
SOCFIN's plantations in Africa: many places of violence and destruction

Photo: SOCFIN

In 2016, the multinational agro-industrial SOCFIN Group - controlled by the Belgian Fabri family (50.2 per cent of the shares) and the French Bolloré group (39 per cent of the shares) -, announced its so-called "responsible management" policy. (1) This policy refers to strict environmental standards, respect for human rights, transparency, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification, good management, among many others. But these are hollow words when they do not represent transparent, responsible and respectful practices towards the communities living in and around the plantation areas, which experience daily the real behaviour of the company.

This article looks at what is happening on the ground in some of the countries where SOCFIN promotes its rubber and oil palm plantations. It reveals the large gap between its so-called "responsible management" policy and the reality of violence and destruction around those plantations, which, with the complicity of national governments, attempt to suppress people's resistance.

Nigeria

Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC is a Nigerian industrial oil palm and rubber plantation company. Okomu was founded in 1976 as a state company, but SOCFIN acquired part of the company in 1990 and now owns 63 per cent of the shares. In 1998, at least four villages were forcefully destroyed and the inhabitants evicted, with their houses, properties and farmland taken over by the company. The four villages are Owieke with 25 houses, Agbede with 31 houses, Lemon with 15 houses and Ijawgbini with 7 houses. A state investigation accused villagers of being illegal occupiers even though the same report recognized that they were already on those lands before the area was made a Forest Reserve in 1912. Besides, a forest ordinance of 1935 also affirmed the existence of these villages before that year.

In 2010, another village, Makilolo, was to be evicted, but the people resisted Okomu's plans. In response, the village was locked-in by the company's security forces, cutting off any access with the outside world as an arm-twisting strategy. The company aimed to, first, gain support from the other villages to the eviction of Makilolo for more than three months (from November 17, 2010 to February 25, 2011) and, secondly, attempt to force Makilolo headship to sign an agreement with the company stating that the village is an illegal occupier on the company's property. At the end, the company managed to get an agreement signed, but only with a small group of people and not Makilolo Community members.

The agreement states that "Okomu Oil Palm Company is the legal owner of all land currently being used or occupied by occupants of Makilolo (...) and all occupants of Makilolo agreed that they are not the legal owners of the land and have no title or hold on the land (...) Notwithstanding the fact that Okomu Oil Palm Company is the legal owner, and holds all rights and title, according to Nigerian Law, it shall permit the occupants of Makilolo to remain and to carry out their daily tasks on the land

defined herein". However, the company only left 50 acres [around 20 hectares] as a "donation" for the community and, on top of this, imposed restrictions over its use, such as limiting the right to plant food crops. Furthermore, the river on which the village depended for its water supply became contaminated with agrottoxins used in oil palm plantations. (2)

In 2015, the Edo State Government, under former Governor Adams Oshiomhole, ordered the revocation of those land deals involving the company because of their shadiness. The decision was published in the Edo State Gazette on November 5, 2015. The revocation order covers about 13,750 hectares spread through Okomu forest Reserves to Owan Forest Reserve, covering Ovia North East, Uhunmwode and Owan Local Government Areas.

But until now, Okomu has disregarded the Edo State Government's Revocation Order. Instead, the company has militarized the communities' areas and, under military shield, embarked on a continuous bulldozing of the forest for the expansion of their oil palm plantations. As a result, over 20 thousand peasant and forest-dependent communities have been displaced. Okomu village, Agbede, Ik camp, Makilolo, Lemo, Oweike, Avbiosi, Sobe, Uhiere, Owan, Ugbebezi, Oke-Ora, Ekpan, Oke, Atorumu, Ogbetu, Umokpe, Orhua, Ozalla, Sabo, Odiguetue, Agudezi, Uhunmora, Uzeba and Odighi are some of the communities directly impacted. (3)

On June, 21, 2017, in spite of several attempts at intimidation by security forces, oil palm impacted communities, peasants, women and civil society groups such as ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, organised a massive protest against the complicity of the present Edo State Governor Obaseki with Okomu's activities.

Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, SOCFIN arrived in 2011, promising jobs and scholarships to the people of Malen Chiefdom in Pujehun District, Southern Province. But instead, they imposed payments on landowners and took land on which the local people depend. As crop compensation for the oil palm plantations (palm trees and land) that the communities lost, SOCFIN paid the amount of 200 US dollars per acre [around half a hectare] for a period of 50 years. SOCFIN also pays an Annual Lease Rent of 5 US dollars per acre, 50 per cent of which goes to the land owners and the rest is paid to local authorities and the central government. These amounts are ridiculous, considering that families could earn over 200 US dollars per acre per year by working on their land. The few community members that could get jobs in the company are paid very little.

