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SOCAPALM conflicts, Cameroon

Last update:
2022-05-02

One of the most (in)famous cases of high-profile slapp suits against journalists daring to explain social and environmental injustices in rubber and palm oil plantations and other business in the 'Françafrique'.



▼ Description of the conflict case

The SOCAPALM plantations have been a source of massive socio-ecological problems and resistance. The plantations (then state-run) were established in 1968 on confiscated land customarily belonging to Bagyeli and Bantu populations. In 2000, the plantations were privatized and they belong today to the Luxembourgian holding Socfin which is linked to the Bolloré group, a massive French conglomerate led by Vincent Bolloré. The Bolloré group is one of the key players of 'Françafrique'.

The expansion/intensification of the plantations has continued since its privatization, at the cost of the adjacent ecosystems on which local populations depend. For instance, the agrochemicals used in the monocultures and the residues of its Kienké processing plant have massively polluted nearby rivers. The local populations' traditional way of life has become difficult – especially for the Bagyeli – and no satisfactory alternative has been put in place. The SOCAPALM brings its workforce from other parts of Cameroon and places them in camps located in the plantation. The conditions of life and work are bad. Hundreds of subcontracted workers work 6 days a week and sometimes from 6am to 6pm, without social security coverage and without adequate protection, for about 1.6 euro per day (2010). In this context, strikes and protests have multiplied. A large number of SOCAPALM vigilantes have been hired to prevent local villagers from entering the plantations. This situation led to a serious clash between vigilantes and villagers in 2003 (during which legs and arms were sliced with machetes). In retaliation, the army came to support the guards and randomly grabbed villagers and detained them for two weeks.

In January 2018, GRAIN announced: "We will not be silenced by Bolloré's SLAPP lawsuits! This Thursday 25 January, a lawsuit was opened against three newspapers (Mediapart, L'Obs and Le Point) and two NGOs (Sherpa and ReAct), who are accused of defamation by the Luxembourgian holding Socfin and its Cameroonian subsidiary Socapalm, for articles reporting on the mobilisation of villagers and farmers in West Africa who live near farms managed by these two companies. These companies have strong links to the Bolloré group, and Vincent Bolloré himself serves on their board of directors.

The lawsuit marks a new step in the judiciary proceedings launched by Bolloré and its partners against the media, non-governmental organisations and journalists who brought up what was going on behind the scenes regarding its

economic and commercial activity in Africa, its links with the Luxembourgian holding Socfin, and the consequences of the large-scale land acquisitions. Since 2009, no less than 20 defamation lawsuits have been launched by Bolloré or Socfin in France and elsewhere against articles, audio-visual reports, reports by NGOs, and even a book: France Inter, France Culture, France Info, France 2, Bastamag, Libération, Mediapart, L'Obs, Le Point, Rue 89, Greenpeace, React, Sherpa, etc. More than 40 journalists, lawyers, photographers, NGO leaders and media directors have been targeted by Bolloré and its partners."

The wave of lawsuits ("slapp suits") started in 2009 when, following the broadcast on France Inter of a program presenting a critical perspective on the SOCAPALM, the Bolloré group launched a lawsuit against Radio France and journalist Benoît Collombat who reported on several sectors of activity of the Bolloré group in Cameroon. The SOCAPALM component was finally not considered defamatory by the Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris. The latest lawsuit was open in January 2018 against three newspapers (Mediapart, L'Observateur and Le Point) and two NGOs (Sherpa and ReAct) for articles reporting on the mobilization of villagers and farmers who live near farms managed by the SOCAPALM. The verdict has not been published yet in August 2018 but Vincent Bolloré, in the meantime, has himself been prosecuted (as of April 2018) by French justice for a corruption case concerning his port activities in Africa. He is liable to be sentenced to ten years in prison.

Basic data

Conflict name

SOCAPALM conflicts, Cameroon

Conflict country

[Cameroon](#)

State or province

Provinces of Littoral and South

Location of conflict

6 sites: Dibombari, Mbongo, Mbambou, Eséka, Edéa and Kienké

Accuracy of location

MEDIUM (Regional level)

Source of conflict

Type of conflict. 1st level

Biomass and Land Conflicts (Forests, Agriculture, Fisheries and Livestock Management)

Type of conflict. 2st level

Plantation conflicts (incl. Pulp)

Deforestation

Land acquisition conflicts

Agro-fuels and biomass energy plants

Agro-toxics

Other types

Specific commodities

[Palm oil](#)[Rubber](#)

▼ Project details and actors

Technical information of the contested project

The SOCAPALM (Société Camerounaise de Palmeraies) is an agro-industrial company operating in Cameroon. It is the largest palm oil company in the country, managing plantations on some 78,529 hectares in Mbongo, Dibombari, Mbambou, Edéa, Kienke and Eséka, 32,901 hectares directly exploited and about 20,000 hectares indirectly exploited via family plantations. A few figures: - Socapalm's turnover amounted to over 72 million euros in 2016 - Creation: 1968 – privatization: 2000 - 6 sites: Dibombari, Mbongo, Mbambou, Eséka, Edéa and Kienké - 6 palm oil mills (all certified ISO 14001) - Production: 95 644 tons of crude palm oil per year (2016) - Surface area of oil palm plantations: 32 901 ha - Surface area of rubber tree plantations: 2 079 ha - Staff: 3,200 employees + 2,338 outgrowers who themselves have about 3,000 agricultural workers. In total, then, nearly 30,000 people are linked to the SOCAPALM. Website: <http://socapalm.com/?lang=en>

