
Communities in West and Central Africa Resist Industrial Oil Palm Plantations, Even in Times of Covid-19

While palm oil companies present themselves as benevolent donors during the pandemic, communities living in and around these plantations tell another story. The WRM asked activists engaged in an Alliance against the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa about communities' situation since the Covid-19 outbreak.

In the middle of a health crisis, palm oil companies are presenting themselves as benevolent donors, with marketing campaigns directed at the national and international media. This is the case in West and Central African countries where these companies operate. This propaganda hides the fact that companies are gearing up to profit or otherwise take advantage of the pandemic: from undermining workers' rights, to demanding economic bailouts and special treatment as "essential businesses."

Since 2013, the oil palm industry has targeted West and Central Africa for a new wave of expansion of its industrial plantations. At that time, estimates amounted to around 4 million hectares of land locked up in large-scale concessions to oil palm companies, particularly in Cameroon, the DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. (1)

Meanwhile, grassroots organizations, community groups and activists from the region have been coming together since 2013—in Cameroon, Gabon, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast—to share experiences of the devastating impacts that these monoculture plantations have on communities' livelihoods and wellbeing. They began to discuss how they could better organize and resist this invasion. This culminated in the creation of the Informal Alliance Against the Expansion of Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa.

The Alliance seeks to strengthen communities' resistance to industrial plantations, and to defend their territories against plantation expansion. Integral components of this resistance include the Alliance's support of communities reclaiming their lands; the commitment to ensure safe spaces for women to discuss the specific impacts that industrial oil palm plantations have on their lives; and women's involvement in these struggles and in the Alliance. The Alliance defends the traditional use of oil palm and the importance of forests and savannahs for communities' wellbeing.

In their years working together, members of the Alliance have shared and learned from each other about the many tactics that oil palm companies use to commit illegal and oppressive acts to impose and expand their business. (2) Women in the Alliance in particular have raised awareness, and shared stories about, the increase in sexual violence, rape and abuse that women and girls face. This devastating aspect of industrial oil palm plantations is usually kept hidden. (3) Today, the land in concession to industrial oil palm companies has been reduced to almost 2,5 million hectares. Strong community resistance is a key factor in companies' failed attempts to occupy more of the land that governments had promised to set aside for industrial oil palm plantations.

In this context, the WRM asked organisations and activists engaged in the Informal Alliance about how the situation in and around industrial oil palm plantations has evolved since the Covid-19

pandemic started; and with governments across the region implementing so-called emergency measures to confront it. This article highlights their experiences. Testimonies are kept anonymous for security reasons.

In **Ivory Coast**, oil palm plantations owned by the company **PalmCi**—a subsidiary of the **SIFCA group**—are located in the department of Aboisso. The company fired several community residents without prior notification, citing lockdown measures as the reason. The workers who still have jobs are not given protective gear to reduce the risk of spreading or contracting the coronavirus. One woman from the region said: *“Locals are left to defend for themselves, because the company does not provide them with protective gear. The situation is difficult for communities living around and within the industrial plantations.”*

Another woman talked about the worrisome situation regarding access to water: *“Obtaining drinking water in Yapokro is absolutely impossible. The situation we are living in has been going on for decades, and nobody does anything—despite the presence of the company, PalmCi. Now with Covid-19, I can say that the situation is even more disturbing, given that we drink the same water as the animals that roam everywhere looking for food. The worst part of all of this is the water that PalmCi provides us with once or twice a week, because it divides the village in order to distribute it. The water arrives in very dirty tanker trucks and is not suitable, as it makes our whole body itch after we bathe. That same tanker truck supplies water to the plantations. I can say then that the people of Yapokro were not safe before, and we are not safe now with Covid-19. It is discouraging to see women and children fetch water morning and afternoon. The attempts to get PalmCi to bring us water were unsuccessful; the village chief told me so. He made several complaints, but they were not successful, or sometimes led to promises that were never fulfilled. I always get the same answer: that it is the regional council that should take care of this and not PalmCi, which is just a company. When it rains, the whole village rejoices because the women go to collect rainwater that for domestic tasks and other uses. Daily life for villagers in Yapokro is alarming; they are simply looking for a solution by launching a call for help through my voice.”*

Women involved in the Alliance have been focusing on the matter of abuse that women suffer, due to the existence of the plantations. In particular, they have focused on the violence faced by women who produce traditional palm oil and who are regularly harassed and intimidated by company guards.

Two women were recently arrested in Ivory Coast, allegedly for stealing palm fruits. They worked for the company, and were fired due to the Covid-19 situation. A few days after their dismissal, they were arrested. According to one of the women, a security agent from the company saw them, and *“he grabbed me by the ponytail and dragged me a long way, mistreating me, and then cut a branch to hit me with.”* She continued: *“The strange thing is that this security agent knows our husbands; he went to the houses to apologize to each of them for his behaviour, and apparently he wants this case not to come to light, he wants it to stay between them. I asked what he apologized for.”* They were released, but as mothers of six and four children, respectively, they are now in a desperate situation. *“This pandemic hurts us a lot. PalmCi is insensitive and does nothing at all, except for firing people unfairly. Covid-19 and PalmCi are a cancer to communities in the region.”*

In another instance, two PalmCi agents recently attacked a woman collecting materials to make brooms inside another PalmCi plantation. Company agents take the view that the plantation is company property and that for any material taken from the plantations, people have to pay a fee at the checkpoint set up at the entrance of the plantations – or leave their material behind.

