

PROMISE, DIVIDE, INTIMIDATE, AND COERCE



**Tactics Palm Oil Companies Use to Grab
Community Lands**

Summary Edition

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Informal Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm
Plantations in West and Central Africa.

June, 2024

This booklet is also available in **French**.

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Beware! Companies come ready to take over the land





Companies need large areas of fertile land to set up their industrial oil palm plantations. Therefore, their plans include taking over land that communities are already using. Often families will feel ‘fenced in,’ and when it becomes unbearable to be surrounded by industrial plantations, they may leave one by one. Furthermore, companies use large amounts of toxic chemicals on the industrial plantations. These agrottoxins pollute the farmland and water on which communities depend.

Companies know that all these practices will cause serious conflicts with communities. That’s why wherever they operate, they use very similar tactics to take control over community lands. Violence is part and parcel of the industrial plantation model.

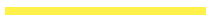
The importance of being united and in contact with other communities



Companies know they have little chance to take over community lands when a community is united in resistance. Companies will therefore do anything to break this unity and look for ways to undermine community resistance – even use very dirty tricks such as spreading rumours about the people who are opposed to their plantations. That is why, for a community, it is important to stand united.

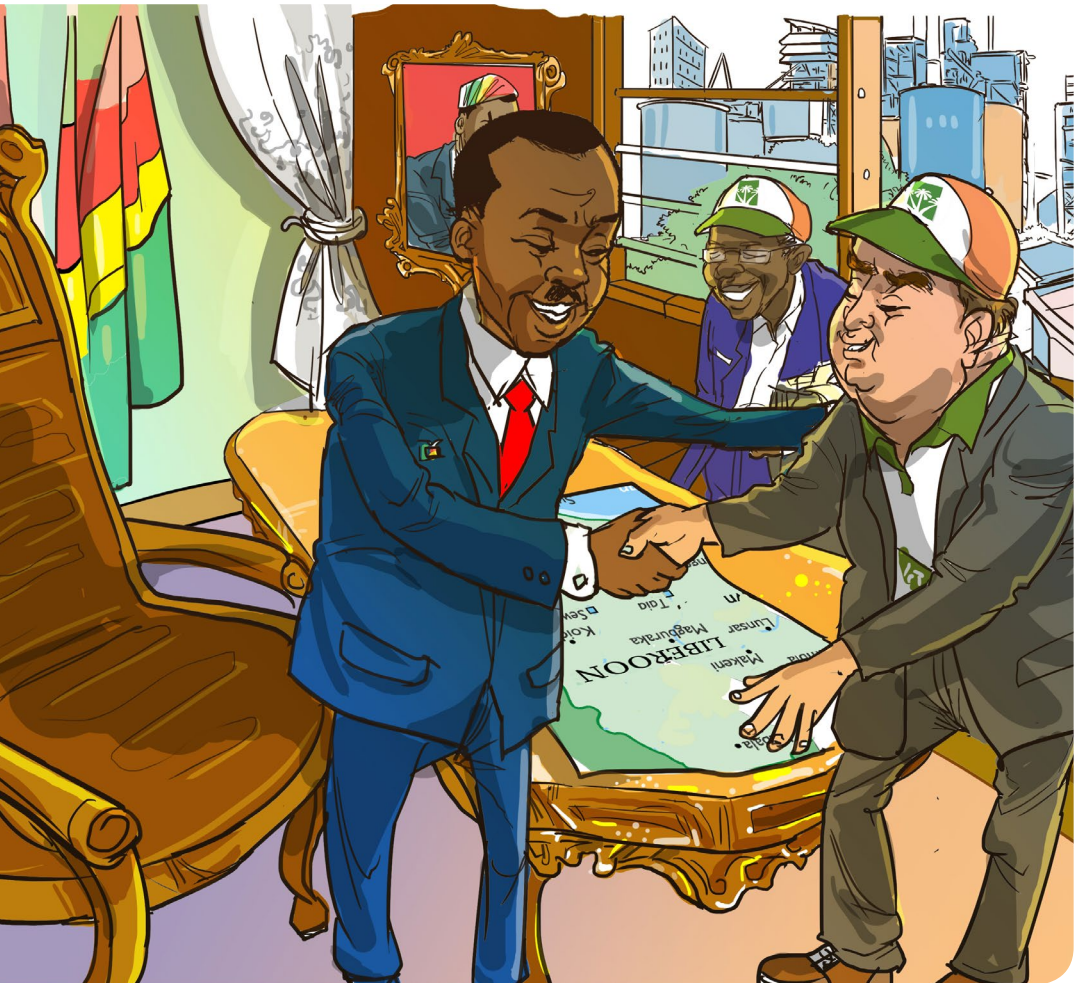
Seeking alliances and learning from other communities about how they have responded to companies' tactics can be very helpful. Resisting large international corporations can feel overwhelming for a community struggling alone. That is why exchanges and alliances with other communities in similar situations can strengthen community struggles. Such alliances can help carry a community through the hard times when people may be tempted to give up.

