

Debate rages over intensive oil palm farming in Gabon

by Yorick Nelly Kombila on 1 November 2019 | Translated by Lydia Beadsworth

- *Nearly 88 percent of Gabon is covered in forests, but NGOs fear that the development of oil palm plantations threatens this viable resource.*
- *Local communities accuse SOTRADER, a public-private partnership between the government and the multinational Olam, of land grabbing.*

- *Its defenders say that the project respects the environment and community social commitments.*
- *In September, the government of Gabon signed an agreement allowing the sustainable management of its high carbon stock forests.*

Nearly 88 percent of Gabon is covered in forests. As the country seeks to diversify its economy, including developing agriculture and commercial plantations, can it continue to protect this important resource for local communities and biodiversity? Numerous NGOs are worried by the industrial cultivation of oil palm by the multinational Olam and have launched a campaign to raise the government's awareness of the risks plantations pose to communities and the environment.

In 2015, under the framework of a programme called GRAINE (Gabonaise des réalisations agricoles et des initiatives des nationaux engagés – Gabonese Initiative for Achieving Agricultural Outcomes with an Engaged Citizenry (<https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/GA/le-programme-graine>)), the Gabonese authorities formed a public-private partnership with the firm Olam Palm Gabon for the development of a tract spanning 58,500 hectares (144,600 acres). The company, known as Société gabonaise de transformation agricole et développement durable (<https://www.rspo.org/members/4125/SOTRADER-Societe-Gabonaise-De-Transformation-Agricol>) (SOTRADER – Gabonese Company for Agricultural Transformation and Sustainable Development) set up operations in Ndendé, in Ngounié province.

People living in the area, in the villages of Ferra and Nanga, had initially welcomed the project in light of their precarious economic situation. But now they are accusing the

company of running a counter-productive policy. These communities want to continue to enjoy their traditional rights to use the forest for farming and harvesting, and to ensure their food sovereignty.

Added to this is anger among dissatisfied young people in these villages, who are critical of the insecurity of the jobs the company has created. "The average agricultural worker's salary, which fluctuates between 100,00 and 150,000 CFA francs per month" — about \$170 to \$250 — "is difficult to achieve, even working full time, while according to management's reports, the firm itself is seeing turnover soar exponentially," said Mouity Kombila Dimitri, an Olam employee in the department of Dola, speaking to Mongabay by telephone.

Ladislav Ndembet, chair of the NGO Muyissi Environnement, who closely monitors the multinational's conduct, sees enormous risks for nature, communities, plants and animals. "It is in everyone's interests that the authorities, who have ceded several thousand hectares to Olam, review their land allocation policy," he said. "This will avoid them being booed, as has just happened to Brice Laccruche Alihanga, the president's chief-of-staff in Mouila; residents did not want to hear him praising Olam, who they accuse of depleting the soil and running a counter-productive policy."

On September 21, the International Day of Struggle Against Monoculture Tree Plantations, a coalition of residents of the affected areas and civil society groups from across West and Central Africa launched a petition against the expansion of plantations and land grabbing.



The Ngounié River in Mouila, Gabon. Image by Vincent Vaquin via Flickr (CC BY-3.0)

Defenders of the project

But Olam also has its supporters in Gabonese civil society. Hervé Omva, chair of Initiatives Développement Recherches Conseils Africa (Development Initiatives Research Councils Africa, or IDRC Africa), an NGO working to support local groups for the protection of biodiversity and increasing the value of non-timber forest products, does not agree. When asked about the growth of Olam's plantations, he sees Olam's activities as among those carried out in the country with due care. "I am for the sustainable development of RSPO-certified oil palm plantations," he said. "Since its arrival in this region, Olam is to be congratulated for its work in terms of respect for the environment, basic community social commitments and especially regarding the creation of sustainable jobs."

In a press release, the NGO Croissance Saine Environnement also rejected the allegations against the project: "It is important to remember that the concession which is implicated (SOTRADER Ndendé) in the aforesaid petition has been the subject of development which is 100% compliant with zero-deforestation principles; no forest in the concession has been touched. Furthermore, no development could have taken place without the consent and approval of the communities (through FPIC [free, prior and informed consent]), including those of Nanga and Ferra, communities which actively participated in the process of protection of their ancestral lands". According to Croissance Saine Environnement, thousands of hectares have been put under conservation as a consequence of Olam's project. The NGO points to the social contracts that have been agreed to with the communities in the south: "Beyond even those commitments, the Olam group has developed numerous additional programmes, particularly to guarantee improvements in the living conditions of inhabitants through the implementation of revenue-generating activities".

Yvon Martial Nzantsi Miyagou, coordinator of ROSCEVAC Ngounié and an active member of Croissance Saine Environnement, tells Mongabay that the intervention of his NGO is based on a regional study of several Olam sites carried out in partnership with the Institut National Supérieur d'Agronomie et de Biotechnologies (National Higher Institute of Agronomics and Biotechnology).

Marc Ona Essangui, a long-time environmental defender and the executive secretary for the NGO Brainforest who won the Goldman Prize in 2009 in recognition of his work against

deforestation, does not understand these interventions. "Muyissi Environnement is an independent NGO which is criticizing Olam's activities in the Ngounié; without even waiting for the company's reaction, it's Croissance Saine Environnement which is all over the newspapers," he told Mongabay. Brainforest is a signatory of the petition alongside Muyissi Environnement.

Ndembet, while not entirely opposed to Olam's activities which he says can, to a limited extent, create wealth, settle populations, and improve their well-being, is opposed to the government's ambition to make Gabon the leading African producer of palm oil in the very near future. "My fear stems from the fact that Olam cannot meet its commitments to the villages for whom land is fundamental. The multinational has signed social contracts which have no force without legal value, which rather resemble a fool's bargain aimed at enriching Olam to the detriment of rural communities," he said. Since 2000, the government of Gabon has created 13 national parks, one of which is classed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In September, Gabon signed an agreement aimed at sustainable management of its high carbon stock forests

(<https://www.cafi.org/content/cafi/fr/home/all-news/gabon--first-in-africa-to-receiving-payments-for-preserved-rainf.html>). The agreement will reward the country with payments amounting up to \$150 million, based on results for the protection of high conservation value areas and maintaining its vast forest cover.



Gabon is home to nearly 60 percent of the forest elephants remaining in Africa. Image by Ngangorica via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA-4.0)

Banner image of tropical forest in Gabon by Axel Rouvin via Flickr (CC BY-SA-2.0)

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