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**Resistance in the face of multiple tactics
 to expand monocultures**



Monoculture tree plantations in Mozambique. Photo: Justicia Ambiental

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Resistance in the face of multiple tactics to expand monocultures

Our Viewpoint

Industrial Monoculture Tree Plantations: Making the voices of resistance louder!



Demonstration against Arauco's monoculture tree plantations in Argentina.
Photo: Productores Independientes de Piray (PIP)

“Large-scale industrial tree plantations undoubtedly help the international pulp and paper industry secure stable supplies of raw materials. They are also capable of periodically making sizable profits for the huge conglomerates which plant them. They are not designed, however, to benefit Southern countries as a whole, their people or their environments. Although they normally destroy more employment than they create, they nevertheless rely on subsidies extracted from large numbers of people to generate their profits. They do not help preserve land, forests, grasslands, or water sources, but rather exploit local natural advantages ruthlessly. Neither Southern countries nor their local communities, therefore should hope to benefit from the presence of huge plantation and pulp firms producing for export. On the contrary, they must be on their guard against the damage these corporations can wreak.”

While plantation tree roots may be within national territory, it is very unlikely that the roots of such companies will be.”

This text was not written recently. It was published almost 15 years ago by Ricardo Carrere. (1) Ricardo was the coordinator of WRM from 1996 until 2010.

We introduce this bulletin with Ricardo's words, not only because the on-going devastation of industrial monoculture plantations is the focus of this issue, but also because it is 10 years ago that Ricardo passed away. His legacy on the struggle against industrial plantations and his teachings remain very much alive.

Besides the damage and harm caused by industrial plantations that Ricardo alerts about in his text, which are still present today, nowadays, communities living in and around plantations need to also confront politicians, plantation and related companies as well as

conservation NGOs with new tactics to keep on trying to make the industry appear 'sustainable'. The arguments are still as perverse as they were 10 years ago. For example, that trees (meaning, industrial plantations) can save humanity from climate chaos. Tree planting is regularly part of offset schemes, such as REDD+ or the so-called "nature-based solutions". These plantations allow polluters to claim to be 'carbon neutral' or having 'net zero' emissions.

Plantation companies and their investors are further expanding their profits by entering new markets besides the pulp and paper, including the production of wood-based textiles, plastics, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, paints, fertilizers, resins, energy and many others. (2) For example, the European Union will be pushing with the plantations industry's lobby during the UN climate negotiations to allow biomass (turning trees into wood pellets and burning them to make electricity) to be considered 'sustainable' and emitting 'zero emissions'. Moreover, the world's largest wood pulp producer Suzano Papel e Cellulose has entered into a new partnership with the company Spinnova to build the first commercial scale production facility of wood-based fibre in Finland. They brand this as 'sustainable' fibre.

In reality, the large-scale plantation model cannot be decoupled from histories of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy and racism. This intensive and violent model is largely based on crimes. Crimes like the stealing of land and livelihoods, unlawful criminalization, sexual assault and harassment, human right violations, oppression of women, labour exploitation, environmental devastations and pollution. Those behind the violent imposition of this model in the global South have often tried to erase the violent pasts and presents of their activities with nice-sounding propaganda. Yet, the 'sustainable', 'net zero' or 'carbon neutral' claims hide countless histories of dispossessions and oppressions that have built and sustained profits for a few. Histories that have largely been silenced and marginalized by forces of money and power.

But these histories also carry another set of powerful and strong stories; stories of community resistance. Their struggles against industrial tree monocultures are struggles for their lands and forests, their communities and their life spaces nurtured with their histories, knowledge and understandings.

Since 2004, September 21 marks the International Day of Struggle against Monoculture Tree Plantations. This is a day for communities, movements, organizations and networks to applaud the courage and strength behind every resistance struggle. Acknowledge the countless resistance stories and join their call for an end to the expansion of these devastating industrial tree plantations.

Let's turn up the volume of the voices of resistance against industrial tree plantations!

(1) Pulping the South. Industrial Tree Plantations in the World Paper Economy, Ricardo Carrere and Larry Lohmann, 1996, https://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Pulping_the_South.pdf

(2) WRM, *What could be wrong about planting trees? The new push for more industrial tree plantations in the global South*, 2020, https://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/WEB_EN_What-could-be-wrong-about-planting-trees_corrected.pdf

Oil palm monoculture in Ixcán Municipality, Guatemala: A story of dispossession and deception



Photo: Movimiento Social Intercultural del Pueblo de Ixcán, Guatemala

Oil palm is not traditionally grown in Guatemala. When palm companies arrived in the Municipality of Ixcán in the state of Quiché, or what is called the northern lowlands, they did not evict people to plant palm. Rather, they did so much more strategically. We call what they are doing **systematic dispossession**.

Traditionally, indigenous peoples in Guatemala manage land collectively. There are no bosses and no owners. Since the 1960s there have been “development” plans in the country, which have included the Xalalá Dam, oil exploration and exploitation, and oil palm. A highway called the Franja Transversal del Norte was built in order to transport these products. The Municipality of Ixcán, created just in 1985, was one of the municipalities most affected by the internal armed conflict (1960-1996). Because it is a completely forested area, Ixcán was where the guerrilla movements gained a lot of momentum. The intention was to fight against all the injustices of the political system, and that is why many of our grandparents and even parents took up arms. At the height of the conflict, several companies had to withdraw from the area due to pressure from the guerrilla movement. However, after the 1996 peace accords, the strategy of systemically dispossessing people resumed.

Of the 12 peace accords, the Agreement on Socioeconomic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation was key. In this agreement, an alliance of guerrilla groups—there were four groups which ultimately formed one alliance—along with other sectors, such as the Catholic Church and international observer groups, proposed a just distribution of land to do away with the system of servants and bosses. In the Agreement, the State of Guatemala committed to creating mechanisms for people to access land, such as the Land Fund and the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs. But from 2001-2002 on, the Guatemalan State began to promote private land titling through the Land Fund. That is, each person had to have a document ensuring individual, not collective, ownership. This ignored the way indigenous peoples had managed their lands. This process lasted six or seven years in some communities. The Municipality of Ixcán was one of the first regions to implement private land titling. There are around 30 communities in the region, 12 of which are affected by palm.

Coincidentally, three years later, the government of Álvaro Colom set up a trust so that other companies could obtain money and offer agricultural credits to communities. Many

communities fell into the trap. They decided to accept, and when farmers were given their individual deeds, they were told: “You are now the property owner. If you want to sell now, you can. You can take out a loan and you can pawn your lot.” Many chose to get agricultural credits. Between 2008 and 2009, 17 companies offering agricultural loans appeared in the Municipality of Ixcán. They took advantage of the fact that people had many needs following the conflict. Through this mechanism, people could pawn their land deeds in order to obtain loans. This municipality happens to be below sea level, and almost every year there are floods, and crops are lost. Logically, people could not pay back their loans. In many cases, two or three years went by in which they were not charged. When they began to ask about their credits, they were told: “Don’t feel bad, the palm company has already paid, and they have the deed now, they are the owners.” In other cases, people offered their land to the “coyotes,” the frontmen for the company who showed up offering to buy lands to grow corn supposedly. This is how the Palmas del Ixcán company got a lot of land.

Another case that illustrates the company’s tactics is that of two people who decided to sell their plots to the company. Since they could not read or write and their language was Q’eqch’í, the company asked for two witnesses to endorse the document of sale. They then took four people to Zone 10 of Guatemala City, the most exclusive area, and made four documents of sale. That meant that the people who were supposedly signing as witnesses were actually signing a document that handed over their lands to the company. One of the Q’eqch’í-Spanish interpreters noticed this and filed a complaint against the company and the public notary who promoted this situation.

Another tactic they use is to buy out the person who is at the edge of, for example, the cultivation area, and then the next person; and if that person doesn’t want to sell, they buy from the person further ahead. This way, whoever is in the middle has to go through the plantations, and this prevents them from working freely; they therefore have to sell. Or, companies look to the local authorities and get them to become “coyotes” or a front for the companies in order to obtain plots. So there are several strategies. That is why we call it systematic dispossession.

Impacts, violence and precariousness

Water pollution and scarcity have generated more awareness about the multiple impacts of palm monoculture. This issue has made communities aware of other impacts and has forged the resistance that currently exists in communities. This region used to get flooded quite a bit, but since 2018 it has been one of the regions most affected by droughts, leaving people without crops. People now understand that the greater the destruction of diversity, the greater impact the droughts will have on the territories.

