

**COMMUNITIES FACING  
ZERO DEFORESTATION  
PLEDGES: THE CASE  
OF OLAM IN GABON**



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**Muyissi Environnement and World  
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# FOREWORD

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“Zero deforestation” pledges are one more idea in the list of voluntary initiatives created in the past 10-15 years to supposedly address the negative impacts of industrial agriculture commodity crops. Oil palm plantation companies have responded to pressure from global food corporations such as Unilever, Nestle and Mars and made a commitment to “zero deforestation”<sup>1</sup>. Global food corporations are major buyers of palm oil and they, as well as the financial backers of oil palm companies, have started to feel consumer pressure about the contribution made by these companies to the destruction of the world’s tropical forests. A growing number of European and North American consumers want to be assured that their purchase of chocolate, biscuits, soap or lipstick does not contribute to this destruction. Companies in other sectors such as the meat and soy industry have also adopted “zero deforestation” pledges, for they too are notorious drivers of deforestation.

Along with other international initiatives, a considerable number of transnational companies have in one way or another adopted this voluntary “zero deforestation” idea. But has it resulted in anything significant?

Undoubtedly one outcome of “zero deforestation” pledges has been a surge in paper work. Along with specific policies that have been generated to guide the implementation of these commitments, international declarations about the world’s forests that have been signed by governments, NGOs and corporations, along with certification schemes, now mention “zero deforestation” in their documents. All together, an impressive volume of documents, policies, criteria, plans and recommendations about “zero deforestation” have emerged.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of OLAM, and many other companies, although they talk about having committed to avoid deforestation in their public relations materials, they actually use a “zero net deforestation” policy. “Zero deforestation” and “zero net deforestation” are not the same, as will be explained under section 2 of this booklet.

The commitments are also useful propaganda for oil palm companies that are concerned about creating a positive image and 'greening up' their reputation, having been targeted for years as drivers of deforestation.

What is striking, however, is the absence of information on the experiences of communities living inside or adjacent to the plantation areas of companies that have signed "zero deforestation" pledges. Although there are various studies and articles specifically about "zero deforestation", they tend to be desk studies that lack information on how these policies impact on local communities.

In response to this deficit, a field study was carried out with communities located in and around four concession areas used by the agribusiness company OLAM in the province of Ngounie, which is located in central-southern Gabon, a densely forested country in Central Africa. OLAM actively promotes industrial oil palm plantations in Gabon, while supposedly committing to "zero deforestation" in 2017. The villages that were visited in these four concession areas are facing varying degrees of impacts from OLAM's activities.

Women in particular face severe consequences as a result of these plantations, yet their voices are often absent in studies on the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations. To address this gap, the research teams placed emphasis during the field visits on allowing women to access a space to share their experiences, by way of conversations within women-only groups.

The research was carried out in 18 villages in the period of April 25 to May 25, 2019 (see ANNEX I), by the organisations *Muyissi Environnement* (based in Gabon) and the World Rainforest Movement.

*Muyissi Environnement and WRM.*

# 1. About “zero deforestation”

The first “zero deforestation” commitment was launched in 2007 in Brazil by nine major conservation NGOs, including WWF, Conservation International (CI) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). **(1)** Their objective: to reduce deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon to zero by 2015. Curiously, they invited companies that destroy forests to join their initiative. These corporate-friendly NGOs claimed that companies could continue to expand their operations as long as the lands they use are not classified as forests and the companies occupied instead either deforested lands, so-called “degraded” forest lands, or other biomes with no forest cover. As a result, these NGOs created possibilities for corporations to continue their destructive expansion.

Over the years, the idea of “zero deforestation” pledges has become very popular. In addition to company pledges, a large number of international tropical forest initiatives have also adopted this initiative. They include: the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests, which commits those who sign the declaration to reach “zero deforestation” by 2030; the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals aim at halting deforestation by 2020; the Consumer Goods Forum, which consists of around 400 retailers and manufacturing companies, also set a 2020 target to end deforestation; and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) incorporated the so-called High Carbon Stock Approach in 2018, with the objective to conserve all categories of forests, including secondary forests and those in the process of regeneration.

A very important additional push came in 2015 with the adoption of the UN Paris Agreement on climate change. This included one more international forest policy document that declares forests, especially tropical forests, as crucial “carbon stores” that must be protected. Forest conservation and measures to halt deforestation have become the overriding targets to mitigate the global warming emergency. Halting deforestation is important for many reasons, although when it comes to the climate crisis the problem lies elsewhere: the non-stop burning of fossil fuels. Yet the Paris Agreement makes no mention whatsoever of this direct cause of the climate crisis.

Nonetheless, the most important push for oil palm plantation companies to adhere to “zero deforestation” pledges is that deforestation has become a major concern for plantation investors as well as consumers. According to Glenn Hurowitz, CEO of the Mighty Earth conservation NGO, “in today’s global marketplace, people simply don’t want to buy food or soap that’s grown by destroying elephant and chimpanzee habitat”. **(2)** For its part, the Norwegian government decided in 2018 to exclude palm oil from its list of biofuels, due to its contribution to deforestation.

Companies are therefore under strong pressure to actually do something, as inaction may negatively affect their profit margins. In this context, committing to “zero deforestation” practices becomes an attractive alternative.

First, it is a voluntary commitment and very far from representing any legal obligation. And second, it conceals the forest destruction that the company has already caused prior to making the commitment. What remains in the spotlight is a new bright image of a “green” company, a friend of nature. This modus operandi becomes strikingly clear in the case of OLAM International Limited in Gabon.