Being aware of other communities' experiences makes it easier to recognise company tactics in your own community and discuss how to respond to them. If one way of resisting fails, your community can try a different resistance strategy that it may have heard about from another community in a similar situation. Your community may also recognise new tactics that the company might use.



Tactic 1:

Companies secure approval and support from high-level government officials



When a company arrives in a country, it already knows where to find the best land to grow oil palms. It knows who to approach in government and who to ask to make connections to local elites. It will claim that ‘plantations bring development’.

Presidents of many countries have adopted this false argument, and they will promise to swiftly provide the necessary licenses and land. They may even promise that there will be no ‘community trouble’. Companies know that once the President or a minister supports their plans, other government officials, paramount chiefs and community leaders will be less likely to oppose their plantations, even if they are in disagreement. The company may also offer a share of profits or a position in the company to government officials, to show that there will be personal benefits if the plantation project proceeds smoothly.

When governments support the plantation company, this may weaken the resolve of some community leaders, but it is rarely enough to break community resistance.

Tactic 2:

Companies get local elites on their side



A plantation company needs the support of local elites to overcome community opposition to its industrial plantations. To secure that support, it may invite a local politician or businessperson (they are usually men) to visit company plantations elsewhere, even in another country. Once back home, these people will understand what is expected of them. They will speak highly of the company plantations and work to convince community leaders to support the company's plans.

