

African Land Grabs: Defending Basic Human Rights, Promoting Sustainable Agriculture

Groups around the world accuse European business magnates Vincent Bolloré and Hubert Fabri of using intimidation to silence local opposition to African land grab.

By [Grain](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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GRAIN

SOCFIN Agricultural Company Sierra Leone Ltd. (SAC), a subsidiary of SOCFIN, (Société Financière des Caoutchoucs), a Luxembourg-registered company controlled by the prominent French entrepreneur Vincent Bolloré and Belgian businessman Hubert Fabri, is suing a Sierra Leonean NGO, Green Scenery, for its reporting on the activities of the company.

In May 2011, Green Scenery released a report on SAC's oil palm project in Sierra Leone, which highlighted inadequate compensation, corruption, and pressure on land owners and chiefs to sign agreements to give up their land. [1]

Earlier in 2011, SAC signed a 50-year lease with the Sierra Leonean government for 6,500 hectares (ha) on land used by more than 9,000 farmers in 24 villages in Pujehun District. The deal gave SAC an option to expand the leased area by an additional 5,000 ha.

The company responded by filing suit for defamation (known as a SLAPP suit) against the NGO and its Executive Director, Joseph Rahall, asking a Sierra Leonean court to order them to apologize, pay damages, and to stop publishing information that the company may consider defamatory. Yet, Green Scenery's report is consistent with the formal grievances filed by local communities opposed to the forceful takeover of their land and the destruction of their crops and forests by SOCFIN. [2] In December 2012, 101 members of landholding families from 36 villages called on the national Human Rights Commission, civil society organizations, and the United Nations to support their struggle against the company. [3]

The allegations have also been corroborated by independent assessments on the ground conducted by several international organizations, including the Oakland Institute in February 2012 [4] and Welthungerhilfe in May 2012. [5]

"Bolloré and Fabri are using a defamation suit to silence local opposition and to intimidate an NGO whose only crime is to defend the basic rights of local farmers whose land is being taken away," says Frédéric Mousseau of the Oakland Institute.

"Similar practices by SOCFIN subsidiaries have been reported in recent years in Liberia, Cameroon, and Cambodia, [6] where Bolloré or SOCFIN have used the threat of legal action against NGOs and the media to silence criticism," says Devlin Kuyek of GRAIN.

As organizations committed to defending basic human rights and promoting sustainable agriculture, we are as much concerned about the threat that SOCFIN's project poses to Sierra Leone's farmers as we are about the threat that intimidation maneuvers pose to the work of independent civil society organizations and, through them, democracy. This is why we are standing by Green Scenery.

Signed:

- [Oakland Institute](#) (USA)
- [GRAIN](#) (International)
- [Foi & Justice](#) (Cameroon)
- [SHERPA](#) (France)
- [Peuples Solidaires](#) (France)
- [11.11.11](#) (Belgium)
- [Centre national de coopération au développement-11.11.11](#) (Belgium)
- [Action Solidarité Tiers Monde](#) (Luxembourg)
- [SWISSAID](#) (Switzerland)
- [Pain pour le prochain](#) (Switzerland)
- [L'Autre Syndicat](#) (Switzerland)
- [Plateforme pour une agriculture socialement durable](#) (Switzerland)

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Notes

[1] See "[The Socfin Land Deal Missing Out on Best Practices](#)"

[2] See Malen Land Owners Association (MALOA), "[Grievances of Land Owners in Malen Chiefdom](#)," letter to the district officer, Malen Chiefdom, Pujehun District, Sierra Leone, October 2, 2011.

[3] See [Statement by the Malen Land Owners Association](#)

[4] See "[The Socfin Land Deal Missing Out on Best Practices](#)" and "[Grievances of Land Owners in Malen Chiefdom](#)"

[5] [Global Hunger Index: Country case study - Sierra Leone](#)

[6] See "[Rights groups say rubber producer must halt work over disputed land](#)," Deutsche Presse-Agentur, October 6, 2011, accessed March 17, 2012; and OECD Watch, "[Environmental and labour violations at SOCAPALM in Cameroon](#)", accessed March 17, 2012.

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