Now in the lowlands, where there is still too much water, the company is making some ditches to drain the water. These ditches are carrying chemical waste pollutants into rivers.

There is no palm oil extraction plant in Ixcán Municipality. Fruit is just harvested there and transported to Chisec Municipality, on the other side of the river, where it is ground to extract the oil. All of the waste from this process goes directly—without any kind of treatment—to the Chixoy River (or Black River), one of the largest rivers in the country. Residue from the fruit, called *raquis*, causes fly infestations that get into homes. Flies are in the food, on clothes, they are everywhere; and as a result they transmit diseases, mainly stomach diseases in children. There is so much waste that the fly infestation has reached Ixcán Municipality.

In the case of the community of Sonora, after a 2018 investigation by the Ministry of Health, the prosecution authorities of Guatemala investigated the chemicals present in the Sonora River. The results were obtained at the beginning of 2021, and the presence of chemical products was verified. All of them were tied to palm and the Palmas del Ixcán company. The case went to court. After that, the company filed a complaint against community authorities for aggravated usurpation and illegal detentions. The company wanted to continue working on the community's lands, and the community ran them off. The company argues that the community is trying to take away its lands, yet it has not presented documentation that proves it owns those lands.

So, there is no more water and no more organic matter on the land. The water is no longer going through its natural process of rising in vapor form and returning in liquid form. All the water is filtered, and the artesian wells that the people use for their consumption dry up. Women now walk up to two or three hours to fetch clean water in other communities; some even cross the border into Mexico. These are very severe situations.

Meanwhile, community authorities are criminalized and coopted. Companies take over community roads. They co-opt leaders however they can in order to engender conflicts in the community. And the companies are good at marketing and at hiding everything that the community says. Palm oil is environmentally friendly, they always say, despite communities' testimonies to the contrary.

One example of marketing tactics is labor exploitation. The Palmas del Ixcán company claims that it is paying its workers very well, because the minimum wage for agricultural work, according to Guatemalan law, is around 79-86 quetzals, and the company is paying 98 quetzals a day (US \$13 approximately). But the company never mentions the amount of work. For the job of *plateo*, that is cleaning around the palm plant, people are assigned 250 plants per day. This means that they are making around 48 cents per plant. That is the same amount the Germans paid their grandparents when the latter were dispossessed to grow coffee a hundred years ago. If they do not complete the task, they are not paid; the next day they have to complete the previous job as well as the current day's job. Furthermore, they almost never have contracts and therefore have almost no labor rights (1).

The elders here are very wise. They say: "You cannot have two hearts. One heart with the company and another with the community is not possible. You are either with the community or you are with the company. It's simple. You cannot have two hearts."

RSPO Certification

The Palmas del Ixcán company says that it is fully certified. We know that the company is RSPO-certified for the product, but we do not know when they were granted this certification. The communities have no idea of what happens at that level, nor do they have information about what certification entails.

We filed a complaint to the RSPO; we also participated in a consultation mechanism with this entity, but this was about the new plantations that the company planned to implement, not about existing production or plantations.

When we accompanied the communities in consultations with the company about new plant-

ations, some unpleasant things happened. The consultation document mentioned a first visit already made to the communities in May 2019, and it claimed that six Ixcán communities in the plantation area had already accepted the new plantations. Palmas del Ixcán had hired the company, IBD Certificaciones, to supposedly conduct consultations with the communities. Yet when we spoke with the communities, they told us they did not know anything about this. In other words, it was not true that they had visited the communities.

At the time, we sent briefs to the RSPO explaining this. Then, a person from IBD contacted us to have a meeting. He wanted to have a meeting with each community separately. As for us, we consulted with the communities, and it was decided that the meeting would have to be with all of the communities together, not separately, because we didn't know what kind of manipulation strategies they might use. IBD accepted this and we told them to come so that we could explain the whole situation. At the meeting the person said he did not know what was happening with the palm company. But when he told us his name, we realized he was the same person who had signed the previous report—the report that the communities considered to be false. Nonetheless, a brief containing all the minutes from the meetings was done, stating that that report was false. This brief was given to the IBD representative, sent to the RSPO, and disseminated in alternative media channels.

Nonetheless, the RSPO's recommendation to the company was to approach communities to try to convince them. There was no other way to interpret its response. In December 2019, Palmas del Ixcán wrote the Social Intercultural Movement of the People of Ixcán asking us to meet with them. We did not, of course. The company should have communicated with and met with the communities. After that, there were other proposals for dialogue, which we passed on to the communities because they had not been invited. They expressed they were not in agreement.

That was the perfect excuse for the RSPO to grant certification. When we later criticized the RSPO for certifying Palmas del Ixcán, their response was that the company had approached the communities and the communities did not want to dialogue.

In 2019 we issued the declaration, "The RSPO is a sham," because we believe that the RSPO's purpose is to plant palm at any cost, and that the motive behind approaching communities is to continue to plant it (2).

In response, the RSPO wrote to us again via its representative, Francisco Naranjo (Latin American Director for the RSPO), to tell us that the certification was already done. Francisco Naranjo has not been to the communities. As we say in Guatemala, "he couldn't care less" what the communities are experiencing, so the communities are not going to obey the certification either.

The communities have decided that they will no longer allow palm to be planted on their lands. Six communities were in the process of certification for new plantations. After all of this, five of them are now informed about the impacts, but not all of them. One community has authorized companies to plant palm.

Small farmers program: "independent palm producers"

We were very surprised by the 2019 agreement between Palmas del Ixcán, US company Cargill, and the Dutch NGO Solidaridad. We were struck by the fact that in a very difficult

moment for us, just as we were examining what would be presented to the RSPO in response, the corporate media came out with this agreement as great news.

The “independent palm producers” process had already been in the works. There is nothing independent about it. Palmas del Ixcán is the one that sets the prices and all the conditions, and people cannot sell to any company other than them. Supposedly, the support families have received from the company is technical training on palm management and harvesting. But we must not forget that the same drought that was caused by palm, also affected palm. In the last two years, palm production has been much lower than in previous years. Therefore, there has been a lot of pressure on “independent palm producers;” they have to produce the same amount of palm as stated in the contract, regardless of what happens.

There are more than 100 “independent palm producers” in Ixcán, and each one has been given a pair of goats to help eat the vegetation underneath the palm trees. In practice, these so-called “independent palm producers” are the company’s support base. When communities in resistance publicly denounce the RSPO or other entities, it is the “independent palm producers” who tell a different story than the communities.

While there are a lot of reservations among the communities, it is the women who really do not accept palm under this scheme. In many families, the men agree to be “independent palm producers” and it is the women who are opposed, who say: “No, not in this family, our land is not for that.” **There is already a lot of awareness and organization among women.** They are the ones who have been on the frontlines of the communities that have started to resist palm—palm grown both by the company and by “independent palm producers.” They live with the problems of water scarcity and contamination up close.

Resistance

The institutionality of the Guatemalan State is being highly criticized by the population. Regardless of the will one could have, and even if there were investigations carried out and complaints filed against palm companies, what State institution would dare follow up on a complaint against the palm companies? Within the CACIF (Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations), which is made up of business leaders in Guatemala, billionaire palm companies make up the Chamber of Agriculture, which has much more influence than any other chamber. It is quite complex and riddled with corruption. So communities despair, and in many cases do not even file complaints. The resistance is therefore focused on the territories.

In La Sonora, where the water pollution complaint was made, residents decided to reject the palm company’s development proposal. They did so in a meeting that took place in June 2019, and they cut all ties with anything related to the company. They stressed that everything they have built in the community has been with their own resources and is a result of their work. They recorded this in a communal record, and it was agreed that the Palmas del Ixcán company would be asked to withdraw from their territories.

Two years ago, the community of Prado decided that it would no longer allow palm to be grown on its lands. In July 2021, when the company arrived, the community stopped the trucks that were transporting the plants, and forced them to turn around and not plant palm there. The company filed a writ of amparo before the Court of Appeals so that it would invalidate the community’s decision.

The communities of Ixcán Municipality, as in all of Guatemala, have the right to decide what is and what is not grown on their lands.

Herbert Sandoval,

Social Intercultural Movement of the People of Ixcán, Guatemala (Movimiento Social Intercultural del Pueblo de Ixcán, Guatemala)

(1) Communities denounce labor exploitation at palm company, La masa, March 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2745838992151798&id=420515274684193

(2) Movement of communities in defense of Q'ana Ch'och' water and the Social Intercultural Movement of the People of Ixcán, October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/104416791202155/posts/191632732480560/>

The New Forests Company in Uganda: Villages Evicted, Deceived and Dumped into Poverty



Photo: Witness Radio

In the early 2000s, neighbouring villages envied Kanamire, a village located in the Mubende district, in the central region of Uganda. It had made a name in farming, and its story of success was spreading like a wild bushfire. Its inhabitants had set a high bar for anyone who practiced small-holder farming. The arable land and farming practices was the magic behind their success.

