

Global Forest Reporting Network Global Palm Oil

Lessons from Herakles: sorting out a road map for palm oil in Africa

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Conflict between Cameroonian communities and an American agribusiness company reveals problems in how palm oil is expanding across the country.



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- *In 2009, Herakles Farms was awarded 73,000 hectares of largely forested land in the southwest portion of the country to develop into palm oil plantations. The allotment was reduced to less than 20,000 hectares in 2013 when it was discovered the land had been awarded incorrectly.*
- *Since it appeared in Cameroon, Herakles has been at the center of controversy, with local activists and international NGOs alike claiming the company acquired and started developing land without the consent of the communities that surround and depend on it.*
- *Herakles has not been active in its concessions in recent years, but its contract for the land remains valid. The company has until November 2016 to develop its holdings.*



This is the third in a four-part series on palm oil in Cameroon. Read the [first](#) and [second](#) parts for more discussion on the topic.

Getting to Mundemba in Cameroon from the highway intersection in Kumba requires a four- hour (or more) drive on a dusty - or impassably muddy - road through sun-seared hamlets and then kilometer after kilometer of oil palm plantations set up decades ago by state-run palm oil companies, Pamol and the Cameroon Development Corporation.

Despite the signs of modernity on the outskirts of Mundemba offering air conditioned accommodation and cold beer, it still has its roots firmly planted in agriculture. Crammed into any free land between the mud- and cinderblock

houses in the town center are bananas, corn and the occasional elevated pig pen. And just beyond Mundemba's main road sit fields that in February had just been burned in preparation for planting once the rains came.

The town has also played a central role in a well-publicized row since the American company Herakles Farms first tried to set up a palm oil plantation nearby. Abutting Korup National Park, a jewel of biodiversity that's home to rare apes, monkeys and elephants, Mundemba embodies the struggle to protect people's livelihoods and safeguard valuable forest habitat and carbon stores while also using the land to grow the country's economy.



Decades-old Palmol oil palm plantation line the road between Mundemba and Kumba. Photo by John C. Cannon.

There are signs that oil palm, currently expanding at an unprecedented clip in Africa, is making headway toward a compromise. Experts say that Olam, for example, [has engaged with local communities](#) in Gabon and worked very closely with the government to identify and set aside priority areas for conservation.

But the Herakles Farms story in Cameroon has become something of a fable for what not to do.

"There was nothing done properly in Herakles - no technical plan, no financial-business plan, no proper [environmental and social impact assessment], no [free, prior and informed consent of local communities] at all," said Laurène Feintrenie, an agronomist-geographer with the French agriculture and development research organization, CIRAD, who has previously worked in Cameroon studying oil palm. "It is a complete fiasco, and it will end badly for the company."

However, it did show what can happen when local residents get involved. "The only positive thing was the illustration of Cameroonian social power," Feintrenie said. "The national NGOs were very efficient in drawing the attention [to] the abuses of the government and company."

In 2009, Herakles Farms began to assert its claim on some 73,000 hectares of land that they had been given in a contract with the minister in charge of lands in Yaoundé, Cameroon's political capital. Almost immediately, a schism occurred based on the way the company acquired and began developing the land.

To begin with, said Samuel Nguiffo, such a large piece of land should only have been given out by a presidential decree. Nguiffo is an attorney and the founder and director of the Center for the Environment and Development, an NGO based in Yaoundé.

