
NGOs at the service of plundering territories: the Earthworm Foundation case

For decades, agribusiness, mining and oil corporations have partnered with NGOs and nonprofit organisations to try to greenwash their image in face of the pollution and destruction their activities cause. Promoting themselves as 'sustainable' on the basis of these partnerships is a strategy that helps companies meet consumers' demands, obtain tax benefits, access funding and abide by compensation measures demanded by regulatory agencies.

But beyond greenwashing corporate destruction, the organisations hired by extractive and agribusiness companies have also increasingly taken on a central role in so-called 'conflict mediation' with rural communities that are part of the territories coveted by these industries. One such organisation is the Earthworm Foundation, whose name has often appeared in reports received by WRM from communities facing conflicts with corporations in the territories they inhabit.

What is the Earthworm Foundation?

Founded in 1999 as the Tropical Forest Trust, Earthworm converted itself into a foundation in 2019. It is headquartered in Switzerland and has more than 300 members of staff in over 15 offices in various countries. (1)

According to the foundation, its mission is "to create a world where people and nature thrive in harmony" (2). One of its promotional videos says Earthworm “creates solutions with businesses to heal nature and people”. (3) This almost lyrical tone is very far from expressing what Earthworm Foundation does and for whom it works. In practice, its work helps international corporations make sure that nothing gets in the way of the flow of commodities along their long supply chains, so that the corporations face no obstacles in extracting raw materials and increasing the sale of their production on globalised markets.

Corporations and the Earthworm Foundation

In its 2023 annual report, major corporations, mainly from the agribusiness, but also mining, consumer goods and large-scale retail sectors, are among the supporters of the Earthworm Foundation. (4) In previous years, the organisation also received funds from oil companies, like Shell.

Companies that support Earthworm (2023)	
Industry	
Agribusiness	Bunge, Cargill, Wilmar, Asia Pulp & Paper, Louis Dreyfus Foundation, Olam, Veracel (Suzano and Stora Enso) and Socfin, among others.
Consumer goods and retail giants	Pepsico, Nestlé, Danone, Mars, L’Oréal, Colgate-Palmolive, Mc Donald’s, Wal-Mart Foundation and 3M, among others.
Mining	Alcoa

Between 2019 and 2023, the Earthworm Foundation's revenue grew by 59 percent, totalling almost 100 million dollars. Some 90 percent of this amount came from its more than 50 members and partners – mainly private companies. This contrasts with the roughly 4 percent that originate in grants from public authorities. The revenue growth is also reflected in the earnings of the eight members of the foundation's executive team, who took home 1.6 million US-dollars in 2023. (5)

In one of its promotional videos, Earthworm states that "if we don't work with companies, we are not changing the world". (6) The fact that several of these companies are members of the Foundation raises the question: where is the line between working with them and working for them?

What does the Earthworm Foundation do?

Earthworm enters the scene when conflict between a company and communities in some way threatens to affect corporate profits. The Foundation is then contracted to solve the problem with goodwill by all the parties involved in a process of mediation. However, what WRM has learned from decades of supporting struggles of communities is that land grabbing, violence, conflicts and destruction are inherent, inseparable parts of the business models of Earthworm's clients, and impossible to be solved through mediation and goodwill.

With that objective, Earthworm approaches affected communities, organises courses and other activities with communities, NGOs, governments, academics etc. However, to what extent can an organisation that proposes to mediate conflicts do so in a just way when most of its money comes from the corporations that cause the conflicts? Beyond the money issue, another question arises: can there be an honest intervention when the worldview of those who present themselves as mediators is much more closely aligned with that of the corporations than that of the affected communities? Questions like these have emerged in several places where Earthworm has intervened on behalf of corporations.

Earthworm 'mediating' conflicts between the palm oil industry and rural communities

Let us take one of the main products around which Earthworm's work gravitates: palm oil. The palm oil production system adopted by many companies that fund Earthworm is based on monoculture plantations, intensive use of agrotoxins, synthetic fertilizers, hyper-exploitation of workers and appropriation of community territories. (7) In West and Central Africa, in particular, the very process by means of which oil palm companies received land concessions is usually at the heart of the disputes with communities. Multinational corporations like Socfin, Wilmar and Golden Veroleum continue to benefit from colonial era land tenure laws that disrespect the rights of communities over their traditional lands and hand over vast tracts of community territory to such corporations. (8)

Consequently, this model has inevitably been associated with loss of land, violence and undermining of traditional community governance. Communities affected by these corporate plantations start having to cope with contaminated water courses, loss of access to hunting grounds, food and medicinal plants. In short, the territories where they live are completely transformed by the production of commodities for export.