Kanamire's villagers used to spend the entire day either tilling their gardens or weeding their crops in anticipation of a bountiful harvest.

"The population in the village had surged and was now entirely thriving on farming. Bigger and sprawling shops were everywhere. Houses made of baked brick were replacing the grass thatched ones. We proudly called it home," 54-year-old Obutu Danial reminisces about the heydays.

As a norm, amongst the rural women, there is an unwritten creed of maintaining peace with your neighbours. The first person to harvest, at least, shared part of the harvest with the neighbours. This belief had stood the test of time and Kanamire's women were no exception. "We had enough land. We grew enough food for the families. We would give yields to our neighbours, for example beans, and in return, they would also do the same when theirs are ready. And [we would] also sell the surplus to cater for other needs", a woman farmer reveals.

Twenty years down the road, the exemplary village no longer exists. Acreages of banana, coffee and maize crops, among others, were razed down, and families were brutally evicted by the London-based New Forests Company (NFC).

New Forests Company and the carbon market

NFC was founded in 2004 with the “vision” of producing “sustainable” timber in East Africa amidst rampant deforestation. It was funded by Agri-Vie Agribusiness Fund, a private equity investment fund, and UK-bank HSBC Private Equity. The East Africa region in which Uganda lies is one of the most fertile regions and thus, it was chosen for the plantations business.

In 2005, the tree plantations company signed a deal with Uganda’s National Forestry Authority (NFA) to develop 20,000 hectares of tree plantations in the Namwasa and Luwunga forest reserves under the carbon trading program, a market-based approach to privatize the carbon dioxide stored in trees for selling it as carbon credits to polluters. This generates additional profits for the Company.

NFC is currently also benefiting from a new project supported by the Dutch Fund for Climate and Development (DFCD); a 160 million euros (more than 185 million dollars) from Dutch government fund that aims to mobilize private sector finance into carbon projects. The DFCD is managed by investment manager Climate Fund Managers (CFM), NGO Worldwide Fund for Nature Netherlands (WWF-NL) and NGO SNV, and it is led by the Dutch Development Bank, FMO. (1)

On August 2020, DFCD approved a 279,001 euros (around 327,000 dollars) grant and WWF technical assistance package for The New Forests Company (NFC), with the aim of developing the final business investment proposal for carbon certification in Uganda, for sustainable smallholder growth and timber market diversification. This in reality would translate into generating carbon finance to support expanding their monoculture plantations and land grabbing.

The Kanamire village’s eviction

The National Forestry Authority (NFA) is a Government agency established under the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act of 2003, as a corporate body responsible for the so-called “sustainable development,” the management of Central Forest Reserves (CFRs) and the provision of technical support to stakeholders in the forestry sub-sector.

Between 2006 and 2010, more than 10,000 people were evicted from their lands in the district of Mubende to make way for the NFC plantations. Despite this, in 2008, the Uganda Investment Authority, which is mandated to “advise Government on appropriate policies conducive for investment promotion and growth” (2) named NFC an ‘Investor of the Year’ for planting monocultures of pines and eucalyptus while villagers miserably live on a barren and crowded piece of land.

In February 2010, residents of Kanamire woke up to a hail of NFC representatives and graders, who were under the protection of the Uganda People’s Defense Forces (UPDF) and the Uganda Police Force (UPF), which in turn were under the command of the then Mubende Resident District Commissioner Nsubuga Bewaayo. They destroyed the villagers’ properties

worth billions of Uganda shillings before the forced eviction, to give way for a NFC monoculture plantation.

The others villages that suffered forced eviction in the Mubende district due to NFC plantations are Kyamukasa, Kigumya, Kyato, Kisita, Mpologoma, and Bulagano villages.

Three years after the evictions, NFC agreed to resettle victims after fretful engagements with human rights activists and other villagers' supporters addressing the violence that locals experienced during the evictions.

In an agreement signed by the company and the villagers of Kanamire, NFC agreed to pay them a total of 1.2 billion Uganda Shillings (around 340 thousand dollars). And residents were requested to form and join a cooperative society, which would allocate half of the money to buy land and the other half to cater development projects, such as boreholes and schools. Evictees were forced to pay subscription fees to become a member. Those that had no money by then to join the cooperative, were not included in the resettlement process. (3)

"We formed Bukakikama Cooperative Society and 600 million [Uganda Shillings] for land was wired on the cooperative account," (around 170 thousand dollars) Mr. Bakesisha William, the former cooperative chairman said.

Mr. Bakesisha said the 600 million Uganda Shillings bought land equivalent to 473 acres (around 190 hectares) in the Kampindu village, in the Mubende district. Out of the 901 families, 453 were allocated 1 acre (less than half an hectare) of land. The remaining 448 families haven't been compensated or resettled up to date.

Everyone in the cooperative had to pay 30,000 Uganda Shillings (around 8.5 dollars) to join. There were additional payments victims had to make, namely: 3,000 Uganda Shillings (almost one dollar) for having a share in the Cooperative and 5,000 Uganda Shillings (1.42 dollars) as the initial saving pot. Upon the fulfilment of the above required payments, the cooperative chairman would issue identification numbers.

And only those who had met such requirements would be registered as an eligible member of the cooperative to benefit from one acre of land to resettle.

In Kampindu, the place where the evictees from Kanamire were 'resettled', malnourished children in tattered clothes wandering all over the village are your first sight. The angry, hungry and mean-looking youth and their fatigued elders are crowded in makeshifts and muddy houses. Others with hoes on their backs and dirty feet reveal their destitution.

Even those that received one acre of land are not in any way better than those that did not receive it. They too are wallowing in poverty. They were resettled on a barren piece of land.

It has been established that even what is supposed to be claimed as resettlement has not been met. No relief support was offered, like basic housing, foodstuffs, water or clothing. They were dumped and abandoned by the UK-based multimillionaire company.

"Both groups are living poor lives. Those that got a chance to resettle on an acre of land are suffering. The land is too small to cultivate. It is located in hilly areas that can't either be built in or be farmed. And the others that had no chance are starving and working as labourers on

other people's plantations for survival. About 5 cases of fatality resulting from the displacement have been recorded in the areas," a researcher at Ugandan media platform Witness Radio noted.

Mr. Rwabinyansi Charles is one of those that were allocated land in Kampindu. The 75-year-old father of 11 cannot forget the ruthless manner in which NFC grabbed his land and threw him at Kampindu, a place he describes as hell.

"It is as if I don't have land. Look, it is filled with stones hard to build in or farm. When you plant crops, they dry. Look at the maize that was planted last season," he said while referring to a piece of land he had received from NFC.

11 years back, Mr. Rwabinyansi was a happy villager. Before his eviction, he had 30 acres (around 12 hectares) filled with crops of coffee, bananas, cassava, among others. Besides this, he also practiced animal husbandry on his land.

"On a good season, I would harvest over 30 bags of coffee, 20 of maize, and 15 of cassava. I would sell them while my wife at home would grow what fed us. We also sold the milk from our four cows, so it was indeed a good life," he narrated.

Now, on a well-wisher's piece of land in Kampindu, stands a makeshift tent that Mr. Rwabinyansi and his family call home, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Not even death will relieve the eviction-related pain because even in death, the eviction has continued to haunt them.

"I cannot build on that land. It is not safe for me. I cannot also build here, because any time, the owner may want to use it. I recently lost my daughter in law and I had nowhere to bury her", he reveals.

When someone dies, among the Baganda indigenous, a condolence message is accompanied with a decent burial and a farewell message to the deceased, "*Wummula mirembe*" which is akin to "Rest in Peace", however, this was not the case for Mr. Rwabinyansi's daughter in law. "We struggled to get where to bury her. But finally, God had mercy on us. A nearby friend gave a portion of his land to lay her to rest," he added.

The chairperson of the affected communities for NFC, Mr. Julius Ndagize, faults the criteria that informed the processes of allocating the evictees the one-acre piece of land.

"Firstly, the land is too small to accommodate all of us, and the procedures of first buying shares and savings in the cooperative were also not favouring my people since they had no money. People including those who got land to have nothing to eat. Imagine a family of 15 children, all have grown and built on the same land, where will they dig. The only benefit that the group which got land has ahead of those that did not get is that they have where to bury their beloved ones," he explained.

