against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa

Communities in West and Central Africa are facing the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations. With the false promise of bringing 'development', corporations, backed up with government support, have been granted millions of hectares of land for this expansion. This article highlights four current struggles that reclaim their lands back.

For many decades, communities in West and Central Africa have been facing industrial oil palm plantations encroaching onto their community land. With the false promise of bringing 'development' and jobs, corporations, backed up by the support of the governments, have been granted millions of hectares of land under concessions for industrial oil palm plantations.

The results of this expansion have been disastrous for communities living in and around these industrial plantations and, in particular, for women.

In response, grassroots organisations and community leaders from across the region have been organizing, mobilizing, raising their voices, and networking among each other to stop this destructive and violent occupation of their land. At the heart of these struggles is the community desire to get their lands back. Exchanges with community activists involved in similar struggles helps to break the isolation and make visible the extent of violence that communities often face when confronting a multinational company and government armed forces.

This article highlights four specific community struggles: communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo against PHC-Feronia (which recently changed owners to KKM), in Gabon against Olam Company, in Cameroon against Socapalm (which is owned by Socfin) and in Nigeria against Okomu Oil Palm Company (which is also owned by Socfin).

PHC-Feronia/KNM in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Villagers arrested after peaceful protests must be released immediately and those responsible for yet another brutal death at Feronia-PHC's oil palm plantations must be held to account.

A peaceful community protest on February 13 in the town of Lokutu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for the palm oil company PHC to respect their rights, was met with brutal violence by company security guards and police. At least 17 people have been arrested at different locations following the protests. Some have been brutally beaten and tortured by PHC security guards. (1) A young man, Blaise Mokwe, died on February 21 of the injuries he suffered when he was beaten and tortured a few days earlier by PHC security guards following a false accusation of theft of oil palm nuts. (2)

This latest escalation of conflicts happened while one of the new owners of the company, Kalaa Mpinga and a new company called Feronia KNM, have been bringing potential foreign investors to the plantations, in the middle of a global pandemic. Villagers from the community of Mwingi took part

in the peaceful protest. The President of the Civil Society in Basoko, the district in which the community of Mwingi is located explains, "When the plane arrived, we took the banners there and the next day we presented them in town and then we tried to talk to them about the social clauses that the company had signed with the communities in Kisangani in the presence of the Governor. We wanted to tell them that nothing had been done so far." (1) PHC's oil palm plantations occupy a large portion of the community land in Mwingi.

At Mwando, also in the Lokutu area, communities are tired of waiting for the company to fulfil promises that have been made and broken too many times throughout the more than 100 year of occupation of communities' ancestral land by PHC. A community mill to process oil palm fruits harvested from plantations abandoned by PHC has been set up by the community. "With access to these lands, we are able to resume our palm oil production, which was violently interrupted with colonisation", a member of the operation's management team said.

European development banks have propped up the colonial-era plantation company with more than US\$ 150 million since 2013. As a recent report points out, the investment in Feronia-PHC is certainly not the only disastrous investment in agriculture by European development banks - but the Feronia debacle must be the last. European development banks must respect communities' demands for restitution of their ancestral land. (2) They must also live up to the responsibility that comes with their investment and ensure the villagers arrested after demanding that the company respect their rights, be freed immediately and those responsible for the brutal death of Blaise Mokwe be held to account.

(1) RIAO-RDC (2021). Interview with Gilbert Lokombu Limela, President of the Civil Society of Basoko (Lokutu side). [Available here](#).

(2) Objectiv Vert TV programme with interviews from community members in four of the villages affected by the recent company violence against the communities [available here](#).

(3) RIAO-RDC and others (2021). [Development finance as agro-colonialism: European development bank funding of Feronia-PHC oil palm plantations in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#).

Olam in Gabon

Let's save the Pépéyo community! (Sauvons Pépéyo)

In 2012, the Gabonese government gave a concession of 35,000 hectares to the Singapore-based company OLAM to set up its first industrial oil palm plantations in the province of Ngounie in Gabon, destroying more than 10,000 hectares of forests. The existence of the community of Pépéyo, and many others, was ignored and it was completely fenced in by the oil palm plantations. The Pépéyo community was also excluded from the so-called social contract that OLAM signed with communities, with the support of the Gabonese authorities.

The fact that Pépéyo did not exist for OLAM led to a situation where the community had to face even more impacts than other communities in the area. For example, the profanation and destruction of tombs, obstruction of roads, drying up of rivers used by the community and banning of agricultural activities. Pépéyo became invisible, non-existing and doomed to disappear in the middle of OLAM's monoculture of oil palms. To access their community, inhabitants of Pépéyo are obliged to use an identity card issued by OLAM.