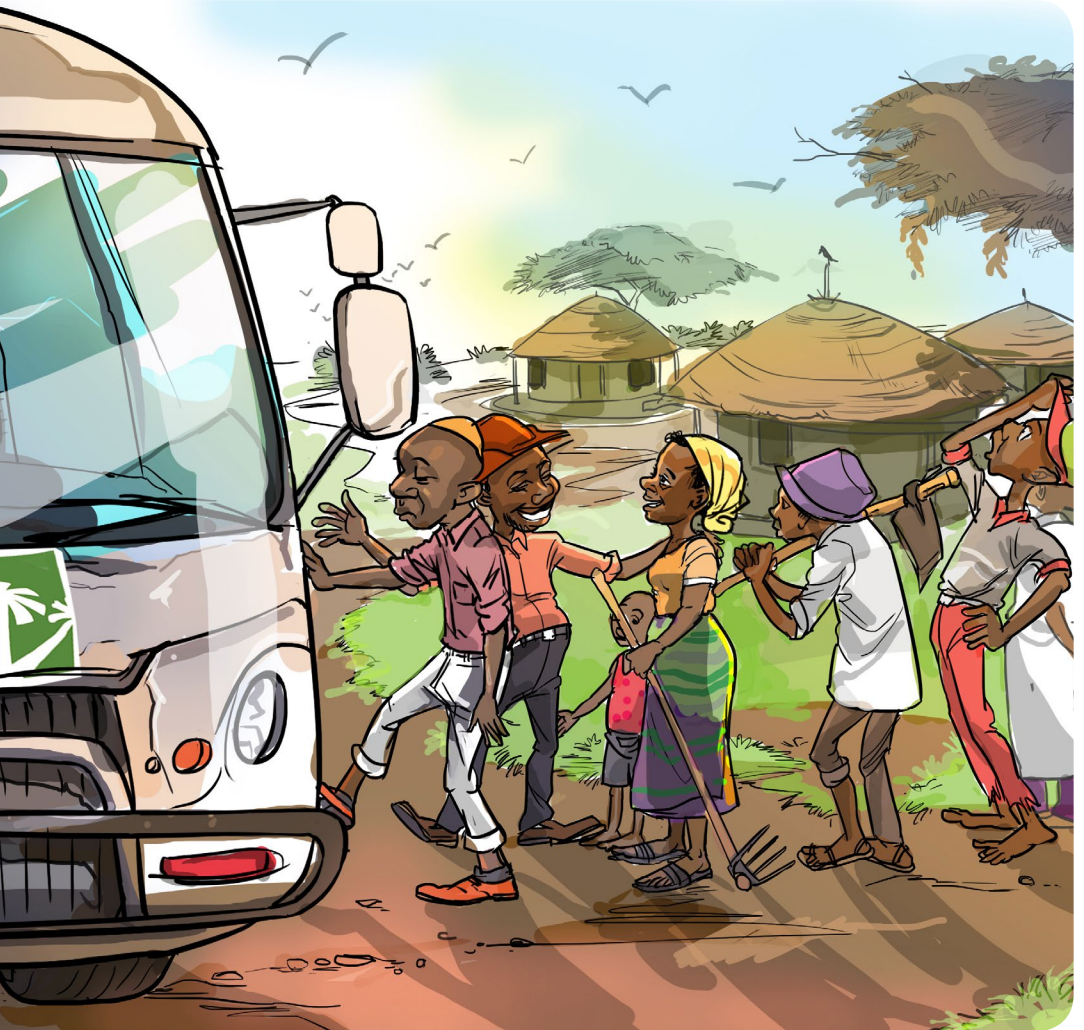
Some companies also set up "community committees" to get local elites on their side. Sometimes, chiefs, community leaders and other influential community members are invited to join such committees. The reason they are invited is so that they will not defend the interests of the community as strongly as they might otherwise when conflicts arise with the company.

All of these committees are effectively under the control of the company. If a community representative is part of the committee, they understand that they are expected not to contradict the authorities. And it's the company that covers the expenses of committee meetings.

Community members who attend the meetings and do not take the envelopes handed out at the end of the meetings know that they may not be invited back.

Tactic 3:

Companies get people on their side that the community trusts



Often, companies use people known to the community to introduce the industrial oil palm or rubber plantation project to the community. The company may send a “son of the soil” to try and convince community members that they should provide the land that the company is asking for. Because they are known and trusted by the community, this person may convince villagers to support the project, even when the company itself has failed to gain community support.

Local people who are co-opted in this way can also become important contacts for the company, alerting the company about rising anger in the community or informing it of who the key ‘troublemakers’ in a community are.

If the company informant has a small business, he (because it is usually a man) may get company contracts once the plantations are up and running. His business might transport the workers to the plantation sites or collect fruit bunches to be delivered to the company mill. He may become the local contractor for security guards patrolling the company plantations, or he may get to hire the day labourers. These kinds of contracts are almost always given to outsiders or to local elites who support the company, not to those living in the communities who are affected by the company’s plantations.

Tactic 4:

Companies try to co-opt chiefs into making community lands available to them



The company will arrange meetings with chiefs or community leaders after it has met with ministers and local elites. The company may meet with each leader privately or ask a government official to attend a first meeting. These meetings tend to take place in the city, without the knowledge of the wider community, and the company may pay for the leader(s) to stay at an expensive hotel and wine and dine them. The leader may also be offered gifts which can be hard to distinguish from bribes. This way, it is more difficult for a community leader to reject the company's plantations, especially if they are told that the President supports the company plans.

