

Agro-industrial plantations in Central Africa, risks and opportunities

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Abstract Large-scale land-based investments in Central Africa are not new, and the first decade of the twenty-first century saw renewed interest in agriculture by foreign investors. The new rush for farm land has involved new multi-national holdings in the region and sometimes in the sector. This paper analyses the recent wave of investments in farm land, and discusses their specificity, the ways the host countries deal with investors, and the impacts of these large-scale projects on livelihoods and on forest cover. It focuses on the four countries that host most of the natural forests in the Congo Basin: Cameroon, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo. The analysis was based on a historical review of the scientific literature and of media reports. Results are based on the assessment of large-scale land acquisitions for agricultural expansion and on field surveys conducted in 2012 and 2013, during which key stakeholders were interviewed in the four countries.

Keywords Agro-industries · Deforestation · Land grabbing · Cameroon · Gabon · Republic of Congo · Democratic Republic of Congo

Introduction

Central African rainforests are the second largest rainforests in the world after those in Amazonia (Mayaux et al. 1998), and harbour rich biodiversity. Until recently, they remained largely intact due to low demographic pressure, limited accessibility, poor

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infrastructure, low impact logging, and rural exodus (Burgess et al. 2006; Megevand 2013). However, deforestation has increased in recent years, with a deforestation rate of 0.13 % between 1990 and 2000, which doubled between 2000 and 2005 to reach to 0.26 % (Ernst et al. 2012).

The rush for farmland (including for agro-industrial oil palm and rubber plantations) and non-renewable natural resources of metals or fossil fuels (oil, iron ore and coal) has driven a flow of foreign investments to the region, where concessions have been negotiated by the national governments at increasing speed in recent years (Deininger et al. 2011; Ochieng 2011; Hoyle and Levang 2012; Karsenty and Ongolo 2012). As a consequence, huge areas of forests are threatened, along with local people's access to land (Cotula et al. 2009; de Wasseige et al. 2012). Both developed and emerging countries are increasingly looking abroad for resources to fulfil the needs of their populations. Multi-national and trans-national enterprises are turning to Central Africa to look for land to establish agro-industrial plantations for food, animal feed or biofuel, and for mineral resources in forested areas. There has been a huge increase not only in the number of prospecting and development projects, but also in land deals based on speculation over the increasing price of land (Deininger et al. 2011; Anseeuw et al. 2012).

Large scale land based investments in Central Africa include individual ownership of 1,000 ha of land to agro-industrial plantations covering several hundred thousand hectares. Domestic and international companies invest in agricultural land to produce food crops including sugar cane and palm oil for the domestic market, or cash crops like rubber for export. Some companies also invest in timber plantations for carbon sink purposes, targeting the international free carbon market.

In Central Africa, agro-industrial plantations and mining are key sectors in the countries' long-term strategies for economic growth and employment while forestry and environmental issues are of decreasing importance on contemporary development policy agendas (Megevand 2013). The potential economic benefits of agro-industrial projects are huge, and involved promises of developing infrastructure, direct compensation for surrounding communities, tax revenues and employment that tempt not only decision makers, but also local populations (Ochieng 2011), as has been the case in South East Asia (Feintrenie et al. 2010; Feintrenie and Levang 2011).

In addition to these production sectors, large areas of forests are being set aside for conservation purposes, thereby reducing the amount of land available to local producers. The increasing demand for natural resources is also leading to competition for land among very different actors ranging from indigenous farmers to multi-nationals. As a consequence, conflicts over land are on the increase, especially where plantations or extractive mining activities overlap customary lands, logging concessions in permanent forests, or protected areas (Cotula et al. 2009; Ncube 2012).

The paper examines the emerging pressures on land from agro-industries in four members of the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) which host more than 95 % (de Wasseige et al. 2012) of forests in the Congo basin: Cameroon, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Congo (RC).

Method

This analysis is based on a historical review of the literature (scientific, public documents, reports) and of media reports, including a review of the online database Land Matrix (ILC

2012), and on field surveys conducted by the author in 2012 and 2013 in Cameroon, Gabon, RC and DRC.