Unsurprisingly, conflicts around these demands for payment at the checkpoints regularly occur.

In **Gabon**, a public-private partnership between agribusiness multinational, **Olam**, and the Gabonese

government began setting up industrial plantations in 2012, on land received for free from the government. Of the plantations established so far, six blocks are oil palm plantations and one is a rubber plantation. With Olam's occupation of community lands and forests, the conflict between people and animals has aggravated. Because forests and savannahs have been converted to industrial plantations, elephants now invade people's farms.

In regards to how workers have been affected by Covid-19 measures the government has put in place, one Gabonese activist said, *"There are employees who sometimes couldn't go to work, as the number of people authorized to get on the vehicle was very limited. Therefore, those who were not able to get on the vehicle got lower wages. And now, the latest news from the provincial labor directorate is that around 1,000 employees—mainly agricultural workers—are going to lose their jobs. In other words, Olam is taking advantage of this crisis to get rid of those employees and hand them off to subcontractors. And unfortunately, the subcontractors treat them even worse. With Olam, the treatment already was not what it should be [...], and with the subcontractors it is even worse! It is really worrisome. Now, we know that because of the pandemic, the State made some decisions and took some measures to support companies that will have problems. But Olam is going beyond all of that. And as a result, jobs will be lost in order to benefit subcontractors, who do not treat the workers better."*

Before the pandemic, communities living around Olam's oil palm plantations were already denouncing the company's lack of respect for the promises and agreements it made to the communities, in terms of social projects. The Gabonese activist continued: *"Unfortunately, there are communities that lack water. There are communities where Olam had built water wells. But unfortunately those wells do not work anymore, the pumps do not work. Some worked for a month or two, and then stopped. And people suffer from a lack of water, which is crucial—since we know that washing your hands with clean water is, of course, one of the measures to prevent Covid-19. As for the clinics, they were built without medications being available; therefore we have no medications. This means that if there is a positive case or someone gets sick, people will only have traditional treatments. And speaking of traditional treatments, since many communities lost their forested areas, they no longer have access to the forest. Well, things will be difficult. With no healthcare and no forests, how will they be treated? It will be very difficult for them."*

Two major corporate players operate in **Nigeria**, where communities are being evicted, harassed and arrested. Their rights are being severely undermined by the conversion of farmland and forests to oil palm plantations. **Wilmar**, one of the biggest plantation companies in the world, has more than 100,000 hectares of land in Cross River State; meanwhile **Socfin** operates in Edo State.

Socfin is a Luxembourg-based holding company owned by two rich European families: Hubert Fabri (Belgium) and Vincent Bolloré (France). Socfin controls a total of 400,000 hectares of land in 10 African countries. In Nigeria, the Socfin group owns **the Okomu Oil Palm Company (OOPC)**, controlling 33,000 hectares of land. (4)

On 20 May 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, Okumu Oil Palm Company agents burnt down villagers' homes in Okumu Kingdom. This is the fourth time that a village has been burnt down in connection with the company's expansion of plantations. This time, over 80 people ended up homeless and were forced to seek shelter in nearby communities and churches. This, in turn, exposed them to even greater health risks during a global pandemic. A villager said *"Many times the company security would come and harass us and accuse us of stealing the company's palm fruits; other times Asemota, the Head Security Contractor, would come to the village to threaten us that he would deal with us before this came into a manifestation."* A 16-year old villager said: *"I just woke up*

this morning, then I went to the river to check my fishing hook. Before I knew what was happening, OOPC security and soldiers were coming. As they were coming, they were shooting so I ran into the bush. Then they burned down our houses all my school books, school uniform and other properties were burnt down. This is the only piece of clothing left on my body. So let people come and help us.” Villagers cannot even go to the city to file complaints, due to the restrictions on movements as a result of the government’s pandemic emergency measures. (5)

In **Ghana**, industrial oil palm plantations owned by **Socnaf** (another **Socfin**-owned company) affect nine communities. The company says it has acquired concession rights to 17,000 hectares, but communities argue that more land has been taken from them. One Ghanaian activist declared that *“Over the past six years, Socfin has been employing many community members as casual workers. It made a system, where it hires them as casual workers for three months, then renews them for three more months, and then three more months; it has been like this for the past six years. In Ghana, if a company hires someone for more than three months, that person becomes a worker and is no longer a casual worker. And now, Covid-19 comes up. Because it has to follow social distancing, Socfin has actually released, if not sacked, all those casual workers without any prior notice, without any payments. I have witnessed this personally. I was there.”* At the same time, the same activist condemns the use of violence and intimidation tactics used by the company’s security guards. He said, *“one young man from Adanse community, one of the most affected communities due to the plantations, went fishing beyond the company concession. He saw his motorbike seized and broken by security guards. The issue is at the local court at the moment.”*

