
Covered under the shade of oil palm companies in Cameroon: A recount of the abuses that women suffer

Plantations are increasingly surrounding and engulfing communities. Women must walk through company-occupied lands in order to seek their livelihoods. This, among other things, can cost them their lives.

The food and financial crises of 2008 unquestionably led many investors to pounce on Africa, which is one of the foci of large-scale land transactions. Investors are increasingly requesting large areas of arable lands, which are mostly used by communities. Foreign Direct Investments are also tied to the acquisition of agricultural assets (1). Frequently, these demands for land are made with a view to installing vast agricultural monoculture systems. These companies' presence in developing countries in general, and in Cameroon in particular, keeps bringing complications for communities.

We can mention companies operating in Cameroon (non-exhaustively), such as PAMOL (Cameroon), HEVECAM (Singapore), SGSOC (United States), SOSUCAM (France) and SOCAPALM (Luxembourg). As the primary users of lands, women are often the most affected. They condemn the destruction of their livelihoods for the sake of company profitability, which causes food insecurity. They also condemn job instability, as well as the lack of freedom to come and go through the areas they formerly cultivated, for fear of reprisals.

This article aims to explore the situation of women in and around industrial plantations in Cameroon. It **shows the damages and abuses that women suffer, in regards to the land and society.**

Land conflicts: Violation of land use rights, violence and intimidation

The expansion of industrial plantations, such as oil palm in Cameroon, require large areas of land, which consequently diminishes the spaces that local communities—and in particular women—previously used.

“Biofuels' demand for land threatens to displace crops such as cassava, peanuts, sorghum and corn in order to benefit this fuel. Non-edible products (...) also directly compete with agricultural products for fertile land (...), represent a threat to poor communities and drive food prices up...” (2) Rural women are most affected by this situation, as they use the land and its products as a source of income and subsistence for their homes. **Land scarcity is one of the main causes of the difficult situation of women living in and around industrial plantations. In addition, plantations are increasingly surrounding and engulfing communities.** This situation creates a real problem in the management of relations between companies and neighboring populations, who denounce the mistreatment and documented cases of violence.

For some years, in fact, **women living in and around agroindustrial plantations in Cameroon have suffered physical and psychological violence**, mainly when seeking their livelihoods—which have become scarce due to the presence of these industries. Their gardens, which were once close to their homes, are now a considerable distance away. For the WHO, violence can be defined as “*the*

deliberate use of physical force or power—whether threatened or real—against oneself, another person or a group or community, which causes or is likely to cause injury, death, psychological harm, developmental disorders or hardship.”

There have been cases of assaults and rapes that have sometimes even led to the death of these women. For their part, the women were only trying to secure their families survival, by picking some palm nuts in the company's plantations. **Accused of theft, they suffer assaults, almost always at the hands of security workers hired by the companies.** In addition to enduring constant verbal aggression, they must also tolerate threats and physical attacks.

Indeed, there are already many documented cases of violence from the plantations of **the company, SOCAPALM**, perpetrated by contracted security employees (3). While these assaults and rapes have diminished in frequency somewhat, it is important to point out that this situation has already generated a kind of psychosis among the women who live near the plantations. One women who lives near a plantation in this area explains to us that she used to be able to go out to the field alone early in the morning, but that now this is not advisable. She says that **women go in groups, for fear that plantations watchmen will attack them.** In short, these rural women, who for the most part have not had schooling and are ashamed of their situation, often prefer to keep silent about the abuses they have suffered from the companies' presence. **This situation is very clear; yet, it will continue to be ignored if civil society remains silent.** In addition to the atrocities mentioned, there are other forms of abuse that women working in agribusinesses suffer.

Social Abuses: Between injustice and the separation of families

The combination of certain risk factors—such as land scarcity, pressure placed on the land, the food crisis and declining revenues from rural plantations—has pushed women seeking better welfare to find work in neighboring agribusinesses. Women are then forced to work on plantations where they face many other injustices, and which causes the separation of families. **Their schedules prevent them from really being able to take care of their children,** since they do not have fixed work schedules.

Mrs. X believes that **“working in these companies is very distressing, and in the worst case, can mean almost falling into slavery.** *The workload sometimes doubles when we finish ahead of time, because the count is done on a task-by-task basis; that means that as long as the task is not finished, it doesn't count.”* These women sometimes have very difficult tasks to carry out given their physical conditions, but for fear of dismissal they feel obligated to comply; they also run the risk that the task they have completed not be counted at the end of the day. In her opinion, women **“don't have the right to speak and their complaints are not taken into consideration; on the contrary, complaints favor the loss of bonuses and benefits.”** On top of this, their salaries do not allow them to prosper or to take care of their families.

Coercion and injustice seem to be the daily fate of women who live near plantations. **They do not have the right to complain, for fear of retaliation that could lead to disciplinary action.** *“We cannot complain, [as] the immediate consequence would be a transfer that doesn't take your marital situation into account. I lived in Douala with my family; they assigned me to Kribi, so I had to leave my husband and children,”* and she adds: *“It is too unfair and sad.”*

Another category of women who work in agribusinesses are those recruited by intermediaries. These women are not entitled to any benefits (insurance, medical coverage, maternity leave, etc.)

In conclusion, it is clear that foreign investors' behavior on fertile lands in Cameroon is a burning

issue that deserves to be taken very seriously, especially because women's rights are often trampled—despite that, as we know, women are the mothers of society in Africa. So, those living near plantations are daily demanding that their rights be taken into account; meanwhile, those working in the companies demand justice and better working conditions.

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(1) According to government figures, Cameroon received 348.2 billion CFA francs in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2013. Only 4.1 billion CFA francs corresponded to the agricultural sector.

See: <http://www.investiraucameroun.com/gestion-publique/2309-5666-le-cameroun-a-capte-348-milliards-de-fcfa-d-investissements-directs-et-rangers-en-2013>

(2) MUNZARA, A. 2011. Land grabbing undermines food security in West Africa, FECCIWA/ACCEAO

(3) <http://www.cameroonvoice.com/news/article-news-2706.htm>