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Speaking truth to power



The village women taking on the
palm oil giant

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The village women taking on the palm oil giant

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Community elder Martine Aougou says the situation with the military at Socapalm's plantation is seriously disrupting villagers' lives.



Introduction

The Société Financière des Caoutchouc (Socfin) group is among the world's biggest independent plantation owners, managing 187,000 hectares of mostly oil palm and rubber plantations in Asia and Africa, where it has been operating for more than a century.

Its largest shareholders are Belgian businessman Hubert Fabri and the Bolloré group, run by one of France's richest men, the billionaire industrialist Vincent Bolloré. Bolloré is currently under investigation for bribing officials in Africa.¹ Meanwhile controversy of various kinds has dogged Socfin in recent years.²

The company has been accused of threatening primary forests; its operations are said to lack transparency; and it has been blamed for land grabs, with land owners and village leaders reportedly pressured into signing agreements and local people not consulted when the company has taken land.

In Cameroon a bitter land rights struggle has unfolded between villagers and Socfin's local subsidiary Socapalm, which owns six palm oil concessions in the country.³

Locals have claimed that the company has expanded its plantations onto their land, polluted the environment, and prevented them from benefitting from their own palm oil.

1 Hubert Fabri owns 54 per cent of shares and the Bolloré group owns 38 per cent. See: <http://www.socfin.com/en/investors/socfin-s.a./regulated-information/category/palm-oil>. Bolloré is currently being investigated in France: accused of paying bribes and influencing elections in Togo and Guinea.

2 In 2010 Socapalm was accused of violating OECD guidelines, and in 2017 a communication was issued to that effect by the OECD's Belgium's National Contact Point (which Socfin denied).

3 In 2000 La Société Camerounaise des Palmeraies (Socapalm) was sold to a conglomerate of private companies, with Socfin holding the majority interest.



Sieur Ebongue (husband of Louise Nkakè) gestures in front of the family's palm oil press, now lying dormant – as it has done for more than a year.

In response to the latter, Socapalm has publicly claimed that their crackdown on villagers' small-scale oil palm operations is in response to the widespread theft of fruit from their plantations.⁴

In the face of these mounting controversies, Socfin has adopted measures to respect human rights and follow strict environmental standards, including working with TFT, the transparency supply chain organisation, and having some of its palm oil plantations certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).⁵

But is change filtering through on the ground yet?

To find out, award-winning Cameroonian journalist Madeleine Ngeunga and Fern's Indra Van Gisbergen visited villages in the shadow of two of Socapalm's oil palm plantations, to see if the problems driving a dispute between locals and the company are being resolved.

Their findings offer a vivid snapshot of life there and raise disturbing questions for Socapalm, revealing that the chasm between many locals and the company appears no closer to being bridged.

4 In 2015, Michel Noulowe, chairman of Socapalm's board, told the Guardian that 20 per cent of the company's oil palm harvest was being stolen and in response, the company has cracked down on small-scale milling operations. See: *Life in and around a palm oil plantation*, The Guardian, 27.07.15.

5 Regarding RSPO membership Socfin's website says: "The output of our African plantations is intended mainly for the local market and only enters export channels to a marginal degree. For reasons of efficiency, such products will first be certified to the ISO 14001 standard before consideration is given to RSPO certification, which ideally requires a prior national interpretation." ISO 14001 refers to "standards ... for companies and organizations of all kinds looking to manage their environmental responsibilities". According to a news report, in Cameroon the company has had difficulties receiving RSPO accreditation partly because the "relationship between Socapalm and local smallholders is less clear since the company was privatised".

The women who won't be silenced

MBONGO VILLAGE, DIZANGUE – The indignation in Carine's voice is clear. "Why does Socapalm stop my father from pressing the nuts that come from our own palm grove?"

Carine, who prefers not to use her real name, was born 21 years ago in Mbongo, one of the 34 villages in Dizangue, an area around 40 kilometres from Douala, Cameroon's financial hub and largest city, which lies in the country's fertile and humid coastal region.

Her entire life has been lived in the shadow of Socapalm, the company created by the Cameroonian government in 1968, and which in 2000 – three years after Carine was born – was privatised and acquired by the Socfin group.

Socapalm produces almost 70 per cent of Cameroon's palm oil. Its six plantation sites are dotted around the country's rural areas, bordering – and sometimes encroaching upon – villages and local peoples' lives.⁶

Census figures show that 58 per cent of Dizangue's population of 17,000 is rural. For the vast majority, land is central to their survival.