*Palmeraie Olam de Mouila.  
Ph: Jacques Torregano pour  
Jeune Afrique*



## 2. OLAM and its Zero Deforestation policy in Gabon

Gabon is a country in Central Africa with forest covering 89% of its territory. **(3)** In 2009, the Gabonese government adopted the “Strategic Plan Emergent Gabon” (PSGE), with the objective of diversifying Gabon’s economy, currently heavily dependent on extraction of timber and petroleum. However, one aim of the Strategic Plan is to make the country the biggest industrial palm oil producer on the African continent. OLAM –a food and agri-business company active in 70 countries- is viewed by the Gabonese government as a key corporate partner to lead this effort. The company’s headquarters are in Singapore and its main stakeholders are Temasek Holdings (Singapore) and the Mitsubishi Corporation (Japan). OLAM has been active in Gabon since 1999.

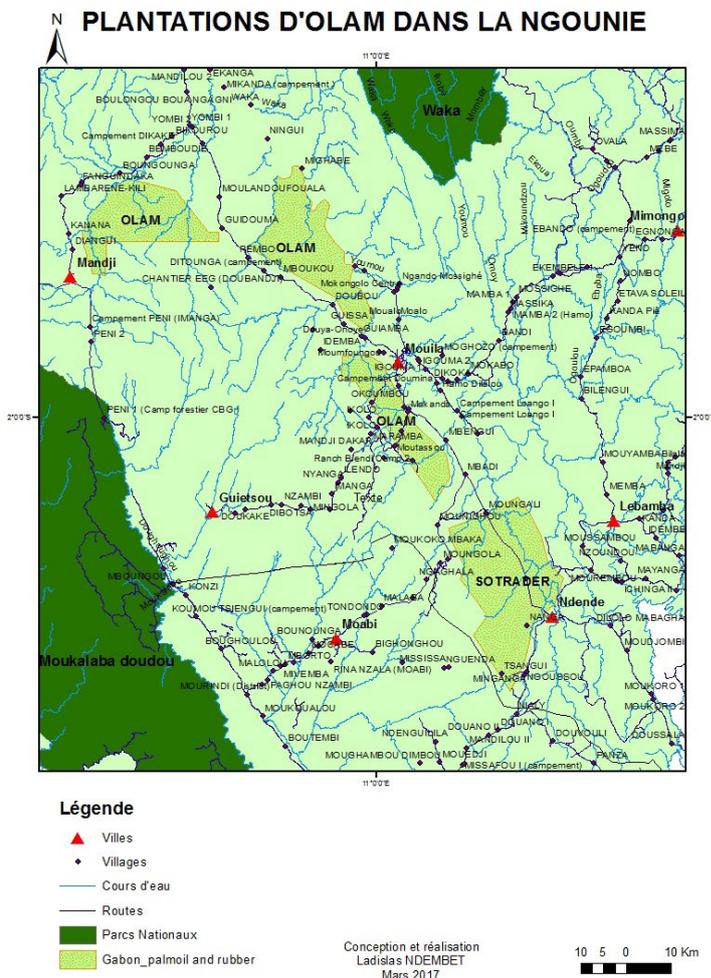
In 2010, OLAM signed an agreement with the Gabonese government by which it received a number of incentives and benefits to initiate its oil palm plantation activities in the country. Today, it is Gabon’s biggest industrial oil palm and rubber plantation company. To promote oil palm plantations, OLAM and the Gabonese government have created two companies:

- Olam Palm Gabon, a joint venture of OLAM (60%) and the Gabonese state (40%). The Gabonese government provided OLAM Palm Gabon with a “land bank” of up to 300,000 hectares **(4)**, to be gradually conceded to the company by way of lots. The total area of concession land of OLAM Palm Gabon now stands at 143,412 hectares, of which 59,275 hectares is planted with oil palm. A total of 43,922 hectares of oil palm plantations is located in the province of Ngounie, divided between three lots: Lot 1 Mboukou, Lot 2 Mandji and Lot 3 Moutassou. **(5)**
- SOTRADER, a joint venture of OLAM (49%) and the Gabonese state (51%). SOTRADER set up the so-called GRAINE project, for

which the Gabonese government has set aside a “land bank” of up to 200,000 hectares. **(6)** The GRAINE initiative promotes the cultivation of food crops as well as oil palm through small-holder cooperatives. **(7)** SOTRADER controls 58,401 hectares in the province of Ngounie where it focuses exclusively on cultivating oil palm. To date, an area of 7,953 hectares has been planted with oil palms, and the intention is to expand such plantations over another 23,169 hectares. **(8)**



Ngounie province



The three OLAM Palm Gabon concession lots, identified as ‘OLAM’ on the map, as well as the SOTRADER concession lot, all in the province of Ngounie, indicating the location of villages inside and adjacent to the concession area (source: *Muyissi Environnement*)

These figures show that the total “land bank” provided by the Gabonese government for OLAM Palm Gabon and SOTRADER for the development of oil palm plantations covers a total of 500,000 hectares. The numbers of OLAM’s “land bank” also underline its huge expansion plans for the near future. In the province of Ngounie, OLAM’s lot 1 has been RSPO certified. **(9)**

In 2012, OLAM Palm Gabon started its activities in the province of Ngounie. It logged and destroyed forests and savannas and set up oil palm plantations. SOTRADER began its activities a few years later, after it was founded in December 2014. OLAM has destroyed tens of thousands of hectares of forests over the years.