The author (or a consultant) met managers of 100 % of functioning agro-industrial plantations in Gabon, 90 % in Cameroon, 75 % in DRC, and 62 % in RC. The plantations whose managers were not interviewed were all confirmed by a public officer from the ministry in charge. Projects for plantations still under negotiation and negotiations in which agreement was not reached were also all confirmed by a public officer from the ministry in charge.

Representatives of all the ministries involved in large-scale land deals in each country (four to five ministries per country) including Ministries of Agriculture, Forests, Land and Conservation were interviewed. Five to ten non-governmental experts were interviewed in each country (NGOs, land and tenure experts, academics). Two to three plantations were visited by the author in each country, and, where plantations were visited, villagers living near the plantation were also consulted in informal discussions.

A clear distinction is made in the results presented below between (i) contracts signed and launched, whose ongoing activities in the field were ground checked, and (ii) contracts under negotiation at the time of the survey which were confirmed by a ministry representative. Negotiations between the public authorities and the company wishing to invest sometimes failed and when this situation was documented, it is included in the results section of the paper. Land deals that were announced in the media or mentioned in the literature but not confirmed in the field or by public authorities are not taken into account in the paper.

Large-scale land acquisitions in Central Africa, a long story

History of large-scale land-based productions

Large-scale land investments are not new to Central Africa. There have been several periods of large-scale investments, beginning with the development of large-scale agro-industrial plantations or crops (including rubber, sugar cane, and cotton) in the colonial era, followed by nationalization in the post-colonial period after independence, and privatization in the 1980 and 1990s.

During the colonial period, north–south commercial flows, mainly comprised raw material extracted or produced in the southern colonies to be processed in northern countries, and added value manufactured products produced in northern countries and exported to southern countries. The exploitation and export of natural resources from the South was a major practice of colonial powers, and strongly shaped the global economy. Most commercial flows involving least developed countries still follow this south–north direction (Giljum and Eisenmenger 2004). Newly independent countries continued to feed this market, and tried to make use of the industrial plantations left behind by former authorities.

The development of export markets from poorer southern countries to richer northern countries was expected to end in an equitable global market based on the Ricardian theory of regional comparative advantages (Ricardo 1821). Public interventions and management were identified as the main causes of the poor economic development of southern countries. In the 1990s, neo-liberals promoted disengagement of States and opening of market barriers under International Monetary Fund (IMF) re-adjustment plans, promising rapid development. But political instability, conflicts, lack of a clean and stable business climate,

and the high cost of infrastructure development, have long limited investments. Major disparities in the conditions of agricultural production and access to subsidies between farmers in North America and Europe and those in Africa also created unfair competition on the food market, and have not helped develop the agricultural sector in Africa. But, since 2000, things have changed; new flows of investments in Africa do not involve northern countries but rather southern emerging countries. Investors from Malaysia, India, China, Brazil and South Africa are now exploring Central Africa and investing in land and industrial projects in the region.

Figure 1 shows the history of agro-industrial concessions since 1910. For the period before 1980, the estimate is not complete, since plantations or large fields that have been abandoned are not included, only attributed concessions are considered here. Hopkins (2002) distinguished four waves of globalization. In African colonies these led to four waves of attribution of land for agro-industrial production: (1) between 1900 and 1910 when agricultural companies were established in the colonies; (2) between the two World Wars, when recovering exports encouraged new investors to invest in available lands or to purchase agricultural companies in financial difficulties or which had been abandoned; (3) in the 1960 and 1970s, when the newly independent states invested in public plantations; (4) since 2004, when renewed worldwide interest in farmland and agricultural production in the region takes the form of attributions of abandoned public plantations and new concessions to agro-industries.