The pain of losing a promising young generation to an eviction

The evictees are now grappling with shocking eviction-related consequences, including child pregnancies, child labour, and school dropouts.

“Cases of early marriages and child labour are high in the area, children no longer go to school because ideally if a parent lacks what to eat, can he educate a child. And people are dying because they have no money to go to the hospitals” he further said.

Mr. Ndagize said the smallholder farmers are now working as casual labourers. “Given the fact that the land is small and infertile, these people go and work in the neighbouring farms to get what to eat,” he added.

Smallholder farmers’ contribution to the national food basket remains unrivalled, but when you speak to them, they believe they have been let down by their government, and thrown under the bus by multinationals like NFC.

“If agriculture is the backbone of Uganda as they say, why do they take the small we have, we were not starving, and neither were we begging anyone. But look at me now. Next time you will either find me on the streets begging or dead in my house,” depressed villager Rwoya Nyange concludes.

Efforts to talk to the Corporate Social Responsibility Programme Manager from New Forests Company, Mr. Kyabawampi Alex, were unsuccessful, as he did not respond to Witness Radio’s emails by press time.

Witness Radio - Uganda
Witnessradio.org

(1) WWF, The DFCD supports in carbon certification in Uganda, August 2020, <https://www.wwf.nl/wat-we-doen/aanpak/internationaal/Dutch-Fund-for-Climate-and-Development/The-DFCD-supports-in-carbon-certification-in-Uganda>

(2) Uganda Investment Authority, <https://www.ugandainvest.go.ug/about/>

(3) Witness Radio, The Agony of a Tree-Planting Project on Communities’ Land in Uganda, in WRM Bulletin 251, September 2020, <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/the-agony-of-a-tree-planting-project-on-communities-land-in-uganda/>

Women, Land, Plantations and Oppression in Sierra Leone



Photo: Farmlandgrab.org

The long standing land-grabbing processes in Sierra Leone is a result of a colonial and imperial violent past. Arable and collective land previously cultivated for food is being made conveniently available to big business, often in long-term leases to produce export products such as palm oil.

The oil palm has been a traditional crop for many communities in Sierra Leone and across West Africa. Nonetheless, with the arrival of multinational oil palm company Socfin, its production in Sierra Leone has turned into one of industrial monoculture with a trace of violence, patriarchy and oppression.

In 2011, Socfin entered into a 50-year land lease agreement with the Sierra Leonean government and local authorities, which was followed by two more agreements. The company paid landowners of the Sahn Malen Chiefdom a once-off compensation of 1 million Leones per acre (around 177 dollars). In less than 10 years, the forests and fertile land of this Chiefdom were transformed into thousands of hectares of oil palm monocultures.

Women are extremely important contributors to food sovereignty in the rural areas in Sierra Leone. However, they have usually no legal title to land. Even if statutory laws might allow women to be landowners, women have to confront another patriarchic system closer to their homes.

Customary laws often give men most decision-making and ownership power over land issues. On top of that, Paramount Chiefs are the custodian of the land according to customary law in Sierra Leone. Chiefs are the uncontested leaders within the boundaries of their territories. They are descendants of the “ruling families” designated by the British colonial rulers in 1879. This hierarchical structure means that the company can acquire community land with the consent of just one person.

Women are the most affected ones.

This is an interview with Aminata Massaquoi, a member of the Informal Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa. Aminata is accompanying and supporting women in Sierra Leone who are opposing and denouncing the oil palm plantations model, and has recently visited several communities affected by Socfin's plantations.

How is the land tenure system organized at the governmental level in Sierra Leone, particularly in relation to women rights?

Land in Sierra Leone is classified as state, private or communal land. In the western part of the country most lands are held under individual private ownership with exclusivity rights to use it and transfer it. Families or individuals have rights of access, use and transfer by lease or sell. And, as you know, there are also the customary land tenure systems, tenancy and state ownership operating in the country, as well as in other parts of the world.

For women in rural areas or women living in communities is not so easy because of the customary laws that are in place there. Civil society and women's rights groups over the years have been advocating for all land laws in the country to be synchronized to avoid dual interpretation on the same subject matter but that is yet to be achieved.

Meanwhile, large-scale land acquisitions, primarily by foreign companies for agricultural development, have increased rapidly, precisely at the same time as debates around land policy have taken place. A research by the NGO Christian Aid reported that from 2009 to the end of 2012, foreign investors had taken out or set to take out long leases on at least 1,154,777 hectares, about 21.4% of the country's total arable land for large scale industrial agriculture (1). As has been the case elsewhere in Africa, such large acquisitions have been criticized by numerous experts and NGOs claiming that rather than helping to improve the living standards of those who live in rural areas, such leases exploits land titles and actually increase poverty and economic inequalities. This is still a great concern and the signs are evident in areas where such leases were undertaken.

What is the situation of women at the community level in relation to land tenure and land access rights regarding customary laws?

In Sierra Leone, customary law sits alongside statutory law, but in rural areas, where there is little access to statutory justice services, customary law tends to prevail. People rely on village chiefs to resolve disputes. And when it comes to marriage, customary marriages tend to dominate though they are not recognized by the statutory law. Unless a customary marriage is registered with the local councils, it does not confer any property rights on the husband or wife. So if one's spouse dies, the couple's land may revert to the deceased spouse's family.

For women, who are often the main workers, breadwinners, and caregivers in households, and who depends the most on their land to make a living and support their children, this means that if the man dies or if a woman wants to dissolve a marriage due to domestic violence, she may have no rights over the land she has worked on for years. In that case, she could be removed from the land by her husband's family. Her children likewise have no rights to the said land and that can be difficult to confront because these women are not financially strong to fight back. In Sierra Leone, the 2007 Devolution of State Act gave women the legal right to inherit land, but in reality only few women inherit land.

Because of numerous advocacy activities around women's land rights, it is made to believe that women are included in decision-making, but in practice it is not the case. Several women explain to me during field visits that they would only know when the land deal has already been done because the customary law is used to silence them. Women have always

denounced the complete lack of possibilities for them to participate in the discussions when companies, governments or others come to the communities to offer projects or buying the land

Furthermore, statutory laws give women rights to own or lease land, however, customary laws denies them that right. Because vast of the lands are in the rural areas, the majority of the women are suppressed by local authorities. Nonetheless, the continuous advocacy work at the communities level has been helping out a lot.

There is also a prevalent violence towards women from within communities and from communities' Authorities. This has been a concern from place to place and because of customary laws and traditions, in most rural communities, women are expected to take the back seat during public engagements. Especially if a woman is married, she must not dare to talk or take decisions in the presence of her husband. The husbands or men become the spokespersons for the women. In consequence, an empowered woman or women that are aware of their rights in that light, become exposed to violence from within their homes for insubordination. Many schemes can be put in place to silence women.

During your visits to several communities confronting industrial palm oil plantations, what did you perceive is the most relevant grievance that women raised?

The common complaint has been the lack of inclusion in land deals and decision making. With the palm oil plantations came they became deprived to access their lands and need an alternative source of income. They are struggling to regain their lands back because the deals are not profitable to them. Local people are not employed by the company as promised; schools, water wells, health centers, scholarships, feeder roads, and many other promises were not delivered. Women also complain that their communities are not safe anymore as they were before the arrival of the company.

It was also clearly stated that sexual abuse do happen within the confines of the plantations but because of stigma and rejection by the men, it is normally not discussed.

Which types of abuse are women subjected to?

For women working with the palm oil companies, it is hard work for a low pay. They walk long distances to work. There is no proper medical attention; there are dismissals without benefits; they don't have labour rights (they keep them as "casual workers" without contract, and can be sacked at anytime); they have no health insurance or coverage for accidents on duty.

Women shared experiences related to sexual advances made by some workers or security guards on those working for the company, and these women are expected to cooperate or else they would lose their jobs. Some women unwillingly go into such experiences for keeping their work and wages.

For those women who are against what is happening, they are being marginalized from being part of the community activities. They are always targeted by local authorities and their movements are sometimes monitored.

How are women confronting this situation?

They do so mainly by boycotting the community meetings that are connected with the companies. They act in disobedience towards the Paramount chief and strengthen relations with allies as well as local and international organizations that engage with them from time to time on the subject matter. Also through workshops on laws and rights. They meet internally from time to time though they are being monitored.