In **Cameroon**, **Socapalm** (another **Socfin**-owned company) is one of the main oil palm plantation companies in the country. The company’s concessions occupy a total of 50,000 hectares. Villages are completely surrounded by Socapalm plantations, and villagers have no access to land to cultivate food. The company’s plantations even invade cemeteries. Because of the size of the trenches that the company dug around its plantations, many villagers have to walk more than seven kilometres to get to a field where they can cultivate food. If anyone picks up a palm fruit fallen from the Socapalm truck, they risk being arrested.

Denouncing the violence against women who live around Socapalm’s plantations has been an important issue for the women involved in the Informal Alliance in Cameroon. They have documented several cases, and called on Socfin’s offices in Cameroon and Switzerland to act and ensure that women are no longer exposed to sexual violence in or around the company’s plantations.

In this period of Covid-19, many workers have been sent home on unpaid leave without compensation, especially those who are temporarily employed. Those who haven’t been let go by the company are transported in packed personnel transport vehicles, without any personal protection. In some countries, workers commute every day between big cities, like Douala in Cameroon, and the plantations. This poses risks for workers, their families and also the villagers. (6)

Workers and communities affected by Socfin plantations in Nigeria, Cameroon and Ghana struggle to survive even under 'normal' conditions. They witness the company violating their rights and denying their access to land that they depend on for their livelihood. Under conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has become outright unbearable for many. Meanwhile, in 2019 alone, Socfin’s major shareholders and directors helped themselves to 30 million euros in dividends out of a net profit of 47 million euros. (7)

In the **DR of Congo**, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, disputed concession rights to more than 100,000 hectares of land held by the Congolese company, **Plantations et Huileries du Congo**

(PHC), are being handed over to an opaque company registered in the tax haven of Mauritius. Communities in the DR Congo insist that the current owner of PHC—Canadian company **Feronia Inc**—and its colonial-era predecessors, Unilever and Levers Brothers, acquired the concession rights illegally. They say the communities never consented to the theft of their palm groves by industrial oil palm plantation companies. On top of this, workers at the company's plantations have toiled under atrocious conditions and for wages below the minimum wage. Just a few months ago, several of the houses that the company provides to workers collapsed at one of the three plantation sites, in Boteka. Conflicts have been numerous and deadly; the latest victim was a community activist killed by a company security guard in 2019.

One activist from DR Congo said that the company is cashing in on the Covid-19 pandemic by *“retiring many plantation workers, without giving them a final settlement.”* While the company has been paying out millions in salaries to its Europe- and Kinshasa-based management teams, it claims it is unable to make these final salary payments to retiring workers, because no funds were set aside.

Communities in the Basoko area at the Lokutu plantation site made an important step in recovering their ancestral land in early 2020, when they successfully started to take back control over parts of their territory. When, under the guise of Covid-19 pandemic measures, the company started again delaying payments of wages and restricting availability of palm oil for villages surrounded by the plantations, communities started to take palm oil production into their own hands. They introduced traditional and artisanal palm oil harvesting and production systems. Working conditions are now much better in these areas than when they were managed by Feronia. Moreover, since the company's costly offices in Kinshasa and London are not involved, all the value created by this work stays in the communities. A community manager of the operation stated: *“With access to these lands, we are able to resume our palm oil production, which was violently interrupted by colonisation. Since the beginning of the week, I alone have sold 15 drums of oil, which gives me 300 thousand Congolese Francs (US\$150) in profit. That's seven times what you could earn working extremely hard for the company for a whole month.”* (8)

- (1) GRAIN, [Communities in Africa fight back against the land grab for palm oil](#), 2019
- (2) The Alliance, [WRM and GRAIN, Promise, Divide, Intimidate and Coerce: 12 Tactics Palm Oil companies Use to Grab Community Land](#), 2019
- (3) The Alliance, [Breaking the Silence: Harassment, sexual violence and abuse against women in and around oil palm and rubber plantations](#), 2019
- (4) GRAIN, [Unravelling the Socfin/Bolloré plantations, thanks to Profundo](#), April 2020
- (5) Farmlandgrab, [Another terror attack on local communities by Okomu Oil Palm Plantation Plc](#), June 2020
- (6) Farmlandgrab, [We demand justice and safety for workers on Socfin's rubber/oil palm plantations during the Covid-19 pandemic](#), April 2020
- (7) GRAIN, ["Business as usual" at Socfin and Bolloré...](#), May 2020
- (8) WRM, [DR Congo: Communities take back control over land stolen from them and urge the oil palm company Feronia to confirm their announcement to “abandon” the land](#), June 2020