
Gabon: OLAM's industrial oil palm plantations deprive community of Sanga of access to safe water

The expansion of industrial oil palm plantations hit the village of Sanga in the South of Gabon particularly hard: The community's main water source became so polluted that the water is now unsafe for drinking and not suitable for other daily uses. Pollution of water, however, is only one of the impacts that the plantations managed by the Singapore-based company OLAM, and co-owned by the government of Gabon are causing.

In September 2018, 35 women and men from communities affected by the industrial oil palm plantations managed by the Singapore-based food company OLAM came together in Mouila, in the South of Gabon. Several national and international organisations and activists joined the meeting where villagers freely shared their communities' experience with OLAM's large-scale oil palm plantations. They analyzed the strategies the company uses to promote industrial oil palm plantations and obtain access to community land. They also discussed the fundamental role of women in the resistance against industrial plantations and discussed actions to strengthen their resistance against OLAM's plantations and the company's expansion strategy as they see this resistance key to defending community livelihoods, especially for future generations.

Water pollution in Sanga

Part of the workshop agenda was a field visit to the villages of Mbadi, Sangha, and Mounigou, three villages that are severely affected by OLAM's industrial plantations. The situation in Sanga village is particularly critical. This village was recently built on land used by the community people for generations. The village was set up with the aim of putting a halt on the uncontrolled advance of the large-scale expansion of oil palm plantations by OLAM in the area. In spite of their resistance, the monocultures had advanced up close to the houses – about 200 meters - to, almost fencing in the village. With the plantations creeping up so closely, the dangerous and toxic pesticides, intensively used inside these plantations, also are applied dangerously close to the village.

According to Dieudonné Moukétou-Tarazewicz, graduated in Physical Geography and founder of the local NGO Muyissi Environnement: « monocultures favour the cultivation of one single species over others which leads to an environmental imbalance among plant and insect populations. Some species disappear and more powerful pests appear, because with prolonged use of pesticides insects create resistance. And this requires higher doses of pesticides. An aggravating factor is that these compounds are bioaccumulative, that means they accumulate gradually in the food chain and are neither eliminated nor dissolved over time. They are not biodegradable, in other words, they are resistant to biological degradation, in addition to being resistant to chemical and photolytic degradation, i.e. degradation to light. Therefore, even at low concentrations, they seriously affect the balance of the ecosystem.»

Sanga is facing a very severe situation now because the main water source of the village, located at about 50 meters from the houses at one side of the road, has become polluted as a consequence of the plantations encroaching. To address the villagers' complaints, OLAM constructed another well. As

is often the case with such wells and bore holes constructed by plantation companies, this one, too, was not maintained well by the company and, moreover, is also located in close proximity to the polluted water source, which is fed by the same contaminated water table than the community's main water source that is now no longer fit for use.

Besides the aforementioned risk of pesticide contamination, water sources located close to monoculture plantations are at risk for another contamination: chemical fertilizers. Mr. Moukétou-Tarazewicz explains: "When used excessively and with poor planning, fertilizers can also pollute the surface water of rivers, lakes and wells, causing damage to the ecosystem. In fact, in general, these compounds are soluble in water." He adds that these compounds, once they enter water, also become nutrients for algae: "With runoff rainwater, these products are deposited in rivers, lakes and wells, causing a proliferation of algae in a proportion higher than normal. This hinders the penetration of light and the oxygenation of water. This situation becomes worse when these algae die, because they release a lot of rest matter that is degraded by aerobic microorganisms."

The main water source on which the villagers of Sangha depend shows this phenomenon described by Mr. Moukétou-Tarazewicz. During the field visit, he took water samples and has since carried out preliminary tests: "Preliminary analysis of parameters such as hydrogen ions and dissolved oxygen performed in situ showed that pH, turbidity, and dissolved solids were within the resolution range, which is not the case for Dissolved Oxygen (DO), revealing a high organic matter content of the water. For the other parameters concerned, a further analysis of the samples taken is needed to assess whether the authorized limit for Class II waters (WHO, 2004) has been reached and which may have adverse effects on human health."