The history of the Republic of Congo is representative of the four waves of large-scale land investments in agriculture. (1) From 1891 to 1960, it was a French colony. Some sugar cane, oil palm, and rubber plantations were established by private companies. The concessionary regime was instituted in the forestry sector, and industrial forestry plantations were tested on savannahs around Pointe-Noire. (2) The country became independent on August fifteenth 1960. In the 1970s, oil palm plantations were nationalized; all agricultural production was controlled by public marketing offices in charge of providing technical support to family farmers, and of collecting and selling the products, with a minimum price fixed by the Ministry. The State tried to develop cash crops such as oil palm, coffee and cocoa, Eucalyptus plantations were established in the early 1980s. But in the mid 1980s, neglected public plantations were abandoned. (3) In 1990, the public agricultural offices were dismantled and public plantations were made available for privatization. No investors were interested in the old oil palm plantations, whereas successive private investors managed the Eucalyptus plantations in the south of the country. The private sector was not prepared to take over the marketing of agricultural commodities (especially coffee and cocoa), and the whole agricultural sector entered an economic crisis. Since then agriculture has been limited to family staple food production, with little trade, even on the domestic market. (4) After a decade of political unrest and economic crises, with the exception of sugar cane produced by Saris (on land acquired during colonial times), there are nearly no exports from the agricultural sector. The State then launched public development programmes targeting rural areas. Infrastructure is being developed and investors are awaited to galvanize the Agricultural Sector. A National Afforestation and Reforestation Programme (ProNAR) was launched in 2011 with the aim of planting one million ha before 2021. In the framework of this program a French company (Lignafrica, a subsidiary of FRM-Rougier) established a new Eucalyptus plantation.

The same historical evolution is found in the DRC although the areas involved are smaller. (1) During the Belgium colonial period from 1908 to 1960, the strong political desire for development led the colonial authorities to promote agricultural development by settling Belgium farmers in all the provinces (Van Der Straeten 1945). These individual

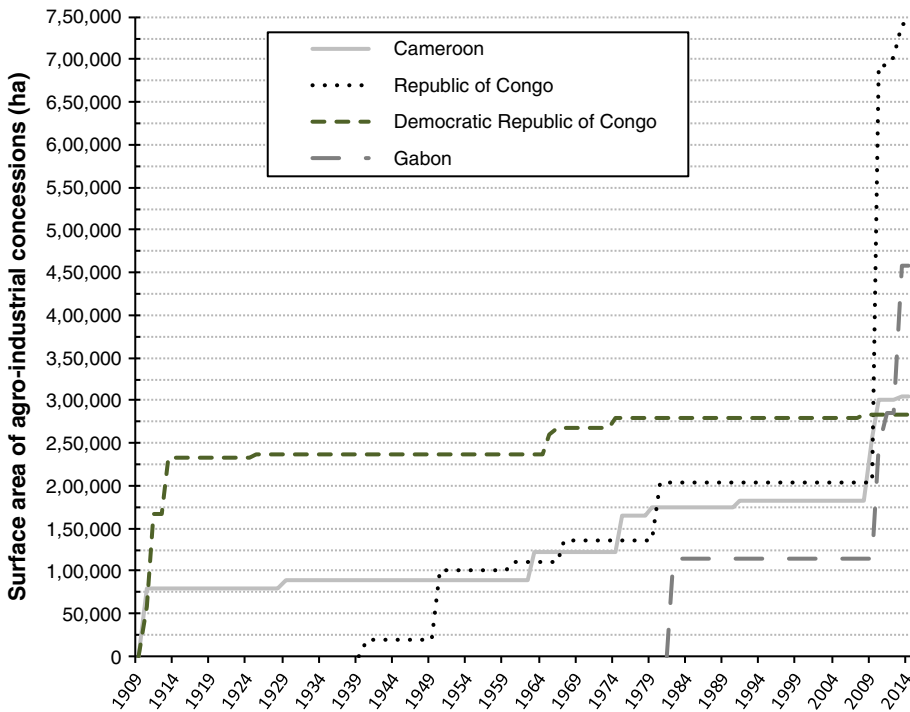


Fig. 1 Changes in the amount of land under agro-industrial concessions in four countries in Central Africa, only including concessions still in production in 2013 (Source: field data collection in 2012 and 2013 and a historical literature review)