Carine's family is no exception.

As she travels near her village, trudging along the dirt roads which criss-cross the oil palm plantations which stretch far into the horizon, Carine ponders her future with a distant look in her eyes.

Her main concern is whether she can attain her high school certificate and reach her goal of enrolling in university. Or will her prospects remain forever constrained by the financial straightjacket her family exists in?

Carine's father works for Socapalm, earning between 70 and 100 thousand CFA francs (107 – 153 Euros a month). It's a salary on which he struggles to satisfy the needs of his 30 children and four wives.

Compounding the lack of money is another problem: one which emerged as a common grievance among those we spoke to.

Palm oil is an essential cooking ingredient for most Cameroonians (and palm kernel oil is also used widely as skin oil). Yet while Socapalm workers can buy up to 30 litres of palm oil per month from the company, many grow their own in the villages near the plantations.

Carine's father, for instance, has a palm grove covering 11 hectares, seven of which are operational. It should be a major source of oil supply for the family. But Socapalm's reaction when the family try to use it evokes a burning sense of injustice in her.

⁶ In addition to its six plantations in Cameroon, Socapalm has seven palm oil mills and one rubber plantation. See: <http://www.tft-earth.org/stories/news/socfin-group-progress-update/>

“When the palm oil runs out at home, my dad has to fall back on his palm grove. He asks his wives to gather nuts to extract palm oil required for cooking family meals,” she explains. However, for the past two years, they have been forced to sell all their nuts to Socapalm. If not, they face retaliation.

“A few weeks ago, my mum put a small amount of nuts in the fire to cook and extract oil. Socapalm security agents arrived at the house. They took away the pot full of nuts and they took my dad to the Gendarmes’ office”. He was later released on bail.

“My dad cannot read or write. He showed us the document that they forced him to sign. This is a letter [which Carine later provided us with] which obliges my dad to no longer consume the nuts from his palm grove,” she explained.


“I told him that he should not have signed it because he has the right to manage his palm grove freely. He said he had no choice. It was the condition for keeping his job,” Carine continued.

But she was determined not to let this pass. “I went to meet the brigade commander to find out why he had forced my dad to sign it. He turned me away and banned me from his office.”

This story – of Socapalm or their agents preventing people from using their own vital natural resource – was one we heard widely repeated.

MBONJO VILLAGE, DIBOMBARI – Mbonjo village is reached by a dirt road surrounded by palm groves. On the patches of ground between the oil palms and the road are maize, plantain and vegetables, which people have planted under the high-voltage cables which supply the community’s electricity: a sign of the lack of available land for growing their food crops.

In the village itself old family plots fashioned out of wooden planks are interspersed with newer homes made from grey breezeblocks.

A woman with her hair styled in blue braids, wearing a light-colored sleeveless top, stands in a palm grove. The background is filled with tall palm trees and lush greenery.

Louise Nkakè says that she and her husband have faced threats, intimidation—and even violence—from the military: all aimed at stopping them using the oil palm nuts grown on their own plantation.

Here too, we find a simmering anger among many towards Socapalm.

Retired customs agent, Sieur Ebongue and his wife Louise Nkakè are among them.

Speaking in front of their home, which is made from a mismatch of breezeblocks and planks, the couple blame their current woes on the soldiers responsible for monitoring Socapalm's plantations.

They say they've faced threats, intimidation – and even violence – from the military: all aimed at stopping them using the oil palm nuts grown on their own plantation.

Louise Nkakè alleges that one day soldiers attacked her by pushing her forcefully with their guns and confiscated the nuts she was roasting. They suspected that the nuts were stolen from Socapalm's plantation. She insists the nuts were theirs.

“[The soldiers] said the nuts I was roasting did not come from my palm grove, but from Socapalm's... They confiscated everything – more than three tonnes of palm nuts.”

“The Socapalm soldiers asked to meet the owner of the press (the mechanical instrument used to mash the fruit and extract the crude oil). I told them that I represent my husband who is the owner. They said that the nuts that I was roasting did not come from my palm grove, but from Socapalm's. I called my husband who arrived immediately. Despite his explanations, the military did not want to hear what we had to say. They confiscated everything – more than three tonnes of palm nuts,” Nkakè explains.

They decided to file a complaint against the assailants – but this only aggravated things.

“When they [the military] were informed that we'd filed a complaint against them, they returned and ordered us to stop using our press, whether we owned the palm grove or not,” says Nkakè.