As a result of the company’s interest in certifying all of its plantations by RSPO, and the latter’s requirement that companies conserve at least part of the forest areas inside oil palm plantation concessions, soon after OLAM started planting its first oil palms, it hired consultants to identify so-called “High Conservation Value” (HCV) areas, on which the company would not set up oil palm plantations. Outside of these areas identified as HCV, however, OLAM could continue to destroy thousands of hectares of forest and savannah that consultants had classified as not being of “high conservation value”.

In December 2016, the US-based conservationist NGO Mighty Earth showed in a public report, which included satellite images **(10)**, that since the start of its operations, OLAM Palm Gabon had deforested at least 20,000 hectares in its four lots in Gabon. Three months later, in February 2017, OLAM signed an agreement with Mighty Earth in Washington DC by which the company committed to a moratorium on any further deforestation: a “zero deforestation” pledge. According to the agreement, the company agreed to a “moratorium on any kind of forest clearance for new plantation expansion”. **(11)** The company reconfirmed this commitment when it declared in October 2019 that it was on track to have all its plantations certified by RSPO in 2021. RSPO reinforced its criteria about deforestation in November 2018, adopting also a “zero deforestation” policy. **(12)**

## “Zero deforestation” in a densely forested country? OLAM’s loopholes.

The contradictions in OLAM’s commitment to stop deforestation soon become apparent. In fact, OLAM had first reacted to Mighty Earth’s report with defending its forest destruction policy, stating that “We agree with Gabon’s sovereign right to convert **a tiny percentage** [our emphasis] of its least valuable forested land for agriculture, so long as it is responsibly and transparently done” **(13)**. Knowing that the “zero deforestation” commitment pressure on oil palm companies is intense, the question then is what loopholes have been built into the commitment to enable such companies to continue expanding in densely forested countries like Gabon.

### “Zero net deforestation”

After assuming its “zero deforestation” commitment, OLAM developed its so-called “OLAM living landscapes policy”. **(14)** In that document, the first loophole appears straight at the beginning: OLAM explains that to achieve “zero deforestation”, it is adopting “net-positive principles”, resulting in a “net positive impact”. The company explains it will “set out a long term plan to embed a net positive approach in the commodity systems in which we participate”.

The word “net”, although it might appear insignificant, is in fact crucial. “Zero net deforestation” means that the total area of forest within a given geography remains unchanged. However, this can be achieved not only by not destroying any more forest but also by planting new trees to offset forest that has been destroyed. **(15)** “Zero net deforestation” thus allows a company to continue destroying forests as long as it restores “comparable” areas elsewhere by planting trees. In practice, this means that a company “compensates” for forest destruction by protecting other “comparable” areas in terms of biodiversity and types of flora, which they claim would be at risk of destruction.



*Olam Living Landscapes*

The word “positive” in the formulation “net positive impact” goes even further: in this case, a company not only “compensates” for the destruction it has caused, but also protects other at-risk places or rehabilitates areas where forest has been destroyed, claiming that overall, these measures are creating a “net positive” impact in comparison with a scenario lacking such interventions. This idea has become popular among corporations, as it allows them to continue destroying forests and yet present themselves as even more “green” and as “creators” of biodiversity. The ideas of “zero net” and “net positive impact” are at the heart of a mechanism called “biodiversity offsetting”. (16)

In essence, however, these concepts are quite perverse. Each place is unique, has its own diversity, and is rooted in a specific time and space; it cannot be compared to or replaced by other areas. Such living spaces are also often used by and sustain the livelihoods of local communities, and should never be destroyed!

## **A focus on protecting HCV forest areas only**

As part of its “living landscapes” policy, OLAM continues to emphasize that it will conserve and create more High Conservation Value (HCV) forests. In other words, those areas, including forests, that the company does not consider part of this category can be converted into oil palm plantations. Indeed, in a press release from October 2019, OLAM stated that “Our plantations are located only on areas of land that have been identified and mapped as grassland, secondary regrowth or degraded logging areas”. Local communities in the lots where OLAM is active in the Ngounie province have a different view, claiming that before OLAM set up its oil palm plantations, the company logged the forests itself, thus turning them into “degraded logging areas”. In fact, in the case of OLAM and in the context of its project to establish oil palm plantations in its densely forested concession areas, the company itself hired a logging company to fell timber with any commercial value inside said areas. The profits generated were then shared between the logging company, the Gabonese state and the communities. In the case of the communities, these revenues were distributed in the form of community projects. After the logging, OLAM prepared the land cleared for planting oil palm trees.

Moreover, OLAM in its “living landscapes policy” document underlines that it supports the policy for “sustainable palm oil” development that has been adopted by a number of African governments. This policy only requires protection of HCV and also High Carbon Stock (HSC) forests – both are usually considered primary forest areas. That means that the remaining forest areas that consultants hired by the company consider secondary or logged/degraded forests can be destroyed. **(17)**

## **“Savannah is not forest”**

Another loophole OLAM uses is planting oil palm trees on areas of savannah, which are very valuable for communities (see more in the next section). A comparable focus in Brazil over the past 10-20 years to protect the Amazon forest led to the large-scale destruction of the very rich Brazilian savannah, known locally as the cerrado.