The incompatibility and shock between this model of production and the way of life of traditional communities has brought about serious conflicts in various regions of the Global South. The Earthworm Foundation has been hired by oil palm corporations to intervene in several of these

conflicts, which has tended to increase rather than resolve problems faced by communities.

Earthworm and Socfin in Cameroon and Liberia

One example is the agribusiness giant Socfin, whose majority share owners are the Belgian Fabri family and French billionaire Vincent Bolloré. The corporation became a member of Earthworm in 2017, roughly at the same time it published its "responsible management policy". In this document, Socfin states its commitment, among others, to rural communities in the regions of its palm and rubber tree plantations.

Cameroon, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Cambodia are some of the countries in which Socfin subsidiaries operate, and where Earthworm has conducted investigations into conflicts that the presence of the company brings about. Since 2023, Earthworm has published seven reports about these conflicts. These reports follow a pattern that makes the organisation sound much more like a spokesperson for the Socfin group than an impartial entity that is investigating complaints against the company. (9) Below we highlight three recurring perceptions from these reports.

First, it is worth mentioning that Earthworm recognises that "Socfin continues to receive environmental and social grievances" – not doing so would be impossible –, adding that these complaints come "from international media and NGOs". Note that by complementing the sentence in this way right at the start of its reports, Earthworm situates the problem with media and NGOs – as if it were they rather than affected communities raising complaints about violations. Furthermore, in Earthworm's reports, this acknowledgement of violations by Socfin is always accompanied by a mention that the company has made "progress in implementing its responsible management commitments".

Second, among the damage and violations reported by communities – like land grabbing, sexual violence, pollution of water courses, destruction of grave sites and sacred places, threats and intimidation, among many others (10) – Earthworm recognizes only some in its reports. A number of incidents invariably end up being classified explicitly as "unfounded allegations", "partially founded", or "founded but not Socfin's responsibility". An example are the Earthworm reports on three locations in Cameroon (Edéa, Mbongo and Mbambou) where it has been determined that Socfin must give back thousands of hectares of land to decentralised local authorities. According to Earthworm, this is an "ongoing" measure, initiated seven years ago with surveys to set the limits of the company's plantations. Because the process has been dragging on for years, communities began taking back certain areas, asserting their already established right to these lands. Rather than provide an impartial account of the context, Earthworm adopts the company's perspective on the controversy when it writes about "intrusion by third parties" and that "third parties (communities, workers etc) are encroaching Socapalm Land Titles". (11)

Another example comes from Liberia. After 7 years of partnership, Socfin and Earthworm's inability to solve the conflicts with communities led to the company selling one of its plantations in the country in 2024. (12) But why, if 'progress was being made'?

The third characteristic of the Earthworm Foundation's reports is precisely its positive emphasis, i.e., everything is in a "continuous improvement process". In one of the more recent investigations about Socfin's conflicts with communities (although the word conflict does not appear in these Earthworm reports about Socfin), Earthworm concluded that "despite the challenges encountered at the start of Socfin's operations in Cambodia, the organisation has taken significant steps to implement its sustainability commitments progressively".

Earthworm Foundation reports suggest that Socfin is progressing while the corporation continues with its business as usual. (13) At the same time, Earthworm shirks away from the fact that after nearly a decade of 'working with' Socfin, the problems faced and denounced by communities persist wherever Socfin operates, above all complaints relating to access to land and violations of communities' customary rights to their lands.

Earthworm and Agropalma in Brazil

Agropalma is one of Brazil's largest oil palm companies. Although it states that its relations with communities are "at the heart of its sustainability strategy", Agropalma stands accused of land grabbing and the use of violence to expel traditional communities. Because of accusations such as these, it had its RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) certification suspended in 2023.