The couple relented. Next to their home, broken, bent fuses hang near a straw shed, which is raised on a tilt supported by wooden stakes. This is the family's palm oil press, now lying idle – as it has done for more than a year.

Nkakè says that not only has she lost two-thirds of her income, but they have been burdened with additional costs to produce palm oil, as they now have to pay to get it pressed on their neighbours' presses.

The family's restrictions on using their palm oil press are compounded by a land dispute with Socapalm.

Palm oil trees line the back of Ebongue's concession. According to the couple, these palms were planted by Socapalm.

“They say that our concession is on Socapalm land. Yet this land belongs to my grandfather. All I did was renovate the house. The proof? Here are the graves of my ancestors, built here well before my birth,” explains 70-year-old Ebongue, pointing to a clearance, free from grass.

Ebongue sighs and says that he prefers to turn to the courts to seek compensation. He wants to recommence activities at his press to better protect this family heritage.

Threats and intimidation

The presence of the army worries almost everyone in the community.

“It’s serious what’s going on here with the military in Mbonjo. You’re asleep; the soldiers are outside. They just sleep here outside by the kitchen. They find your nuts roasting on the stove. They accuse you of stealing Socapalm’s nuts. If you deny it, they threaten you, confiscate the nuts and sometimes destroy your stoves,” says 70-year-old Martine Amougou angrily.

Amougou is a community elder, a widow and mother of 13 children, and – like other women in the community – she has come to rely on the bravery of Marie-Noelle Etondè, the president of Synaparcam, a collective of palm farmers, otherwise known as the National Association of Peasant and River Populations of Cameroon, to defend their interests. Synaparcam’s membership has grown in recent years.

When they first complained about the disturbing presence of soldiers in the neighbourhoods, many were turned away by the local chief. But when Etondè – a strong character who is not easily intimidated – took the women’s concerns up, their voices were at last heard.

Etondè is constantly demanding justice, especially for women. Among her principal causes is for the soldiers monitoring Socapalm’s plantations to leave. In the past two years, Etondè, a mother of



Marie-Noelle Etondè, the president of Synaparcam, otherwise known as the National Association of Peasant and River Populations of Cameroon, is a formidable champion of local peoples’ interests.

two, says the company has made some efforts to address locals' complaints, particularly to resolve the issues of water and air pollution.

The odours that once bothered the residents have diminished.

But other pressing issues remain, including women's access to village plantations.

"We always worked our land with our parents even after Socapalm set up here in Souza [a nearby village]. But since Socapalm was privatised [in 2000], we are not even able to exploit the land just outside the plantations, because the inhabitants used to use paths which go through the Socapalm palm groves to reach these peripheries."

"Furthermore, since people were stubborn, Socapalm's employees dug trenches [deep ditches] preventing villagers from getting to the paths to access their plantations. Ever since those trenches were dug, everything has changed. In the past, a villager could travel a kilometre to access his field. Today because of the trenches, he or she has to travel about five kilometres to get to his/her field," she said.

Socapalm's security agents roam the village on motorbikes monitoring people's activity. If there is the slightest suspicion that they are using the palm oil presses, they call on the law enforcement bodies in the village.

On a sunny day in June, we had a small taste of the pressures villagers face when we approached Socapalm's factory. After barely fifteen minutes in the marshy and muddy forest near the factory, young agents on motorbikes alerted the police to our presence.

The young men circled our vehicle on their bikes, clearly attempting to intimidate the driver.

The area's brigade commander appeared immediately and asked us to follow him for what he called "identification". We didn't object, and after almost an hour of interrogation on our reasons for being there, a gendarme explained the risks we were exposing ourselves to. "These people [Socapalm's agents] are actually treating you nicely. They could have poured toxic products in your eyes", he claimed.

Behind Socapalm's factory, we see children digging through a mountain of reddish dark earth: this is the pulp – known as nut cake – which is left after the palm oil is extracted from the fruit. Some use it to feed livestock. Others use it as fuel.

In the forest near this mound of oil palm residue, trickles of black water from the plant drain away, causing soil erosion over the years. Meanwhile the odours from the plant affect local populations and especially students from Mbongo High School.

These dirty waters flow into the surrounding streams and according to administrative authorities, speaking anonymously, Socapalm's activity is the source of this environmental pollution. In a statement, see page 13, Socapalm denied that the water is polluted and detailed the treatment it undergoes to meet environmental norms.⁷

The whole community suffers, with women bearing the brunt.

