
Democratic Republic of Congo: Turning peasant lands once more into oil palm monocultures

DRC is following the trend of promoting programmes to 'integrate' peasants with agribusinesses, putting people's control over their lands at risk.

The PPAKIN project promises to improve the livelihoods of peasants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). But in the Kwilu province peasants are angry. The project made them paying for industrial oil palm seedlings, but without receiving any more support afterwards.

Over the past 10-15 years, **a renewed wave of industrial oil palm plantations expansion has been taking place in West and Central African countries**. This is mainly due to the interest of transnational companies to make profits from the increasing demand for palm oil on the global market. Large-scale plantations have been invading land belonging to communities, affecting food sovereignty, cultural or sacred spaces, increasing violence in particular towards women (1) and leading to many community protests.

A new trend in this expansion is the launch of programmes that declare predominantly that they will improve the production of food crops. While promoting oil palm plantations is part of these programmes, their promoters, which involve (inter) national public and private sectors, assure that these are not their main objective. Besides, they claim oil palms will be planted by peasants, not by the companies.

An example of this is the GRAINE program in Gabon. Promoted by multinational agribusiness company Olam and the Gabonese government, it claims to increase domestic food production to improve the peasant and country's food security. But in practice, the project mainly promotes industrial oil palm plantations on peasant's lands through so-called peasant 'cooperatives'. (2)

Concerned with this new trend, a delegation of the Democratic Republic of Congo's largest Peasant Confederation, COPACO-PRP (*Confédération paysanne du Congo-Principal Regroupement Paysan*), and WRM, decided to visit a similar programme in the province of Kwilu in February 2018, about 500 kilometres east of the capital Kinshasa. COPACO and WRM wanted to learn about the situation of the peasants affected by **a programme called PPAKIN**, which stands (in French) for "Support programme for Kinshasa's food supply and vegetable garden products centres". The general objective of the program is to "contribute in a sustainable way to improving food security and income of peasant producers" (3). The project, which took off in 2014, is carried out by the DRC government and funded by FIDA (the International Fund for Agricultural Development of the UN) for a period of 10 years, with a total estimated investment of 115 million US dollars. (4)

The peasant families receiving us (5) told us that **they received from PPAKIN so-called 'improved' Tenera oil palm seedlings, together with chemical fertilizers** in February 2017. They had to plant the seedlings as a monoculture in about 4-5 hectares, a considerable area for peasant agriculture in DRC. The technicians of the project told them that a specific dose of fertilizers should be applied with each planted seedling. In order to be part of the program, **peasants had to pay an**

admission fee of 15,000 Congolese francs – about 9 US dollars – a considerable amount for DRC. Some also mentioned they had signed an agreement, a “*protocole d’accord*”. We got no access to that contract.

The peasants emphasized that they were promised to receive financial support to maintain the oil palm plantations during the 5-6 years before the oil palm tree started to produce. But until now, **they have not received any support at all**. They are angry about that and feel betrayed by the project. Moreover, **maintaining about 4-5 hectares of oil palm, with 280 oil palm plants per hectare, requires a lot of labour**.

One peasant showed us how he tries to face this situation by planting manioc in the middle of the oil palm monoculture, in an attempt to get some income and food from the area that before was covered by food crops. However, another peasant family, concerned about the chemical fertilizers they were obliged to apply, decided not to plant any other crop between the oil palms. In the experience of COPACO members, chemical inputs negatively affect the soil and their food crops. Therefore they cultivate their main food crops, like manioc and traditional maize as well as other vegetables, without any chemical inputs. One peasant stated: “chemical fertilizers do not let the other crops grow properly”.

A region marked historically by oil palm

Since immemorial times, the province of Kwilu is covered with vast ‘wild’ oil palm plantations, extremely important and with multiple uses for the local communities. Kwilu has been historically the biggest palm oil producer of the country. (6)

Around 1910, the UK soap producing company, Lever brothers, looking for cheap vegetable oil, discovered this natural treasure. They got a concession from the colonial government and set up a plantation company called ‘*Huileries du Congo Belge*’ (HCB), which was renamed after independence into ‘*Plantations Lever au Congo*’ (PLC), and in the period of ex-President Mobutu into ‘*Plantations Lever du Zaïre*’ (PLZ). An older peasant told us that **after HCB got its concession, it started to ‘buy up’ access to the natural oil palm plantations in the district of Lusanga, paying the local land chiefs one sack of salt to secure access to 100 hectares**. The company started to produce seedlings from natural oil palms and planted these in lines in order to increase production, creating semi-intensive plantations. Several other Belgian and Portuguese businessmen followed the Lever Brothers example and settled to profit from this natural palm oil.