In order to meet the demands of a customer, Agropalma hired the Earthworm Foundation in 2022. Earthworm set up an office in Quatro Bocas, in the municipality of Tomé-Açu, at the epicenter of the "oil palm war". It receives funding, among others, from Cargill and Belem Bioenergia Brasil (BBB), companies active in the same industry. In this region, Earthworm says it has "empowered communities" and reduced conflicts in "supply chains". (14)

On the one hand, this engagement with Earthworm has allowed Agropalma to reassure its customers. The report by Sime Darby Guthrie International (supplier of Nestlé, Unilever, P&G), for example, mentions the participation of a "third party to carry out an external assessment to investigate the alleged land rights issues", suggesting Earthworm's involvement is key to Agropalma's plan of action "to regain RSPO certification". (15) The positive tone in publications by consumer goods corporations, however, stands in stark contrast to reports from the region. The reality there is that for communities, activities of the Earthworm Foundation are promoting internal divisions, thus undermining resistance in indigenous and quilombola communities.

Voices from the territories

To better understand how the presence of the Earthworm Foundation affects communities, WRM facilitated an online exchange with activists from Cameroon and Brazil. Their groups are involved in the fight for social justice and for the rights of communities that have been affected not only by the corporate oil palm colonialism, but also by the intervention of this corporate organisation.

From Cameroon participated SYNAPARCAM, an organisation that defends the rights of communities affected by Socfin plantations. From Brazil participated Elielson Pereira da Silva. He was born and raised in the state of Pará and is currently researching the territorial and ethnic conflicts in his state, seeking to shed light on the communities' struggle. The participants of the virtual exchange told us about the Earthworm Foundation's work in their territories. Read a summary of the conversation below.

WRM: How did the Earthworm Foundation contact your organisation, and how would you describe their work?

ELIELSON (Pará, Brazil): Earthworm came to the Acará Valley in 2023, in the midst of heated conflicts with traditional peoples. Earthworm was contracted by Cargill, a company that buys palm oil from Agropalma. Faced with repercussions of the conflicts, Cargill was trying to "clean up the supply chain." So, Earthworm began seeking out indigenous and quilombola leaders to try to mediate the conflict – in an attempt to reach an agreement between community representatives and the palm oil

company.

In 2023, in collaboration with Agropalma, Earthworm provoked an internal division among the indigenous populations. This proved to be extremely detrimental, leading to the creation of another indigenous association that sat down at the table with the company. Agropalma then promised that there would be no more conflicts, and that the communities would be given an area where they themselves could harvest oil palm to sell.

Over the last 40 years, Agropalma has created many barriers around its plantations: the rivers, the cemetery, the fruit orchards, or the gardens are no longer easily accessible for the communities. Their movements are subject to prohibitions imposed by the company. But at the negotiating table, Agropalma promised that everything would change, as long as the new co-opted organisation guaranteed that the actions of the other association (along with its demands for the recognition of territorial rights) would cease. This is how the internal division was created.

When the initial promises were not kept, and representatives of the NGO [Earthworm] disappeared – as did the company's management – indigenous peoples initiated an action to recover their territory, in order to draw attention and alert the media. During this process, an indigenous Turiwara man was shot dead in 2023 by security guards hired by the company. (16)

Now we have internal divisions, with two indigenous organisations. With Agropalma's backing, this NGO [Earthworm] caused this internal division, which has created many problems and made the process of social and political organisation very difficult for the indigenous peoples.

In view of the sale of Agropalma S.A. – a process which has been underway since mid-2022 – we suspect that Earthworm is involved in drafting a new agreement wherein the indigenous communities would renounce their territorial claims. The company interested in acquiring Agropalma S.A.'s shares is Belém Bioenergia Brasil (BBB), a joint venture of Galp Energia (Portugal) and Palma Tauá Brasil (a partnership between Banco Opportunity Agro and Dentauá S.A.).

SYNAPARCAM (Cameroon): In Cameroon, Earthworm (formerly TFT) has a Training Center in the capital. In 2011, some of us went there to give a course on communal defence of the land. The community had been suffering for decades from Socapalm's occupation of our ancestral lands. Earthworm invited us to present the problems we had with the company. At that time, we were beginning to form our organisation, Synaparcam.

When they changed their name [from TFT to Earthworm], they told us: 'We are a new organisation now, and we can help you solve the problem with Socapalm', of the Socfin group. And they presented themselves as mediators. But after two or three meetings, in which, in addition to the company, there were civil servants, traditional community leaders and local elites, Synaparcam decided to withdraw. Because we realised that it was all about Earthworm creating an external image that we were collaborating with them to resolve the conflict.