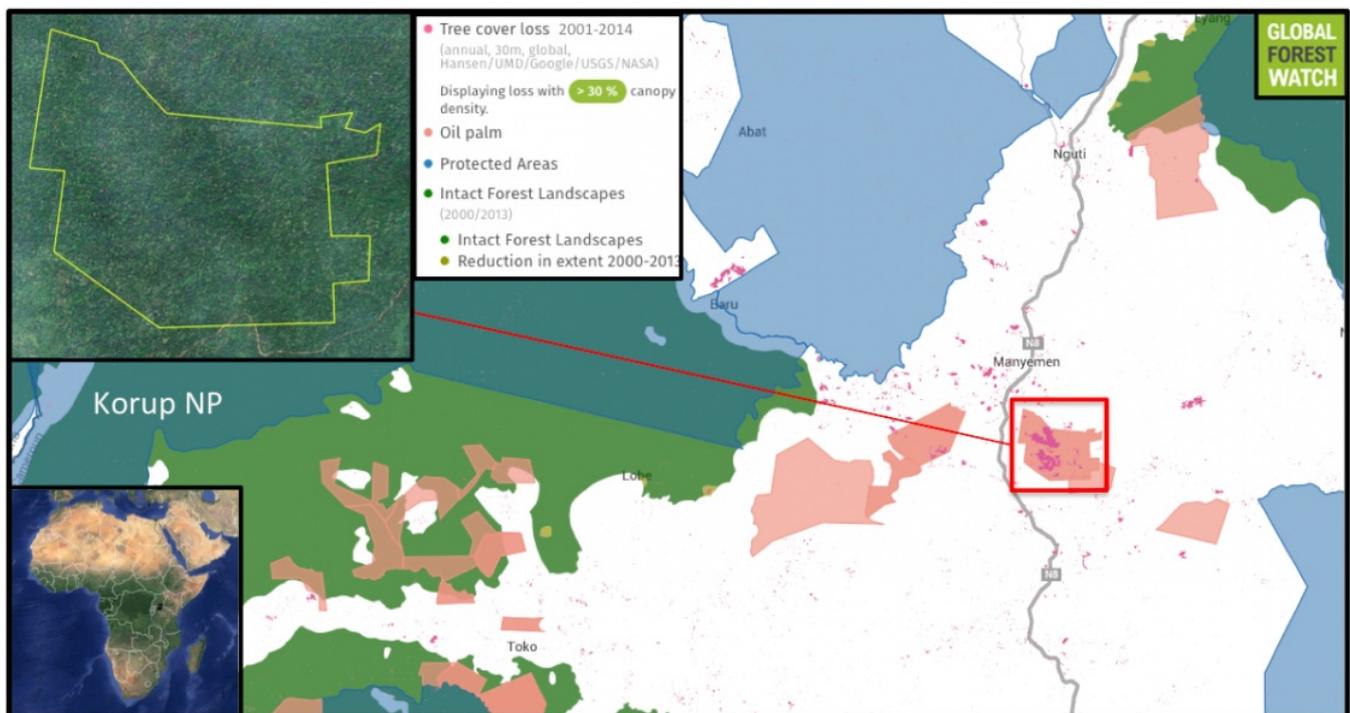
According to land laws in Cameroon dating back to 1976, a minister-signed contract is only permissible for areas of land smaller than 50 hectares, and not for the 99-year lease the contract stipulates.

Herakles did eventually get a decree signed by President Paul Biya 2013 for 19,843 hectares, not the original 73,000 hectares. The decree is only a temporary provision, giving Herakles three years – in this case, until November 2016 – to develop its holdings.

Heading toward the November showdown this year, Herakles seems to have all but pulled out of the plantations around Mundemba. Local residents, even those who have backed the company's presence in the area, say only a skeleton staff remains to tend the nursery.

"They will come back," said Chief Philip Wangoe of Fabe village less than 15 kilometers from Mundemba. Wangoe has defended the company's presence and argues that it will boost the economy of the Mundemba area.

Up until now, Herakles has only prepared a small proportion of the land for an oil palm plantation, Nguiffo said. "In their case, they have to clear and plant. All together – this is in six years' time – they were only able to clear 600 hectares," he said. "Clearly, there remains a problem."



Herakles' palm oil concessions lie scattered throughout the forest near Cameroon's southwest border with Nigeria. Global Forest Watch shows several occupy Intact Forest Landscapes – large, undisturbed areas of primary forest – and are close to protected areas like Korup National Park. However, the concessions have seen little in the way of plantation development. Most of this activity has been concentrated in one concession near Manyemen, which lost 323 hectares of tree cover between 2011 and 2014. Satellite imagery from 2011 shows the concession recently held thick forest.

By contrast, Olam planted 32,000 hectares of oil palm in four years in Gabon, according to a representative of the company.

Based on the terms of the decree, Nguiffo added, "I don't see how they can keep it."