Parameters analyzed	Results P1 / P2	Norms (WHO)
Conductivity (?S/cm)	P1=0558 / P2=0690	2000
Dissolved Oxygen (%)	P1=36.9 / P2=127.4	?
pH ()	P1=7.16 / P2=8.72	6,5 – 8,5
Temperature (T °)	P1=26.5 / P2=27.18	-
Turbidity (NTU)	P1=032.9 / P2=008.8	?
Salinity (mg/l)	P1=0558 / P2=0690	1000
TDS	P1=0361 / P2=0449	-

Results of the preliminary analysis of the multi-parameter sonde

The preliminary analysis clearly shows that the water is not safe for consumption. The results explain why people fell ill from drinking this contaminated water. Yet, despite the health risk, it is the only source of water available as there is no other source near-by. Villagers who relayed the accounts of people who had fallen ill, report incidents of OLAM employees denying people who had fallen ill and on their way to the nearest health facility a lift in their cars.

An open letter to OLAM

Hearing the testimonies from villagers, meeting participants decided to write an open letter to OLAM (you can access the letter in French [here](#)). In the letter, participants demand that OLAM urgently resolve the water problem in Sanga. They also demand that OLAM improve the treatment of workers and the poor working conditions in general. Workers spoke about the lack of Individual Protection Equipment that can reduce the impact on the worker's health when applying pesticides. They also

raised the issue of being paid low salaries which are dependent of workers achieving daily quotas in their tasks that are extremely onerous. The letter also demands clarification from OLAM about the information from the community of Mbadi that the company intends to create a park for ecotourism. Meeting participants heard that the community is opposed to this development because the forest area is fundamental for their livelihoods.

Communities reinforcing their own unity

The workshop held in Mouila showed the multiple impacts that large-scale oil palm plantations have on communities. The workshop also revealed OLAM's strategy to prevent the creation of spaces where communities can collectively express and discuss these impacts and other issues of concern.

Part of this strategy are community committees that OLAM is creating in each village. These committees do not operate on any legal basis. The committees are the place for so-called "dialogue" between communities and OLAM. The topics which can be addressed in this "dialogue", however are restricted to the contents of the "social contracts" that the company signed with each community. These contracts essentially consist of a list of "benefits" the company agreed it would provide and / or concede to the communities. Examples are solar panels to illuminate a single lamp outside each community house; a health post and/or a water pump; a sports place; lodging for professors teaching at the local elementary school. Villagers expressed their dissatisfaction because the committees are dominated by OLAM and state representatives and are not really functioning as a space for meaningful dialogue; the implementation of the contracts they are supposed to discuss are vague and do not contain timelines, nor do they spell out how the promised delivery will be done in practice or how structures will be maintained. What's more, OLAM decreed at the outset that the community committees have no mandate to discuss the issues of most concern to communities: the on-going expansion of the OLAM's plantations, as well as other plans by OLAM to control more land like the creation of additional protected areas and sites for ecotourism. Without any "dialogue", let alone consent from communities over this crucial issue of OLAM expanding its control over community land, the company continues to take over land and forests that communities use and depend on.

OLAM requested to be invited to the recent community meetings in Mouilla. Rather than use its daily presence in the region to seek meaningful exchanges with villagers, the company engaged in what was a blatant attempt to interfere with communities exercising their right to come together and freely discuss the problems they face with OLAM's activities.

Villagers defied the brazen attempt, came together and decided that the best response to OLAM's divisive tactics is to reinforce their own unity. They formulated a number of ideas and plans to strengthen their organisation and resistance against the advance of the plantations. They also discussed ways to improve their livelihoods, always based on the principle of diversification of economic activities in order to secure the physical and cultural survival of their communities.

The village participants made it clear that promoting monoculture is not the way forward for the region of Mouila. It only results in one single corporation increasing its control over land and forests and pocketing the benefits while communities face the costs of being fenced in by industrial oil palm plantations. What is needed, instead is that the fundamental right of communities to make a livelihood and decide over the use of the land they have lived on for generations be respected, now and in the future.

