Empowering local communities in their struggle for land and rights

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This chapter recounts the organising strategy developed by the French-based civil society initiative ReAct through the unfolding of a campaign led against the abuses by Socfin and Bolloré in and around their rubber and oil palm plantations. Land occupied, a lack of living space, rivers polluted, forests destroyed, a sacred place and indigenous cemeteries wiped out: the oil palm and rubber agro-industrial activities of Socfin Group have affected local communities for many decades. Yet, most of these issues are still unresolved or have not given rise to fair compensation. For almost ten years, the association ReAct has supported the local communities’ struggle against human rights violations and environmental destruction, in order to tackle corporate impunity step by step. ReAct’s strategy has involved:

• strengthening grassroots power;
• connecting people and building a transnational alliance; and
• identifying leverage points and running campaigns at a global level.

Local communities organised at a local and global level have worked together to achieve important victories in this David versus Goliath fight, even if the challenges in the years ahead remain significant.

Palm oil and rubber: value unfairly distributed along the product chains

Oil palm and rubber monocultures can have significant negative impacts on local communities and the environment. These adverse effects are sometimes very poorly compensated despite the fact that the company generates significant profits. The Socfin Group was created in 1909. Specialising in the development and management of agro-industrial plantations, it operates in ten African and Asian countries where it has 15 industrial-scale palm and rubber tree plantations. The Group’s different subsidiaries run various activities ranging from plantation management to marketing and scientific research. Its holdings and operating companies in Europe are based in Belgium, Switzerland, France and Luxembourg. The Group’s main shareholder is the Belgian businessman Hubert Fabri with a 54 per cent stake followed by the Bolloré Group with 39.4 per cent. Socfin’s profits (EBITDA) for 2019 amounted to €152 million. Between 2009 and 2018, the Group’s planted area increased from 129,658 to 194,000 hectares (+49.6 per cent). This sharp ten-year growth in areas occupied by monocultures has heightened tensions with local communities over land issues, and conflicts were exacerbated by a lack of transparency regarding plantation boundaries, inefficient retrocessions of land, and expansion into wetlands.

The Socfin Group holds 387,939 hectares of concessions for its plantations. This affects 42 villages in Cameroon, 13 villages in Côte d’Ivoire, seven villages (850 families) in Cambodia, 52
villages in Sierra Leone and 81 villages in Liberia: a total of nearly 200 villages with thousands of people impacted in these five countries alone. The people who formerly occupied this land earned their livelihood mainly from growing food crops and using natural resources from forests and rivers. As a result, they have been deprived of most of their means of survival. In some cases, the villagers agreed to give up their land to the plantations in exchange for promises of jobs and development made some ten years ago by Socfin Group. However, in the long run, the infrastructure and jobs that actually materialised have failed to make up for the loss of their land. The local community representatives denounced these unkept promises, especially the obligations contracted under the sales agreement with Socfin, namely the continuity of the public service mission (education, healthcare, housing), road maintenance, and so on. Moreover, according to Socfin’s own figures, 19,368 of its plantation workers are precarious workers. As Guillaume Nyobe, a resident of Koungue Somse in Cameroon underlines, ‘the only jobs offered to local residents are those of casual worker, labourer and tractor driver’.

The establishment of these plantations and their subsequent expansion have caused substantial deforestation, thus depleting a resource that is crucial for the local and indigenous communities, such as the Pygmies in Cameroon or the Bunong in Cambodia. In Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Cambodia, hundreds of people had their access to drinking water impaired due to the activities of Socfin plantations. In Cameroon, for example, at the Mbongo, Eseka and Kienké plantations, the lagoons used by the palm oil mills to treat their wastewater were clearly dysfunctional as the wastewater flowed directly into nearby rivers used by residents. This was also the case for wastewater from the SoGB rubber factory in Côte d’Ivoire, which emptied into a nearby backwater. In the vicinity of the Safacam plantation in Cameroon, in the Dizangue district, community members reported having witnessed the disappearance of three water
sources. In Cambodia, Bunong farmers were concerned about growing health problems (stomach ache, in particular) which they believed were water-related. In their view, the chemicals such as herbicides and fertilisers used on the plantations went directly into their water sources. The same is true in Liberia, where many inhabitants from villages near the plantations and who used the chemically polluted water complained of stomach ache and diarrhoea.

