



## Ugandan farmers take on palm oil giants over land grab claims

**Palm oil producers backed by the UN taken to court by evicted farmers who say they have received little compensation**

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**Alon Mwesigwa** in *Kalangala*

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Before the bulldozers came, Magdalena Nakamya harvested coffee, cassava, avocado and jackfruit on her three-hectare (seven-acre) plot on Kalangala, an island in Lake Victoria.

But on a July morning in 2011, Nakamya, 64, awoke to find yellow machines churning up her land and razing the crops she had grown in a bid to make way for palm oil plantations.

“No one came to talk to me before they destroyed my crops,” says Nakamya. “I heard that some people were given money, but I didn’t receive anything.”

Oil Palm Uganda Limited (Opul) was launched in 2002, following an agreement signed between the government and Bidco Uganda, a food producer, with the aim of increasing palm oil production in the country.

In 2011, Opul acquired land leases from a Ugandan businessman, Amos Ssempe, with the aim of expanding its plantations. About 7,500 hectares (18,500 acres) of oil palm have been planted since 2002 (pdf). Opul describes the project as part of an initiative to increase vegetable oil production in the country.



Mangdalena Nakamya, 64, now lives on church land after she was evicted from her land in Kangala. Photograph: Alon Mwesigwa

Francis Ssemogerere, 55, tended 3.6 hectares of land for 30 years until he was evicted in the same year as Nakamya. No compensation was paid to him either. “They took all of [my land]. They promised to come back and pay me but they never came back,” Ssemogerere says.

Uganda’s constitution requires authorities to obtain a court order to evict people from their land, and compensation must also be paid. Nakamya and Ssemogerere are from a community of more than 100 people in Kalangala who claim they were evicted from their land illegally.

The palm oil project is supported by the UN’s International Fund for Agricultural Development (Ifad). Bidco and global palm oil giant Wilmar International are major investors. In 2004, the World Bank withdrew from the project amid concern that it was not complying with the bank’s forestry policies (pdf).

Anne van Schaik, accountable finance campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, said: “Wilmar and its subsidiaries, backed by European money, are forcing communities from their land in Uganda.”

On 19 February, a group of farmers filed a lawsuit against Bidco Uganda and Amos Ssempe, who leased the land to Opol.

A spokeswoman for Wilmar said: “No one had been evicted for the Opol project. Where it was not possible for the occupants to leave the land in question, the specific area was set aside and no oil palm development took place. We believe we have developed one of the best oil palm plantations in Africa in Kalangala and the local people have benefited tremendously from the project.”

Bidco Uganda general manager Suvrajit Ghosh denied knowledge of the case.

Ssempe says “due processes were followed and farmers were compensated”. He says: “They [the farmers] signed that they received the money.”

Ann Turinayo, communication and knowledge management officer for Ifad Uganda, says: “Ifad is not involved in any land acquisition. What we do is that we give highly subsidised finance to government which benefits small farmers in Kalangala.

“We [Ifad] support people who are growing oil palms on their own land. There are more than 1,600 farmers in Kalangala, who are growing oil palms at a commercial basis on their own land, and these are the people we support.”

While some of the farmers agreed to be compensated, they say the money they have received is insufficient for the value of the land they have lost and the food that has been destroyed. Some farmers claim they were coerced into signing for the money.

Desire Nsamba Kiggundu, 43, one of the affected farmers, says seven of his 12 acres were taken yet he was given only 250,000 Uganda shillings (\$86.30) in compensation.

“I was told, ‘If you don’t sign for this money, do you have lawyers to argue in court?’” Kiggundu said.

Emmanuel Kyambazi, 41, experienced something similar. He says he was forced to sign for 100,000 shillings (\$34.50) in compensation for his 10 acres of land.

David Balironda, the Kalangala district production officer, said he saw people being compensated.

Asked why he had not objected to the fact that the compensation did not match the value of people’s land and food, he said: “It was their agreement with the landlord. These people were squatters on someone’s land. They agreed on the amount of money.”

He added: “I blame the NGOs; it is them amplifying people to rise up and demand for land even when they were compensated.”



A palm oil plantation in Kalangala. Photograph: Alon Mwesigwa

Opul says it has so far recruited 1,200 local workers, including university graduates. It says the palm oil production will bring benefits for the area. “The project aspires to provide the people of Kalangala district with a great opportunity to immensely improve their quality of life. We have, for example, started construction and maintenance of roads, set up a clinic and housing for our employees.”

Frank Muramuzi, director of the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (Nape)/Friends of the Earth Uganda, said: “Wilmar and the other palm oil companies are aware of the fact that communities have been displaced but have to date not been able to resolve the problems.

“This project was sold to the residents of Kalangala with promises of employment and a brighter future. But they were not fairly compensated for the loss of their livelihoods, and now without access to land face a daily struggle to get by.”

Friends of the Earth Uganda argue that the project has had a devastating effect on the environment. “A large proportion of the palm oil plantations are in areas previously covered by natural forest. An estimated 3,600 hectares of forest have been destroyed to make way for the palm oil plantations, including 100 hectares of the protected Gala forest reserve in Bugala, Kalangala,” it said in a 2012 report (pdf).

Samuel Lowe, a land campaigner at Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland, said: “This case clearly shows that we cannot expect companies and financiers to regulate themselves. We need binding regulations in Europe so financiers can no longer provide their services to companies engaged in land grabbing.

Land disputes in Uganda are not unusual and, as the government dishes out land to foreign investors, it is the local farmers who are usually the victims.

In 2011, a report by Oxfam said at least 20,000 farmers had been evicted from a government-owned forest in Mubende and Kiboga districts in central Uganda to make way for a British forestry company, New Forests Company (NFC).

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