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# Oil Palm Plantations and Water Grabbing: Ivory Coast and Gabon

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Industrial palm oil production in West and Central Africa is mainly controlled by five multinational corporations, and could continue expansion. Plantations take up large tracts of land. Land and water are interdependent. Yet, the current water crisis in these territories would not exist if corporations had not grabbed the land from communities.

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Oil palm plantation in Gabon. Photo: AFP/Archive

Industrial palm oil production in West and Central Africa is mainly controlled by five companies: Socfin, Wilmar, Olam, Siat, and Straight KKM (former Feronia). These multinationals control an estimated 67 per cent of the industrial oil palm planted area with foreign investment and may drive continuous expansion. (1) Their established industrial plantations have been linked to numerous impacts on the populations and territories.

The impact on water availability for communities that live in and around industrial oil palm plantations is systematic and dramatic. This is becoming increasingly evident with the many community reports of water scarcity and water pollution.

Industrial plantations often lead to loss of lakes, springs or streams, directly affecting the livelihoods and wellbeing of communities. Drinkable water becomes scarce or inexistent. Besides, the intensive use of chemicals in the plantations and processing plants results in a high pollution of the water sources that remain available, posing a serious health risk for the population, workers and all life that exist in those areas. This also puts at risk local food sovereignty, as water availability for growing crops becomes increasingly challenging as well as fishing and drinkable water for livestock. In consequence, it is often women and girls who are forced to walk longer distances to access drinkable water. This in turn not only heavily increases their workload but also puts them at risk of sexual violence and harassment during the walks.

Palm oil plantations are systematically grabbing from communities and forests. Land and water are interdependent and cannot be separated. The water crisis would not exist if the companies had not taken the communities' land. Their resistance is therefore one: to claim back their territories, with all that belongs to them.

## **Wilmar's Subsidiary in Ivory Coast: PalmCi**

Wilmar International, a multinational company in Asia and Africa and the world's largest palm-oil trader, has a total reported planted area under its oil palm plantation and sugar milling segment in both continents of 232,053 hectares. The company directly owns three palm oil refineries in Africa, along with eight refineries indirectly through its associated companies. In Ivory Coast, Wilmar sources its palm oil through the SIFCA Group, which is 27 per cent owned by and supported by Wilmar. SIFCA Group in turn runs its oil palm plantation operations in this country under PalmCi, which has 9,361 hectares of planted areas in the department of Aboisso.

Yaproko is a small village located around 50 km from Aboisso. To enter the village, one has to pass a gate controlled by the company's security staff. Passing the gate and driving along the roads inside PalmCi's plantations is the main route to reach the village by car.

In 2020, an article in the WRM Bulletin alerted on the dire situation that the people in Yaproko were experiencing for years regarding access to water. (2) One woman explained at that time that *“the situation we are living in has been going on for decades, and nobody does anything (...) The worst part of all of this is the water that PalmCi provides us with once or twice a week, because it divides the village in order to distribute it. The water arrives in very dirty tanker trucks and is not suitable, as it makes our whole body itch after we bathe. That same tanker truck supplies water to the plantations. (...) When it rains, the whole village rejoices because the women go to collect rainwater that for domestic tasks and other uses. Daily life for villagers in Yapokro is alarming.”*

In 2022, WRM visited Yaproko and talked with some villagers. People said that forests were everywhere in this area until the day that forest officials arrived and cut down all the forest, except for a small portion which was left to the community. Then, Sodepalm (today PalmCi) entered and set up the plantations, encircling Yaproko with plantations. And that is when all the problems and conflicts started.

The villagers explained how they have long been requesting that PalmCi provides clean water as the river is polluted. PalmCi started providing water in tanks, but people generated many skin problems when using the water, in part because the company did not regularly cleaned the tanks. Despite several requests to build a water tower, the community is still waiting. In the discussions during the visit to Yaproko, it became evident that this elemental crisis remains unbearable for the communities.

Besides, women manifested that they are threatened and arrested when they enter the plantations to collect mushrooms and nuts left after the harvest. When a family member visits the community, women cannot give palm nuts as gifts, as visitors risk being arrested and harassed by security guards. This also means that women cannot sell the traditional oil that they produce in the villages or local markets. Women in Yaproko confront structural violence. The water crisis aggravates their dire situation.

Villagers recounted how when government officials arrived to Yaproko, they offered them a glass of water for refreshment; seeing the colour and smelling the odour, they refused, and made all sorts of promises to solve the water crisis. The promises were nonetheless forgotten as soon as these officials left the village.