(1) Christian Aid, Who is benefiting?, 2013, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-08/who-is-benefitting-sierra-leone-report-july-2013.pdf>

A Dangerous Place for Women. Stories of Indigenous Women Working in Oil Palm Plantations in Papua



Women workers of oil palm plantation in Papua. Photo: Rassela Malinda

[This article is also available in Bahasa Indonesia.](#)

From ten meters away, I saw a women worker who was carrying a bucket in her right hand and a sickle in her left hand, standing still. We stared at each other steadily for a few moments. She then turned her body, as if she was dodging us. Robertus, one of the local residents who accompanied me while I was conducting a field research on the multiple impacts of oil palm plantations in the Anggai Village, shouted out to her, '*Mama Maria, this is me Robertus*'. She then looked back while narrowing her eyes '*Oh is that you, Robertus?*' It turned out that she had avoided us, because she thought I was a company officer who was conducting a field checking, and she felt afraid.

Mama MY then invited us to enter her work block, which was a stretch of palm tree seedlings that range from one to two years old. Women workers in the company PT. Merauke Rayon Jaya are generally employed in the nursery division. The nursery is a plot in which the young oil palms develop, when the oil palms are big enough, they are planted out in the palm grove. The main duty of these women workers are to take care of them by watering, fertilizing, and protecting them against insects and diseases. Almost no men are assigned to this section, they are mostly placed in the land clearing, traction (production of oil palm trees and repair of transportation) and logging. Most likely, the general assumption that women are good at caring is the reason for this placement.

During my visits, we met other women workers apart from Mama Maria. One of them is Mama PM. She is an Awyu Tribe Indigenous Woman and has been working in the MJR's nursery since 2014.

PT. Megakarya Jaya Raya (MJR) is a subsidiary of the Malaysia-based Menara Group, with a concession area of 39,920 hectares of forests. MJR has been operating in the Kampung Anggai area, Jair District, Boven Digoel Regency, Papua, since 2013. They have already cleared 10% of the total concession area, or about 3,000 hectares, and the deforestation is still ongoing until today. This company was mentioned in a cross-border investigation of the journalist groups Gecko Project, Mongabay, Tempo and Malaysiakini, as part of a mega plantation expansion agenda, known as Tanah Merah oil palm project. This investigation reveals the dirty methods employed by those who control the fate of the forests in Indonesia — through their money, power and political positions. (1)

Mama PM's working hours are from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. When I asked her about her strongest motivation to stay at this work, she replied, *'Mama will stop working one day, only when my son graduates from his college'*. Her son has just entered his third semester majoring in agriculture at a local college and Mama PM is deeply determined to bring her son to have a degree in Agriculture. *'I may not go to school, but children don't'*. She does not want her son experiencing the same fate as her; uneducated and working as a wage labourer for the oil palm company. She hopes education can change her son's life, though there is a price to pay.

Mama PM would do all her domestic duties at home before six in the morning. Sometimes, she would manage to prepare lunch for herself, and if not, she would remain hungry until she returns home. To arrive at the plantation, she needs to walk; the company does not provide transportation to pick up the workers. It would only take her 15 to 20 minutes to reach the plantation by motorcycle. However, by foot, the mostly clay route – which turns into a mud route when it rains – takes about an hour. Every day, she spends at least two hours walking to and from the location.

While being in the nursery, I noticed that only some of the women workers were wearing rubber boots – the rest were barefoot, and almost none were wearing protective gear such as masks or even gloves. This is certainly worrying, as workers in the nursery division always deal with hazardous chemicals. Every day they must carry out fertilization activities with urea, NPK, Anderson, and others. Especially when it rains, there is a risk that their eyes or skin are getting exposed to the chemicals, causing irritation and itching. Can you imagine that they use their bare hands?

During the early planting activities of the company, workers still received some work tools by the company, but lately these are no longer provided to them. The disposable yellow gloves that are supposed to be used for fertilization activities should be changed every day, but there is no initiative from the company's field staff to replace them. *'We are the one who have to ask them first'*, said a woman.

Next to a wooden-made structure that serves as a resting place for the workers, there is a runnel which is usually used for washing hands and cleaning work tools. The runnel however was not very hygienic, and also possibly contaminated with chemical fertilizers. This might also gradually affect the health and safety of women workers.

Before starting to work in the oil palm plantation, Mama PM fulfilled her daily needs by selling vegetables and gathering Sagoo – a Papuan Indigenous staple food. *'We were free to work as we want, no boss, no rules, but the income we got were uncertain'*. For her, working in the plantations allowed a monthly wage – something she did not get when relying on harvesting and gathering activities. But, to what extent is this true?

As a casual and temporary palm oil worker, Mama PM receives different wages depending on the number of days she worked in each month. Moreover, Rina, the administrative officer of the PT MJR nursery who is responsible to distribute the wages, is at the same time the owner of a small grocery stall with basic daily needs such as rice, sugar, coffee, tea, instant noodles and cigarettes. Each month, Rina cuts the wages according to the amount owed by the workers to her shop. If Mama PM works for a full month (25 days), then she will take home approximately two million rupiah (almost 140 dollars), from which she would still be deducted the monthly debt at Rina's shop. Her monthly debt usually goes from 600 thousand to one million rupiah (around 42 to 70 dollars).

In addition to this, she still has a debt for the working tools, which need to be bought by workers in monthly instalments that are deducted from their salary. The company might sometimes provide a pair of rubber boots and masks - only if requested by the worker.

Fixed monthly income, as one of the main motives of Mama PM and others to work in oil palm plantations, is more like an illusion than a reality. The bondage of debts as well as the status as a 'casual and temporary worker' sabotages the fixed income. Meanwhile, returning to gathering activities is almost impossible; the forest has turned into plantations.

And this is no exception to the rule. Researchers Julia and White (2) also found a similar motives in the Hibun Dayak indigenous women who decided to become plantation workers, the need for economic cash competed with the desire to maintain their means of production. Oil palm plantation companies around Indonesia represent many dangers for women workers. YK, an Indigenous Woman of the Moi Tribe, has been working as labourer at a palm oil company in the West Papua Province since 2008. Apart from having very minimal work safety standards, she believes that plantations are also places full of danger. One day, while she was cutting down a tree, she was attacked by a group of bees. She ran as fast as she could to find water, then she hid long enough under the water to deceive the chasing bees. *"I held my breath for a long time, my friend shouted out to me, told me to keep hiding because the bees haven't left yet. After a while, I came out of the water, got fainted, and woke up in the hospital"*. She had fever for days after the incident. *"No one from the company visited me in the hospital. No one"* she said.

RK, another woman worker from the same plantation as YK, tells a similar story. She started working in 2014 as a casual worker for spraying an area of two hectares using chemical components such as Vienna, Gallon and Sloar. She had to spray approximately eight lanes with 30-32 trees each, thus the total trees to be sprayed daily was around 240 trees. In 2019, she decided to quit her job after working for five years spraying fertilizer.

Her main reason was the asthma she suffered since January 2019. The doctor's diagnosis at that time was that the asthma was due to stomach acid. Besides that, the asthma was also allegedly caused by the excess of spraying chemical fertilizers. RK had to be hospitalized for two weeks. She and her husband paid the bill themselves, because the company insurance did not apply to the clinics around the village. There had been no collaboration between the

company and the clinic. She had to spend almost 1.4 million rupiah (almost 100 dollars) for the medical treatments. While being hospitalized, no company officer took care or even visited her. This neglect and indifference encouraged her to no longer work on the plantation.

No place for women

Another potential and very real danger that specifically lurks women workers in the oil palm plantations is sexual violence. I met a young woman, MG, an Indigenous Woman from the Yei Tribe who is also a former casual and temporary worker from an oil palm plantation that operates around Bupul and Muting, Merauke regency, Papua Province. She was dismissed by the company for taking her menstrual leave. According to her, the company applied strict rules especially for casual workers, no excuse could be accepted if workers could not be present in the field.

MG, a single mom with two children, has to leave her children at home while doing her activities at the plantation. She realized that it was too risky for his two children, but she had no other choice. She was the only life support in this small family. Once a barrack guard from the plantation field verbally abused her when MG refused to respond to his sexually objectifying behaviour. When she found relatives to stay with her children, she stayed to sleep in the company barracks to avoid the travel, but this was not too frequent. MG was afraid when she had to sleep in the barracks alone. The perpetrator was often drunk and forced the door to enter her room. This unpleasant experience really traumatized her.

Oil palm plantations are one of the most unsafe spaces for women, not only because of their vulnerable working status –mostly as casual workers – but also because of the potential for sexual violence that lurks them in and around the plantation fields.