## **Modifying the definition used for Gabon’s forests**

But the biggest and most perverse loophole adopted by OLAM and its business partner, the Gabonese government, is a change in the country’s definition of what constitutes a forest. This change in the forest definition is crucial for the company to be able to both continue expansion of its industrial plantation and claim to be adhering to its “zero deforestation” policy. **(18)**

In 2018, the Gabonese Ministry of Agriculture proposed to modify the current forest definition, itself based on the UN FAO definition, which only takes into account tree coverage. The proposal is unprecedented. It would consider a forest not only as an area with trees but would also set a parameter of a minimum quantity of carbon that a forest area must contain. According to the proposal prepared by Gabon’s National Agency for National Parks (ANPN), “a forest is an ecosystem with a surface of at least 4 hectares of endemic forest trees with an average of at least 5 trees with a DHP [the French initialism for diameter at breast height] of > 70cm/ha and/or a biomass of > 118 Tons of Carbon/Ha”. **(19)**

If this definition is adopted it would create a dangerous precedent. The suggested minimum quantity of 118 tons of carbon per hectare would simply exclude secondary forests and those in a state of regeneration from the definition used for forests. The objective is very clear: if such environments are no longer defined as forests, OLAM could convert those secondary and regenerating forests into oil palm plantations, while still claiming to be upholding its international “zero deforestation” commitment in terms of its stakeholders and consumers. OLAM would also be able to maintain its RSPO certification. It would even allow the company to further its plans to obtain RSPO certification of all of its plantations. Given that RSPO no longer allows the destruction of secondary forests or those in regeneration, a loophole was needed. The change in the forest definition would provide this loophole.

## **The consequences of OLAM’s loopholes for communities**

These loopholes, if implemented, tend to heavily impact on the communities living inside and adjacent to OLAM’s concession areas:

- If a forest area is identified by the company as supposedly under risk and receives protection, or rather to serve as a “compensation area”, the community using that forest suffers negative impacts. They are the ones blamed for deforestation. Companies such as OLAM claim that peasant agriculture and other uses of the forest will destroy that environment in the future, and that, they argue, is the reason why these areas need “protection.” In its 2018 progress report on its sustainable oil palm activities, OLAM refers to peasant farmers and forests as follows: “encouraging them to conserve forests and wildlife and to seek other development opportunities for communities.” **(20)**
- OLAM’s focus on creating more HCV areas ignores the potential value and importance of these areas for local communities. It does so when it argues in its “living landscapes” policy that “some degraded ecosystems such as logged tropical forests may be classified as HCV or critical habitat and require protection and restoration.” And OLAM’s announcement that “we will promote

sustainable agricultural systems and elimination of unsustainable forest burning” might well lead to the demonizing of communities practising swidden agriculture systems that include controlled burning. Thus, severe restrictions on community land use and constant surveillance are a likely consequence.

- The expansion of oil palm plantations over savannah, much of which is grassland and not forest areas, tends to affect community use of this particular biome.
- The change in the forest definition will enable OLAM to set up oil palm plantations in secondary forest areas and those in a state of regeneration. Most of these areas are extremely important for and part of the territories used by local communities.

However, according to its “living landscapes policy” document, OLAM argues that its “net positive principles” will produce a “triple positive impact”, resulting in: “prosperous farmers and farming systems”, “thriving communities” and that they will help in “regenerating the world”. Nice words. The problem is that they don’t reflect the reality on the ground, as the following sections will show.

## 3. OLAM and the communities

The communities whose territories overlap with OLAM's concession areas have built close ties with their territories over many generations, be they forests or savannahs. The present location of the villages in this sector is a direct result of French colonization. After the construction of the Libreville-Mouila highway, French colonial policies forced people to relocate their settlements close to this road, the purpose of which was to facilitate tax collection. As a result, the different family clans that until then lived dispersed in their respective territories, were forced to rebuild their villages alongside the highway.

In spite of the forced displacement, people maintained strong ties with their respective territories or 'terroirs'. They continued to return to these lands to grow their food, hunt, fish, and collect fruits, mushrooms and medicinal plants. Their livelihoods continued to center around maintaining a connection with "their forests", their ancient villages and sacred sites.

### **OLAM's arrival in the communities**

When OLAM Palm Gabon started its activities in the country, the central government had already provided the company with concession areas. Taking into account that the Gabonese government was its business partner, it is clear that it not only had a clear interest but had already decided that the project would go ahead.

When the company arrived in the province of Ngounie in 2012, OLAM came to the province not merely as a private sector company, but as a partner in a joint project with the State. Having said that, OLAM did not ignore the principle of free, prior and informed consent. Public consultations took place to ascertain if the communities would accept the project. However, OLAM was able to exert a strong influence on this process in its own favour, given that when it arrived in the province the decision to implement the project had already been taken. Besides, for some villagers, "OLAM c'est la présidence"

(OLAM is the presidency), alluding to the robust participation of the President of the Republic in the project, what also had a threatening effect.

During our visits to the area, we heard of two communities that had rejected the project. Such was the case of the town of Ndendé where a whole district said no to the project, receiving the support of the town's mayor. OLAM has not set up plantations in that district. Besides, in the case of the community of Bemboudie, villagers also successfully rejected OLAM's project. In this second case, villagers commented that their rejection of the plantation project did not stop OLAM from invading their lands and destroying forest. This deforestation took place around the same time that OLAM signed its "zero deforestation" commitment. According to the villagers, shortly after forest had been destroyed, the company claimed the deforestation had been a mistake and offered compensation.

Conversations with representatives of local departmental and municipal authorities also revealed that the oil palm plantation project is being imposed by the Gabonese State and OLAM. Their main message is that they can do little or nothing about the problems the communities face related to OLAM's plantations and the company's control over their territory. They claim they have no influence and fear opposing "the president's project". Remarkably, they also have no information about OLAM's project, not even an outline document or an impact assessment.

