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# Campaigners oppose industrial palm oil plantation



Courtesy David Hoyle/WWF Cameroon

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project proceeds.

"The plantation will economically displace approximately 25,000 people and put at risk many others who depend on that land for small-scale food production, hunting, and non-timber forest products. Thus, the net impact on employment will actually be negative. This is not a fair deal," Nasako Besingi, one of the campaigners against the plantation, told IRIN.

The project in Mundemba Region is overseen by SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SGSOC), a subsidiary of Herakles Farms, a US-based agricultural company.

In 2009 SGSOC signed an agreement with the Cameroonian government to develop an **industrial palm oil plantation and refinery**. A year later forest clearing began on part of the 73,086-hectare site acquired on a 99-year land-lease deal.

Campaigners argue that a large industrial plantation could destabilize the area's rich ecosystem and that the environmental and socioeconomic gains from preserving the rainforest outweigh the promised benefits from the plantation.

Local smallholders grow millet, cocoa, cassava, oil palm, beans, rice and fruit, which they supplement with fishing and hunting. They also collect wild foods, medicinal plants and wood for fuel in the area, which is inhabited by between 14,000 (according to SGSOC) and 45,000 people (according to campaigners).

"If you look at the working conditions in other agro-industrial plantations, they are truly deplorable. Most employees make US\$34-70 per month, which is not a living wage in today's economy," Besingi added.

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### Why controversial?

SGSOC still lacks presidential approval and the project has been in violation of the law since 2010, say campaigners.

"It is curious that the company is continuing its operations even though there is considerable evidence of illegality and that those who draw attention to the systematic violation of the law are threatened by the authorities," said Samuel Nguiffo, a lawyer and director of Cameroon's Centre for Environment and Development.

The company had been clearing forest and developing oil palm nurseries prior to submitting an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) or obtaining the Certificate of Environmental Conformity as required by law.

"Not only do they not want to comply with existing law, but the company has clearly turned its back on sustainable practices," he added.

When an ESIA was eventually carried out in 2012, it was discovered that SGSOC had destroyed 14.5 million trees of various species; the company was asked to pay damages and interest amounting to 24,506,000 CFA francs (US\$48,519), according Ebo'o Léopold Francis, the regional government delegate for environmental issues in the South West Region.

"What the government is doing in collaboration with the local authority is to bring [together] all the sector ministries - Agriculture, Forest, Land Tenure and Environment - in order to map out protected, farming, and plantation areas."

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cultivate on other fertile non-forest land in Cameroon," he wondered.

**Opinion**, however, is divided: "I think this might be an opportunity for people of Fabe village. This company is new and unlike PAMOL [Cameroonian state-run palm oil company] they could give better pay packages to workers," farmer Sone Samuel told IRIN, explaining that his cousin had a job on the project.

"We are already employing more than 500 people and we have committed to prioritizing hiring among the 38 villages. As such, we are organizing job fairs, recruiting, and [conducting] training programmes, said Bruce Wrobel, CEO of Herakles Farms, in September. "Once fully operational, the organization will require approximately 8,000 [employees]."

"While we are still in the early stages of making an impact, we are already seeing villages once skeptical of us beginning to change their views, particularly after seeing the benefits of our work. However, if a village doesn't want to participate in the project, we will respect their decision," Wrobel added.

Brendan Schwartz, programme coordinator of Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim (RELUFa) in Cameroon, told IRIN: "We are concerned about the new wave of investments in land due to its negative impacts on local food production and rural communities' access to land. Communities and individuals have very precarious land rights which leave them vulnerable to economic displacement when large-scale land investments take place."

Major protests erupted against Herakles after it withdrew from the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a body that assures formal compliance with a set of eco-friendly industry guidelines.

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### Rights violations?

An investigation in June 2012 by environment watchdogs the Oakland Institute and Greenpeace noted aspects of human rights violations practised by the company, describing the agreement with the Cameroon government as the equivalent of being given "what amounts to police powers". It suggested SGCOC had an intimidating presence among the local population.

"Following local protests, SGCOC was given police protection and they have a threatening influence in this region," Besingi told IRIN.

On 14 November Besingi and three other campaigners were arrested and detained without charge in Ndian.

"It was only following international and local pressure that we were released - however, on condition that we present ourselves before the authorities when called, and if we can't show up the community members who negotiated our release will have to pay \$1,500 for each of us," Besingi explained.

"There is also an element of unfairness in the system as we see it," said RELUFA's Schwartz. "While peasant farmers have numerous obstacles to titling their land and securing access to other natural resources on which they depend, multinational companies can fly into Yaoundé and sign deals to secure huge tracts of land with little regard for the communities in these areas. This is a fight for the livelihoods of rural peoples in Cameroon and across Africa."