On top of this, it is important to highlight that the inheritance of customary land, which generally follows male lineage in Papua, causes the exclusion of Indigenous Women from their right to own the land. While women are still given the right to manage and use the land as a source of subsistence fulfilment, this becomes even more problematic when customary land is commoditized.

Palm oil companies arrive to the villages offering promises of prosperity and progress with the condition of “*give me your land*”. In the process of acquiring customary land for transforming it into monoculture land, women are rarely involved and their opinions are unheard. After experiencing marginalization and exclusion from the very beginning of the process of transferring land rights, Indigenous Women in Papua lose access to their forests and livelihoods due to the deforestation and clearing up of land. They, in the end, do not have much choice but getting thrown into the oil palm plantations’ precariates with dangerous working conditions and treatment.

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[This article is also available in Bahasa Indonesia.](#)

Read the full research report from Rassela Malinda in Bahasa Indonesian at: Mama ke Hutan, 2020, <https://pusaka.or.id/assets//2021/04/MAMA-KE-HUTAN-Cover.pdf>

(1) The secret deal to destroy paradise, 2018, <https://thegeckoproject.org/the-secret-deal-to-destroy-paradise-715b1ffc0a65>

(2) Julia & Ben White. (2012) Gendered experiences of dispossession: oil palm expansion in a Dayak Hibun community in West Kalimantan, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39:3-4, 995-1016, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2012.676544

The world of speculation and green bonds



Photo: Edie.net

It was with the slogan “Our purpose is renewing life inspired by trees” that Suzano Papel e Celulose corporation launched its publicity material relating to its results for 2020. The document seeks to show the first consequences of recent mergers and acquisitions, which have turned Suzano into the world’s largest producer of eucalyptus pulp. The publication focuses on presenting the fact that what moves the company’s production activities – much more than profits – is providing solutions. By 2030, it aims to replace 10 million tons of plastic and other oil-based products with vegetable-based products, as well as removing 40 million tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere through the expansion of tree plantations. According to the report, beyond environmental questions, Suzano plans to lift some 200,000 people out of poverty in the areas where it has activities.

These and other measures are in Suzano’s crosshairs with the aim of intensifying its operations with *green bonds* as a way to finance its expansion and competitiveness projects. According to the company, one of the main results in 2020 was its pioneering bond issue (Sustainability-Linked Bond) that was able to raise US\$1.25 billion, against the promise of a 15% greenhouse gas emission reduction by 2030.

Our reading is that the report referenced reveals the media effort by major agro-industrial enterprises to mask the objectives of their predatory accumulation logic. In order to understand this process better, one must reflect upon large-scale corporations’ new accumulation tactics, especially their involvement in the so-called *green economy*.

First steps

Let us try, therefore, to translate the technical tangle set up for these new speculative operations in this long period of the worldwide crisis of capital. Perhaps one of the major difficulties we face in understanding the *dominance of speculative accumulation* over productive capital and other forms of appropriation of socially-produced wealth is the way of conceiving economic movements. One often sees definitions that the term *economics*

originates in the Greek words *oikos* (home) and *nomos* (to manage), thus suggesting a certain link with domestic activities, based on which one might explain human choices surrounding societies' production, distribution and consumption over time.

Simplifications such as this end up hiding the fact that under capital's relations, so-called *distribution* does not orient completely the wealth produced toward households' final consumption. Rather, it mostly goes toward an intense process of accumulation. Under capitalism, accumulation has been the path for corporations to become big, strong and competitive, constituting economic conglomerates capable of commanding a diversified set of forms of appropriation of ever larger slices of the wealth produced on the world scale.

Hence, accumulating means reapplying resources conquered in their own expansion and penetrating market segments by means of large-scale competitive disputes between capital units (whether as factories, banks, commercial houses, landed property or speculation).

Out of these domestic simplifications about the capitalist economy, a rather convenient fantasy has also been born: *abstinence theory*. According to this, corporations emerged on the basis of decisions made by entrepreneurial people, who yielded on consuming a reasonable part of what they had earned from their work and were willing to employ such savings in favor of social production. This legend also leads to the illusion that the development of large-scale companies is necessary, in order to employ the large contingent of people that preferred not to abstain from consuming and spent everything they earned in their lifetime. Without these employment opportunities, these people would not be able to live – so the tired, repetitive formula insists.

Fallacies aside, we know that since the mid-19th century, there has been a separation between the property and the management of capital. Initially, banks supplied credit to fund major ventures. But soon afterward, stock markets were created and the banks gradually merged with productive capital, thus creating large-scale corporations.

Hence, major investments started being financed via borrowing but also via the sale of shares in the property of corporations. To this end, new institutions were created, the so-called *stock markets*, which operate on an international scale, intermediating the buying and selling of such shares. While the option for loans meant the issuing of bonds by borrowing companies, in the case of shares placed on stock markets, companies started opening up their own capital for the entry of a large number of partners, some of whom with voting rights on company boards, but mostly completely anonymous and with no say in management.

In this process, debentures also emerged. These are debt bonds that are convertible into shares of the borrowing company in case the debt is not liquidated within the established time frame. Therefore, one notices that the purchase and sale of companies' shares on stock exchanges, as well as the possibility of exchanging bonds for shares, brings about a continuous ownership exchange, making it impossible to determine exactly who all the owners of companies are. Whoever holds shares with voting rights chooses and hires executive managers to administer corporations' units around the world. Such managers may be remunerated with a slice of companies' profits, but also with shares.

The escalation toward the dominance of speculation

Ever since the creation of credit systems, part of the commitments taken on by borrowers represents mere speculation about the business risk. As well as the interest to be paid, loan agreements always add to the debt a risk fee, as a way to compensate potential losses from delinquent borrowers, even if this never actually takes place.

When stock exchanges operate normally, purchases and sales of shares are operated based on prospects for future distribution of profits (dividends) by companies to their shareholders, with share prices tending to go up or down and no major oscillations. However, one shareholder or another may wish to sell a large number of shares, thus generating a certain amount of speculation about the motives for the decision. In the absence of immediate buyers, the price of the shares offered tends to fall and may depreciate the shares of all the companies. This shows that irrespective of companies' performance in terms of actual production and revenue, the price of their shares can go up or down out of mere speculation on the stock exchange.

Starting in 1971, speculation with company bonds and shares gained renewed motivation with the international dissemination of so-called *secondary markets*. In that year, the United States decided to break the agreements signed at the end of the Second World War that maintained fixed exchange rates between all countries' currencies and the dollar, with the US committing to maintain direct convertibility between its currency and gold.

With the breakdown of the international monetary standard, interest rates began to oscillate, thus generating a new wave of globalized speculation. From then on, primary bonds, where public and private loan contracts were signed, or purchase and lease options, together with companies' shares, started backing a series of bets on future prices in gigantic proportions.

Thus there emerged so-called *derivatives*, traded on secondary markets. These are contracts that derive from primary debt bonds or shares, to operate a speculative transaction normally linked to bets on the future variation of prices of goods and services, exchange rates or interest rates practiced in various countries. From there emerges the term *speculative merry-go-round*, truly a worldwide casino, which reproduces fictitious wealth on a gigantic scale as a form of parasitic accumulation, ever more distant from the production of real wealth. It is estimated that the current volume of derivatives is worth 10 times the world's GDP.

This new stage of globalized speculation has been a consequence of the deepening of a long-running crisis of capital overproduction. This has meant that ever larger amounts of surplus capital are used in bets about future values, in search for alternatives to the difficulties in applying capital productively at reasonable returns. Despite resulting from simple bets about the future, derivatives are socially recognized as real wealth and afford commanding power over economic operations to its holders in the present.

Speculation with green bonds

In this global climate of dominance of parasitic speculation, it was not long before derivatives became an opportunity for accumulation involving global debates about environmental collapse. In the face of the difficulties in controlling deforestation and the emission of pollutants on a world scale, *international summits* ended up yielding to the appeals for the

commodification of the protection of nature, creating so-called *payments for environmental services* (PES).

The proposal has been about disseminating and consolidating the idea of the possibility of *compensation for environmental damage*. Hence, companies and private institutes develop sophisticated ways of putting a market price tag both on the emission of pollutants and the *provision of environmental services*. The intent is to show that it is possible to quantify and compensate the ecological devastation produced by industrial expansion projects.

The neological creativity stands out with the idea of *polluter-payer* companies. This makes it possible to measure, via market prices, the volume of biodiversity devastated and offset it with some kind of preservation project in another commodified ecosystem.

