
[A Reflection from Africa: Conquer the Fear for Building Stronger Movements](#)

An interview with social and environmental activist and human rights defender Nasako Besingi. He organized communities in their protests against US agribusiness Herakles Farm's palm oil plantations. Due to this engagement, he has been the victim of Herakles Farm and government physical attacks, intimidation and criminalization.

The WRM Secretariat carried out an interview with social and environmental activist and human rights defender Nasako Besingi. He is the Director of the Cameroonian organization Struggle to Economize the Future Environment (SEFE), which supports local communities' land rights struggles mainly against palm oil plantations. Nasako has organized communities in their protests against the development of palm oil plantations by the US agribusiness company Herakles Farm. Due to this engagement, he has been the victim of Herakles Farm and government physical attacks, intimidation and criminalization. The activist has vehemently condemned the human rights violations around the current crises in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

Often, one hears that communities in Africa cannot really defend or claim back their lands from companies that get concessions from the national government, because, according to the national Law, "all land belongs to the State". What is your view on this?

First, what constitute a State? It consists of four key elements: population, territory, government and sovereignty. Hence, the phrase "all land belongs to the State" does not imply that land is owned by the government, but rather by the entire population living within the territory of a State, including the people in the government. Most of the population of a State resides in communities, where they struggle daily to defend for themselves such territory. On the other hand, a government is best described as an agency to which the WILL of the State is formulated, expressed, and carried out, and through which common policies are determined and regulated in terms of political, economical and social development. Fulfilling those tasks does not translate into governmental ownership rights on land and natural resources of the State.

It is wrong for any government to claim ownership over land, discarding communities' land rights. As a matter of fact, the problem with Africa's land ordinances was drawn up with the help of colonial masters, who, without the consent of the population, handed over the territory to the presidents, which were not elected by the population but most often handpicked by the colonizers to serve their long-term interests. Moreover, the notion that "all land belongs to the State" does not give a government the rights to own the land and to dispose it unilaterally, but rather to legislate and regulate on land matters, considering and respecting community interests.

It is the duty of the governments to provide happiness, liberty and peace to the population as well as to protect properties. Adding to that, these governments have ratified international instruments on behalf of the States in order to enhance the rights of the population. Since international law takes precedent over national law, it goes without saying that the ratification of these international instruments override governments' unilateral disposal of land under the greedy misinterpretation of

“all land belongs to the State”, without the consent of the primary element of a State (people), whose daily survival and existence depend on the land.

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations Charter, the Africa Charter on Human & Peoples Rights and other international instruments make it illegal for these governments to unilaterally cede land for development purposes without community consent. Recently, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has weighed in on land grabs and communities rights' abuses as crimes that rise to the level of international jurisprudence and pledged to prosecute violators (governments and corporations).

Since I have been involved in community land rights' movements and organizations in Cameroon and other countries, no single community I met accepted the idea that land is owned by the government. They say affirmatively that the land belongs to their communities and is an ancestral heritage. None of the communities I have worked with agrees with the presence of multinational corporations on their land, claiming that the companies were established through the use of coercive force.

In your experience, what are important aspects/strategies for building and strengthen movements and community struggles in the African context?

Movements and community struggles in Africa are still in early stages because of Africa's dark history of slavery, forced colonization and post independence semi-colonial administration, with no democratic and human rights opportunities. Today the situation looks very different, with partial democracy and discretionary use of human rights mainly due to the conditionality placed by industrialized countries.

The most important aspect of building strong movements in Africa is to conquer the fear and ignorance deliberately instilled in the population by colonial and post-colonial administrations. Identify communities' concerns is also key while creating awareness and educational manuals that reflect on those concerns. Another important aspect is to strengthen the capacity of community activists and civil society organizations to know their rights and to know how to defend them in line with their daily livelihoods. Considering that long-lasting movements are those which are built from the base and not from the outside, strong resistance can only occur when glued to community concerns.

The strategies going forward include: establishing a strong coalition of Africa's civil society organizations and communities with the aim of frequently sharing experiences and information; planning and executing activities around communities' land rights; supporting advocacy based on defending and addressing violations; making available other forms of education materials for communities; and simplifying informative manuals and videos exposing the strategies and tactics used by corporations to infiltrate and grab community ancestral land.