colonial farms, covering several hundred hectares, consisted in plantations of coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar cane, rubber, cotton, *sisal* (*Agave sisalana*) and other crops. (2) From 1911 to 1939, agricultural companies were established, either based on existing individual plantations or created on available land (forested or not). One company, Lever Brothers, was created in 1911, together with HCB (*Société des Huileries du Congo Belge*) to produce palm oil from wild oil palm groves and from palm oil plantations. (3) Industrial plantations were mainly established in the 1920 and 1930s, between the two World Wars. The first oil palm plantation was planted in 1924 by Lever Brothers, and the ‘Compagnie Sucrière’ created a 3,200 ha industrial sugar cane plantation in 1925. The first civil war broke out after independence, which was declared on June 30, 1960. After the announcement of the first Democratic Republic of Congo in 1965, President Mobutu Sese Seko (formerly General Joseph Désiré Mobutu) nationalized agricultural companies. After 32 years of economic decline, a policy of ‘Zairisation’ (1971–1997) limited foreign investments. However in the 1980s, a few investments were nevertheless made in the agricultural sector in response to a policy of liberalization (e.g. GBE, Compagnie sucrière du Kwilu). (4) After a further decade of war (1997–2005), the political and social context has stabilized, and since 2,000 investors have been returning to the country; GBE, PHC, Socfin purchased public agricultural companies and invested in replanting.

Cameroon was the subject of the same four waves of investments in agriculture and the fact that the country was stable ensured more continuity in investments. Agricultural

plantations have been bought and sold since public companies were privatized in the 1970s, with an increase in the scale and frequency of land deals since the 1990s.

Gabon is not an agricultural country, but rather relies on forest and oil resources. This characteristic is illustrated by the presence of only three agro-industries managing large-scale plantations in 2013 (Fig. 2), and in Fig. 1 is characterized by the concentration of agro-industrial development in only two waves, one at the end of the 1980s, and the other after 2004.

Throughout the region, some land acquired before 1960, i.e. during the colonial era (Fig. 1) is still exploited today, although most by a different company than the first owner or concession manager. One exception, an affiliate of the SOMDIAA Group, is the only agro-industry with a long history of production in the RC and Cameroon. In 1940, the French Vilgrain family purchased 20,000 ha of land in the territory of Nkayi in the RC, and created the Industrial and Agricultural Company of Niari (*Société Industrielle et Agricole du Niari*). Peanut oil, sugar cane, and flour were produced, plantations were established and mills built, although corn was imported for manufacture into flour. In the 1970s, the agro-industrial complex was nationalized. When the complex was privatized in 1991, only sugar cane production was still running. The industry reverted to the Vilgrain family under the name of SARIS Agricultural and Industrial Sugar Refinery, (*Société Agricole et de Raffinage Industriel du Sucre*), 66 % of whose financial capital belongs to SOMDIAA, an affiliate of the Vilgrain & Castel Group, and 34 % to the Congolese state. SOMDIAA also owns similar sugar cane complexes in Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Ivory Coast. The Cameroonian company, Sosucam has belonged to the Vilgrain & Castel Group since 1963.

Land acquisitions since 2000 are at a larger scale than ever before (Fig. 1): 600,000 ha of which 180,000 ha of plantations was attributed to Atama Company in the RC, and 300,000 ha in Gabon, of which Olam planned to plant 200,000 ha of oil palm and rubber in joint-ventures with the State.

Rush for farmland in the 2000s

Altogether, Central African countries account for about 40 % of uncultivated, unprotected low population density land suitable for cultivation in sub-Saharan Africa and 12 % of such land worldwide. If only non-forested suitable areas are included, the Central African region still accounts for around 20 % of land available for agricultural expansion in sub-Saharan Africa and 9 % of such land worldwide (Deininger et al. 2011). Until recently, poor governance, high political risks and lack of infrastructure have limited investments in large-scale land acquisitions in the region. The lack of infrastructure has also helped preserve forests (Megevand 2013). As they were unable to transport and sell their products in urban centers and had no access to inputs and equipment, farmers focused on satisfying family needs. As a consequence, farming practices have not significantly evolved, and there are huge opportunities for technical progress to improve labor conditions, increase yields and introduce more sustainable practices. Another consequence was that urban markets depended on imported food, which in turn did not favor domestic production (Megevand 2013).