## **Olam multinational in Gabon**

In Gabon, a public-private partnership between agribusiness multinational Olam, and the Gabonese government began setting up industrial plantations in 2012, on land the company received for free from the government. The activities of the company are linked to deforestation and land conflicts on its palm oil, rubber, and timber concessions. A 2020 report from WRM evidenced how the company hides under false claims of ‘zero-deforestation’ while neglecting the rights of communities.

Villages like Mbadi, Sanga, Mboukou, Rembo, and Mounigou were especially hit hard by OLAM's large-scale industrial plantations. Despite local resistance, the company expanded its oil palm crops up to 200 meters from villagers' farms—almost fencing in the villages. This expansion is particularly worrisome given the massive use of hazardous pesticides in the plantations. These chemicals spread to the surrounding community lands, thereby contaminating also the smallholder farms. (3)

Already in 2018, an article in the WRM Bulletin alerted on the severe situation of the water around the village of Sanga. (4) The village's main water source, located about 50 meters from the houses, is polluted due to the advance of the plantations. In response to villagers' complains, OLAM built a well near the polluted water source, which is fed by the same contaminated groundwater. People use the water from swamps for various livelihood purposes, including drinking, fishing, and sanitation. The expansion of the plantation has resulted in water streams being filled up with soil to enable the cultivation of oil palms; besides hindering local communities' access to water basins and lakes. Women have been particularly affected, since fishing, an important traditional activity, was particularly impacted by the company altering the flow of the streams and the pollution.

Villagers affected by Olam's plantations in Gabon gave their testimony in July 2022 regarding their current situation with water quality and availability. Here are their testimonies:

*A villager from Boungounga said: "We have noticed that the water of OVigui river has changed in taste, that it is polluted and that even the fish has changed. The fish don't even last two days; they sleep one night and the next morning they are turned into dough. We are forced to move perhaps as far as 4 km to get to another river. We no longer can live from the OVigui river. We have sent a complaint to the company in regarding this water problem. We are waiting to see if there will be any action because they promised us... but with them, it's always promises. In the meantime, we continue to suffer."*

*A member of the Yamba village, said: "Since we have been there, we have been living from our lakes, our forests, the fruits. We were fine; we had no problems. The company made social contracts with the villagers, but until today this has never been respected and we are still waiting. They only make promises. OLAM dried up our lakes, where we used to fish. The company wants to make us believe that they did not dry up our lakes, but we ourselves used to live there and we know all the lakes that existed. Each lake in the Yamba area has a name. There are several lakes that they have dried up. Besides, with the chemical products OLAM uses for their palm trees, the fish can no longer stay in the remaining lakes. It is the same in our rivers. The quantity and quality of the fish we used to have is lost, because the water is polluted. The day that we go fishing, it's difficult to get the amount of fish we had before. The fish, at the moment, no longer lives in the Yamba river."*

*Last year, when we went fishing with our big brothers during the holidays I experienced the effects of the chemical products OLAM uses. I sat down on the sandbanks by the river, and 30 minutes later, I felt that my buttocks were tingling a lot*

*so I had to soak myself in water. I tried washing the pants and tights I was wearing, but it didn't work. The next day, I found myself with swollen buttocks. You see, even sitting by the river was a problem. Drinking water is a problem. The water is very dirty, it has another colour. I know that to have good quality water, you have to pass OLAM's plantations. But to cross to the next water source, it's really difficult. So the village is experiencing a slow death... the water is polluted."*

*A member of the Mandji village said: "The water here at Lake Mangui is not drinkable at all. They pass the water from OVigui river through a motor pump to a reserve, and from the reserve, they put products to be able to whiten the water so that it can be consumed. But it is not drinkable at all. When you wash with this water, it makes you itchy, you get pimples on the skin, there are some who get diarrhea from drinking this water, some children get sick. Those who do not have the means, have to use this water for drinking and cooking. When people can, they use the water in Ouanza or Keyua. But there is no joy here, the water is not drinkable at all."*

*A resident of OLAM's Madi site, which is in Moutassou, explained: "Truly, all OLAM's sites are facing a water problem. The water we are given, the one that is in our houses, with which we are supposed to wash ourselves, consume and do all the household chores, is not drinkable at all. If you wash with it, without heating it, it gives pimples, itches the body. And women are the most exposed. If someone would come to OLAM's sites to have women examined, in particular with urine tests, the results would be catastrophic, a disaster. A lot of women have infections that they complain about all the time: fungal infections, pain in the lower abdomen, in the pelvis... and where does these all come from? The water.*