And what are the biggest challenges?

In the context of Africa, there are many challenges which need different approaches for resistance movements to succeed. An important one is the ignorance of communities about their land rights and on how to defend their ancestral land, supposedly due to their inability to confront the rising strengths of conspiratorial land seizure perpetrated by corporations and governments. Another challenge is the bad governance characterized by endemic corruption and the poverty designed to again keep community submitted to the government's will. There are also political obstacles put in place by the government in order to shrink the space of NGOs, civil society organizations and social movements,

through intimidation and criminalization. Cumbersome conditions and limited funding opportunities are other challenges that movements have to face.

In your opinion, do you think that international solidarity is important for community struggles?

International solidarity remains the only best option to stop the senseless and unconscious takeover of community land. It is important for diminishing the clout of corporations and governments from exploiting communities' ignorance and from forcefully grab communal land.

Gaining more knowledge about rights will translate easily in stronger resistances against land thievery. The enlightenment through knowledge sharing at the base, where the violations occur and in countries where the finance and consumers are coming from is an important first step.

Local groups may not be able to handle alone the intimidation, violence and prolonged trumped up legal cases brought against them by the government and corporations. They have not much experience with nonviolent direct actions which consist of having the right information and intelligence to confront the violators.

Which type of international solidarity do you think has worked the best until now?

Until now, in the African context, I can think of the campaign in Cameroon against Herakles Farms, a US based firm that intended to chop down 73,000 hectares of pristine forest for its palm oil plantations project in the midst of four protected areas, including the Korup National Park. The backlash against Herakles Farms came from local communities, local and international NGOs, researchers, scientists, academics, among others. Immense pressure mounted at both, the local level, where the operations were taking place, and at the international level, where the companies were sourcing for funds to establish the project. In 2013, the president of Cameroon signed a series of decrees reducing the concession from 73,000 hectares to 19,843 hectares. Yet this didn't bode well with the communities' aspirations as they continued their resistance and echoing original demand of "No Plantation On Our Land". The company abandoned its operations in Mundemba and Toko concession areas in 2015.

Moreover, intercontinental collaborative initiatives such as the one involving GRAIN/WRM and local NGOs and community organisations in Africa under the guidance of the Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Expansion across central and west Africa, has done a tremendous job of awakening depressed communities by providing visibility to their struggles, information and jointly identify opportunities to stop destructive oil palm plantations through community solidarity exchange programs, including workshops and villages visits to encourage them to counter land grabs over their lands. Besides, the joint work also aims at exposing the strategies and tactics used by the multinational companies that grab community lands and alerting those who are now threatened by such grabs.

Is there a different type of solidarity that you would wish for strengthening the resistance against land grabbing in Cameroon or elsewhere in Africa?

Strengthening community solidarity and exchanges among villages directly and indirectly affected by developmental projects in order to build confidence at the community level is the backbone of any successful resistance. Other key points are: intercontinental exchanges with different communities for sharing experiences, which help to dissipate and expose corporate deceits and tactics; coherent village visits to keep affected villages and would-be-affected villages on alert against the wrongful

expansion of oil palm plantations and other projects without their due consent; a stronger expose of corporate deceits and claims on sustainable development and how they are been tokenized by corporations instead of respecting communities' right to their Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

We need to align local community resistance with overall local community alternative opportunities. Invest on building capacities of local organizations and communities to put in place a "Reliable Community Resistance" capable of pre-empting land grabs and human rights on the continent as they occur. Organise a series of events such as workshops, seminars, village visits, in person and off person meetings among key players.

There is a key need to build a stronger collaborative partnership between northern NGOs and communities and southern counterparts in order to tackle land grab and deforestation, because these ventures are driven and abated by investors and government policies including choices of consumers in northern countries. Exchange meetings among communities from the North and the South will enable a better understanding on how the political decisions, the governments and corporations are affecting the environment and abusing human rights in the South, especially as companies are bombing deceitful communication and advertisement to cover up their destruction and abuses, associated with products which they claim are sustainable.