Workers were recruited by force from other regions and heavily exploited for doing the risky work of harvesting the palm fruits. They got accommodated in worker camps in Lusanga - at the time called Leverville -, where the company set up its palm oil mill facilities. Following the economic crisis of 1929, with workers’ payments being reduced, the town of Kikwit became the area of the biggest uprising against the Belgian colonial regime in Congo in 1931. (7) It resulted in a violent repression with hundreds of people killed. One older peasant tells his family had only survived keeping hidden in the bush.

When Mobutu came in power in 1965, decades of economic crises and civil wars started and the company abandoned Lusanga, including its oil palm mill facilities and the plantations. The company nevertheless kept plantations in other regions, and sold part of them in 2009 to the Canadian company FERONIA, where for years the communities have been struggling to get their lands back, stolen since the colonial period. (8)

Remember the past to build the future?

What happened with the Lever Brothers? In 1930, with their very profitable business in the colonial Congo, they merged with the Dutch Margarine Unie company, and created UNILEVER. This UK-Dutch company producing consumption goods grew out to become one of the biggest global multinationals with an annual profit of billions of dollars. The historical description on its website of the 'successful' company record seems to have **carefully excluded the story of abuses and violence against the Congolese people**.

Nowadays, in spite of its public discourse, **the PAKIN project seems to intend to revive the past in the same Kwilu province, turning peasant lands once more into oil palm monocultures**. Its financial support tends to push in the same direction: UN-FIDA has been promoting the new wave of industrial oil palm expansion in Africa, in close collaboration with African governments, the World Bank and the private sector.

And what has happened with Lusanga and the peasants after UNILEVER left during the Mobutu period? The company's installations have turned into ruins. The town, nowadays with about 15,000 inhabitants, lacks basic services like water and electricity supply. Peasants took over the old UNILEVER plantations. Mainly men specialized in producing at a small-scale and with artisanal equipments are harvesting palm oil for the domestic market. They are looking for ways to organize and improve their production, as palm oil is key to their culture and can enable them with some income.

Peasants organizing to build a different future

Peasant organisations like COPACO alert for the threat of expanding oil palm monocultures and other crops, due to their social, cultural and environmental impacts. They stress that **peasants must maintain the control over the lands they depend on**. The suggested 'integration' of peasants with the agribusiness sector however, such as the PAKIN programme, puts this control over their lands at risk. COPACO defends a diversified production system based on the control over lands to secure food sovereignty for present and future generations. The principles of agroecology, which radically oppose the implementation of monocultures depending on chemical inputs, are fundamental.

Nowadays in Kikwit you can still find the fine red palm oil on the market for sale, which is produced by women and is the one they prefer for cooking their meals. In their experience, it is impossible to produce this high-quality oil from the improved seedlings that the PAKIN project distributes. **The push of the PAKIN project is only to attract private companies to invest and control oil palm production**. This can become a serious threat for the traditional palm oil, still under the control of peasants and with multiple uses very much linked with their daily life and needs.

An interesting comment of the peasants we talked with is that the natural oil palm spreads easily by itself. Its natural non-chemical nature facilitates its spread with the help of animals and birds.

Final remarks

If the PAKIN project succeeds in attracting private sector investment to 'rehabilitate' the palm oil mill facilities in Lusanga, it will also 'rehabilitate' the same logic as before: **grabbing land and exploiting people/labour for private profit, with power concentrated in the hands of state-supported private companies**. Again, peasant communities play the essential role of producing the

raw material for the palm oil business at the lowest possible cost. But under such logic, peasants producing oil palm but unable to fulfil the contract with the private company run the risk to lose their lands.

Winnie Overbeek, winnie [at] wrm.org.uy

Member of the international secretariat of WRM

- (1) WRM Bulletin 236, March 2018, [Women, tree plantations and violence: Building resistances](#)
- (2) [The seeds of despair: Communities loose their land and water sources due to Olam's agribusiness in Gabon](#), WRM Bulletin 231, June 2017
- (3) FIDA, *Programme PAKIN*, document de conception de programme, 2013.
- (4) [PAKIN: Une solution pour contribuer a la securité alimentaire](#), Forum Des As,
- (5) When we arrived in Kikwit, we found out that our visit was announced on a local radio station the day before we arrived. Coincidentally, the cooperative set up as part of the PAKIN project activities in Kikwit refused to receive us. We found out that the peasants who are part of the project had received instructions that same day not to talk with us. Nevertheless, we were still able to visit several peasants who participate in the project and who shared with us their experiences.
- (6) [Oil palm in Africa: Past, present and future scenarios](#) – 2013 update, WRM
- (7) [RDC: a Lusanga, les fantomes d'Unilever au Congo](#), 2017, JeuneAfrica
- (8) [Land conflicts and shady finances plague DR Congo palm oil company backed dy development funds](#), 2016