In recent years, several infrastructure development programmes have been launched. National roads now cross the RC from north to south and east to west; Gabon has also improved its main roads. Several huge hydro-power dams have started production and small towns in rural areas now have access to domestic and public electricity. These development programmes have only been possible thanks to the relative political stability

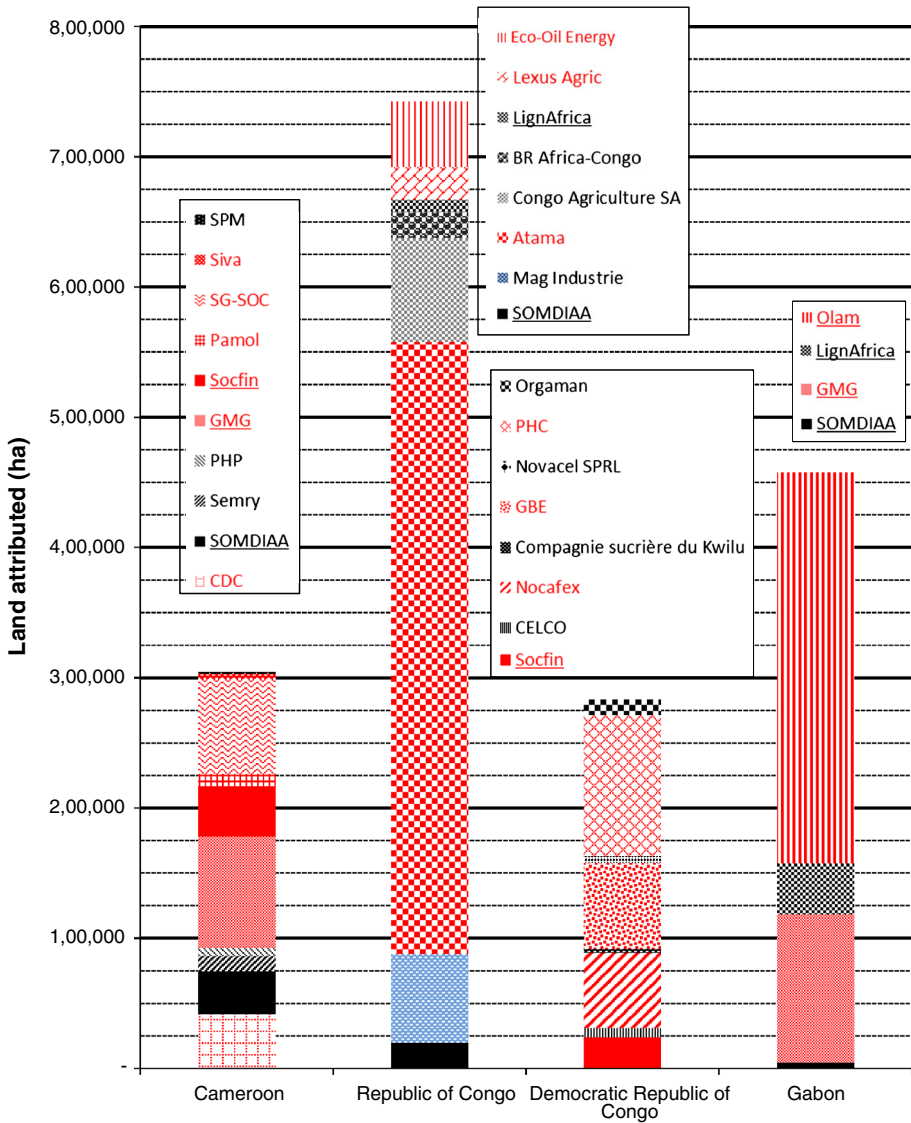


Fig. 2 Agro-industrial concessions in four Central African countries. In the legend, *red* differentiates oil palm and rubber plantations from other crops, investors present at least in two countries of the region are underlined (*Source*: field data collected in 2012 and 2013 and a historical review of the literature)

in the region since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Combined with a lack of non-forested, non-cultivated and non-protected land suitable for agriculture in other regions, these improvements have resulted in new interest by investors in Central Africa.

