
Women and Traditional Oil Palm: A Struggle for Life

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Marie Crescence, you organized four workshops on traditional oil palm in 2016. How did that work, and what did you observe in those meetings with women?

The workshops involved assisting women to delve deeply into their cultures and traditions, in order to draw out their values associated with traditional oil palm. The objective was to recover recipes involving nutritional, medicinal and artisanal uses of traditional oil palm, and together make a booklet that will be distributed to the women. The aim is to value these uses and preserve traditional oil palm.

The workshops were organized in the framework of a caravan composed of the women that participated in the activity in Mundemba. (1) Everywhere we went, the caravan shared with women our messages about the sustainable use of traditional oil palm and preserving the best ways to use it. Those four workshops enabled us to make four major observations.

The first observation is that traditional oil palm is in real danger of disappearing. This palm is threatened by the expansion of industrial oil palm, because the latter has greater economic value in terms of productivity; it is ever-expanding, and thus wipes out traditional palm. Traditional palm is also threatened by local populations themselves, who have begun to use a destructive method of extraction. They sometimes pull out traditional oil palms from the root or they cut the trunks, in order to extract a wine which is both drunk directly and used to prepare a brandy that local people consume in great quantities. That is why traditional varieties of oil palm are increasingly scarce. Consequently, women are no longer able to easily collect the fruits or the seeds like they could before, in order to process them and feed or treat their families.

The second observation is that traditional oil palm is extremely important; women used to be able to go behind their houses, collect the fruits, and a few hours later prepare the meal for their family. This is no longer possible. Given the scarcity of traditional oil palm and its derivatives (fruits, seeds, roots, etc.), they are forced to go to the market to buy them. Unfortunately, they do not always have the money for this, and therefore hunger settles in at home. Traditional oil is also important because the "selected" or industrial oil does not produce the same results in terms of flavor. The communities we met with only want traditional palm oil for certain traditional recipes. In the case of many Cameroonian families, when women go to market they have to buy fruits 'from the village' to make the best dishes. With the industrial fruits, also called 'socapalm,' these dishes inevitably lose their good flavor, and consequently we lose our culinary sovereignty.

Regarding medicinal aspects, all the medicinal recipes made with oil palm should be done so with the traditional oil, in order to achieve good results. We recognize that this traditional pharmacopoeia is the first aid for local populations, as hospitals are frequently very far away or do not have doctors. But

women know that if they have their traditional oil palms, they can take the roots, fruits and seeds to administer first aid, or to heal people completely.

The third observation is that it is extremely important to value traditional oil palm, because despite its known nutritional, medicinal and artisanal value, industrial oil palm surpasses it from an economic standpoint. That's why we are increasingly thinking about opening a national center specialized in selling only products derived from traditional oil palm, in order to meet a potential demand. Women in urban centers need the traditional palm oil they call village oil, village fruits, and black palm kernel oil. We must find a way to facilitate access to these derivatives of traditional oil palm.

And the fourth observation we have made is that the women we met with have a great desire to perpetuate this species, and to do what it takes not to lose it completely. They have even begun setting up small nurseries, in order to replant their lands. Also, when they are working their land and encounter traditional oil palm shoots, instead of destroying them as they used to, women preserve and protect them so that they can grow.

These are the observations that came out of our activities. We thank all the women for their willingness and openness, and for making this initiative their own. We are convinced that the recipe book will help preserve all the cultural wealth that comes from traditional oil palm, for current and future generations. This compilation will enable us to encourage people, even men, to sustainably manage this traditional species of oil palm. Through this tool we hope to reach young people too, who must continue working for the sustainable management of traditional oil palm.

In Africa, we are now seeing large industrial plantations of thousands of hectares multiplying, and communities are losing their lands—forests where their traditional palms are located. How does this affect women?

The expanding consumption of industrial palm oil has already created a food dependency on those oils whose origin and production process are unknown. It is always more reassuring to consume a product of known origin. This was the case with traditional oil, which is clearly a more natural product, even at first glance. With industrial oil local dishes lose their authentic flavor, and local culinary values deteriorate and are threatened—and with them our food sovereignty.