Communities who have witnessed their leadership being co-opted by plantation companies have this advice to share with communities that are not yet surrounded by plantations: Do not let your traditional leaders meet with the company in private meetings or outside of the village, and make sure that they never sign any documents in private meetings. Communities might want to state in a very public and direct manner that any commitments made by their leaders in private meetings with the company are not acceptable without the validation of the community as a whole.

Tactic 5:

Companies try to silence leaders and activists who oppose the company's plantations



When persuasion tactics, gifts and bribes fail, and a community leader or activist continues to oppose the plantation plans, the company will switch to intimidation and harassment.

A government official or local politician might pressure the leader or activist to cooperate with the company. The government might threaten to stop basic services if a village keeps opposing the company's plantations. Or the government might step in and pressure community leaders to sign documents that falsely suggest there is community support for the company's plantations. It may even get community leaders arrested on invented charges. Another company tactic is to have leaders who resist their projects removed from power and replaced with someone who is supportive of the palm oil project.

Tactic 6:

Companies promise improved roads, schools, health facilities



Most industrial plantations in West and Central Africa are located in regions where the state is failing to provide basic public services. Companies exploit this situation and often promise to improve roads or to build new health centres, dispensaries and classrooms if the community supports the company's plantations. A company that promises better roads might later restrict community access to these 'improved' roads, claiming that they are now the property of the company. The roads might then be closed off with guarded gates. Communities will have lost their right to freely come and go on their own land, because company security guards will control who enters and who leaves the village.

The reality is that companies ignore these promises as soon as they secure control over the land they want. Communities will end up waiting years for promises to materialize; meanwhile the company will clear community lands right away and get seedlings into the ground as soon as it can. The company will move quickly to set up the plantations because it knows that once the trees are in the ground, it is much harder for communities to stop the project.

Tactic 7:



Companies promise employment, especially for young men

***“Maybe there are some benefits, but the damage is
much bigger than the benefits; they are buried under
the damage that the plantations do”***

*(Participant at a meeting in Mundemba, Cameroon, in 2016, on the expansion of industrial
oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa)*

The most dangerous company lie is the promise of local employment. Chiefs and community leaders often initially support the plantations because the company promises jobs. **This false promise of employment regularly turns into disappointment, anger and conflict.**

The entire community will lose access to the lands that were their source of food and livelihood before they were taken over by plantations; meanwhile only a few community people will be given jobs. These jobs are usually poorly paid short-term contracts, or day labour. The work often involves dangerous activities, such as spraying chemicals at the nurseries or plantations without adequate protective clothing. Or it involves back-breaking work like harvesting and collecting heavy fruit bunches. Workers may have to rely on family members to help them meet the high daily quota – otherwise their wages will be reduced; they may even lose an entire day's wages if they are unable to meet the quota.

Exploitation can be even worse for women, because subcontractors sometimes demand sex in return for jobs. Women have found themselves without payment because superiors demanded sex before they would pay the women for work at the plantations that they had already done.

Tactic 8:

Companies organise meetings to create the appearance of community support



Community meetings play an important role in corporate tactics. Companies use community meetings to present themselves as ‘responsible’, especially to international customers of their palm oil or to banks financing their plantations; or companies use meetings as proof that they are ‘consulting’ with communities. Such proof might be required if a company wants to be certified and use green labels such as RSPO (see Tactic 20).

When companies call these meetings, it is often not clear to villagers what the meeting is about. They might be made to believe that they are meeting to discuss a community project that the company has promised, such as water boreholes or a health centre. When asked if they are *in favour of the project*, community members might vote ‘yes’ and raise their hands, thinking that the vote is about the community project. Someone from the company might take a picture just at the moment in which many people have raised their hands, and the company may use the picture to claim that the community voted to support the company’s plantation project.

If conflicts have already broken out, company representatives are usually accompanied by security guards and police to demonstrate their authority over the community. In this situation, meetings may be held in locations that are difficult to reach for those who are opposed to the plantations, or the venue may be changed at the last minute.