## **Social contracts**

What OLAM and the government of Gabon allowed communities was to make a list of grievances, so-called "doléances". In meetings with community members, they were asked to detail their needs, resulting in supposed "social contracts" signed by community chiefs from one particular lot or concession area and OLAM Palm Gabon. **(21)** In practice, these are social projects that the company had promised to carry out. According to these contracts, in exchange the communities hand over the territories, forests and savannahs they depend on, so that the company can start setting up its plantations and related infrastructure. What we found in our field investigations was that the contents of the contracts had not been disseminated within the communities. Many chiefs do not disseminate the contents and many village people do not even know that the chiefs have such contracts in their possession.

Some of the “compensation” projects were fulfilled. Others are still pending or are not functioning following implementation. The “social contracts” we were shown during our visits, do not include schedules for the company to implement the list of community demands. They also do not contain details on how a health service should be equipped and maintained. To name just a few examples: the dispensary in the Rembo community does not function, the reason being there is no staff or medicines available. The majority of the solar panels installed in this and several other communities are defective. The water coming out from the two water pumps in the village of Moutambe Sane Fomou is undrinkable. And the list goes on and on. Communities feel cheated and expressed indignation because of these crucial omissions and the poor implementation of other commitments set down in the “social contracts”.



*The closed dispensary at Rembo village. Photo: Muyissi Environnement/WRM.*

A related problem is mentioned by villagers in Fanguidaka, Lambarene-Kili and Rembo. The steering committees (comités de pilotagem), led by the mayor and set up with representatives of each community in each concession lot to oversee the implementation by OLAM of the social contracts, barely function. Villagers complain these committees have not held any meetings for a long time.

## “Participatory” mapping

Another initiative OLAM claims to have carried out with communities when it started activities in 2012 was a so-called “participatory” mapping of community territories. This was carried out by consultants and resulted in a map of each village territory. The maps identify types of flora, the location of the villages and important places for local use, including subsistence farming and lakes where fishing activities are carried out, as well as old settlements, lakes and rivers, sacred sites, and the areas set aside for OLAM’s plantations.

Some villagers called into question the “participative” nature of the mapping exercise. An inhabitant of the village of Rembo noted the following: “We have not been informed about the production of a participative map and we have no idea who produced it”.

Meanwhile, OLAM has not even respected the sites that the communities defined as important for their livelihood activities or because they are considered sacred, even though the company promised to respect them, according to the social contract. Some examples:

- in Rembo, villagers claim that the sacred site used for hunting and fishing, referred to locally as Mavassa, has been destroyed;
- in Bounougounga, villagers claim that a sacred site with ancient cemeteries known as Pangani, where OLAM presently has its office in Mandji, has been destroyed;
- in Mbadi, villagers claim that the historical site Mbombé-Nyonda Makita (where the first battle took place between two warriors) is under threat due to OLAM’s plan to install a new palm oil mill on the same site.

Villagers in Rembo, Doubou and Guidoma also report that the promised distances – i.e. buffer zones - between OLAM’s plantations and important sites for the physical and cultural survival of communities have not been respected either. This partly explains the problems reported by villagers in the following section.



Participatory map of Mboukou. Source of the document: INC, WRI/Palm Olam Gabon/Écosphère, 2012)

The map appears to be one more item on OLAM's checklist of requirements in order to start up its project, rather than a meaningful exercise with communities to visualize and defend the extent and importance of their territory.

In the following section, it will also become clear that OLAM's "compensation" through the provision of social projects does not provide even minimum compensation for the severe problems and losses the communities are facing, due to the arrival and expansion of the company's plantations over their territories.

## 4. Problems faced by communities due to OLAM's plantations and “zero deforestation” policy

### Strangers in their own territories

Community members frequently mention that one major impact of OLAM's plantation project is the growing number of restrictions and obstacles imposed on people, making it difficult for them to access their own territory. Particularly problematic are restrictions on the forest and savannah they use. Villagers state that this started around 2015 when OLAM created the so-called “High Conservation Value” (HCV) areas inside the village territories – these represent 50% of OLAM's concession areas. **(22)** It became worse, they say, from 2017 onwards, which was when OLAM adopted its “zero deforestation” policy. According to women in Mboukou village, the guards that supervise the OLAM concession told people: “this forest no longer belongs to you, it belongs to the State and we [OLAM] are the State!”

For several years, OLAM has also been requesting that people carry a permit issued by the company when they enter the concession areas. The permit is referred to as “macaron”. Several villagers complained that they still don't have such a permit and thus cannot access their own territory. Some also stated that although the company had come to the villages to take their photograph, it had never provided anyone with the required permits.



Example of a 'macaron' permit.  
Photo: Muyissi Environnement/WRM.



Even with a permit, however, the company still creates problems. Villagers complain they can no longer pursue their activities inside their territory during OLAM's working hours (between 08:00hs-16:00hs). According to a woman in Nanga village, women without a permit can only fish on Sunday in the few lakes that remain, such as the one located at Moulalambe. Only those villagers with a permit can access these lakes during the week, but only outside company working hours.

Another obstacle was described by the villagers of Kanana and Ferra, who complained that the company had dug ditches around their plantations, supposedly to stop elephants from entering and destroying them. But neither can villagers cross the 3 to 4 meter deep ditches, and accidents involving people and animals have been reported. By digging these ditches, OLAM violates the freedom of movement of villagers, as well as the right to use their traditional pathways throughout their territory. The ditches restrict villagers' rights to fish, hunt, collect food, materials and medicines, and even to grow their own food, while also denying them their right to visit sacred sites located within the forests.



