

"Business as usual" at Socfin and Bolloré...



On 26 and 27 May 2020, the Socfin and Bolloré groups hold their annual general meetings. Socfin, which is 39,7% owned by Bolloré, controls 400,000 ha of oil palm and rubber tree concessions in ten African and Asian countries with the participation of Bolloré. While in Luxembourg and Paris, shareholders are meeting behind closed doors to share dividends, thousands of people in Africa and Asia working in these plantations are directly exposed to crisis provoked by the Covid-19 epidemic. Local communities denounce dismissals, unpaid leave and lack of adequate measures to face the virus. These impacts created by the crisis are adding to the effects of the loss of land on local communities' agriculture and food security. The resolution of these conflicts and the protection of workers' and human rights seem to come second to the search for profit for the shareholders and managers of these two groups.

Insufficient measures against the pandemic...

Last year, according to Profundo, an independent Dutch research group, 30 million Euros were distributed to Socfin's main shareholders and directors, out of a net profit of 47 million.^[1] This year does not seem very different: 20 million will be distributed from a net profit of 30 million Euros, despite the continuing tensions around the plantations and the health and economic crisis provoked by the Covid-19^[2].

According to an open letter sent to the leaders of the two groups at the end of April, in several countries, Socfin workers may be sent home and forced to take unpaid leave, running the risk of losing their benefits. In Liberia, Socfin is reportedly laying off some employees without notice - and without guarantee to re-employ them later full-time. According to the same letter, in several plantations in Cameroon, Ghana and Sierra Leone, workers in the palm oil and rubber agro-industries controlled by Socfin don't consider themselves properly protected and complain about unsatisfactory health measures. They are forced to travel long distances packed closely together in trucks, have no water sources to wash their hands and no hand sanitiser either.^[3]

In this context of a global pandemic, the company might therefore not be implementing sufficient

measures to protect and assure a minimum income to its workers and the families who depend on them.

The management of the Covid crisis by the Socfin and the Bolloré groups comes on top of persistent tensions around the plantations regarding land rights, environmental impacts, sexual and other forms of violence against women and lawsuits.

Ongoing abuses being denounced: land conflicts, sexual violence, repression and lawsuits

NGOs and local communities are going to courts and complaint mechanisms to denounce the abuses they've observed and experienced :

- a year ago, on 27 May 2019, ten NGOs and unions brought a lawsuit against the Bolloré group in the French courts^[4] to force implementation of an action plan the company had agreed to under a mediation process handled by the OECD.^[5]

- on the same day, a complaint was filed against Socfin at the World Bank, concerning a series of problems caused by the Salala Rubber Corporation in Liberia: the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank is involved through a loan of US\$10 million.^[6]

- in October 2019, a hearing was organised in a court in Nanterre with 9 indigenous Bunong representatives from Mondol Kiri, Cambodia to claim the rights of the 80 plaintiffs against the Bolloré group: they demand the restitution of their land, occupied by Socfin-KCD^[7]. Farmers from Cameroon have joined their case.^[8]

- in October 2019 as well, a complaint was filed by civil society with the Dutch National Contact Point for the OECD against the ING bank for its lack of effective action against abuses on plantations of its client Socfin in Cameroon and Sierra Leone^[9].

Women are also increasingly speaking out about the injustices they suffer around the plantations. In Cameroon, women issued a statement on 8 March 2020 that denounces the working conditions they face, sexual abuse, unpaid debts, destruction of their environment and the theft of their crops, including on plantations companies owned by Socfin (Socapalm, Sosucam).^[10]

Land conflicts continue to create tensions. In Nigeria, the communities around the Okomu plantation are trying to reassert their sovereignty over their lands, which they say were acquired by Socfin without their consent.^[11] In Sierra Leone in January 2019, mobilizations of communities asking the Socfin group to respect their rights in Pujehun district led to intense repression by the military forces, resulting in the death of two villagers, the arrest of 15 people and the displacement of 2,500 people, mainly women and children.^[12]

Finally, the Bolloré and Socfin groups have filed many lawsuits alleging defamation, considered "gag lawsuits" by targeted NGOs and journalists. Since 2009, more than twenty libel lawsuits have been launched by Bolloré or Socfin in France and other countries against articles,

documentaries, reports by non-governmental organisations and even a book.^[13] At the end of 2019, Socfin brought an action for defamation and invasion of privacy against NGOs representatives and the NGOs themselves, in Belgium and Luxembourg^[14], and a defamation suit against Green Scenery in Sierra Leone is still ongoing^[15].

It is urgent that these conflicts are resolved and that the lawsuits stop. Foreign companies like Socfin extract immense profits from the lands and labour of communities in Africa and Asia. The time for "business as usual" is over, and the enrichment of directors and shareholders can no longer come before human and environmental rights.

