
[DRC: Communities mobilise to free themselves from a hundred years of colonial oil palm plantations](#)

Oil palms are native to the forests of Central and West Africa and inseparable from the region's peoples and their cultures. Communities in this part of the world have relied on oil palms for thousands of years— as a source of food, textiles, medicines and construction materials.

Most of the world's oil palms, however, are cultivated far away, in Southeast Asia, and not in forested palm groves, but on massive monoculture plantations where tropical forests used to stand. These oil palm plantations are a product of Europe's brutal colonial legacy.

When the European colonizers invaded Central and West Africa during the nineteenth century, they came to understand (in a very narrow way) the possible wealth that could be generated from oil palm cultivation. They began taking over the local people's large oil palm groves and tearing down forests to set up plantations. One of the pioneers of this effort was Britain's Lord Leverhulme, who, through a campaign of terror against the local people, took over community palm groves and turned vast swathes of the Congo's forests into slave plantations. His company's oil palm plantations would eventually expand throughout West and Central Africa and then to Southeast Asia, and provide the foundation for the multinational corporation Unilever, one of the world's largest food companies. Unilever sold off its global oil palm plantations about a decade ago but to this day it remains one of the world's biggest buyers of palm oil.

The communities living next to and within Unilever's former plantations are amongst the poorest in Africa. At a recent gathering of leaders from African communities struggling against the expansion of oil palm plantations, held in Mundemba, Cameroon, participants on a field visit were shocked by the living conditions of the people in Ndian Town— a community within one of Unilever's former oil palm plantations in Cameroon, now run by the Cameroonian company Pamol (1). Decades of oil palm plantations had brought only poverty to the community.

The lands of Unilever's plantations across the Congo Basin have not been returned to their inhabitants. They have instead been sold at a profit to a new batch of companies: some of them domestic, most of them foreign; some of them multinationals with plantations in other countries; some from other business sectors having no experience with plantations. The latter is the case with some of Unilever's original oil palm plantations— in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

After 100 years in what is now the DRC, Unilever sold three of its oil palm plantations in 2008 to a company called Feronia, registered until recently in the Cayman Islands. This company, listed on the Stock Exchange in Toronto, Canada and now majority owned by European development funds, had no previous experience in agriculture. Through its sale of these DRC plantations, Unilever made around USD 14 million dollars in cash and left behind around USD 10 million dollars in liabilities to the new owners.

In October 2015, 12 leaders from communities located within the various concessions of Equateur

and Oriental provinces in DRC where Feronia operates its plantations (Yahuma, Boteka, Basoko, Yaligimba, Yalifombo, Mosité, Lokutu) gathered in Kampala, Uganda, to share experiences and chart a course of common action to liberate their communities from the occupation and exploitation that they have endured for generations. The meeting was held in Kampala for security reasons.

It was also a moment for the Congolese NGO RIAO-RDC and its international partners to provide the communities with information about Feronia that they were not aware of. Prior to the meeting, Feronia and its main shareholder, the UK development finance institution CDC, had issued statements maintaining that Feronia was improving the lives of workers and the local communities and that it was in full compliance with national and international laws and standards with regards to its land concessions and labour practices. (2)

The community leaders were outraged by the claims made by the company and the CDC. After having shared their experiences, they issued a collective statement to make clear the reality in their communities. The leaders rejected the claims made by Feronia and the CDC, dismissing them as “lies”. They said that the situation for the communities had deteriorated since Feronia took over the plantations in 2008. Their homes, schools, clinics and roads were in awful condition, and contrary to what the company maintains, no new infrastructure or worker homes have been built.

The CDC claimed that the average salaries of plantation workers were increased to US\$4 per day, but the leaders say that workers are frequently not paid at all and when they are it's only at a rate of US\$1.5 per day. In response to the company's claim that workers were receiving “bonuses”, the leaders said that this must be a newly invented word, since the concept was unknown on Feronia's plantations.

The leaders challenged the CDC to come see for itself what Feronia has been doing to local people. “The money that you give to Feronia does not reach the workers and the local communities,” they stated.

What the leaders say the communities want, more than anything, is to get their lands back from the company. They have suffered long enough, and they are tired of false promises.

At the close of the meeting, the leaders established a new alliance of communities affected by Feronia, and pledged to work together to advance their demands.

In January 2016, Feronia became majority owned by the CDC and several European development banks, through their investments in the African Agricultural Fund. This Fund is a Mauritius-based private equity fund financed by bilateral and multilateral African development finance institutions. Its Technical Assistance Facility (TAF) is funded primarily by “the European Commission and managed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The TAF is co-sponsored by the Italian Development Corporation, United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)”. In addition, development banks from Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands are also involved as investors (3).

Colonialism has come full circle, and once again this exploitation is being justified as “development”, as if the horrors of the colonial plantation system never existed. If European governments are really interested in making amends, they should focus on reparations and support the communities in their demand to bring the occupation of their territories to an end and ensure expiry of concessions in the near future is used to hand the land back to the communities.

RIAO-RDC and GRAIN

(1) Link to statement: <https://www.grain.org/e/5426>

(2) <http://business-humanrights.org/en/dem-rep-of-congo-report-raises-concerns-about-land-grabs-inadequate-consultations-compensation-by-feronia-unilever>

(3) http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578007/EXPO_STU%282016%29578007_EN.pdf (pages 20, 21)