*A ditch dug by OLAM in lot 3 Moutassou. Depth between 3-4 meters  
Photo: Muyissi Environnement/WRM.*

Consequently, and in order to access their territory, villagers are forced to use the only road available – the one that crosses OLAM’s plantations. This road includes a checkpoint controlled by OLAM’s guards, who only let people pass if they carry the company-issued permit. The guards also search people’s bags, even though article 252 of the Gabonese forest code – law 016/2001 – permits citizens to exercise their customary rights in terms of their personal or collective needs, including the right to hunt. According to one villager: “if a security agent of OLAM finds you carrying something you hunted or tools used for fishing, they will confiscate the meat or expel us from the places we traditionally use to fish”.



*Checkpoint  
Photo: Muyissi  
Environnement/WRM.*



This has severely undermined the liberty and freedom of villagers to come and go as they please, as well as their capacity to maintain and transmit their culture and knowledge about fishing, hunting and other activities to the future generations.

## **Undermining fishing and hunting is damaging to people's identity**

Fishing is a traditional activity of women in the region. However, it has become much more difficult in communities impacted by OLAM's activities for women to fish in the rivers and small lakes known locally as "marigots".

The way OLAM has established their blocks of oil palm plantations has also had a negative impact on women's fishing activities, as the company basically ignored the geography of the region's water basins. The flow of water in the basins was obstructed and many were backfilled, which in practice has severely affected rivers and lakes. Women in the village of Bemboudie reported that the Disouva, Malaga and Moukouakou rivers have all been backfilled, while one of the worst situations was reported at Nanga village, located between the concessions of SOTRADER and OLAM Palm Gabon. According to one villager, most of their lakes are now "closed off" to them.

Local women also complain about the water pollution caused by the run-off of chemical products such as fertilizers and other agrottoxins, as well as plantation workers defecating in the small lakes where women traditionally fish. According to one woman from Mboukou, "the OLAM people have damaged our waters and we often catch them defecating in the lakes that still exist". In the case of the Mboukou and Rembo villages, they have basically lost all their lakes and small rivers. And according to a villager from Moutam Sane Fomou, "the majority of the rivers and lakes that served us are backfilled, due to the expansion of the plantations, while those left are also a problem, because if we wash our bodies with this water they start itching".

Women from the Doubou and Sanga villages also reported that the water in their lakes has changed colour. They are now forced to smoke the fish they catch in order to consume it, given that fresh fish is of little use as it soon starts to rot. And when fish is being prepared, foam rises out of the cooking pot. The village women told investigators that after OLAM workers finish applying the chemical products inside the plantations, they empty what's left into the lakes, contaminating the water and even changing the physical appearance of the fish. According to one woman from the village of Boungouga, "the water

is not good quality anymore, the body itches and we do not eat [the fish] any longer; we prepare it by boiling it and when we fish, the fish [caught] has no flavour or a nice taste anymore, and this has been happening since OLAM's activities started on our lands".

The pollution of the lakes forces women to walk longer distances to find drinkable water. To make things worse, the company now plans to irrigate its plantations due to the ever-longer dry periods that affect the region. In Bemboudie village, women complain that OLAM wants to set up irrigation reservoirs for its plantations along the Ovigui river, which flows through a dozen villages. For the local women, this is the only river left that they can still use to go fishing.

Hunting in the forest and savannah areas as well as visiting sacred sites inside the plantations has also become difficult. Women in Mboukou reported that many of these activities have to be carried out in clandestinely, while if they are caught by the security guards, the animals they have hunted are confiscated.

Villagers are also angry that OLAM does not seem to distinguish between villagers and outsiders, including workers who are not from the local communities. Many local people complain about the plantation workers who enter the forests to hunt in territories belonging to the communities, but who never gave their permission to do so.

These hunting restrictions not only violate the legal rights of community members, they also violate a clause in the social contracts signed between OLAM and the villagers. In these contracts, the company assured villagers that they would be able to freely hunt and fish for subsistence purposes inside their territories.

## Deforestation puts food sovereignty at risk

The “zero deforestation” commitment adopted by OLAM in 2017 has not offset the profound ecological and social damage caused by the company’s destruction of thousands of hectares of forest in the province of Ngounie since 2012. To date, in lots 1 and 2, OLAM has already destroyed most of the forests. This destruction continues to have a heavy impact on communities and people’s livelihoods.

A woman from Mboukou village, one of the most heavily affected communities, described how by taking control of fertile community land, OLAM’s destruction has left them without the necessary land to maintain their livelihoods: “All the forest has been destroyed; they built their accommodation facilities inside our forest and destroyed our lands”.

For OLAM, in contrast, deforestation has been highly lucrative. Given the size of its concession areas, the amount of conversion timber logged inside the future plantation areas has been huge. No information is available on how much profit has been obtained from this conversion wood. Villagers stated that the company had promised part of the windfall from selling this timber to their communities. In the village of Kanana, people complained that they’re waiting for this to happen.

The impacts caused by the forest destruction and subsequent implementation of large-scale oil palm monocultures are numerous and severe:

- destruction of areas where villagers collected food products such as fruits, medicine and medicinal plants;
- a profound ecological imbalance, including the fragmentation of fauna and flora habitats and the destruction of water sources; this has resulted in a tremendous problem with elephants and other animals regularly roaming around the communities looking for food; villagers have also observed a significant increase in the population of flies, along with other insects and reptiles, including snakes;

- destruction of fertile fields for food production in forest and savannah areas that are now planted with oil palm monocultures.
- the use of chemical products, fertilizers and agrottoxins in the plantations, contaminating soils, rivers and lakes in the area;
- the water needs of the plantations; this has been aggravated by the irrigation programme being planned by OLAM to ensure year-round availability of water for plantation areas, placing communities at even greater risk in terms of water shortages.