AEFJN, Europe

AFASPA, France

Amis de la Terre France

Alliance for Rural Democracy, Liberia

CADTM France

COLAT, Cameroun

Collectif pour la défense des terres malgaches – TANY (France)

Confédération Paysanne, France

COPACO, République Démocratique du Congo

CNRT, France

CNOP, Congo

Entraide et Fraternité, (Belgique)

ERA - Friends of the Earth Nigeria

FIAN Belgium

FIAN Switzerland

GRAIN, international

Green Advocates USA

Green Advocates International

INSPIRIT Creatives, Germany

JUSTIC'ITIZ, Liberia

JVE, Côte d'Ivoire

MALOA, Sierra Leone

Milieudefensie - Friends of the Earth Netherlands

Muyissi, Environnement Gabon

Natural Resources Women's Platform, International

OGARSEAI, Gabon

OIP, Côte d'Ivoire

Pain pour le Prochain, Suisse

RADD, Cameroun

ReAct, International

REFEB, Côte d'Ivoire

Réseau Foi et Justice Afrique Europe, Antenne de France

RIAO, République Démocratique du Congo

SEFE, Cameroun

SOS Faim, Luxembourg

Survie, France

SYNAPARCAM, Cameroun

The Oakland Institute, USA

Union des Villages Déguerpis, Côte d'Ivoire

We For Her, Côte d'Ivoire

World Rainforest Movement

YETIHO, Côte d'Ivoire

^[1] Profundo, “Unravelling the Socfin Group”, February 2020, <https://profundo.nl/en/projects/unravelling-the-socfin-group>

^[2] Bolloré group will distribute 182 million Euros from its 1.4 billion EUros profit (Sources: [Socfin](#) et [Bolloré](#) annual reports)

^[3] ARD, Green Advocates, JUSTICITIZ, MALOA, NMJD, RADD, Synaparcam et YVE, “We demand justice and safety for workers on Socfin’s rubber/oil palm plantations during the Covid-19 pandemic”, open letter to Socfin, 29 April 2020, <https://farmlandgrab.org/29602>

^[4] Business and Human Rights Research Centre, “Cameroun: Sherpa et d'autres ONG portent plainte contre Bolloré pour l'obliger à respecter ses engagements sociaux”, mai 2019,

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/fr/cameroun-sherpa-et-dautres-ong-portent-plainte-contre-bollor%C3%A9-pour-lobliger-%C3%A0-respecter-ses-engagements-sociaux>

^[5] French OECD National Contact Point, “SOCAPALM — BOLLORE Group and SOCFIN Group in Cameroon: Followup statement from the French National Contact Point on 10 March 2020”, 18 March 2020, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/2020/03/18/socapalm-groupe-bollor%C3%A9-et-groupe-socfin-au-cameroun-communiqu%C3%A9-de-suivi-du-pcn-fran%C3%A7ais>

^[6] Office of the Compliance Ombudsman, “Liberia / Salala Rubber Corporation-01/Margibi and Bong”, last updated 31 March 2020, http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/case_detail.aspx?id=3282

^[7] Patricia Jolly, "Les paysans cambodgiens accusant Bolloré de spoliation invités à produire des preuves", Le Monde, 11 novembre 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2019/11/11/les-paysans-cambodgiens-accusant-bollor%C3%A9-de-spoliation-invites-a-produire-des-preuves_6018784_3244.html

^[8] Fiodor Rilov, "Bolloré facing the landless peasants", Seuil, octobre 2019, <http://farmlandgrab.org/29583>

^[9] See “Friends of the Earth groups and supporters file OECD complaint against ING for financing palm oil abuses”, 5 July 2019, <https://en.milieudefensie.nl/news/friends-of-the-earth-groups-and-supporters-file-oecd-complaint-against-ing-for-financing-palm-oil-abuses> and the case documents at https://complaints.oecdwatch.org/cases/Case_543.

^[10] Landcam, “Position statement by women living in the vicinity of agro-industries in respect of their land rights”, March 2020, <https://www.landcam.org/sites/landcam/files/resources/NOTE%20DE%20POSITION%20EN.pdf>

SYNAPARCAM, "We also have the right to life", 3 April 2019, <https://farmlandgrab.org/28888>

[11] “Reply by the Traditional Council of Okomu Kingdom to the Okomu Oil Palm Company, of subsidiary of SOCFIN”, 17 May 2019, <https://farmlandgrab.org/28996>

[12] See letter from the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to President Julius Bo, 4 March 2019, <https://www.escri-net.org/news/2019/sierra-leone-protect-land-rights-defenders>

[13] See the list: "Faced with gag lawsuits: We will not be silent", 24 January 2018
<https://www.asso-sherpa.org/face-aux-poursuites-baillons-ne-tairons>

[14] “NGOs Brought Before Luxembourg Judge in Socfin Defamation Case”, Chronicle, 5 December 2019, <https://chronicle.lu/category/charity-volunteering/31246-ngos-brought-before-luxembourg-judge-in-socfin-defamation-case>

[15] FIAN Belgium, "The finalisation of the investigation report on the Malen land conflict: a constructive step towards the resolution of the conflict", 31 March 2020, <https://www.fian.be/La-finalisation-du-rapport-d-investigation-sur-le-conflit-foncier-de-Malen-une?lang=fr>.