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## [Gabon: Controversy over a eucalyptus monoculture project in the Bateke Plateaux](#)

Since 2021, initial implementation of a eucalyptus monoculture project has put the populations of the Plateaux and Djouori-Agnili departments on alert. These departments are in the Haut-Ogooué province of Gabon, in Central Africa. Gabon belongs to the Congo Basin, which is considered to be the second largest tropical forest after the Amazon. More than 80 percent of the country's territory is covered by forest; our focus in this article is on the savannahs of the Batéké Plateaux, a different kind of ecosystem with unique landscapes.

In the departments of Plateaux and Djouori-Agnili, like in many parts of the world, agriculture as well as the sale of raw, and/or processed products from the crops grown, represent the main sources of subsistence for most of the population. This is why the announcement to implement a monoculture mega-project on the Plateau has caused great concern among communities in the region.

Concerns have grown upon hearing that the project promoter also intends to sell carbon credits from the planting of the eucalyptus trees. Consultants for these polluting companies try to convince governments that it is important to plant trees in order to protect forests and help the climate.

In general, when companies come with their consultants to a country, they make promises that their tree plantations will support the national economy, protect the forest and create jobs. They talk to leaders about carbon and the climate, claiming that these trees will protect the environment. In reality, their true intention is to appropriate community lands so that they can plant trees for profit. In the case of the eucalyptus project in the Bateke Plateaux in Gabon, the Sequoia company has already registered its eucalyptus plantation project with Verra, the main organization that certifies carbon credit projects. (1) This would suggest that the eucalyptus project in the Bateke Plateaux, called AODA, is also envisioned as a carbon credit project.

### **Former director of Olam Gabon is behind this project**

The eucalyptus monoculture project is falsely named LAPHO (Leconi Agroforestry Project in Haut-Ogooué), a clear contradiction because eucalyptus does not lend itself to agroforestry. The project claims to have obtained 60,000 hectares for the planting of eucalyptus in this savannah region, a serious threat both to the people living on the plateaux and to the ecology.

The company promoting this project is Sequoia Plantation, which was created by a fund based in the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi). The main shareholder is Gagan Gupta, the former director of Olam Gabon – a company which has taken over almost all of Gabon's economic sectors. The Sequoia project would apparently constitute a group of economic activities under the management of the Gabon Special Economic Zone (GSEZ). GSEZ is considered to be a front company for the Bongo family, which ruled Gabon for decades until it was overthrown in a military coup in 2023.

### **Project advanced during the Covid period**

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During the Covid-19 period in 2021, populations on the Plateau noticed the movement of vehicles and heavy machinery behind the village of Kandouo, in the eastern part of Haut-Ogooué province. The earthworks for a nursery and housing for workers were carried out without consulting the populations. In the process, the graves of their ancestors were razed. The concerned families approached the operators on the ground to complain about this situation; the operators told them to take up their concern with the president (of the country) at the time, Ali Bongo Ondimba. Thus, it became evident that the Bongo family was involved in this project. Going about setting up the plantations in this way – without public and participatory consultation with local populations – clearly demonstrated an abuse of power and a disregard for Gabonese regulations. After these occurrences, news of the project spread throughout society.

It was in this context that the organization, CREPB (Collectif des Ressortissants et Ecologistes des Plateaux Batéké), began engaging with ministries and institutions of the Gabonese government in early 2023. Yet their requests to access documentation on the project were ignored – revealing the dubious evolution of the project. The CREPB has initiated multiplied administrative procedures, organized press conferences to challenge national and international opinion and informed about the dangers of plantations and non-regulatory procedures of the project. The actions of CREPB have prompted the Sequoia company to turn to the Prime Minister's Office for support.

Meanwhile, the CREPB and JVE Associations (Young Volunteers for the Environment) organized and carried out a collaborative awareness mission in the Plateaux, in December 2023. Eventually, after continued pressure from the ground, Sequoia organized a so-called public consultation ceremony on July 31, 2023. However, instead of holding this event in the localities affected by the project in the Plateaux and Djouori-Agnili departments, the company organized the activity in Franceville, several kilometers from the site planned for the eucalyptus plantations. Sequoia company also publicly declared the cessation of its activities on December 7, 2023 by sending a letter to the Prime Minister's Office and four other ministries.

On March 23 and 24, 2024, the company resumed its consultations. This included a consultation in the village of Kandouo, which is adjacent to the Sequoia project plantations, and one in Bongoville, further away from the plantation site. On May 8, 2024, Sequoia submitted its environmental impact study report to the Department of Environment and Sustainable Development. The Department issued a press release on May 22 calling on interested parties to view and comment on the report. Four civil society organisations submitted a joint observation on the report, highlighting the project's shortcomings and the serious dangers it poses.