Between 2012 and 2020, Earthworm tried to position itself as a mediator several times. But we in the community realised that it did not make sense for us to meet with the company using Earthworm as an intermediary. In September 2020, Earthworm arranged one such meeting between the company and Synaparcam, claiming that it would be useful for us to join because it would get the company's management to listen to the communities. After the meeting, we realised that the Earthworm team had put together a good report, but that the resolutions presented therein were beyond what Earthworm could get Socapalm to accept. When we understood this, we realised that Earthworm was

not playing fair.

That was our first experience with Earthworm, and that's why we originally had some faith that they would commit to what they had told us.

WRM: Earthworm is funded primarily by companies that hire it to "mediate" conflicts, among others. When Earthworm came to your organisation/community, did they explain to you what their relationship with the companies was and who was funding their work? How do you think Earthworm's source of funding has influenced these "conflict mediation" processes?

ELIELSON: Based on what the communities say, they present themselves as if they were an independent organisation; they do not mention their links [to the companies], even though they do say that they monitor the companies' supply chains. The words "independent organisation" are frequently mentioned in these dialogues. What we have seen are very harmful mediation experiences – of "coercive harmony," of fomenting internal division in order to weaken the peoples' struggle and their identity.

SYNAPARCAM: Earthworm's representative in Africa is Cameroonian, and yes, he informed us that Earthworm receives fees from Socfin. And he told us that if Socfin did not change its policies, Earthworm would refuse to continue with the mediation process, and that Earthworm's work with the company would end. He told us: 'We will not allow the colonizers' companies to do the same as before' [referring to the fact that Socfin is controlled by French billionaire Vincent Bolloré].

But we realised that Earthworm prioritized these fees over the communities throughout the process. So, we are aware [of where their funds come from]; they are in the same line of work as big NGOs like WWF.

WRM: Synaparcam refused to conduct joint "field visits" with Earthworm in 2023. Could you explain a little more about the reasons for this decision and why Synaparcam decided to produce its own report?

SYNAPARCAM: In 2023, Synaparcam was already aware that Socapalm was not upholding the commitments it had previously made. By 2023, we were no longer collaborating with Earthworm. So, we looked for our own funding to prepare a good report (17), including with very skilled people from abroad, in parallel with Earthworm's report.

Synaparcam's study confirmed that there were seven points of conflict, whereas Earthworm identified a much smaller number. For example, Earthworm's report states that the company built several schools and that there was almost no contamination of the rivers. Earthworm's report was published before Synaparcam's report. Earthworm has not commented on several of the points identified in the Synaparcam report [and which were missing in the Earthworm report]. If you read these two reports, you would think they are talking about two different worlds.

The same thing happened with the RSPO. One of the reasons Socapalm hired Earthworm was because it wanted to obtain the RSPO certification.

WRM: On the subject of RSPO, moving back to the situation in Brazil, we know that Agropalma's RSPO certification was suspended in 2023 due to accusations of land-grabbing and violence. Elielson, do you believe that contracting Earthworm represents some kind of guarantee that Agropalma will respect the rights of communities?

ELIELSON: In no way does it represent any kind of guarantee. The company is in open conflict with the communities. All of this huge investment in advertising and communications, all of this talk of "corporate social responsibility," is just a big case of greenwashing. This "discursive arsenal" of [terms like] 'sustainable oil palm,' 'harmonious relations', etc., is very different from the reality. Since 2022, there has been a resurgence of conflicts, due to the company blocking access to common areas, to ancestral cemeteries, and to river travel. The company even had trenches dug or set up barricades that block community movements.

There are large trenches, in some places five meters deep and two meters wide, which literally look like a battlefield. These trenches are very dangerous, and there have already been accidents. Some communities are surrounded, for example, by barbed wire, as if this were the border between Mexico and the United States, or Palestine and Israel.

WRM: And what does Earthworm have to say about this?

ELIELSON: We have never heard Earthworm make any public statement or declaration about these corporate acts of terror – the barricades, trenches, fences. And the communities even fear that these fences will be electrified. We are not aware of Earthworm ever condemning these practices by Agropalma.

WRM: If we take, for example, the Cameroonian villages of Dibombari and Mbonjo: Since Earthworm got involved, has anything actually changed for the better for the communities with respect to the problems caused by Socapalm?

SYNAPARCAM: The communities' main demands are concerning land, sacred sites, water pollution, and violence against women. So, this is a very important question, thank you. Women being raped, the failure to comply with the retrocession of lands, and the disregard for sacred sites are the three most serious problems for us.