An academic article **(23)** commenting on the destructive impacts of OLAM's intensive logging in the areas that were turned into oil palm plantations, states the following: "logging is helping to open up paths that facilitate that elephants come to villages. Also, logging is the main cause of destruction of natural habitats through the elimination of plant species. The elephant, for example, which is the primary animal involved in the conflicts linked to the destruction of crops in the agricultural fields in Gabon, has a dense and diversified diet. (..), an elephant consumes between 150 and 180 kg of food per day in the dry season; between 200 and 260kg in the rainy season. As a result, the search for food resources can be one of the main causes of their migration to village areas when their natural habitat is fragmented by logging." (..) "the presence of elephants in certain villages in this province [Ngounie] is linked to the installation of OLAM's oil palm plantations."

## **The conflict of humans versus animals**

The Ministry of Water and Forests that deals with such "human-fauna" conflicts, is understaffed and has a restricted budget. Villagers complain that they even have to cover the transport costs themselves if they request ministry staff to record a situation where wild animals have damaged their crops. In 2017, the 317 complaints received from the province of Ngounie were the highest number in the country related to elephants threatening people's crops, followed by the province of Haut-Ogooué with 247.

In the villages most impacted by OLAM's plantations, the only way to cultivate food is in small plots located around the houses of the local villagers. The soil in these plots is usually far less fertile than in the fields used before OLAM took control of the land and turned it into oil palm plantations. Women in Kanana and Sanga complain that the quality of the food they produce has fallen, that some crops have a bitter taste and that others are tasteless. Moreover, if and when the crops mature, the harvested products rot more quickly. The women attribute this to soil pollution. What makes the women even more desperate is that elephants, porcupines, apes and other animals ravage their fields and there's nothing much they can do about it. Elephants in particular can be quite dangerous, but they are also a protected species; this means that villagers cannot kill them and risk fines and imprisonment if they try to do so. In the village of Boungounga, people report that they can no longer leave their homes at night, all because of the presence of elephants.



*Elephant dung not far from the village of Lambarene-Kili  
Photo: Muyissi Environnement/WRM.*

A villager from Bougounga described the situation: "We do not have enough space left so we plant near our homes due to the problems with the elephants, as they ravage everything we try to do in the forests that are left. That's why we decided to plant close to our homes, but over time we have become victims of these elephants that come right behind our homes to feed, and we fear for our safety and that of our children."

This puts communities in an extremely difficult situation. While the Ministry of Water and Forests campaigns around the importance of protecting the country's wildlife, and especially elephants, which are a totally protected species, communities suffer from their presence. Villagers in the Ndolou department area say that they view themselves as being "imprisoned": on one side by OLAM's plantations that have gobbled up most of the fertile lands, and on the other side, foraging elephants.

Even in the village of Lambaréné-ili, where women still practice traditional agriculture, people suffer from the invasion of elephants and the destruction of their fields. This has forced them to watch over their fields day and night, which is both exhausting and discouraging. Some prefer to abandon growing food altogether under such dangerous conditions, while wondering at the same time what other options they might have to survive.

The problem puts people's food security and sovereignty in danger, and is impoverishing the communities ever more. In order to feed their families, women are often obliged to buy food, which depends on finding work that provides a cash income.

## **Zero deforestation? Plantations advancing over savannah areas**

The communities visited during our field trips did not report any significant destruction of forest areas by OLAM around their villages since the company committed to "zero deforestation" in 2017. They did, however, explain that OLAM has continued to expand its destruction of savannah areas in Lot 3 and in Lot Sotrader and that this is also putting their livelihoods at risk. The current RSPO rules allow destruction of vegetation types defined as "scrub" and "cleared/open land" – which includes the savannah in Gabon - for industrial oil palm plantations, as these plant types are not considered a forest and thus supposedly not valuable enough to be protected.

The CEO of the Mighty Earth NGO, commenting on how OLAM could go ahead with its business expansion without destroying forests, argued that "most countries (...) have lots of degraded lands where they can expand agriculture". **(24)** Can the only available "non-forest" areas in the Mouila region - savannah – really be defined as "degraded land"?

The researcher Boussou Bouassa G. in the framework of his Ph.D., "Urban Study of the Ngounie" (1984) revealed the importance of savannahs in the provinces of Ngounié and Nyanga. His information on soil formation mentioned two particularly pertinent aspects: first, the soil is an important water reservoir during the dry seasons and fortifies the natural vegetation. Second, the good conservation

of humidity allows for the fast re-growth of the grassland. In addition, the diversity of these savannahs is important for the fauna, such as buffalo.

As for the communities, women in particular have customarily used the savannahs, which allow them to find and produce food, and there are also trees that only grow on the savannah. Now that OLAM's no-burn policy prohibits the burning of the savannah, villagers claim that it also puts their mushroom harvest at risk, as traditional controlled burning secures a good mushroom crop.



*Savannah in the department of Ndoulou.  
Photo: Muyissi Environnement/WRM.*



## **Women face the most severe impacts**

For women the story is often one of “before OLAM” and “after OLAM”.

Before OLAM arrived, women could find food and plants in the forest to care for the health needs of their families. While according to one woman in the village of Guidouma, “when our husbands went hunting, they came back with two or three game a day and that was a plus for the family. The sale of products from hunting allowed us to feed ourselves better and, above all, to educate our children well.” The sale of products from their farming plots, along with the hunting and gathering of materials from the forests and savannahs, allowed people to keep their children in school, even when children had to go to Libreville, the capital, to continue their studies. Before OLAM, children were also taught traditional activities such as food gathering and fishing. The forest and savannahs enabled villagers to reproduce the way of life on which they base their culture and identity. The soil was fertile at that

time and villagers had access to a healthy territory. The women note that even if they could afford it, they did not need a refrigerator then, because the food was always fresh and diverse.

