
Cameroon: Major impacts of oil palm agribusiness on food sovereignty and livelihoods

In a context of massive land concessions in the country over the last five years - be it the expansion of existing plantations or the granting of new land concessions for palm oil or rubber - the US based company Herakles Farms, through its local subsidiary SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon PLC (SGSOC), plans to establish a large-scale industrial oil palm plantation and a palm oil refinery. Both projects would be established in an area covered by rainforest and surrounded by two national parks, a forest reserve and a wildlife sanctuary.

On September 17th, 2009 SGSOC signed a contract with the Cameroonian Government which granted the company the rights to 73,086 Hectares of land in the Ndian and Kupe-Manenguba Divisions of Southwest Cameroon through a 99-year land lease. The South-West region is already largely covered with palm tree plantations; roads and houses are surrounded by palm trees.

In 2012, the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim (RELUF), carried out a research (1) on the Herakles/SGSOC's deal and found that the project is exceedingly beneficial to the company: the contract exempts it from paying all export duties and certain social security payments for the 99 years of the project as well as all taxes for a 10-year period to begin when production equals 10 tons of palm fruit bunches on at least 3,000 ha – which leads to SGSOC paying a surface rental fee as little as US\$0.50 to US\$1.00 per hectare per year.

The Herakles project claims it only plans to use 'degraded' land and 'secondary forest' but the company has already built a road deep into the forest – a 3km road near Talangaye clearing out tropical rainforest to set up its plantation in the Bakossi National Park - a reserve area -, without any authorization from the Ministry of Forestry. As a consequence, SGSC was summoned and its equipment was impounded.

The Oakland Institute has also produced a report (2) and a video (3) revealing the impacts already being felt by many small farmers whose land may be taken away by the project, in a country where agricultural production employs 70% of the population. Throughout the villages within the concession [south-west region], farmers are opposed to the Herakles Farms project mainly because many of these families will soon be left with no land to farm if Herakles Farms is allowed to move forward with its plans.

Although the license does not grant the company the right to start operations, SGSOC functions as if it can and has started making demarcations for its plantation without the knowledge or approval of traditional land owners. The farmers tell: "They entered into the forest without the knowledge of the village ... and they demarcated the area". "We want them to go away and leave us alone". "We don't need them, we are fine". "We will fight and we will die for our land".

The company has created nurseries in 3 locations, and now some villagers regret it: “I have to say that we made a big mistake when we let the company set up its nursery in our village. But the company told us if we give it land for its nursery it will build us houses; it will bring light and water; it will build us a hospital. But since then, nothing has been done inside the village”, says one of the small farmers.

One of SGSOC’s main arguments behind claims that they will bring economic development to the area is that they will create 7,500 new jobs during the duration of the project. But in fact, independent farmers have the potential to make four times as much when managing their own land and growing different crops sold on local markets than they do working for an agro-industrial company. Most of small farmers grow diverse crops – millet, cocoa, cassava, kola nuts, bush mango, beans, rice, fruits and even oil palms either individually or in co-operatives. Hunting, fishing and collecting forest products, including wild food, and medicinal plants as well as fuel wood are common activities in the area. Indeed, the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) carried out has recognized that the massive use of chemicals typically used in such a large plantation constitutes a major threat to water sources in the area, and to the fish population as well as to the supply of safe drinking water. The ESIA indicates that the negative impact of the industrial oil palm plantation on livelihoods will be “major” and “long-term.”

“Everybody here is self-employed. We have the cocoa farms;” “We don’t need palm, - individuals have their own palms enough,” express many of the people interviewed in the video. The agro-diversity allows them to build their own food sovereignty: “We have everything in our village: cassava, cocoa farm, palm oil, mace, bush mango that we sell; kola nuts, bita kola. We don’t have only one thing in our land, we have so many things that give us money, so we don’t need people to come and disturb us. ... We are not suffering. Then why should you [SGSOC] say we are hungry? We don’t need you [SGSOC].”

The Herakles/SGSOC case in Cameroon is part of the massive land-grabbing by investors that in a little less than one year snatched up around 56 million hectares of land, 29 million of which are located on the African continent, south of the Sahara. CED’s and The Oakland Institute’s reports and video illustrate the problems communities, environment, and the entire country are exposed to when large agro-industrial plantations are developed.

As the president of Nature Cameroon says: “We have to concern: what should be the livelihood of the people ... if we have to give out 70.000 hectares of land to a single individual, as a company? What land is left for the communities?”

Article based on the following reports: (1) “Herakles’ 13th Labour? A Study of SGSOC’s Land Concession in South-West Cameroon”, Samuel Nguiffo and Brendan Schwartz, Centre pour l’Environnement et le Développement (CED):

<http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2012/02/herakles-13th-labour-english.pdf> ;

(2) “Understanding Land Investment Deals In Africa Massive Deforestation Portrayed As Sustainable Development: The Deceit Of Herakles Farms In Cameroon Land Deal Brief”, September 2012, The Oakland Institute:

http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/Land_deal_brief_herakles.pdf ; (3) The Herakles Debacle, video produced by The Oakland Institute,