At the end of 2013, more than 1.5 M ha had been acquired for agricultural production or plantations (Table 1), but more than 1.8 million ha had been the subject of negotiation between States and investors but had not concluded in land attributions. Negotiations for large-scale land acquisitions are usually kept secret. Little official information is published

before an agreement is signed between a government and a company, and the figures concerning cancelled deals in Table 1 are probably under-estimated. In the case of Gabon, an agreement on the amount of land to be allocated to Olam in addition to the concessions already acquired by the company to create oil palm and rubber plantations has been signed; discussions are now underway on the exact location of these extensions.

Four international holdings are active in at least two countries in the region (Fig. 2): Socfin (Socapalm/Safacam in Cameroon and Brabanta in the DRC), SOMDIAA (an affiliate of The Castel & Vilgrain Group in the RC, Gabon, and Cameroon), GMG (in Cameroon and Gabon) and Olam (in Gabon and the RC). SOMDIAA specializes in sugar cane, the other companies in natural rubber and palm oil, and in the case of Olam, also in the sale of other agricultural commodities and the production of timber. Oil palm is the most widespread commodity (Fig. 2), with the largest concessions (Atama in the RC, Olam in Gabon, SG-SOC in Cameroon, PHC in the DRC) totaling more than 800,000 ha and with the biggest plans for expansion (ENI-Congo is negotiating in the RC, GMG is negotiating in Cameroon and Gabon, Olam will expand in Gabon, Socfin and SG-SOC are negotiating in Cameroon), totaling more than 260,000 ha.

The rapid expansion of oil palm plantations is in response to domestic demand (all the countries in the region are net importers of palm oil), increasing worldwide demand for edible oil (for humans and for animal feed), for industrial use and to some extent for biofuel. Oil palm is endemic to the region. Huge areas of uncultivated, unprotected and low population density land are regarded as free for the development of industrial plantations (Deiningering et al. 2011). However, potential yields are lower than in Southeast Asia because of the rainfall regime, which includes a dry season, and the lack of sunlight during the rainy season. In addition, certified companies will not set up plantations on forested land where the most suitable areas for oil palm cultivation are located. For this reason, and because of the difficulties encountered in its plantation in Liberia, Sime Darby decided to cancel its plans for oil palm plantations in Cameroon (600,000 ha of oil palm plantations were at stake). Sime Darby is one of the founding members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), and is deeply involved in the promotion of sustainable palm oil production, and consequently considered it would be impossible for the company to establish a plantation on forested lands, and no large-scale (>300,000 ha) of non-forested land suitable for oil palm was available. Certification may thus slow down and limit the extent of land converted to oil palm plantations in the future in the region.

Impacts of large-scale land investments

National procedures have been developed by governments to limit risks of land grabbing and negative impacts on the environment and on the populations affected by large-scale

Table 1 Surface area of agro-industrial concessions acquired and deals cancelled in Central Africa (Source: field data collected in 2012 and 2013 and media review)

	Acquired (ha)	Cancelled (ha)
Cameroon	304,500	700,000
Republic of Congo	742,200	110,000
Democratic Republic of Congo	283,300	1,000,000
Gabon	219,400	
Total	1,549,400	1,810,000

land acquisitions. These usually involve environmental and social impact assessments (ESIA) conducted either by independent consultants or by public officers (or both), followed by operational plans for impact management (Table 2). But although environmental concerns are mentioned in the legislation, the social impacts of large-scale land deals are not. The signature of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the inclusion of the company's commitments in the specifications signed by all the parties in national legislations are not planned (Table 2). These agreements and documents are among the requirements of certification procedures but are not yet compulsory.

Non-certified companies may choose to respect FPIC procedures even though they are not required to do so by law. This is the case of Atama company, which has been present in the north of the Republic of Congo since 2012, but is not certified. The company respected the legal procedure and 2 years of assessments and discussions went by before the presidential decree was signed (on December seventeenth, 2010) and the company received authorization to make use of a public land reserve for 25 years (renewable). During the 2 years (2008–2010), ESIA were conducted (but were yet to be validated by the Ministry in charge in March 2014), public consultations were organized in Ouesso and Makoua, and book of requirements signed by the company and the Governors of the two regions (Sangha and Cuvette).