Among other things, the organisations showed (1) the discrepancy between the description of the project and its actual content; (2) the lack of participatory mapping; (3) the botched study parameters (e.g. failure to take into account animal and hydrological resources; small sampling sizes; and false identification of species in sites outside the area intended for exploitation); (4) the risks of groundwater pollution with pesticides; (5) the risks of drying up groundwater sources; (6) environmental disruption (through the destruction of plant and animal species); (7) the loss of biodiversity; (8) the risks of mega-fires; (9) the risks of the appearance of serious illnesses in impacted populations due to the effects of pesticides and the company's activities; (10) the risks of endangering local populations and forcing them to emigrate; (11) the lack of mitigation measures to address these risks; and (12) the farce of the public consultations. In short, the company's environmental impact study report had very serious omissions and shortcomings.

Despite the evidence of these shortcomings, the committee that evaluated the impact study chose only to address the discrepancy between the formulation of the project and its content, the absence

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of a budgeted environmental management plan, and the absence of a project management monitoring committee. Based on this reduced list of deficiencies, the evaluation committee rejected the report at first reading, and asked Sequoia to address or complete these elements.

## **Total rejection of the project**

The numerous missions that CREPB and others carried out in the heart of the Batéke Plateaux revealed that the population totally reject the Sequoia company's eucalyptus plantation project. The testimony of the district chief Djouani/Ompouyi reflects the opinion expressed in all the villages we visited: "We will never accept the monopolization of our land for eucalyptus trees. The Téké people only plant trees that nourish; go and see all our old villages and you will find: mango trees, safou trees, avocado trees – not the trees that will destroy our land, not the eucalyptus trees." Except for the divided opinions in the village of Kandouo (where the nurseries are located), the people of all the other localities in the departments concerned are 100 percent hostile to the plantation project. The same goes for all the villages of Plateaux and Djouori Agnili, as well as the towns of Leconi and Bongoville. **A survey of 1,432 people that CREPB carried out recorded 100 percent rejection of the project.**

Since then, the organisations CREPB, JVE, Copil-Citoyen, Muyissi Environnement and the Bongo Ayouma Foundation have come together to collectively use administrative procedures to oppose the project. Specific actions they are taking include: drafting and submitting interpellations to governing bodies; analysing the Sequoia environmental impact study; and producing and submitting their collective observations to the Department of the Environment and Sustainable Development, as well as to television and radio broadcasts. (2) The work of these associations is resonating positively with national and international opinion, which is taking up the cause to preserve the environment of the Batéke Plateaux.

The Prefect of Djouori Agnili called for the resumption of real public consultations that respect the legal standards. Meanwhile, local populations held a public demonstration to oppose the project when the Minister of Agriculture visited Kandouo and Bongoville. Furthermore, high authorities inside the current government of Gabon – such as the Ministers of Oil and Tourism, and the First Quaestor of the Economic and Social Environmental Council (member of the parliamentary assembly responsible for internal finances and administration) – have openly expressed an unfavorable position on the project. (3)

## **Perspectives**

The struggle of local populations and environmental associations against the Sequoia company's eucalyptus project is currently at a cross-road. Despite well-documented proof of the dangers of eucalyptus monocultures, and the overwhelming opposition of neighboring villages to the plantation project, Sequoia's illegal actions are gaining momentum.

But the populations and associations that oppose the project are on alert and are closely following its development. People are deeply concerned that the plantations will jeopardize their food sovereignty, and they have expressed their opposition to them. Community leaders continue to repeat what communities have expressed they need in terms of development:

"We need solutions to the elephant intrusions, and we need to improve family farming; plus road construction. No to eucalyptus," notes the village chief of Ekouyi. The village chief of Souba, Department of Djouori Agnili, adds: "No to eucalyptus trees, yes to tractors for local crops."

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Likewise, the Chiefs of the villages of Saye, Kabala and Akou say: “We need solutions for agriculture and road construction, not eucalyptus,” and “We need mechanization for our agriculture, because in the Plateaux we plant cassava, pineapple, corn and yams, not eucalyptus.”

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(1) [Leconi Agroforestry Project in Haut-Ogooue \(LAPHO\). VCS ID-Nr. 4543. Project «under development».](#)

(2) [Radio Broadcasts.](#)

(3)

<https://magazinesuperstar.com/solidarite-internationale-bertin-kourouvi-sallie-a-bertrand-zibi-pour-contrer-les-plantations-deucalyptus-au-gabon/>