Project area

80,000

Level of Investment for the conflictive project

Type of population

Rural

Affected population

Start of the conflict

2000

End of the conflict

Company names or state enterprises

[Socfin group \(La Société Financière des Caoutchoucs\)](#) from [Luxembourg](#)

Relevant government actors

International and Finance Institutions

Civil society organizations and their web pages, if available

- SYNAPARCAM (Synergie Nationale des Paysans et Riverains du Cameroun): <http://www.palmespoir.org/index.php/synaparcam> - FOCARFE (Fondation Camerounaise d'Actions rationalisées et de Formation sur l'Environnement): <http://www.aedev.org/focarfe/> - ActionAid France: <http://www.peuples-solidaires.org/> - Attac France: <https://france.attac.org/> - Bastamag: <https://www.bastamag.net/> - GRAIN: <https://www.grain.org/> - Greenpeace France: <https://www.greenpeace.fr/> - Mediapart: <https://www.mediapart.fr/> - Ritimo: <https://www.ritimo.org/> - Sherpa: <https://www.asso-sherpa.org/home> - Survie: <https://survie.org/> - ReAct: <https://www.reactgroup.org/> - Reporters sans frontières: <https://rsf.org/en>

▼ Conflict & Mobilization

Conflict intensity

LOW (some local organising)

Reaction stage

In REACTION to the implementation (during construction or operation)

Groups mobilizing

- Indigenous groups or traditional communities
- Industrial workers
- International ejos
- Local ejos
- Trade unions
- Ethnically/racially discriminated groups
- Farmers and peasants

Other Mobilizing Groups

Forms of mobilization

- Creation of alternative reports/knowledge
- Development of a network/collective action
- Involvement of national and international NGOs
- Lawsuits, court cases, judicial activism
- Media based activism/alternative media
- Objections to the EIA
- Official complaint letters and petitions
- Property damage/arson

Other Mobilizing Forms

∨ Impacts

Environmental Impacts

- Biodiversity loss (wildlife, agro-diversity)
- Loss of landscape/aesthetic degradation
- Waste overflow
- Deforestation and loss of vegetation cover
- Surface water pollution / Decreasing water (physico-chemical, biological) quality

Other Environmental impacts

Health Impacts

- Violence related health impacts (homicides, rape, etc..)
- Health problems related to alcoholism, prostitution
- Occupational disease and accidents
- Infectious diseases

Other Health impacts

Socio-economical Impacts

- Displacement
- Loss of livelihood
- Social problems (alcoholism, prostitution, etc..)
- Land dispossession
- Loss of traditional knowledge/practices/cultures
- Militarization and increased police presence
- Increase in Corruption/Co-optation of different actors
- Violations of human rights

Other Social Economical impacts

∨ Conflict outcome

Project Status

In operation

Conflict outcome / response

- Compensation
- Corruption
- Environmental improvements, rehabilitation/restoration of area
- Court decision (undecided)
- Repression
- Under negotiation
- Violent targeting of activists

Other Outcomes

Proposal and development of alternatives

Neighboring populations have essentially two basic demands: (1) a compensation in any form - monetary, village plantations or infrastructure (roads, schools, etc.) - for the destruction of what they regard as their forest; and (2) the non-extension of the SOCAPALM, i.e. the preservation of the remaining fields, agro-forests and forests. It is basically for these goals that local Bantu villagers ask for their presence in the management board of the company.

Do you consider this an environmental justice success? Was environmental justice served?

No

Briefly explain

The company claims to have recently improved the social and environmental situation but local people continue to protest (as of 2018)

Other comments

Many sources are available. This is only a few landmark publications.

Source & materials

References to published books, academic articles, movies or published documentaries

Related media links to videos, campaigns, social network

"Procès Bolloré, 2e round : le 'Germinal des tropiques'" (4 April 2018): Useful overview article (only in French)

[Click to view](#)

"Il a témoigné contre Bolloré: 'Bien sûr que je suis inquiet'" (5 April 2018): Interview of a local EJO activist (only in French)

[Click to view](#)

Huffpost 24 April 2018. Vincent Bolloré en garde à vue pour des soupçons de corruption en Afrique.

[Click to view](#)

"We will not be silenced by Bolloré's SLAPP lawsuits!" (25 January 2018): Useful list of all the Bolloré lawsuits against journalists and NGOs

[Click to view](#)

GRAIN (a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements, based in Barcelona) . We will not be silenced by Bolloré's SLAPP lawsuits! Civil society organisations, media outlets, journalists and NGOs | 25 enero 2018

[Click to view](#)

"Bolloré y sus practicas mafiosas en África, ¿habrá justicia?". Chema Caballero. Mundo Negro, 4 mayo 2018, Vicent Bolloré fue detenido por la policía francesa y trasladado a las instalaciones de la fiscalía nacional el 24 de abril 2018, acusado de sobornos a funcionarios públicos extranjeros.