Similarly, before acquiring the authorization to lease government lands for oil palm plantations, Olam-Gabon underwent the following Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) procedure: (1) the government accepted, in principle, to lease a concession to Olam; (2) Olam consulted with the communities which would potentially be affected, assessed the effect the plantation projects would have, and then signed a FPIC in each village; (3) where FPICs were refused by the local population, the land was excluded from the concession; (4) ESIA were carried out; (5) High Conservation Value (HCV) zones, where the environmental impacts of the project would be negative, were excluded from the concession. As a result of this process, plantations were reduced from 20,000 to 7,300 ha in Kango, from 38,000 to 15,000 ha in Bitam, and from 51,000 to 7,000 ha in Mouila of the amount of land the government had originally allocated to the company (Feintrenie et al. 2010). The aim of this process is to make sure the social, economic, and cultural rights of the rural population are protected and the environmental impact of the plantations limited to a minimum. Thanks to its close relations with the State, Olam-Gabon should benefit from future land allocations, to reach the 100,000 ha of oil palm plantation originally stipulated in the agreement between the company and the government.

The main difference between the Atama non-certified plantation and a RSPO certified plantation is the impact on forest. Indeed, in Gabon, a member of the RSPO, Olam refused land in HCV forests, inundated forest or Ramsar sites, and Sime Darby, RSPO certified,

Table 2 Compulsory procedures for industrial plantations in Central Africa (*Source*: field data collected in 2012 and 2013 and review of legislation)

	ESIA	Regular assessment of ecological impacts	FPIC	Regular assessment of social impacts
Cameroon	Yes	Yes	No	No
Republic of Congo	Yes	Yes	No	No
Democratic Republic of Congo	Yes	No	No	No
Gabon	Yes	Yes	No	No

cancelled its plans for oil palm plantations in Cameroon because only forested land was available for large-scale plantations. Conversely, Atama is not a RSPO member, and accepted a concession in a forested area, part of the concession being a declassified forest (from the UFE Ngombe), and part being inundated forest, and even argued with the government officers that savannahs were not suitable for oil palm plantations, without further enquiry into the actual production potential. Because Olam-Gabon followed the RSPO recommendation to define the area to be planted, including FPIC, HCV assessment, buffer zones around rivers and inundated areas, 70 % of the land attributed by the State to the group was set aside and will not be planted. Part of it has been excluded from the Olam concessions (especially land on Ramsar sites or where villages refused the project), and part will remain under the management of Olam but not be planted (HCV areas, buffer zones).

On the other hand, when FPIC and ESIA are not conducted transparently, or are not conducted at all, social conflicts can arise due to a feeling the contracts were not fair, or that land grabbing has occurred, or there is complete refusal of the project by the local population. This was the case in South-West Cameroon, where the American company Herakles Farms, with its subsidiary SG-SOC, has an oil palm plantation project. In 2009, the company signed an agreement with the Minister of Economy Planning and Regional Development to create an oil palm plantation. But this agreement was not accompanied by a transparent discussion with the other public institutions involved (for example the Forest and Agriculture Ministries), or with the villages which would be impacted by the project. The lack of transparency raised a lot of complaints from local villagers, as well as from national and international NGOs. At the beginning of 2014, SG-SOC's operational plan has still not been clarified: how much land will be planted with oil palm, and what compensations and benefits the local population will receive.

The correct scheduling of such large projects respecting clearly defined procedures, will limit negative outcomes and increase positive impacts on local livelihoods and benefits for national economies. If FPIC are conducted scrupulously with full information provided to the affected population and true negotiations concerning the company's commitments, they might be a guarantee against land grabbing, encourage good partnerships, and increase the economic benefits for all the stakeholders. Transparent deals and negotiations are keys to success. As FPIC is not compulsory in the four countries concerned here (Table 3), only a few of the new plantations were established after proper agreement had been reached with the local communities and a FPIC signed (Table 3). Even ESIA, which is just one step in the official procedure for a lease of public land, are not systematically conducted.