Corporations can take part in these PES programs on the basis of the expansion of their traditional monoculture tree plantation projects. From being devastators of nature they become promoters of environmental offsets, based on projects to *store carbon* in the trees planted. This has been possible inasmuch as the State takes a step back from fostering environmental policies, leaving regulation in the hands of private companies and institutes. The latter start acting as certifiers and measurers of the payments that must be made over the duration of such environmental services projects, as well as being responsible for the evaluation of results.

Given that these PES agreements are formalized through long-term contracts, they generate future *receivable rights*, in other words, rights to payment in future for the provision of environmental services over the course of projects' execution. Hence, large volumes of receivables for environmental services become the backing for the issuance of derivatives negotiated on the basis of bets on exchange rates, on interest rates and especially on prices that may be reached by the very commodities produced as a result of *offset projects*.

Final remarks

There seems to be at least one more explicit objective to these corporations' new tactics. They find the best way to adapt to agreements reached at international summits around mercantile solutions for the crises that are currently coming together. So they make the most of the moment of global tension to solve structural funding problems, whether linked to old debts or to the demands for expansion of their production activities. The old credit lines, which demanded total quality and cost reduction targets, have been joined by new fundraising approaches linked to the production and reproduction of long-term receivables, through PES contracts and commitments to reduce the emission of pollutants.

The primary operations in the issuing of so-called green bonds are supplied by the dissemination of flows created by the official recognition of the mercantile concept of polluter-payer companies. At the same time, the gambling circuits in derivatives markets have found yet another impulse for their parasitic reproduction based on PES contracts and similar receivables.

Hence, it is not surprising that large-scale pulp producing corporations such as Suzano are operating and expanding with a portfolio of such high-risk liabilities. This is the nakedly harsh reality that dominates the world of big business all over the capitalist world, with less and less control exerted by government authorities.

Without the usual simplifications, it is possible to notice that public and private indebtedness has become an opportunity for the creation of ever more creative instruments for parasitic speculation. The risk of an unprecedented economic collapse has shown signs of being imminent, but this has been the reality in the face of capital's generalized incapacity to overcome the great depression that has deepened in the early 21st century. Meanwhile, the commitments made by corporations to formal sustainability are building up, under the regulation of institutions created and contracted by the predatory mercantile relations themselves, which further increases the risk to the continuity of life on the planet.

Helder Gomes, Brazil.

The Sangha region in the Republic of Congo

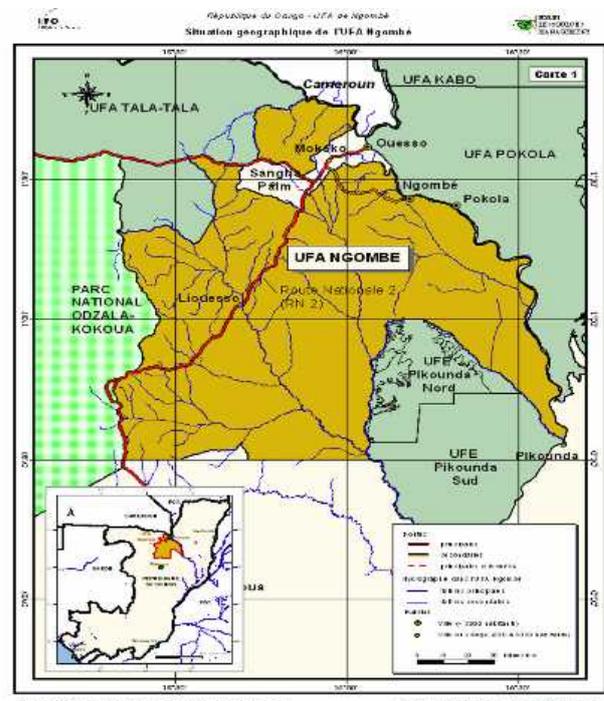


The conference of Berlin, as illustrated in 'Illustrierte Zeitung', 1884, which established the rules for the conquest and partition of Africa. Image: Wikicommons.

There is a serious risk that conservation and extractive industries will exert full control over tropical forests by implementing so-called 'nature-based solutions.' (1) These include large-scale carbon offset projects and the creation of more protected areas, as well as the continuation of supposed 'sustainable' logging and industrial tree plantations. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the implications that such territorial control can have on forest-dependent communities.

The heavily forested Sangha region in the north of the Republic of Congo is one example of how territories can end up entirely under the control of conservation and extractive industries. Three concessions occupy almost the whole region: one held by the palm oil company Eco-Oil Energie SA, one by the Odzala-Kokoua National Park and one by the logging company Industrie Forestiere d'Ouessou - IFO (see map).

While climate chaos would indicate that the alleged 'nature-based solutions' are more like 'fantasies' than anything else, the three companies in the Congo are mainly concerned about their businesses and competing among themselves, both in terms of the green propaganda they disseminate, as well as around the promises they make to grassroots communities. What is kept hidden, however, is the fervently unequal, racist and patriarchal nature of such concessions, which have their origins in colonial times. The three companies have deployed armed guards and/or local police against the local inhabitants of these forest areas to prevent them using their ancestral lands.



This article describes certain aspects that expose those behind each of the companies and their perception about grassroots communities.

Eco-Oil Energie

Oil palm grows naturally in the forests of the Sangha region. Archaeological sites show there is a longstanding tradition of the planting of oil palms by forest-dependent communities, especially women.

The radically different model of industrial oil palm plantations has its roots in colonial times, when the Compagnie Française du Haut et du Bas Congo (CFHBC) was granted a concession of 7.5 million hectares, covering an area with the combined size of Belgium and the Netherlands, to start producing palm oil on an industrial scale. Following independence, in 1983 the company was renamed Sangha Palm, a State-owned company with at the time a plantation area of 33,000 hectares. In 1990, and due to a financial crisis then taking place, the Sangha Palm oil factory was closed and the plantations were abandoned by the company. (2)

After Sangha Palm left, peasant farmers, particularly the women for whom oil palm is an essential part of their culture, continued harvesting palm fruits from the Sangha Palm plantation. They produced palm oil through artisanal methods and sold the oil at local markets, providing them with an important source of income. A peasant woman stated at that time: “(..) we have always extracted palm oil. With the money we make from selling our oil we buy medicine and clothes for our children.” (3)

But all of this came to an end when Eco-Oil Energie was formed in 2013, after Malaysian investors negotiated an agreement with the Congolese government to take over the control of the Sangha Palm oil plantations. They also took control over thousands of hectares of plantations in the Cuvette region that belonged to another State-owned oil palm company, the Régie Nationale des Palmeraies du Congo (RNPC).

Eco-Oil Energie SA Malaysia received a 25-year concession over 50,000 hectares, and announced it would recover what it called ‘abandoned’ plantations, ignoring the importance of this territory for the livelihoods and welfare of local people. By 2015, the project had received around USD 89 million from its Malaysian investors. The Gabon-based BGF Bank and the Togo-based Ecobank also invested in the enterprise. The company project included investing in the plantations as well as in producing palm oil, margarine and biodiesel. At the time it was announced that the biodiesel was to supply both the domestic and export markets. The company also announced its goal to increase its plantation area to 300,000 hectares in the future. (4).

Oil palm plantations are one of the major causes of deforestation worldwide. Eco-Oil Energie’s director claimed in 2015 that the company only replants so-called ‘abandoned’ plantations while conserving the remaining forest (5). However, a critical report of consultants who visited an Eco-Oil concession area in 2016, reported deforestation, illegal practices and conflicts with communities, among others, in the Cuvette region. (6)

Besides the Malaysian investors, the President and CEO of Eco-Oil Energie, Claude Wilfred Etoke, has greatly profited from the company’s activities. One of the owners of Eco-Oil Energie is a Swiss-registered company called Eco Oil Energie Sarl, which in turn is owned by

a Cyprus-registered company called the WEC Group. (7) Etoka is the only shareholder of Eco-Oil Energie Sarl.

Etoka is a controversial figure to say the least, as his name has been linked to numerous illegal practices. The coalition “Opening Central Africa” has alleged that Etoka is the “cash man” for President Sassou’s money laundering schemes (8). According to research from Global Witness and Mediapart, Etoka intermediated with international investors for the privatisation of the two former State oil palm companies, Sangha Palm and RNPC, to create Eco-Oil Energie. But that was not his only move, he has done the same for another 45 State companies, building up a huge business empire in the Republic of Congo that covers the oil extraction, agro-industry and manufacturing sectors. (9)

Some investment deals signed by Etoka on behalf of Eco-Oil Energie in recent years indicate that the company is in a process to expand its activities and production area beyond the palm oil business. For example, Eco-Oil signed an agreement with an Israeli company in 2018 to invest in mango and orange cultivation for juice production (10) and another in 2019 with Camaco, a Chinese investor, to invest in manufacturing agricultural equipment (11).