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"Cameroon: Refuting ten lies about SOCAPALM plantations" (2010): Replies to typical arguments in favor of the SOCAPALM (only in French)

[Click to view](#)

"Résistances contre deux géants industriels en forêt tropicale" (2008): Overview of the situation, published by the WRM (only in French)

[Click to view](#)

"L'impact de la privatisation de la SOCAPALM sur les communautés et l'environnement au Cameroun: Exposé de situation" (2010): Overview of the situation, with the participation of local and national NGOs (only in French)

[Click to view](#)

Documents

Some maps of the SOCAPALM

[Click to view](#)

▼ Meta Information

Collaborator

J.-F. Gerber

Last update of the case form

2022-05-02

Conflict ID

3658

> Related conflicts



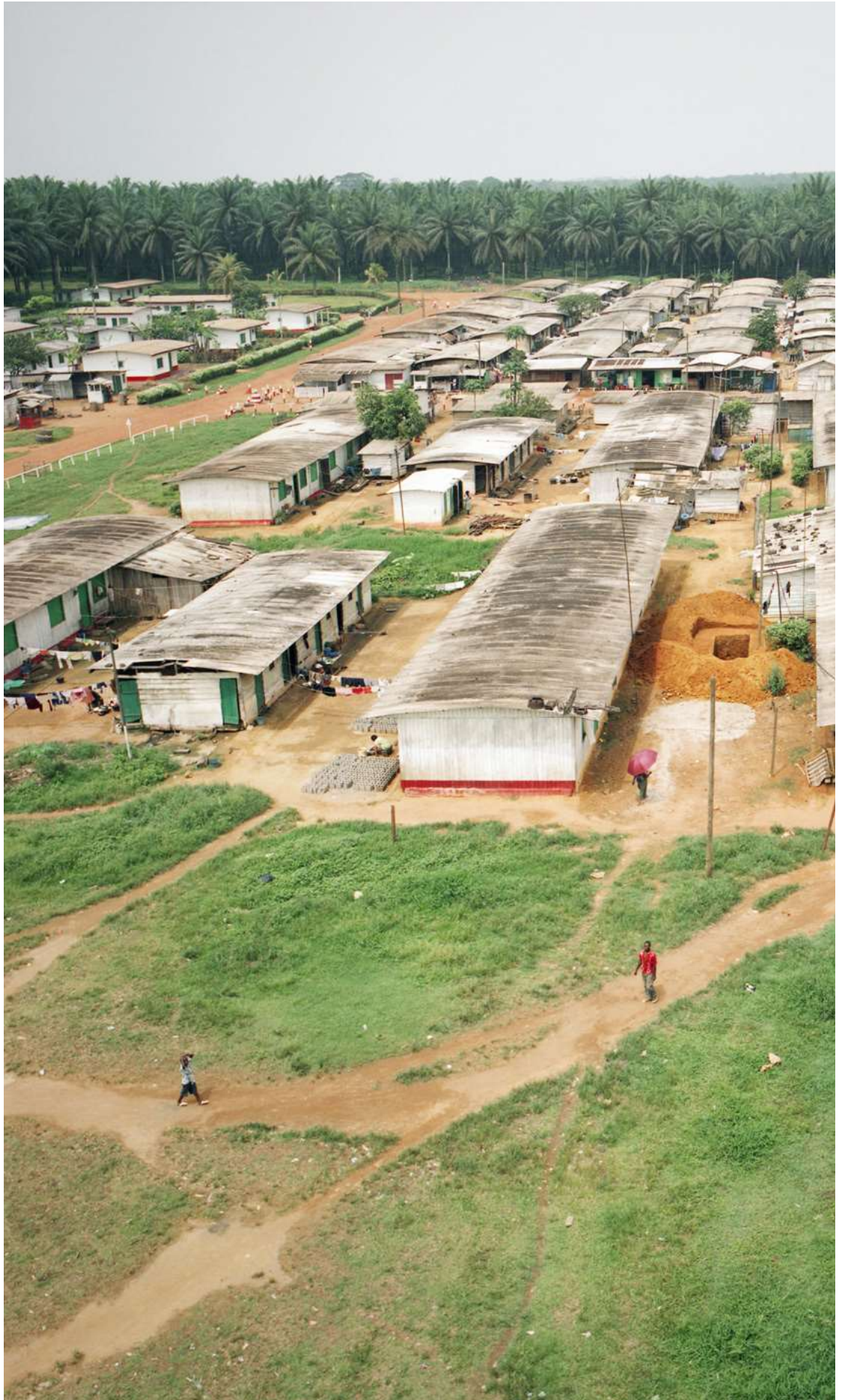












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"Bolloré au Cameroun, un bilan en images" by photographer Isabelle Alexandra Ricq-- a series of photographs of the SOCAPALM-Kienké published in 2009 by Le Monde Diplomatique:

<https://blog.monediplo.net/2009-06-16-Bollore-au-Cameroun-un-bilan-en-images> (All the pictures here are taken from this blog)