In Sierra Leone’s Malen Chiefdom, the impact of the use of chemicals, fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides was also criticised by local communities. In 2013, chemical pollution of the Malen River was confirmed by the national Environment Protection Agency in response to a complaint made by the communities following reports of large numbers of dead fish. In addition to deforestation and water pollution, neighbouring local communities were concerned about air pollution from particles (SO₂, Nox, CO) emitted by rubber processing plants and palm oil mills. They had no access to comprehensive data guaranteeing them that these activities pose no health risk for those who breathe the air in the vicinity of the plants. For the most part, environmental impact studies are scarce and difficult to access. In conflict situations, or in contexts permitting the abuse of power, women are particularly vulnerable. Women from villages near the plantations in Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Liberia have testified to numerous cases of assault and violence, whether they work on the plantation or not. Many women who have to cross the plantation to reach their own fields or produce their own artisanal palm oil are threatened and some have been physically harmed. “If you’re unlucky, you only get your salary if you let the supervisor do his thing,” explains a woman who works as a daily worker on the SRC plantation in Liberia.

In the face of powerlessness and isolation, collective organisation

Given the deprivation of resources, the lack of job opportunities, environmental damages and insecurity, the communities
became increasingly aware that they were victims of injustice. To cope with the anger triggered by this feeling of injustice and to change the status quo, the locals resorted to different kinds of actions throughout the conflict. Yet, these often lead to two different kinds of impasse.

**The impasse created by illusions**

One strategy is to call on the benevolence and goodwill of the other party in the conflict. It involves appealing to the other party’s willingness to sacrifice some of their interests for the wellbeing of those impacted by their activities. However, the adversary’s economic rationale and administrative constraints often make it unresponsive to the language of charity and morals. This method is frequently advocated by some traditional headmen. It generates a long list of letters and meetings with plantation management or with government representatives, but these never achieve any tangible outcome except vague promises and a token monetary remuneration for the meeting attendees. In the district of Kienké, Cameroon, the traditional headman showed the 18 letters he had written to the plantation’s general manager and the prefect of the region requesting meetings. He also showed the letters written by the Mabi Headmen’s association, comprising seven headmen of villages near the plantation. Most of these letters remained unanswered and nothing significant has ever come of the few meetings that took place as a result. Moreover, such meetings were looked on with distaste by locals, who saw them as a sign that the headmen had been bought off by Socfin’s subsidiary, Socapalm. When the balance of power is so unequal, appealing to the decision makers is tantamount to begging, which is unlikely to result in a conflict resolution that is satisfactory for both parties.
The impasse created by blind anger

Driven by the failure of the first strategy, the exasperation and fatigue of the dominated most often find expression in sporadic eruptions of violence, for instance in the form of riots. This path often results in an impasse due not only to the strategic weakness of the blows received, but most of all to a lack of awareness of negotiating logic. The absence of a reliable representative or spokesperson, the sporadic nature of protests and the effectiveness of repressive measures are some of the many factors that lead the adversary to not prioritise the avenue of negotiation. On almost every plantation, we observed regular cases of the population rising up against the company: in November 2010 in Kienké, Cameroon, Socapalm employees who had come to take measurements for the plantation’s extension were attacked by residents with machetes; a bulldozer and its driver were shot by arrows in Bikondo on the same plantation; a bulldozer was burnt in Bu Sra, Cambodia in 2008; in Cameroon, the residents attacked Socfin company offices, vandalising and burning company houses, after residents had been abused by the security firm, Africa Security; in Liberia in 2007, Socfin employees were attacked with machetes during the burning of villages for the expansion of the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC).

In most cases, the intervention of law enforcement officials eventually brought the situation under control. Sometimes, these incidents were followed by a visit from the local authorities (with or without the plantation director) to listen to the local communities’ grievances and, sometimes, the company promised to maintain ‘neighbourly relations’. Yet, most often, these initiatives for dialogue in the wake of local uprisings quickly petered out once stability had been restored. To help find a way out of these impasses, in some countries ReAct supported the local communities affected
by Socfin’s activities by introducing methods to help the communities self-organise so that they could climb the four steps to empowerment:

- Organise collectively
- Express concrete demands
- Take non-violent action
- Negotiate

The four-step staircase tool (Figure 8.1) was developed over the process of the Bolloré/Socfin campaign to offer a third path as a method of conflict resolution in an asymmetrical socioeconomic conflict. Building on the activists’ ongoing experience and diverse analytical sources which inspired our work, it aims to compensate for the limits of the impasse situations. The impasses hold two key messages: ‘No negotiation without power’, and ‘No action without the prospect of negotiation’. The tool describes a process enabling a reconciliation of the parties’ interests in order to ease conflict. Developed in a specific context, the tool can be used in all conflict situations in which a dominant, homogeneous actor opposes a disorganised group of people whose interests are being trampled. The staircase concept relies on two main theoretical foundations: the theory of negotiation and the sociology of collective action. Under what circumstances could negotiation lead to a fair compromise in a situation of asymmetrical power?