Tactic 9:

Companies try to silence local opponents of the plantation project



The company will try to single out a few individuals and brand them as ‘troublemakers who want to block development’. The company might claim that such individuals are using the community for their own interests, or that they are being used by foreign NGOs to prevent development and block the company’s plantations.

The company will try to find out as much as it can about these individuals. It may recruit village youth to work as informants. Those who criticise the company’s plantations may find their property vandalised; or vehicles may pass by their homes regularly just to let them know that they are being watched. They might receive untraceable phone calls; or callers may tell them to be ‘careful’.

Family members might be offered company jobs, but only if they get the ‘troublemaker’ to stop opposing the company’s plantations. In such a situation, the family will often start to pressure their relative, claiming that his or her opposition to the company’s plantations is depriving other family members of job opportunities. The ‘troublemaker’ will be put under huge pressure.

Finally, sooner or later, the company will even try to buy the ‘troublemaker’ off. ‘You could close this door and never look back’, a company representative told an activist he was trying to bribe.

In this context, the more individuals who are seen as leaders of community resistance, the better. If different people speak at public meetings or rallies, it will be harder for the company to single out one or two individuals. If the struggle seems to be carried out by just one person, a company can more easily undermine community resistance.

Tactic 10:

Companies exclude and marginalize women



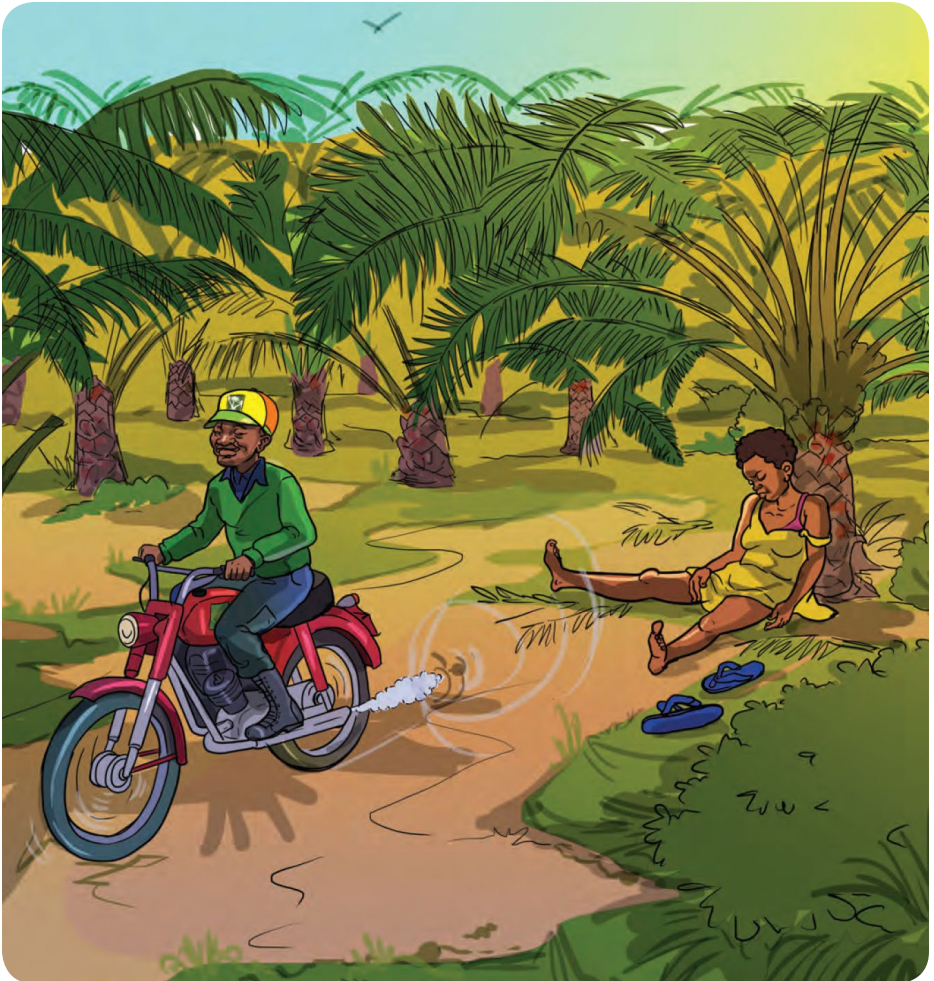
Much of the work that goes into traditional oil palm cultivation in West and Central Africa is done by women. That is why there is so much at stake for women when a plantation company plans to take over community lands. Resistance against industrial plantations is therefore also the women's fight for the economic independence that traditional oil palm cultivation provides.