The concession documents may claim that Pépéyo does not exist. But Pépéyo exists. The community has resisted and its inhabitants are writing a new chapter in their resistance story. In

October 2020, villagers from Pépéyo gathered in Mouila, the capital of the province, to discuss strategies of how to advance in the recovering of their lands and to prevent what OLAM would like to see happen: that the villagers give up and abandon their houses and lands. After a fruitful discussion, the villagers discussed a list of actions and demands to work on in the coming period, including to be recognized as a community by OLAM and the authorities; to get free access to their land; and, above all, to get at least a part of their lands back under their control.

Source: *Rapport de la Journée Internationale de lutte contre les monocultures d'arbres célébrée en différé le 30 octobre 2020 dans le département de la Douya Onoye, Province de la Ngounie autour de la thématique « Sauvons Pepeyó » 2020.*

Socapalm (Socfin) in Cameroon

Women generating income while continuing the struggle to reclaim their land, and with the land, their food sovereignty.

In Cameroon, the industrial oil palm plantations from Socapalm, a company owned by the multinational Socfin, have led to situations where women are not able to feed their families. Conditions are extreme. Children sometimes risk entering the company's plantation to collect oil palm nuts left on the ground. If they are caught, they risk being sent to jail. Women and girls are at risk of being raped, sexually abused and harassed. They have to walk long distances to find places to grow food or to collect water or firewood. The State police and company security guards frequently accuse villagers of stealing palm nuts from the plantations. They enter people's houses to search for palm fruit or traditionally processed oil. If they find even only one bottle of oil, people are sent to jail.

The traditional processing of palm nuts to make oil has always been an important source of income for the women who sell the oil and other by-products at the local markets. One main pillar of the women's resistance in Cameroon against the industrial plantations has been focused on reclaiming the traditional knowledge of processing the palm oil as well as of the many benefits that women obtain from the palm trees. On many occasions, women shared that the use of the palm tree is very important to them because, besides being an income generating activity, it helps to build self-respect and a family and community life.

Because industrial oil palm plantations have destroyed most oil palm groves, and with this, an important source of income for women, processing cassava is one of the few options women have to generate some income. Sometimes, there is not even enough land available for women to plant cassava close to the villages. They may have to buy cassava in villages further away from the plantations because they have no land left to cultivate. And what is worse, with the Covid-19 pandemic, cassava has become less available and overpriced.

In this context, and against all odds, the grassroots Cameroonian organization RADD facilitated support for women living near these industrial plantations to develop income-generating activities. Processing cassava enables women to support their families while continuing the struggle to reclaim their land, and with the land, their food sovereignty.

Okomu Oil Palm Company (Socfin) in Nigeria

Socfin and its subsidiary Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC violations in Edo State Communities

In Nigeria, communities affected by the Okomu Oil Palm Company, a subsidiary of the French-

Belgian Socfin group (whose co-owner Bolloré was recently convicted of corruption in French courts in relation with investments in Togo and Guinea), held a peaceful protest in January 2021, denouncing land grabbing, river pollution and harassment by military forces that they believe are serving the company. They accuse the company of using military personnel to block the only road that links them to Udo, the closest town. They also accused the Edo State Government of enslaving them on their ancestral land by selling the whole land where they farm to the company, which means they have nowhere to farm on their own land. (1)

Villagers carried banners with demands such as: “Government, tell Okomu Oil Company to open our road”, “Okomu Oil Company give us our fishing traps that are with you”; “Stop polluting our stream with your agrochemicals, it is our only source of drinking water”; “We are not terrorists, Stop harassing us with military, Okomu Oil.”

A villager speaking at a press conference held after the protests stated that “The company has locked up the existing road, [which existed] before the company was founded. Since 2019, the road has been under lock and today it has been locked. They used Covid-19 as an excuse to finally lock up the road with lockdown excuse. The alternative road is bad.”

This is not recent news. Many complaints and protests have been carried out over the years since Okomu Oil Palm Company was established in Nigeria in the mid 1970s. Accusations against this company range from locking out citizens from their communities by putting up gates along the only access road, to harassment of people speaking out against the injustice and harassment, land grabbing, destruction of livelihoods, use of brutal force, displacement and eviction of villages and settlements within their areas of operation. In the past years alone, the company’s security forces, in collaboration with the Nigerian Army, have burned down and displaced the villages of Agbede, Oweike, Lehmon and, recently on May, 2020, the village of Ijaw-Gbene, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. (2)

(1) Nigerian Tribune, [Okomu Oil Palm host communities protest marginalisation, water pollution](#), 2021

(2) Farmlandgrab, [SOCFIN and her subsidiary Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC rights violations in Edo State Communities/Villages: An S.O.S.](#), 2020