SOCFIN wanted to relocate some communities, but people resisted. In 2011, the Malen Land Owners and Users Organisation (MALOA) was created, after 40 landowners were arrested by the local police during a protest against SOCFIN activities. Since then, members of MALOA have suffered constant intimidation, including arrests. At least five criminal cases have been filed against MALOA leaders and members, including six MALOA leaders in 2013 and eleven members in 2015. In all cases, the MALOA members were detained for several days, and sometimes for weeks, without trial. On 4th February 2016, the six MALOA leaders were sentenced and given a fine of around 35 thousand US dollars. The draconian fine was paid through an international fundraising drive. In July 2017, the eleven MALOA members were fined 27 US dollars each.

In 2015, MALOA registered about two thousand people from the area as members, but the registration process came to a halt when seven MALOA members, including members in charge of process, were arrested in September 2015 for "writing down names of people" without the knowledge of local authorities. In March 2017, the Chief of Staff in the President's Office contacted

MALOA declaring that he had a mandate from the President to open a dialogue between SOCFIN and the communities, but some of the mediators and contact people he proposed are on record for criticizing MALOA and other organisations opposing SOCFIN, which was unacceptable for MALOA. Since then, the Chief of Staff has held two meetings with representatives of MALOA but the political will needed to advance the dialogue seems to be absent, so the dialogue is yet to take off.

Women members of MALOA complain that the working conditions in SOCFIN's plantations are bad, especially for them. One worker, a mother, declared that she has to leave her home at 04:30 in the morning to go to work, while her children are left malnourished. She complains that before SOCFIN came in, she could feed her children with the food she produced on her field, and with that income she could pay the school fees. Now, the money she earns from working on SOCFIN's plantations is too little to pay the school fees. Besides, her very absence from home and thus the lack of attention for her children has created other problems. Women also suffer from violence, abuses and arrests. A pregnant woman was arrested on the allegation of "stealing" oil palm fruits from the company.

MALOA members have organized sit-ins and demand a review of the concession agreement as well as an independent investigation of their claims. They also demand the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report on the Environmental Protection Agency-sanctioned investigation of the contamination of the Malen River by chemicals used by SOCFIN. They also want the return of some farmland and proper compensation for their lands and crops, as that would mean a small improvement of their current situation. However, they know that without their lands, the situation will never be the same and therefore they will continue the struggle until they get their lands back.

Liberia

In Liberia, SOCFIN has been operating since 1983. Through its two subsidiaries, Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC) and Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC), it has managed to gain access to almost 130 thousand hectares through land concessions, of which more than 18 thousand hectares are for rubber tree plantations (4).

Communities in and around the plantations suffer extreme poverty. In May 2006, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) published a report that described the dire human rights situation on the plantations: child workers under the age of 14, widespread use of sub-contracting, the use of carcinogenic products, the quashing of trade unions, arbitrary dismissals, connections with private militias, and the eviction of peasants obstructing the expansion of the plantation area.

The testimony of a woman from a community affected by one of Salala's rubber plantations shows the dire situation they are facing: "I grew up in a town that was given by my forefathers. We used to have free movement in our communities. We had plentiful land, which was used for agriculture activities, forests for hunting and collecting medicinal plants and rivers for fishing. One sunny day in 2010, while we were in our town, we saw a group of men with cutlasses, axes, and other working tools, walking towards us. When they arrived, we asked them why they were here. They answered that the land we are occupying was bought by the Salala rubber company long time ago from the government. That statement was totally strange to our ears because this land is where we were born, grew up and had our kids; how then can it be from the company. They then told us that the clearing of our town was going to happen the next day because the company was ready to start its operations.

The night after their visit, they came while we were sleeping with the police and yellow machines. The

yellow machines started breaking down the trees (rubber, coffee, cocoa, plantain, orange, etc.) surrounding the town and destroying our water sources. It was the sound of the machines that woke up the members of the town. People started crying and left without any of their belongings. Each went his or her own separate way to find a new place where to start a new life, so the community is no longer together and we are landless. We had children as little as one month old and we had to walk two to three hours to reach the closest town. During our long journey we had nothing to eat or water to drink. We went through so much pain with our legs and feet swollen. We arrived to the nearby town having no clue where we could sleep for the night. For many months, we slept on the floor of an old abandoned kitchen. Other towns around the company operations also had similar experiences or even worse.