Women are also concerned about the broader impact of those plantations on their community. They worry how the presence of plantation workers – usually single men from outside the area – will affect the community. They are concerned about alcohol and drug abuse, and the violence that this incites. Companies know that women will bring up these issues; that is why they prefer to speak only to the men.

Women may also be excluded from decision-making about the company's plantations within the community. Excluding women from these important discussions only benefits the plantation company! That's why women's participation in the meetings and decision-making is so important. With strong participation and leadership from women, community resistance will be stronger.

Tactic 11:

Companies turn a blind eye to violence and abuse against women on plantations



The sexual violence, abuse and harassment that women suffer when companies set up large-scale plantations is rarely mentioned. Usually, the shocking extent of this abuse only comes out when women meet among themselves. In these discussions, it becomes clear that sexual violence is part of the industrial plantation model.

In West and Central Africa, women face yet another type of violence as a result of industrial oil palm plantations: security guards and police working with the company enter homes in and around the company plantations at will to search rooms and cupboards for palm oil. Guards have even pushed the food being cooked on the stove onto the floor because palm oil was used in the dish. The guards will accuse the women of using palm fruit stolen from the company plantations. Even when a woman insists that the oil comes from her own palms or from family plantations, the guards may confiscate the oil.

When women start to speak out about the systemic sexual abuse on the plantations, company representatives deny that sexual abuse exists on their plantations.

Tactic 12:

Companies forge signatures and falsify documents



Falsifying documents and forging signatures are serious offences. Yet, plantation companies have been getting away with using documents that contain forged signatures of village representatives. Community leaders and activists have found their names and signatures on company meeting lists even when they did not attend the meetings. Or, companies attach a meeting attendance list to another document, and when people think they are signing an attendance list, the company uses the list to falsely claim community support for its plantations. Community leaders have also found forged versions of their signatures on agreements allegedly signed with the company.

For community leaders in remote communities, it is very difficult to know what a plantation company operating in their communities is telling overseas financiers and palm oil buyers. And overseas banks and palm oil buyers usually show little interest in investigating whether the documents presented to them are legitimate. A company therefore knows that it will usually get away with presenting fraudulent attendance lists or documents with forged signatures or false information.

Tactic 13:

Companies withhold important documents



Withholding copies of important documents is a common company tactic. Communities are rarely given copies of the lease agreements that a company has signed with the government. Companies may also withhold survey maps, land certificates and other information that is part of lease agreements. Companies also often fail to provide copies of meeting minutes, attendance lists, benefits-sharing agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) about community benefits that they may have negotiated with a community.

If asked to provide a copy, a company representative may argue that it is 'safer to keep the documents at the company office so they will not get lost or damaged'. Or they will promise to drop off a 'clean copy' later. But the copy will never arrive, leaving the community without any proof of what was agreed upon.

It is therefore important to insist that the company provide copies of any documents that villagers sign or that are discussed. Companies must come prepared to leave a copy with the community at the end of a meeting. If the company claims that this is not possible, it is a good idea for some community members to take photos of any documents that were presented. This makes it harder for the company to manipulate documents or deny the agreements that were made.

Tactic 14:

Companies take control of community lands through fraudulent land certificates and surveys



“The [government officials] had proposed a five-kilometre buffer zone, which communities already considered insufficient. Today, company plantations are less than two kilometres away from our huts.”