*OLAM never recognizes anything. We are the ones who are the guinea pigs, who suffer, who fall ill with the water they give us. They ask us to go and do in-depth analyses and bring them proof that it is the water that makes us sick. Every time I go for medical exams, there is always an infection. It's really painful. As a result, families are forced to go on the side of Issanga, Badi or even Mouila for having water to consume. But some do not have that choice, do not have the means to go all the time to take water from the neighbouring villages or Mouila. They are obliged to drink this water, unfortunately. And you can easily see many who have scarred skin, filled with pimples, mycosis, scabies...*

*It is the same situation in the village of Ferra. First, the water pump is damaged because of the continuous pumping of not only the local residents but also of others who come in mass, with lots of containers to get drinkable water, you can imagine. For us to repair it, we have to threaten and shout at everyone... It's really complicated. Ferra is located upstream of the Rimbo River. The examinations made to this river's water confirmed the presence of chemical products, which we did not know before. So the Rimbo River is also polluted, it is no longer drinkable water. The situation of our sacred lake Banfoubou is a disaster! It was polluted since the days of the [oil palm company's] nursery, when the water from the nursery was flowing directly into the lake. We no longer have our sacred lake, most lakes have been dried up, the swamps have been also dried up. We have almost nothing. The water problem is destroying many rivers... and villages.*

*Moreover, the pipes passing through the plantations carry the waste from the factory, and it stinks! Nobody can stay there for long, there are too many flies. With the heavy rains, this water will end up in the lower river, which is where we place the motor pump that supplies the whole city of Mali, so there will be yet another water crisis. With that in mind, how will it be in the rainy season? How are we going to protect our skin? What will happen to our children? Our health? We do not feel safe.”*

Furthermore, the community of Irongou warned at the beginning of 2022 about the terrible situation they confronted due to the pollution of their water sources, as they “noticed with amazement that for several days the water of the river had turned black with dead fish and had an unpleasant odor”. (5) Therefore, the NGO Muyissi carried out a visit to observe and take samples of the Irongou river’s water in April 2022. The NGO informed OLAM in a letter that the pollution of the waters of the Irongou River is due to “water from a canal leading to a water retention pond at the Olam Palm Gabon factory; as well as [from a] backfill (not recommended by the management plan) of an old pond in Irongou village.” The community used that pond to fish. In addition, the letter states that “the backfilling of the pond by Olam Palm Gabon was carried out after the population noticed the corpses of fish, shrimp (...) Moreover, it was without the knowledge of these populations that this work had been carried out.”

It is crucial to support the resistance of communities confronting oil palm plantations to reclaim their lands – and with these, their water, communities and lives! Resistance has been fertile. Communities’ opposition to the expansion of oil palm plantations is among the reasons that have resulted in companies not expanding as fast as they initially planned. At least 27 projects, covering 1.37 million hectares, failed during negotiations or were abandoned between 2008-2019. (6) One of the reasons for delayed, failed, or dropped expansion plans is community resistance. (7)

The water crisis these communities and others resisting oil palm plantations face would not exist if their lands would not have been taken away from them. Resisting land and water grabbing is one united struggle!

(1) [Chain Reaction Research, African Oil Palm Expansion Slows, Reputation Risks Remain for FMCGs](#), March 2022.

(2) Bulletin WRM 250, [Communautés d’Afrique résistent aux plantations industrielles de palmiers à huile, même en temps de Covid-19](#), 2020.

(3) Oakland Institute, [Drying Out African Lands Expansion of Large-Scale Agriculture Threatens Access to Water in Africa](#), 2022.

(4) Bulletin WRM 240, Gabon : [Les plantations industrielles de palmiers à huile d’OLAM privent la communauté de Sangha de l’accès à une eau potable](#), 2018.

(5) Muyissi Environnement, Compte Rendu d’Observation Indépendante, Gabon, 2019 ; Muyissi Environnement, Dénonciation d’un enfouissement de fertilisant (NPK), Gabon, 2019; et ONG L’Bemboudie, Réclamation des analyses des eaux de la rivière Ovigi, Gabon, 2021.

(6) Idem (1)

(7) En Afrique, les communautés résistent à l'accaparement des terres destinées à la production d'huile de palme, 2019.