For women living in communities near large industrial palm plantations, the situation is catastrophic. They enter into poverty with no way out; they become totally dependent because the food they used to produce on their farms no longer exists. They are forced to buy everything. Lacking substantial resources, they must nonetheless deal with their children's education, illness, hunger, and their family's housing needs. They live in insecurity, generation after generation.

Biodiversity is also destroyed when the forest is cleared to plant industrial oil palm. Non-timber forest products—which women used to collect, eat and sell for income—are obliterated. This causes women to sink further into precarious situations. With the destruction of the forest, the very roots of women's lives are destroyed, and with them the roots of families and society.

These destabilizing factors also cause conflict within families and between families. Families are forced to split up. They become fragmented because the bases of their lives have been destroyed. Children live in uncertainty. Girls are exposed to debauchery. Boys embark on adventures and run the risk of disappearing in the sea in search of some *El Dorado*. It becomes impossible to recover the warmth of the home and the family, which is the essential building block for any society's development.

When this expansion sets in, women's lives become vulnerable. It is virtually impossible for them to live and keep their families alive. Some women end up working on farms; they must leave home very early in the morning and return at night, in exchange for a meager salary. When can they take care of their family?

To avoid these consequences, we must help women see that they should firmly defend their living spaces—all places where they carry out their activities (fallows, springs, rivers, markets, etc.)—so that these spaces are protected when large industrial plantations move in.

Could you comment further on the importance of conserving the use and consumption of traditional palm commodities for women and villages in western and central African countries? What are the advantages and the importance of traditional oil palm, and what must be done to conserve it?

Regarding the conservation of traditional oil palm: we must place more value on products derived from this species. They are high-quality products. It is necessary to improve processing and conservation methods, to place the products in attractive containers, and to market them through brands that increase their value. Consumers themselves want this. Plus, it will be a viable and sustainable means of livelihood, which will encourage women to fully take responsibility of preserving and sustainably managing traditional oil palm, from the outset.

We must also foment conservation-related initiatives, and continue raising awareness among both women and men. In our field visits, women said to us: "We need you, madame, to come to our villages to tell the men what you are telling us. Because when we tell them they don't listen to us, they continue cutting [the palms]; if you come they will understand what you are saying, just as we understood a while ago." Thus, raising awareness in the place itself is very important, and it is what the women are hoping for.

In addition to improving processing, preservation and packaging techniques for traditional oil palm derivatives, we must introduce modern technology to extract the oil. I think these two aspects are necessary to promote the sustainable management of traditional oil palm.

I would like to use this platform to **send out a strong call to all women in the communities, to tell them that they are not alone.** Together, we can eliminate or mitigate the impacts they are suffering today. Whether in Cameroon, Gabon, Congo-Kinshasha or Congo-Brazzaville, Ivory Coast, Nigeria or Sierra Leone—**together we can put pressure on the companies that are destroying the lives of women in the communities.** Human rights dictate that these women have the right to live, and to live well. It is unacceptable for them to become slaves in their own villages. If they cannot live fully in their villages, it will be difficult for them to have a better life elsewhere. A farmer whose land has been taken away from her has nothing left, except perhaps death. But we are here to create life, and we are committed to working to restore their lives.

Strong solidarity is required to continue supporting and accompanying these women who are fighting to defend their spaces of life.

I call on the women of Africa and of the world to mobilize—as we know how to do—in political meetings and in churches, to defend the interests of women and families destroyed by land-grabbing. When you fight for a good cause, you must never tire. Nothing should stop us. Let us mobilize in large numbers to express our solidarity, and to support all initiatives aimed at restoring the dignity of women living near industrial plantations.

Yes we must!

Yes we can!

Yes we will win!

(1) The idea to hold four workshops on traditional oil palm with women from communities was a recommendation coming out of a previous workshop with women from several countries in Africa and other areas. This first workshop addressed the expansion of industrial oil in Africa, and the impacts of this expansion on women's lives. It was organized by RADD in 2016, with the collaboration and support of GRAIN, SEFE, CED and WRM, in Mundemba, Cameroon (see the Mundemba declaration [here](#)).