(Farmer from Gabon. In WRM Bulletin 231, The Seed of Despair: Communities lose their land and water sources due to OLAM’s agribusiness in Gabon, 2017)

There are many instances in which oil palm companies have manipulated land surveys or survey maps, or used fraudulent and often hastily issued land certificates to take control of community lands.

Companies may also get someone to burn the forest or drain the peatland they want to use to set up their plantations. Once the forest has been destroyed, the company will apply for permits to convert what they claim to be 'degraded' land into industrial oil palm plantations. Or a local company, often with ties to a local politician, might buy small plots of land from community members and then sell these plots to the palm oil company. The company will deny any involvement with the covert land purchases and demand that the government protect its investments in the country and guarantee its (fraudulently obtained) rights to the land.

Companies often get away with this sort of fraud because communities do not have copies of the lease agreements and associated maps, and because the companies use intimidation and manipulation to make villagers feel insecure about the legal status of their community lands.



Tactic 15:

Companies create or exploit land boundary disputes between communities



Companies are known to exploit boundary disputes between villages in order to take control of community lands. A company may sign an agreement to expand its plantations with only one of the villages that is using lands jointly used by several villages. When conflicts break out, the company will claim that the dispute is for the villagers to resolve, and it will proceed with setting up its plantations.

In other instances, companies have claimed that only a small portion of community lands will be converted to company plantations, and that there will be enough land left for communities to use for their own needs. The company might say that it will 'only' need 50 hectares on one side of the river and another 100 hectares on the other side. Because many communities measure their land differently than the company – they use natural boundaries while the company uses hectares or acres – they may not realize that these two plots of land, which add up to 150 hectares, in fact cover almost all of the land that the villages have. In reality, the company will end up taking control of most of the community's lands.

Tactic 16:

Companies destroy markets for locally produced palm oil and create food insecurity



Much of the palm oil produced on company plantations is for export. When the oil from the industrial plantations is sold on the domestic market, the companies and the banks financing them boast that they are improving food security because they are helping reduce the country's dependence on palm oil imports. But more often than not, the company-produced oil is used to destroy the market for local palm oil. When companies dump large quantities of industrial palm oil on the local market, they undercut prices for local palm oil producers. And even though the company's oil is of lower quality, its low price usually makes it hard for local producers to compete.

Companies may also promise to leave some land around the villages for people to use to grow their food crops. In their glossy company brochures for overseas palm oil buyers and banks, the company may present this as a voluntary contribution to 'improving local food security'. However, in many countries, keeping industrial plantations a minimum distance away from villages is a legal obligation. What companies advertise as a generous deed is simply their compliance with the law – and many companies do not even comply with the law and illegally push their plantations right up to the edge of villages.

The truth is that in many different ways, industrial oil palm plantations create food insecurity by depriving communities of the land they need to grow food for their families.

Tactic 17:

Companies cut off community access to forests



Another way industrial oil palm plantations increase food insecurity is by depriving villagers access to forests inside the plantation concession, or by cutting off villagers' access to forests that are only reachable by passing through the company plantation area. Communities depend on these forests for food like mushrooms and caterpillars, herbs and medicinal plants. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, villagers living around industrial oil palm plantations say they can no longer find caterpillars - a major source of protein for them. For women, this also often means that they can no longer gather the herbs and medicinal plants from the forest that their families depend on to cure illnesses.

More and more villagers are being denied access to forests within plantation concessions. One reason this occurs is because of certification schemes like the RSPO (see Tactic 20). These certification schemes require palm oil companies to set aside what they call 'high conservation value forests' (HCVF) or 'high carbon value' forests. In order to comply with these certification requirements – which will help them sell their palm oil and get money from foreign banks to expand their plantations – companies increasingly prohibit villagers from entering these forest areas that they now call 'high conservation value forests' or 'high carbon value' forests.