**The feeling of injustice as a cement for the foundations of the process**

The first element of conflict, in its most basic form, that this process seeks to transform is individual anger. This is sometimes described as a feeling of frustration or deprivation born from the perceived gap between the good which people feel entitled to – value expectations – and the good which they think they can obtain – value capabilities (Gurr, 1970). This anger can sometimes be expressed as a feeling of injustice whereby one
considers oneself a victim (Gamson et al, 1982). The term ‘anger’ is used to translate these sociological concepts into simple language. It involves recognising that anger is a positive emotion and that we are right to be angry in unjust situations. In the case studied, the feeling of injustice and the anger of local communities affected by Socfin’s activities came from:

- **non-compliance with standards and commitments**: sometimes contractual/written promises had raised expectations regarding compensation, jobs, or social infrastructure for instance, but had not been fulfilled;
- **the communities’ realisation that treatment was unequal**: for example, the situation in some areas of Cameroon worsened when the plantations were privatised or cultivated areas were expanded. This made people aware of the gap between ‘before’ and ‘now’. They were also able to compare the situation in other plantations either run by other companies or located in other countries, which highlighted a gap between ‘elsewhere’ and ‘here’.

**Figure 8.1: The four-step staircase**

Source: ReAct and Alliance Citoyenne
Given this ‘shared anger’, the first step in the staircase is to work on collective organisation.

**The path to collective organisation**

This first step draws on classical theories of collective action, particularly those of Anthony Oberschall (1973), who sets out the necessary conditions for progressing to action. The minimum conditions for collective organisation are shared objectives and the identification of those responsible for the injustices perpetrated. However, these basic conditions will only lead to weak forms of protest. To establish robust collective action that can be repeated, Oberschall identifies two structural factors: an organisational base and a continuity of the established movement. For each of these two factors, Oberschall highlights the need to use existing resources, such as villages, families and communities. Traditional community solidarity is an important resource for structuring strong collective organisations that produce recognised leaders and goals. For Oberschall, weak organisational capacity is the main cause of short-lived, violent and ill-thought-out revolts, such as the peasant revolts described by historian George Rudé, which occurred in France before the 1789 Revolution, or even the contemporary urban riots in the American ghettos and French suburbs.

In early 2010, thanks to different online platforms and websites actively monitoring corporate-generated social conflicts and abuses by multinational companies, the founding members of ReAct identified conflicts between Socfin and the communities living on Socfin plantations in Cameroon through several research projects and testimonies. For example, Bolloré Group, one of the Group’s shareholders, was suing Radio France Inter reporter Benoit Collombat for defamation on account of his report ‘Cameroon, the Black Empire of Vincent Bolloré’. During the trial, David N., a resident in one of the affected villages in the Kienké region, who had been living in France for several years,
came to testify on behalf of the journalist. Brandishing a storm lamp, he tried to describe the difficult conditions in which the local communities were still living, without electricity, while at the same time the company’s power supply line was just nearby. This event led to initial contacts between ReAct members and the people directly concerned, first, in several villages bordering the Socapalm Kienké plantation in the south of the country, then around the Dimbombari plantation, west of Douala. From village to village, the same anger was expressed, the same issues described and listed.

ReAct then engaged with the local communities in their struggle to defend their rights. ReAct’s goal was to help the people impacted by this multinational find a way out of the impasses, starting with first step of the four-step staircase tool. The association supported the collective organisation of these villages, first, by helping to link up people from affected villages located around a given plantation. For example, the Kienké plantation in Cameroon is surrounded by 11 villages, the SoGB plantation in Côte d’Ivoire by 13 villages that claim to have been displaced, and the LAC in Liberia by more than 20 villages. Next, linkages were established between different plantations within the same country – Sofcin owns seven oil palm and rubber plantations in Cameroon, two in Liberia – and, finally, between plantations in different countries – Socfin is present in ten countries in Africa and Asia.

An initial information-sharing effort helped to better identify the shared feelings of anger and injustice uniting the villages. The first meetings were organised between village leaders of the Dimbopari and Kienké plantations in Cameroon, where the people present were able to tell their stories and identify shared interests. Later on, the residents of villages in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia shared photos and videos, as well as documents such as letters sent, local agreements, or newspaper articles. Information on the Socfin and Bolloré Groups in the form of activity reports, key figures or press releases was transmitted locally and analysed.
Gradually, the different elements of collective organisation were set up and strengthened in the different countries – first in Cameroon, then in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Cambodia and Sierra Leone. Local communities around some of the plantations were already trying to organise themselves into associations, despite local repressive actions. This was the case in Sierra Leone with the Malen Affected Land Owners and Land Users Association (MALOA). ReAct was thus able to support the collective dynamic by deploying methodological tools. Elsewhere, organisations were built from scratch by bringing together the first leaders and forming a collective, as in Cameroon with the Dynari association – later to become Synaparcam. In some regions, those directly concerned were trying to organise collectively but faced challenges from non-democratic and non-representative organisations that were sometimes backed by the company to ensure that any opposition was not too disruptive. In these circumstances, setting up new democratic membership organisations often proved more difficult than in cases where there was no pre-existing organisation. The company’s local managers, at times supported by the local authorities, were applying the ‘divide and rule’ strategy by delegitimising the actors involved, slowing down administrative procedures, or repressing and arresting key community leaders.

