

12 DECEMBER 2022

Total's Congo offsetting project 'snatched our land'

Farmers say oil giant's tree-planting scheme has barred them from their fields and threatens livelihoods

WITH

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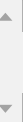
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**planting
scheme
has
barred
them
from
their
fields
and
threatens
livelihoods**

This spring,
when
Pulchérie
Amboula
went to plant
crops on her

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...rowing
behind," she says. "We no longer work. With grandchildren and children, how are we going to live?"

Pulchérie inherited the land on the Batéké Plateau, undulating savannah in the Republic of Congo and farms cassava to sell in the

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...
she and her
neighbours
say.

The guards
are employed
by a local
partner of
TotalEnergies,
a French oil
giant. With
Forest
Neutral
Congo (FNC),
Total is
planting
40,000
hectares with
acacia trees
which it says
will capture
10 million

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generate 4 million of offsets carbon credits which the firm will use to offset its fossil fuel emissions. Farmers like Amboula say the project, whose offsets will, according to Total, be verified by the biggest issuer of carbon credits, Verra, threatens their survival.

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...can you get
the money to
get
treatment? I
feel like these
people came
to kill us on
our own land.”



*Pulchérie Amboula,
a farmer who says
she can no longer
access her land*

During two
recent visits
to the area, at
least six
farmers told

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government
 consulted
 local people
 before
 requisitioning
 the land for
 use by Total.
 But an
 investigation
 by
 SourceMaterial
 and
 Unearthed,
 Greenpeace's
 investigative
 journalism
 wing, found
 that a law
 transferring
 the land to
 the "private
 domain of the
 state" was

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like
these
people
came to
kill us
on our
own
land.

Some
community
representatives
received a
nominal
payment of
around \$1 a

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SourceMaterial that they were not consulted before their land was taken and received little compensation. Some received nothing at all.

In a joint response to questions, Total and the owners of FNC said: "An assessment is underway to finalise the

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project.

The assessment would “identify a remediation action plan, including livelihood restoration measures that comply with international standards,” a spokesman wrote, adding that it was the companies’ ambition “to implement international standards

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...country
minister,
Rosalie
Matondo,
visited
Pulchérie's
village of
Ngo. A
government
video shows
locals
greeting her
as she
descends
from a
helicopter.
Later, men
and women
are seen
writing on a
piece of
paper as an
official points
out where to

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change,
Matondo
says into a
microphone.

A caption on
the video
says that the
ceremony
involved a
“symbolic”
payment to
villagers as
part of the
Total project.
The
document
they signed
says the
payment, also
described
here as
“symbolic”,

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project, an area the size of Singapore. Nine families with land within the area received a nominal payment. Some said that they were offered no choice about giving up their plots.

“All the elders and other land chiefs refused, saying they weren’t

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... ..

But their objections appear to have fallen on deaf ears and the land was taken anyway.

Minister of Forestry, Rosalie Matondo, visiting the Bateke Plateau for the launch of the project

Others complained

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... was not consulted and received nothing.

Maixent Jourdain Adzabi, the land chief for the Nkonon family, told SourceMaterial that he and his relatives were “never included” in the consultation process and that they now have no work.

“Today

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... said. "Our future children will be born and eat what? And their wives and children, how will they live?"

In a joint statement, Total and Forest Resource Management (the French parent company to FNC) told SourceMaterial

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of Congo are
not respond
to questions.

Land laws

Congo's land laws are complicated. When the country gained independence from France in 1960, all land was handed to the state, which later allowed people to buy plots on which to farm and build.

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occupied
these
spaces," says
Lilian Bardros,
a legal expert
in Brazzaville.
"There was a
lot of conflict
between the
state and
these
families."

In 2018, a
new law
allowed
people with
customary
rights to
ancestral land
to register for
deeds. But
registration

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promoters,
says another
expert, Laurin
Lilian Barros.

“People in the
villages do
not have the
information,
they haven’t
been
informed, they
do not have
the means to
go and
register the
land,” he says.

In practice,
plots are
handed down
through
families in a

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SourceMaterial obtained a copy of the lease agreement between FNC and the government. In it, the state promises to evict “all the so-called landowners, holders of traditional and customary rights who claim the land.”

FNC pays
\$100,000

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...the oil company is “subleasing the area from FNC, and FNC from the State of Congo”. He declined to say how much Total is paying for the land, citing “contractual confidentiality”.

Total and FNC said that the project will ultimately create jobs in the area and “provide for

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The development fund would be “dedicated to the local communities, financing social projects in nutrition, health, and education,” the companies said.

Lease between FNC and the government of Congo guaranteeing the

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There are doubts about whether projects like this one really work, says Jutta Kill, a biologist and carbon offsetting expert.

“Tree planting projects are generally taking place on land used by indigenous or peasant farmers,” she said, adding that offsetting schemes are

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“There is no credible carbon offset project,” she said. “They all claim to compensate for real emissions that are measurable and verifiable based on a story of what might happen.”

A spokesman for Verra said that there was no guarantee

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...expert review
and public
consultation
backed by
dozens or
even
hundreds of
random
interviews
with local
communities,”
he said.
“Anyone who
tried to
steamroller
smallholders
would fail to
both get
results.”

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Today, billboards emblazoned with Total's logo line mud roads leading to the neat rows of acacia seedlings that now stretch across at least 850 hectares, interspersed with portacabins to house the workers who water them.

“Total did not

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Commission, a campaign group linked to the Catholic church. "They cannot hide behind the weakness of Congolese law."

Clarisse Parfaite Louba, a farmer who grows potatoes on land inherited from her grandparents, land chiefs in the area, says

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... who brought this enterprise here," she says. "Let him reflect and give us back our space."

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