Tactic 18:

Companies promote out-grower 'partnerships' to control villagers' lands



Palm oil companies increasingly use smallholder or out-grower programmes to expand their production. Sometimes this is also referred to as contract farming. Villagers who sign up for these programmes commit to cultivating industrial oil palms **exclusively for one company** on all or part of their land. They must grow the oil palms according to the conditions dictated by the company and sign smallholder contracts that are non-negotiable.¹

Companies promote these smallholder programmes as a contribution to “rural development” and “food security”, and often call them “partnerships”. Increasingly, national governments are making community involvement a condition for (foreign) palm oil companies that are requesting an agricultural lease covering thousands of hectares. In reality, the conditions written into the contracts show that contract farming is very unequal: the company gets all the benefits and the farmers assume all the risks.

“Clearly, this program is a scam to make us lose our land, through contracts that are hard to understand, and even harder to obtain copies of”

(Member of a cooperative, in Gabon. In WRM Bulletin 231, The Seed of Despair: Communities lose their land and water sources due to OLAM’s agribusiness in Gabon, 2017)

¹ For more information about the risks of smallholder contract programmes, see the booklet *Nine reasons to say no to contract farming with palm oil companies*: www.wrm.org.uy/publications/nine-reasons-to-say-no-to-contract-farming-with-palm-oil-companies

Tactic 19:

Companies claim that farmers can 'get rich planting industrial oil palms'



Companies offering contract farming programmes are known to trick farmers with false calculations and promises. A company may show calculations that make it seem like signing up for a contract farming programme will make the farmer rich quickly. In reality, farmers joining the scheme will soon end up in debt.² **The company's promise of 'getting rich' from planting industrial oil palms ends up making peasant farmers landless on their own land.**

Usually, a company will claim that farmers only need to commit a small parcel of their land to the programme, and that they can still use the rest of their land to grow food; or they will claim that farmers can plant crops among the industrial oil palms. This is rarely true.

For women, the workload increases dramatically when they sign up for an out-grower scheme. They have less time to collect food in the forest and grow food crops (if they have any land left to do so). "Apart from the responsibility in the house, there's also the work outside of the house, from morning until the afternoon; and once home there are still more household chores that must be done," is how a woman from Indonesia trapped in a smallholder contract described the situation.³

Though it is advertised by the company as 'win-win' deal for both sides, contract farming in reality means that the company gets all the benefits and the contract farmers take on all the risks.

² For more information about the risks of smallholder contract programmes, see the booklet *Nine reasons to say no to contract farming with palm oil companies*: www.wrm.org.uy/publications/nine-reasons-to-say-no-to-contract-farming-with-palm-oil-companies

³ Dewy, P. et al. (2010): *The oil palm plantation weakens the situation of women*. Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights, Bogor.

Tactic 20:

Companies partner with NGOs and 'Sustainable Palm Oil' labels to create a 'green' image



Many palm oil companies are working with big international conservation NGOs, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). This helps them divert attention away from the conflicts they are causing in communities. Usually, the partnerships are connected to a private institution called the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). It is an alliance of the largest companies in the palm oil sector (buyers and producers) and some conservation NGOs. Together, they have negotiated a checklist called “RSPO Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Oil Palm Production”. A palm oil company can hire consultants to confirm that its plantations are managed in compliance with these RSPO Principles and Criteria. After it has passed the test, the company receives a certificate and can advertise that it produces “sustainable palm oil”.

The RSPO label has been repeatedly given to companies that violate the RSPO Principles and Criteria. Even though it is common knowledge that some palm oil companies have received RSPO certification in spite of serious land conflicts with communities, the RSPO label still helps companies access bank loans that they need to expand their plantations. Many banks will request the RSPO certificate as a condition for approving a loan to a palm oil company. It has become clear that buyers of the companies’ palm oil and the banks providing the money mainly want to see the label. They don’t seem to care that “certified” companies may have taken over lands without the consent of the affected communities or that they are responsible for violence against women, plantations workers and activists.

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**INFORMAL ALLIANCE AGAINST
INDUSTRIAL OIL PALM PLANTATIONS
IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA.**

June, 2024