The SOCFIN Company destroyed all our farms we labored for, destroyed my parents grave site, destroyed our fruit trees, our cultural sites and sacred sites, our traditional schools for girls and boys. The company also destroyed our healing site for sneak bites and damaged the women sacred site for giving birth.

We have now become beggars because of the damage they created in our lives. We rent a small piece of land for planting crops for survival from landowners in our new town. The chemicals used in the rubber plantations have also infected the river used by the members of the new town. Our water source is swamp. We open holes in the morning and water comes out. The water from the swamp hole is not clean but we have to use it for drinking and other water related activities. We do not want to die from the chemical polluted water.

We, the women, our old enough children and men have no jobs. Children have to stay home and do not go to school due to the lack of a school in the community. There are no health facilities, so we have had many deaths for common sicknesses, not to mention the death of pregnant women and their unborn babies. I have a family of five including my blind father. I am now involved in general labor jobs which involves brushing, weeding, scratching, planting rice, etc. I work from one farm to another doing any job assigned to me and receive one dollar for working all day, which is used to provide food for my five member family. I have nothing else to do that could help improve my standard of living”.

(The identity of this woman is kept anonymous for security reasons)

Cameroon

In Cameroon, the government created SOCAPALM in 1968, a national oil palm company that was privatized in 2000 and sold to the SOCFIN Group. In 2005, the state secured communities 20 thousand hectares of land, however, failed to inform communities about SOCFIN purchase agreement. Only in 2008, community members discovered that in spite of the privatization, community rights were secured in the contract between SOCFIN and the state of Cameroon. Nonetheless, the company continues to promote and expand oil palm plantations on land that belongs to the communities, paying no rent or compensation for it.

In 2010, community people living inside SOCFIN’s plantation areas formed “The National Association of Peasant and River Populations of Cameroon” (SYNAPARCAM), an organization that brings together members from six different plantations and aims to defend their rights. Only in 2014, the government recognized their organisation.

SYNAPARCAM, together with organizations in other countries like MALOA in Sierra Leone and

others, created an alliance of people affected by SOCFIN. In 2013, they organized actions in 4 countries to protest against SOCFIN and to claim their rights as communities. This resulted in a meeting in France in October 2014 with Vincent Bolloré, the French owner of SOCFIN. But Bolloré did not take his responsibility for the problems and violations SOCFIN is causing. Instead, he suggested that people should solve the issues with the national branches of his company in each country, like SOCAPALM in Cameroon. Not surprisingly, however, the dialogue is not advancing significantly.

Several NGOs filed a complaint against SOCFIN at the level of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2010, accusing the company of negatively affecting traditional livelihoods of people and plantation workers. (5) For example, based on an analysis of water samples, the complaint alleged water contamination by agrottoxins. The OECD held the allegations admissible, and an action plan was elaborated. But the company has not made real efforts to implement it and, according to SYNAPARCAM, many problems and impacts continue.

Thus, the struggle of the communities surrounded by SOCAPALM plantations continues with protests, road blockades, dissemination of information nationally and internationally, among other tactics. In the short term SYNAPARCAM demands access for the communities to a vital space of 250 hectares of land around villages.

Final comments

While SOCFIN formulates responsibility policies and plans, the practices on the ground, such as those described here, are completely opposed. People face the crude reality of destruction of community lands, livelihoods and culture and severe violence in many of the company's plantation areas on a daily basis. On the ground, that seems to be the prevailing policy. More evidence of how so-called "responsibility" policies and plans amount to little more than empty discourse. These will also remain empty discourses as long as impunity prevails. This is further facilitated if they are based on voluntary commitments, like RSPO certification, and other non-binding policies and guidelines.

But affected communities have not given up. On the contrary, they keep resisting against all injustices, and increasingly they do so in an articulated way. They deserve all our support and radical solidarity!

We share here an on-going international petition in support of the communities struggling against the Okomu Plantation in Nigeria. Please sign-on here <http://erafoen.org/index.php/2017/07/28/uphold-edo-state-government-revocation-order-on-okomu-oil-palm-company-plc/>

(1) <http://www.socfin.com/en/sustainable-development>

(2) <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/nigeria-okomu-oil-palm-company-destroying-communities-for-oil-palm-expansion/>

(3) <http://erafoen.org/index.php/2017/03/07/field-report-okomu-oil-palm-plc-clears-forest-farmlands-for-industrial-agro-business-in-edo-state/>

(4) <https://secured-static.greenpeace.org/france/PageFiles/266171/Brief%20Liberia->

(5) https://www.oecdwatch.org/cases-fr/Case_200