On the other hand, the contract hasn't been cancelled, so it remains valid. And one thing that Herakles did do right early on was to hire good lawyers, Nguiffo said.

"It's very well written. If you are a land grabber, it's a perfect contract," Nguiffo told Mongabay. "Everything is set for a legal battle that they can win."

From the beginning, Peter Namolongo, the former deputy mayor of Mundemba, was convinced that Herakles was "scrambling for land," with little regard for the consequences to local communities or the environment. His first thought when they arrived was "they will chop down all the forests."

What work on the plantation did occur seemed to be happening without local communities' knowledge, Namolongo said.

Nasako Besingi, director of the Mundemba-based NGO Struggle to Economize our Future Environment, or SEFE, said he found the same thing when he traveled through the area. "Village after village, they said that they have not seen anybody, that no one has come to them."

Besingi founded SEFE in 1996 to address environmental justice issues. He said that to "cut off" local people from their land could be disastrous.

Linus Arong, who owns 10 hectares of land near Fabe village where he grows oil palm, agrees.

"The village belongs to all of us," Arong said. "If we lose the forest, [Herakles is] going to make money, but we aren't. We have to be careful."

*In addition to providing ecosystem services and resources for local communities, Cameroon's forests also provide important habitat for wildlife such as forest elephants (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*). Photo courtesy of dsg-photo.com via Wikimedia Commons (CC 3.0).*

From the outset, Besingi said he saw little willingness on the part of the company to engage with the people who would be most affected by its plantations. In 2011, for example, Besingi said he invited the company and local community members together for an "information-sharing meeting" so that Herakles could explain their project. But no one from the company came, he said.

"We were trying to dialogue with a company that has refused to dialogue," Besingi said. "We were trying to negotiate with a company that had closed the doors of negotiation."

Mongabay made several attempts to speak with representatives from Herakles Farms, contacting someone whose [LinkedIn page](#) indicates that he is the vice president for conservation with the company. A visit to the company's office in Limbe, Cameroon, was unsuccessful, and Mongabay was told the office had been shut down and moved to Nguti, about 71 kilometers northeast of Mundemba. A phone number for Herakles Farms' office in New York had been reassigned to an unaffiliated company, and its [website](#) is defunct.

What Besingi and his collaborators have been fighting for is the free, prior and informed consent, or FPIC, that Feintrenie said Herakles didn't do. It's a component of the requirements for certification by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil.

But in Cameroon, Nguiffo pointed out, "FPIC is not part of our law."

In Nguiffo's view, it's time to make some changes to Cameroon's 40-year-old land tenure laws. In the 1970s when they were enacted, land grabbing wasn't such a big issue, and population densities in Cameroon were much lower, putting less pressure on scarce land resources.

While Cameroon has a population density of 47 people per square kilometer, the Southwest region where Mundemba is located is more than 12 times that.

"Today is different," Nguiffo said. "We really need to look at these types of provisions in the law if you want to avoid conflicts."

Part of the problem is that who owns what land isn't always clear, at least to those outside of the communities where families have worked the same land for decades, if not longer.





Oil palm plantations outside Limbe.

“They don’t have titles, but they don’t think they need [them]. They think it’s theirs because they live there,” Nguiffo said. “They inherited the land from their ancestors, and it’s their property. That’s how they feel.

“But for the state, those lands don’t belong to them. The state can grant property or a lease on them,” Nguiffo added. “We have to change [land tenure laws] and make sure that communities are better protected.”

Besingi said that Cameroon needs more than new laws.

“There is a law in place, there are conventions in place, there are protocols in place,” Besingi said. “The only issue is that these laws and conventions are never respected.”

In his view, the best approach for all involved – including the company – is to engage the communities from the start.

“It should be left for the community to develop a sustainable ecological agricultural system, and they should be supported in that by companies or government or organizations,” he said.

And the problems that Herakles is having, from its embattled public image owing in part to campaigns from watchdog groups like Greenpeace and the Oakland Institute, to the loss of more than 70 percent of the land the company originally hoped to develop, is the leaders’ own fault, Besingi said.

“It’s as if they cooked the food, poisoned the food, and then cried about having a stomachache,” he said. “All the problems they’re having are caused by themselves and nobody else.”

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