The Atama oil palm plantation in the northern part of the RC and Olam plantations in Gabon are good illustrations of the need to take into account the consequences of a local increase in the population. Once the whole 180,000 ha are planted, Atama plans to employ more than 27,000 people on the plantation. The company will build and organize one "life camp" for each 36,000 ha of plantation. These life camps are planned to rapidly turn into villages, including an administration building, schools, a health care centre, food and other stores, churches or other religious buildings. Lack of a local labour force makes immigration of workers inevitable, which will create local pools of ethnic diversity in places with a previously low population density (e.g.: around the Atama plantation: less than 2 hab/km² before the project, and a minimum of 18 hab/km² when the plantation is completed). Local customary land owners may not agree to give land to newcomers for the cultivation of food crops, a fact that needs to be discussed during the FPIC process, to make sure the long-term consequences of a plantation project are fully understood by the local population.

Table 3 Procedures followed by industrial plantations established since 2000 in Central Africa (*Source*: field data collected in 2012 and 2013)

	Industrial plantations	New owner since 2000	New plantation since 2000	ESIA conducted after 2000	FPIC signed
Cameroon	18	11	3	1	–
Republic of Congo	12	11	5	4	1
Democratic Republic of Congo	15	9	2	1	–
Gabon	8	8	4	3	2
Total	53	39	14	9	3

Large-scale land based projects create new living areas, with a local increase in the human population which increases pressure on natural resources and creates a high local demand for cassava and bush meat, among other food products, and also for fuel wood and timber for housing. Adjacent forests might suffer from higher pressure from hunting and gathering, and slash and burn for agriculture. Impact management plans thus require serious thought, and need to be implemented and controlled in such a way to avoid a serious loss of natural resources. Table 2 illustrates the lack of regular assessment of environmental and social impacts by large-scale agricultural companies. In response to the increased demand for food caused by the development of industrial activities in rural areas, some actions are possible. The government of the DRC has mandated the development of large farms to mitigate local food shortages resulting from the feed needs associated with large-scale extractive mining industries which attract large numbers of people.

In addition to livelihoods and environmental impacts, large-scale land investments also influence political reforms, and the institutional and legislative changes needed to adapt and better manage such projects. In the Republic of Congo and in Cameroon, national land use plans are being reframed; in the Democratic Republic of Congo land tenure reforms are back on the political agenda; and inter-sectorial institutions are being created to manage discussions between ministries about large-scale land allocation (Cameroon, Republic of Congo), involving ministries of agriculture, forest, environment, extractive mining, development and others. These reforms are necessary, but they need to be well thought out and implemented, which requires time. The pressing demand from investors leads governments to engage in reforms under pressure, and with guidance from the investors rather than from neutral experts. In the absence of clear procedures, or to avoid waiting a year or two before obtaining a plantation permit, investors may be tempted to negotiate directly with Presidents or Prime Ministers. Such actions do not encourage democratic and transparent decision-making. What responsibilities do big economic actors have in promoting transparent and democratic governance? Is social and environmental responsibility the only responsibility of big companies?

Conclusion

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen renewed interest in investments in land in Central African countries. This wave of large-scale land acquisitions is the fourth of its kind in the region, after colonial, post-colonial and readjustment ones. Oil palm accounts for the largest areas, before rubber. This trend represents both a great opportunity for the

host countries to develop their agricultural sectors and diversify their economies, and a threat to natural forests and possibly to access to land by local populations. To transform risks into opportunities, integrated land use plans are required at national and regional scales, which take into account the interest of the different stakeholders, their individual or institutional power resources and consistently aim at sustainability. Several countries in the region are engaged in reforms and are in the process of creating new institutions to better manage large-scale land investments.

Some standards have already been incorporated in the legal procedures to be followed to obtain permits for plantations, including ESIA. The generalization of ESIA is one step towards better sustainability; if implemented correctly, ESIA might be a safety net against negative environmental impacts. However, texts are not enough, and regular assessment of the implementation of impact management plans is needed. In the absence of regular monitoring and control by the states concerned, the social and environmental impacts of industrial-scale plantations will depend on the good will of each plantation manager.

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