When Socapalm and its oil palm plantations were privatized [more than 24 years ago], Socfin acquired Socapalm. After signing the lease in 2000, the company assessed the leased land and asked the State to sign an amendment to the lease, reducing the area from 78,000 hectares to 58,000 hectares. This reduction in area is clearly established in the amendment. But nothing happened. So, one of Synaparcam's actions was to plant food in one of these disputed areas, because we realised that the state authorities are not upholding their supervisory responsibilities, and the company is not respecting the contracts it signed with the State. We want to maintain those food plots, but we are facing pressure, intimidation, and arrests of leaders.

Another complication is that the RSPO has classified some of the lands previously accessed by the community as "areas of high biodiversity value" – which means that the community can no longer access them. There are signs put up and company guards monitoring the area. Meanwhile, Socapalm has drawn the perimeters to expand those blocks, and has taken over these swaths of community lands. The RSPO does not recognize all the areas claimed by the communities.

Regarding the presence of Earthworm, the situation has not improved; we find ourselves in the same place we were at the beginning.

WRM: Do you believe that these consequences are due to mistakes made by the Earthworm Foundation, or to the very nature of this organisation?

ELIELSON: There is a structural issue. What is the purpose of this company [Earthworm]? Why was it created? When we see that it has branches in every part of the world where oil palm companies are operating (Indonesia, Africa, Latin America), it is clear that Earthworm is a link in this chain, and a part of this power game. So, I think that it will always act in favour of the companies.

SYNAPARCAM: We see a lot of similar things. In terms of dividing communities...in our case, it seems like Earthworm giving advice on how to divide communities, and then the company takes up the recommendations. This is a very dangerous method as well, because on the one hand it approaches [the community], and on the other hand it advises companies on how to divide the community.

WRM: What message do you think is important to convey to a community which could be approached by an organisation like Earthworm – in the same way that they approached communities in your area?

SYNAPARCAM: Never accept such an offer, because nothing will change. It is important never to have an intermediary. If the company is interested in changing, it knows where to find the community. So, we recommend not to accept such a mediation proposal, because the mediation will not lead to any improvement.

ELIELSON: The first thing I would say to them is: "Be very careful!" You should also prevent entities like Earthworm from having one-on-one conversations with leaders. The old saying "divide and conquer" still applies. Companies are experts in creating ways to undermine community struggles.

It is important to understand [that these organisations] are part of a machinery. It is also important to know the history and experience of other communities that have already been subjected to similar situations. And be careful not to participate individually in their attempts to co-opt and persuade, so as not to make precipitous decisions before evaluating proposals among all members of the community.

WRM International Secretariat, Synaparcam and Elielson Pereira da Silva (18)

- (1) Information obtained on the website of the [Earthworm Foundation](#)
- (2) Earthworm Foundation Annual Report, 2023.
- (3) Video [available here](#).
- (4) Ditto (2).
- (5) Information summarized on the basis of Earthworm Foundation annual reports.
- (6) Quote obtained from an Earthworm institutional video [available here](#)
- (7) See also the booklet produced by the Informal Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa, [available here](#)
- (8) For more information, see [WRM Bulletin 224](#), in [particular](#) and [the following article in Mongabay](#)
- (9) We refer more specifically to the seven reports published by Earthworm between 2023 and 2025, about conflicts between Socfin subsidiaries and local communities in the countries referenced. The reports can be [found here](#).
- (10) For more information about the impacts of Socfin plantations on communities, [check pdf](#), [Grain.org](#) and [this article](#).
- (11) Earthworm's three reports about the situation in Mbongo, Mbambou and Edéa, published in February 2025, acknowledge that Amendment No. 1 of the Lease Agreement provides the retrocession of land, totalling more than 8 thousand hectares. The reports are [available here](#)
- (12) See more [here](#)

(13) Read more in the article:

<https://www.earth sight.org.uk/news/idm/socfin-under-scrutiny-alleged-abuses-africa-rubber-palm-oil-plantations-despite-pldeges>

(14) Information obtained at [earthworm](#)

(15) Information obtained at SDGI Supplier Grievance Register, available at [SDGI-Supplier-Grievance-Register_13022025_AR.pdf](#)

(16) See [here](#)

(17) See Synaparcam's report [here \[in French\]](#)

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