After OLAM arrived, everything changed. The women are no longer allowed to practice their traditional activities. Access to their territory, to the forest, has become limited. Their agriculture is restricted and the only place left is behind their houses where the elephants destroy everything. Their fishing activities have also become impossible, mainly due to the pollution caused by chemical products used in the plantations. Nowadays, almost all the products to feed their families are purchased from the town. The quality and diversity of food has been drastically reduced to merely chicken, rice and canned food, while the only locally grown food is a type of wild banana (the matotou) that grows behind the houses (a problem that has been commented on especially in the village of Guidouma). Food prices are also increasing, which makes things even more difficult. The money comes from those who are employed by OLAM and whose wages, according to the women, are miserable. One woman in Mboukou reports that “Our children are obliged to leave us and go and live in the workers camps of OLAM. So there are hardly any young people left in our villages to help us”.

## **Final remarks**

An on-going process of forest destruction since 2012 has severely affected the physical and cultural survival of communities in the province of Ngounie. Their mode of living is based on a healthy territory. The situation in the villages visited differs, depending on the extent of expansion by OLAM over their territories. In recent years, OLAM expanded especially over savannah areas and imposed more restrictive measures on the freedom of communities to come and go inside their traditional territory. Women in particular suffer and are distressed by elephants ravaging their subsistence crops.

Initiatives such as voluntary “zero deforestation” pledges are propaganda tools for oil palm plantation companies like OLAM, but do not improve the lives of the people that make up the communities living inside and around OLAM’s concession areas. On the contrary, the advance of plantations over the valuable

savannah areas and the access restrictions imposed on villagers, make traditional activities unfeasible. The expansion of OLAM's industrial plantations onto savannahs infringes even more on the ability of families to sustain themselves and maintain their mode of living. This expansion risks pushing families into abandoning their villages without significant change to the company's policies, which are driving the spread of plantations into the only areas left for families to grow their food, and to go fishing and hunting.

The proposed change in the Gabonese forest definition is a dangerous and unprecedented one, and could make other countries with a relatively high forest cover to follow Gabon's example. It will also lead to more forest destruction and more problems for forest-dependent communities. Besides, it strengthens the current problems with the FAO forest definition, according to which a forest is reduced to just a clump of trees. And also, it further reinforces the false solutions that use forests to supposedly combat climate change, by promoting the view that what really matters is the carbon stored in the trees.

The major conservation NGOs, banks and consumers need to wake up to the serious impacts that industrial large-scale monoculture plantations imply for communities on the ground. These impacts include but are not limited to deforestation. They also need to call out the loopholes that companies are inventing to continue expanding their plantations and maintain their profits. Policies such as "zero deforestation" are often defended with arguments for protecting tigers, elephants, gorillas and other animals. When these policies hit the ground, they only make communities more vulnerable, not least because these policies make it easier to blame deforestation on communities rather than the companies that are the real drivers of deforestation. In the case of OLAM in Gabon, villagers say they have now lost their freedom; they feel like strangers on their own lands and the women a shadow of themselves. On top of that, it is important to highlight always that women also suffer from harassment and sexual violence. These are among the most silenced but also most terrible impacts that come with the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations. **(25)**

What is urgently needed is that control over their territories reverts back to communities. This is crucial to ensure their and the future generations' physical and cultural survival. The communities of Nanga and Ferra made that very clear on the occasion of September 21st, 2019, International Day of Struggle against

Tree Monocultures: they demanded that OLAM stop any further expansion on lands needed by the community. They made clear they see this as a first step in reclaiming and securing their territory for future generations. **(26)**

Forest conservation is urgently needed, but it should only be carried out by respecting and listening to forest-dependent communities. Evidence shows that forests have the best chance to be conserved if the rights of forest-dependent communities over their territories are respected. Respecting their rights means that communities can effectively control and take care of the lands, forests and other valuable areas inside their territory.

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## ANNEX I - Schedule of date, name of village, department and province visited

N°	Dates	Village name	Department	Province
1	21/04/2019	MANDJI	NDOLOU	NGOUNIÉ
2	Du 22 au 24/04/19	KANANA, FANGUINDAKA	NDOLOU	NGOUNIÉ
3	Du 25 au 27/04/19	BOUNGOUNGA, BEMBOUDIE	NDOLOU	NGOUNIÉ
4	28/04/19 - 21/04/19	FOUGAMOU	TSAMBA-MAGOTSI	NGOUNIÉ
5	Du 30/04 au 02/05/19 Du 22 au 24/04/19	GUIDOUMA, MBOUKOU, REMBO	TSAMBA-MAGOTSI	NGOUNIÉ
6	Du 03 au 05/05/19 Du 25 au 28/04/19	DOUBOU, MOUTAMBE SANE FOUMOU, YAMBA	TSAMBA-MAGOTSI	NGOUNIÉ
7	06/05/19 - 29/04/19	NDENDE	LA DOLA	NGOUNIÉ
8	Du 07 au 11/05/19 Du 30/04/19 au 04/05/19	MOUREMBOU, MOUSSAMBOU, MINGANGA, NGOUSSOU, MOUNGALI, TSANGUI, FERRA, NANGA	LA DOLA	NGOUNIÉ



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**2020**