Industrie Forestiere d'Ouessou - IFO

The company Industrie Forestière d'Ouessou (IFO) has a 1.16 million hectares logging concession in the north of the Republic of Congo. IFO is owned by the Swiss-based Interholco company, which took the concession over from a State company called SCBO in 1999. SCBO was founded in 1985. Interholco is a subsidiary of the Danzer company, an Austria-based hardwood enterprise.

The Danzer company was founded in 1932 by the German Karl Danzer and profited from the tropical timber imports and trade business. In 1962, Interholco was founded in Switzerland, which took over the marketing of African timber for mainly European markets. Danzer’s office was moved from Switzerland to Austria in 2015, among others, for tax benefits. (12)

IFO’s logging operations are certified by FSC and claim to be “the largest certified continuous forest area in tropical regions”. (13) Although the FSC certification system has proven to be no guarantee for consumers of tropical timber products, particularly regarding whether the certified area will be conserved and social well-being of communities ensured inside the concession area (14). For its part, the Danzer group managed to lose its FSC certificate in 2011. This was due to FSC’s decision to dissociate from the company after Greenpeace exposed the activities of Danzer subsidiary SIFORCO in DRC, including systematic illegal logging and involvement in human rights violations. (15)

This decision also exposed WWF, as Danzer was a leading partner in that organisation’s “Global Forest and Trade network” initiative. (16) In 2014, however, WWF celebrated in a press release that IFO had received its FSC-certificate back again, only urging the company “to enforce strict anti-poaching rules” (17).

These rules are probably related to the fact that the company reports about 16,000 people living inside the concession area, including indigenous communities. The company states that it has approximately 40 so-called eco-guards to constantly patrol its area against “illegal harvesting, poaching, bushmeat trade, and irreversible change” (18).

In 2015, IFO, Eco-Oil Energie, WWF and other partners were involved in a project approved by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), with funding of more than USD 3 million, with the aim to reinforce the protected areas in the Republic of Congo. In 2018, the NGO Survival International on behalf of the indigenous Baka people filed a complaint against GEF and the other proponents involved in the project. The Baka people claimed they were forcefully evicted from their lands. (19) A team of investigators from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), gathered evidence that the Baka people had for years been subjected to violence and physical abuse from the guards, including beatings, criminalisation and illegal imprisonment, the burning and destruction of property, rape, and humiliation by forcing women to take off their clothes, among other atrocities. (20) UNDP eventually suspended the project. This shows what such patrolling can mean for inhabitants of forest areas that companies like IFO claim to protect.

The Odzala-Kokoua National Park

The creation of the Park in 1935 appropriated the biggest forest area in the same region with 1.35 million hectares. Since 2010, the control of the Park is entirely in the hands of the African Parks Network through a public-private partnership with the Congolese government for a period of 25-years. (21)

The African Parks Network was founded in 2000 and presents itself on its website as a non-profit organisation that manages 19 national parks and protected areas in 11 countries in Africa. It is nevertheless registered as a company in South Africa. The president of the company is His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales, a member of the British royal family.

The company controls a total area in Africa of 14.7 million hectares, about half the size of Italy, and it intends to expand even more in order to manage 30 parks by 2030. It highlights carbon capture as one of the potential benefits of its parks, indicating the Network's interest in selling carbon credits as an additional source of income. In spite of its supposedly non-profit character, the company undertakes business activities in the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, which includes so-called Discovery Camps where tourists can fly in on charter flights from the Congolese capital Brazzaville. However, very few inhabitants of Brazzaville have the possibility to enjoy such luxury tourism. A 4-day Odzala Discovery Camp visit, for example, costs USD 9.960 per person. (22)

Behind the African Parks Network is also a large group of governments, multi-lateral institutions, conservation organisations, family foundations and individuals that fund its conservation business. The partners of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of Congo include conservation groups such as WWF, the Congolese government, and the European Union.

While the Park was founded in 1934, the African Parks Network itself states that "humans have occupied the area for 50,000 years". The company continues stating that 12,000 people still live around the Park, "yet it is still one of the most biologically diverse and species-rich areas on the planet" (emphasis added). With this affirmation, rather than recognising the inhabitants' contribution towards keeping the forest standing after all these thousands of years, the company makes clear that in its view, the presence of people is not compatible with the aim of conserving forest; it is *despite* the communities' presence that there is still biodiversity left.

The African Parks Network claims to protect the Park “with an enhanced eco-guard team and other law enforcement techniques”, besides investing in “changing human behaviour”. To achieve this objective, the Network receives support from the US Department of State, which “began providing support in 2018 and has committed over US\$3 million for ranger uniforms, equipment and training”, as well as “leadership development” to help achieve the “enhanced capacity to disrupt illegal wildlife trade and promote regional stability”. These claims and views on conservation make clear that for this Network and its funders and allies, people living in and around forests are considered a threat and that their conservation business can be run better without them.

At present, other large-scale concessions are being granted in the Republic of Congo in line with the agendas of extractive and conservation industries. However, the interests of countries and companies in the Global North is to continue extracting minerals, timber, palm oil and other products, as well as doing business with conservation, which represents a common and persisting characteristic of these extensive projects.

However, what is left for communities since the days of European colonisation are lands and forest areas they no longer have access to, and whenever they try to enter, they are being confronted with a violent, racist and patriarchal oppression, including now at the hands of so-called ‘eco’-guards.

WRM Secretariat

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RECOMMENDED

Genetically Engineered Trees: No Solution to Climate Change

As the devastating effects of climate change become more immediate and severe, corporate interests are promoting the use of unproven and potentially dangerous genetically engineered (GE) trees for climate mitigation schemes, including carbon offsetting and an emerging bioeconomy. A statement released by The Campaign to STOP GE Trees warns of the ecological and social harm of using GE trees, in “false solution” climate mitigation schemes. Researchers, point out the Campaign, are working to transform the very composition of wood itself to facilitate production of bioplastics, biochemicals and cellulosic ethanol as well as to engineer trees for increased carbon storage. Large-scale use of these GE trees could devastate forests, biodiversity and forest-dependent communities—and could even worsen climate change.

The statement is available here <https://stopgetrees.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/GE-trees-statement-En-4.pdf>

Nine Reasons to Say NO to Contract Farming with Palm Oil Companies

A recent publication from the WRM explains how contract farming with palm oil companies works, and why it is a serious threat to peasant farming and food sovereignty. The booklet looks at nine of the most common promises that companies make, and most importantly, the information they conceal behind each promise. The publication is available in English, Portuguese, French, Spanish and Bahasa Indonesia: <https://wrm.org.uy/?p=23235>

Palm oil plantations are making inroads in the Brazilian Amazon

A recent article from Mongabay warns on how the palm oil industry is expanding rapidly in the Brazilian Amazon. Oil palm coverage in northern Pará increased almost five-fold between 2010 and 2019. Studies have shown that the conversion of forests into oil palm plantations is a major problem. Most of Brazil's palm oil production is controlled by eight companies. Scientists have found high levels of agrochemical residues in surrounding communities while prosecutors are pursuing legal cases against the companies for allegedly violating Indigenous and traditional communities' rights and damaging the environment. In Brazil, four out of nine pesticides approved for use in oil palm plantations are listed as “highly hazardous.” Brazilian legislation sets no limits for any pesticide residue found in sediments, even though they could potentially contaminate crops and pose a public health risk. At least seven herbicides and 16 insecticides are currently used in these plantations. Impacts are devastating. Read the article in English here.

<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/deja-vu-as-palm-oil-industry-brings-deforestation-pollution-to-amazon/>

Exploitation of migrant workers in palm oil plantations in Malaysia

An academic article from Janina Puder exposes how the palm oil industry in Malaysia heavily relies on the cheap labour of migrant workers in order to keep palm oil profitable and globally competitive. Palm oil is often associated with social inequalities concerning land ownership, land use and access to land, but the exploitation of migrant workers is a further significant, albeit lesser-known, expression of social inequality that has been caused by industrial oil palm cultivation and the steady expansion of the palm oil sector in Malaysia since the 1960s. Read the article in English here.

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-68944-5_10

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