⁷ For further sources on Socapalm and water pollution, see the 2016 report by the National Justice & Peace Service (SNJP), *Rapport D'Enquête sur la Socapalm, Une entreprise aux pratiques belliqueuses*, <http://www.gredevel.fr/index.php/jstuff/file/116-2016-09-12-03-18-16> (pages 32-42 and 44-4)

Women raise their voices

“Before, the leaders of the community and our elders prevented us from raising complaints, saying that it is a man’s business. But, we believe that women are at the heart of a family’s blossoming. Women provide solutions and are the ones most affected by difficulties. Women use a lot more water. Women use the land a lot more,” says Agathe Killeng, who is the president of the Mbongo village branch of the women of Synaparcam and coordinates a group of about 50 women.

Despite having three hectares of palm grove, Killeng fights for access to her land.

She explains that Socapalm’s agents asked her to gather a group of women a few months ago to meet and talk. But the different parties did not share the same objectives.

“They wanted to get us to be excited by asking women to get together and organise ourselves to find ways to generate income. We told them we need land for agriculture [which Socapalm had taken]. They left and never came back.”

“The real issues, such as those related to handing back land and water pollution are not on the agenda”



Agathe Killeng, president of the Mbongo village branch of Synaparcam, says that women are most affected by land resource issues.

On the issue of returning residents' land there is opacity and diverging opinions; yet Socapalm has given commitments to – and made clear that they are in the process of beginning to – hand back some land to locals.

In both Mbongo and Mbonjo, Socapalm is meant to be acting in the public interest. According to Specifications in Socapalm's concession contract for the plantations, Socapalm is supposedly conducting a public service mission.

But very few of residents admit to having seen those Specifications.

Faced with all these difficulties, women in the community do not know who to complain to.

"We have never been involved in the discussion with Socapalm, yet we want to participate. They only deal with traditional leaders. And at the slightest questioning by residents, the company says that it has already discussed this with our traditional leaders," says Killeng.

Quarterly meetings are held in Mbongo, attended by Socapalm managers, traditional leaders, representatives from Synaparcam and administrative authorities. However, for some these meetings amount to little more than a diversionary tactic.

"The real issues, such as those related to handing back land and water pollution are not on the agenda," says Michel Linge, Synaparcam Coordinator in Mbongo.

The atmosphere in the villages around Socapalm's plantations remains tense.

But the women here are not leaving their fate in Socapalm's hands. Long silent, they are now making their voices heard. Many are planning to set up cooperatives to develop agriculture and livestock once they get their land back. For now, they are doing their utmost to ensure it happens, while demanding the company stops infringing on their rights.



Socapalm's response

Fern sent the findings of our investigation to Socfin and gave them a chance to provide their perspective on it. Here is their edited response:

Socapalm insists that it doesn't have the authority to stop villagers pressing their own oil palm nuts, stating that is solely the preserve of the relevant authority.

The company further stated that employees who wish to, can acquire 30 kilogrammes (kg) of palm oil per month from the company at a preferential price, and that all employees have the right to receive 30 kgs of palm oil during their annual leave.

Socapalm denied villagers' claims that the company had polluted rivers with waste from the Socapalm plant. It said that waste from the plant is organic matter effluent and that to avoid polluting the environment with organic matter that is too concentrated, the company has built lagoons. It made clear that Socapalm is certified ISO 14001 (the international standard that specifies requirements for an effective environmental management system) and respects its principles.

In response to villagers' complaints that the military – acting on behalf of Socapalm – are intimidating locals, spreading fear and committing arbitrary arrests, the company said that local gendarmes had felt overwhelmed by the situation around the plantations, so Socapalm called in the military to secure production on its Dibombari plantation. It said the plantation had become a magnet for thieves. Socapalm said the military presence has brought security to the plantation and that the soldiers do not go outside the scope of their mission. It also said that palm oil production had risen considerably as a result.

In response to Mbonjo and Mbongo villagers' claims that the company has extended its concessions on to their land, Socapalm said that the land belongs to the State and has been leased to them. It added that the surface area of the plantation decreased from 78,529 hectares (ha) (30/06/2000) to 58,063 ha (amendment to the lease of the 30/08/2005). The differential of 20,466 ha was given to its rightful owner, which is the State. Socapalm said that it referred the matter to the State in December 2016, requesting the triggering of the mechanism for implementing the provisions of the Assignment Agreement. It said that discussions on clarifying land boundaries are continuing, adding that some individuals have blocked the field work as they are illegally occupying the land.

