
[Gabon: New study warns of impacts of the expansion of oil palm and rubber tree plantations](#)

Tropical rainforests cover 85% of the total land area in Gabon. They are home to an immense diversity of species, on which some 300,000 people depend for their survival, through hunting, gathering, fishing and small farming.

The expansion of oil palm and rubber tree plantations and the companies involved Under the “Strategic Plan for an Emerging Gabon” (Plan Stratégique Gabon Emergent, PSGE) of the President, the government aims to foster export agriculture by promoting plantations operated both by private companies and by communities, known as “community plantations”. The Plan specifically mentions two companies that will develop oil palm and rubber tree plantations: Olam and SIAT Gabon.

According to the scant information that is publicly available, Olam has already been granted the rights to the use of 87,274 hectares of land for a period of 50 years, which can be extended, under an agreement that encompasses a total area of 300,000 hectares. The company is currently operating in the provinces of Estuaire (through the Awala oil palm project), Ngounié (the Mouila oil palm project) and Woleu-Ntem (the Bitam/Minvoul rubber plantation project).

Olam states that its goal is to contribute to the country’s long-term development by generating hard currency revenues through exports and creating employment, while taking into account the concerns of local communities. To this end, it claims that it implements the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). This is also one of the criteria for certification by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a controversial “green seal of approval” scheme in which Olam participates.

SIAT Gabon has oil palm plantations in the province of Moyen-Ogooué (the Makouké plantations in the Lambaréné region), and rubber tree plantations in the provinces of Estuaire (in Kango), Woleu-Ntem (in Bitam and Minvoul) and Nyanga (the Tchibanga estate). SIAT hopes to receive RSPO certification in 2013. SIAT Gabon’s four concessions cover a total of 15,712 hectares, and the company has recently initiated an expansion process.

SIAT states that it has carried out consultations with the local communities affected by its operations, and has pledged to provide support for small oil palm producers to ensure their own production, as well as adopting measures to mitigate the impacts of its plantations.

Under the terms of a presidential decree passed in 2005, these companies are required to conduct environmental impact assessments (EIAs). Olam has already received approval for the EIAs submitted for its projects in Awala and Mouila, while EIAs for all of SIAT’s projects have been given the green light. However, these approvals have been the subject of considerable criticism and doubts.

Above all, the government’s Directorate General of the Environment has still not fully created the conditions for the adequate monitoring and evaluation of these assessments. As a result, the

approval of the EIAs has been a largely informal process.

The local population in the areas affected by the plantations as well as other interested parties have not been informed of the terms and conditions of the agreements signed between the government and Olam. As a result, the benefits and obligations established for the company are unknown, which is also true in the case of the agreements signed with SIAT.

What is known is that the lands where Olam is operating were chosen by the company itself. This is a highly questionable practice, because, in theory, land concessions do not grant this right to the company involved. However, in the case of Olam, the state is a partner in the project, and this even includes the Presidency of the Republic. As a result, the local population is extremely cautious when it comes to discussing the project or opposing it in any way. On more than one occasion, community members stated, “Olam is the Presidency of the Republic,” while high-level government authorities affirmed, “Olam is the President’s project.”

Nevertheless, in some of the regions and communities visited that will be significantly affected by the plantation projects, there were local residents who were not afraid to voice their dissatisfaction, doubts and criticisms.

In general terms, the communities do not have the guaranteed right to the use of their lands, as stipulated by Law 16/01 of 2001, and this results in insecure land tenure. Bureaucracy and a lack of awareness among the population of their rights, even when they have been living in a certain area for many generations, create a situation where the expansion of oil palm and rubber tree plantations leads to a reduction in the size of their territories. For example, all of the communities complain that the buffer zone of five kilometres between the plantations and their communities is insufficient. Some have requested a greater distance, of seven kilometres, while others have proposed that the companies seek out other regions for their projects.

In all of the “consultations” held regarding the oil palm and rubber tree plantation projects, the communities expressed the collective will to guarantee their right to their territories. When the government grants land concessions without precisely delimiting those lands, it leads to heightened insecurity and conflicts with communities.

Gabon My Land, My Right

An important initiative to support the process of regularization of land tenure for local communities is “Gabon Ma Terre, Ma Droit” (Gabon My Land, My Right, www.gabonmaterre.com). This joint initiative involving approximately 20 NGOs works with local communities in a number of regions of the country to help them exercise their rights to their lands and achieve secure tenure over them.

Food sovereignty

The expansion of large-scale plantations will further aggravate the food insecurity already suffered by the general population, whether as a result of the loss of land and deforestation, or due to the fact that when farmers go to work for the oil palm and rubber tree plantation companies, their fields are not properly maintained. A resident of Doubou in the region of Mouila said: “This forest allows us to survive and we do not want to share it. If we cannot plant food, fish or hunt, how are we going to survive?” The decrease in food production threatens the food sovereignty of the population of a

country that currently needs to import most of its food.

In addition, local communities are also concerned over access to water in the future. Although water is, in principle, a public good, they are greatly worried by the growing private ownership of lands and forests, deforestation, and the expansion of rubber tree and oil palm plantations, and the potential impacts of these on the water supply.

Final considerations and warnings

Based on the impacts and reactions reported with regard to the still recent process of the expansion of oil palm and rubber tree plantations in numerous regions of Gabon, the following considerations and warnings emerge:

* The importance of popular organization

The communities in the regions affected have traditionally not been organized in associations or cooperatives. However, faced with the threat that these plantations pose to them, the local population is organizing, as they view this as a fundamental step that they must take in order to defend their rights. Among the different organizations that are emerging, agricultural associations are the most prevalent, and most of these are cooperatives led and made up by women.

* The importance of knowing their rights

There is growing awareness among local communities of the importance of knowing their rights, such as, for example, their right to their territories, but other rights as well. It is only by knowing their rights that they will be able to fight for them and to challenge the legality of the actions of Olam and SIAT Gabon. In addition, when the companies meet with local communities, it is important for the communities to ensure that minutes are taken during every meeting held.

* The right to the use of their territory

It is crucial that rapid advances be made in the recognition of the rights of communities to the use of their land, to avoid the risk of them losing their territories to agro-industrial projects and other projects being established in Gabon. This will require greater commitment from the government to the fulfilment of this demand of the rural population and to the ratification of international agreements that are fundamental for the protection of the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples, such as ILO Convention 169.

- The right to food sovereignty and incentives for agricultural production

Greater support must be given to the agricultural activities of the population. This would include effective implementation of Law 022 of 2008, which emphasizes “the production of high-quality and diversified food and non-food agricultural goods, which respond to the needs of domestic markets”, “the organization of marketing channels”, and “the creation of favourable conditions for the financing of agriculture and livestock raising and for access to land ownership”.

* The right to information and properly conducted impact assessments

It is essential for communities to have access to all pertinent information on agro-industrial projects planned for their areas. Environmental impact assessments must be conducted impartially and transparently. The community has a right to participate in the monitoring and evaluation of these assessments.

And finally, the right to free, prior and informed consent, which Olam and SIAT Gabon claim to be

respecting through the consultations they have conducted, must be implemented in all seriousness. This not only means informing the community about projects in a fully transparent manner, but also giving them the right to say yes or no to projects planned for their territories and forests, on which they depend for their future.

(1) Franck Ndjimbi, 2013. Etude sur l'impact des plantations agro-industrielles de palmiers à huile et d'hévéa sur les populations du Gabon (Study on the impacts of agro-industrial oil palm and rubber tree plantations on local populations in Gabon). Brainforest, with the collaboration of FERN and WRM.