Words into action

Assessing Socfin's progress

In December 2016, Socfin adopted a responsible management policy⁸: “committing [the company] to implement responsible land development and improve lives in its operations and along its supply chain”.

While its Indonesian subsidiary's palm oil plantations are certified by the RSPO, its African plantations are not.

In July 2017 the company became a member of the transparency supply chain organisation, TFT.

With TFT's assistance Socfin developed a dashboard where Socfin details “its commitments, reports on its progress and allows stakeholders to express their concerns through a grievance mechanism”.

These commitments apply to all Socfin's subsidiaries, including Socapalm.

The four key principles it says will help it achieve its goal of “responsible operations” are: **responsible development; respect for human rights; best management practice; and transparency.**

The evidence of this briefing shows that – in fundamental respects – these commitments are far from being realised.⁹

Respect for human rights

Socfin's human rights principles apply to local and indigenous communities (as well as employees, subcontractors, temporary and migrant workers) and **prohibit harassment and abuse.**

- **A recurring theme of the testimony from the villages of Mbongo and Mbonjo is intimidation – and even violence – being inflicted on locals by the military who protect the plantations on Socapalm's behalf. In the case of Mbonjo, such abuse has already been documented – by the World Rainforest Movement in March 2018¹⁰ – with no sign of being remedied during our reporter's visit.¹¹**
- **Another consistent complaint by villagers was that Socapalm or its agents prevent them from using their own palm oil: denying them an important source of income and a natural resource they rely on daily.**
- **Some villagers have to travel long distances to reach their own palm oil plantations, because of trenches built by Socapalm employees blocking their old, shorter paths.**

8 <http://www.socfin.com/en/sustainable-development>

9 In its March 2018 progress update on meeting these commitments, regarding Cameroon, Socfin stated: “To help improve workers' living conditions in Cameroon, Socfin has planned new accommodation blocks for workers. 2017 has seen this new housing facilities under construction in a number of camps. TFT has supported Socapalm's field team to carry out an inventory to ensure workers are in their rightful place, as issues with squatters in the old blocks had led to overcrowding. TFT has joined Socapalm's management in engaging with Cameroon's Ministry of State Property and Land Tenure, local authorities and NGOs to clarify concession boundaries and help communities gain ownership of the land handed back by Socfin to the government. Building relationships with Socfin's plantation managers has been key to implementing our work, including understanding concession boundaries together.”

10 See: Cameroon: Local women besieged by the military, guardians of the palm oil plantations of Socpalm, 7.03.18 <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/cameroon-local-women-besieged-by-the-military-guardians-of-the-palm-oil-plantations-of-socapalm/>

11 Evidence corroborating the villagers' claims of harassment came in the shape of the young men who intimidated the reports' authors on their motorbikes and the authors' subsequent detention for questioning by the gendarmes.

Best management practice

To achieve best management practice, Socfin has committed to **“minimise and prevent our operations’ environmental impact”**, including **“reducing soil and water pollution”** and **“soil deterioration and erosion”**.

- While the authors were told that Socapalm has made some efforts to resolve complaints about water and air pollution, and that odours from their factory have diminished by Mbongo village, they also witnessed polluted water drain away from the plant – and saw documentary evidence that these dirty waters flow into the surrounding streams. Moreover, the smell of the plant near Mbongo is a source of disquiet for villagers and especially students at the local high school.

Transparency

As part of its aim for transparency Socfin states it will **“implement an open, transparent and consultative grievance management mechanism”**.

- Despite reported instances of the company making efforts to address grievances, others spoke of their complaints against the military not simply going unheeded, but making them the target of even greater harassment.
- Despite the company setting up tripartite platforms for dialogue, local people do not have adequate access to information, and say that the dialogue is not fully inclusive, excludes key community representatives and does not address essential issues such as water pollution and land.

Conclusion

There remains a vast gulf between Socfin’s worthy aspirations and the distressing experiences of some of those living in the shadow of its palm oil operations.

The company must respect the rights of – and increase collaboration with – the people affected by its palm oil operations, and open a genuine and transparent dialogue with them to address – in cooperation with the local authorities and the government – the essential issues including land and water pollution.

The company should also be more transparent about the implementation of its responsible management plan. A regular update of its policy implementation plan would be an important first step.

"They say that our concession is on Socapalm land. Yet this land belongs to my grandfather. All I did was renovate the house. The proof? Here are the graves of my ancestors, built here well before my birth."

Louise Nkakè from Mbonjo village



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