During the second step – after the first step of networking and organising collectively – the local communities worked on formulating their demands, mainly during their local assemblies. Village by village, they identified the problems caused by the Socfin plantation’s operations – problems that had persisted or were even worsening. To produce concrete demands, they mainly drew on the oral or written promises that had been made by the company in the past. For example, in Liberia, senior management at the LAC plantation had signed an agreement in 2007 with the local community delegates and government representatives, listing the company’s responsibilities regarding housing, water and sanitation, new
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educational and health facilities and so on. In Cameroon, a sales agreement framing the privatisation of the Socapalm plantation in 2000 defined the purchaser’s obligations notably with respect to the continuation of the public service mission in the fields of health, education or housing. On the basis of clearly listed problems linked to the activities of the Socfin plantations, they drew up their demands together with proposed solutions. Thereafter, the communities arranged the demands in order of priority so as to build a campaign strategy. As will be seen later, thanks to the collective organisation, the demands were structured on a local scale, first for the villages, then shared more widely to scale up from the local to global level.

Developing a repertoire of actions

The third step in the staircase model is inspired by the sociology of social movements and derived from the ‘social-movement repertoire’ developed by Charles Tilly. In fact, this step requires that the actors use the organisational foundations put in place to develop a repertoire of possible actions. It involves drawing on knowledge of the field, mobilising symbols that resonate with people’s lives and incentivise their mobilisation, and possibly promoting visibility to the outside world via the media. Although this notion of a social-movement repertoire is different from that used by Tilly, who attempted to trace it over the long-term history of European social movements, or from the work of Gene Sharp, who researched and catalogued 198 methods of non-violent action (Sharp, 1973), it allowed us to put together a toolbox of actions that could be used as leverage during negotiations. The diversity and variable impacts of actions from the repertoire will strengthen the position of the people involved in negotiations by multiplying the possible BATNAs (Best Alternative To Negotiated Agreement) at each stage. It is important to identify the actions that can be mobilised in conjunction with a negotiation process.
Those affected need to develop their capacity to act in order to limit the concentrations of power that can lead to violations of human and environmental rights. Non-violent direct action is thus at the centre of the approach. Non-violent direct action is action by people, for themselves, against those whose interests oppose their emancipation. It places the individual in a position of being active. ‘It is a remedy against the feeling of powerlessness. It teaches self-confidence. To act oneself!’ (Pouget, 2008 [1904]: 2) It is also valuable as a form of civic and political education. Direct action is the power of those who have nothing but their capacity to act. Direct action makes it possible to avoid the first impasse created by illusions, while non-violence enables the second impasse to be avoided and helps to open up a negotiating and conflict resolution process.

**We are not alone: building a transnational alliance**

The local communities affected, with support from ReAct, ensured coordination between different countries – initially, to share information and compare situations, then to join forces and build common demands and, finally, to carry out synchronised collective actions. On 5 June 2013, the local organisations of the communities neighbouring the Socfin and Bolloré Group plantations in five countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Cambodia and Côte d’Ivoire), expressed their common demands in a letter addressed to the Bolloré Group CEO. To deliver it to Vincent Bolloré, they decided to organise a global day of action on the day that the Group’s annual shareholder meeting was to be held in Paris. The communities all took action simultaneously in each of their countries. In Sierra Leone, several hundred villagers occupied the land of the SAC plantation. In Côte d’Ivoire, a peaceful march of residents was blocked by police forces as they approached the main factory and the administrative offices to deliver their message to the management of the SoGB plantation. In Douala, Cameroon, 200 farm workers
and traditional leaders walked to the Socapalm plantation headquarters in their traditional mourning dress to symbolise the loss they were suffering. In Paris, people from Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire and other affected countries occupied the Bolloré Group’s headquarters. They carried watering cans, hand shovels and rakes, and set about tending the lawn outside the headquarters. “We don’t have any more land in our country, so we have to plant cassava in your yard!” exclaimed a man from a village in Cameroon who was directly affected by the plantation’s activities. This first synchronised action embodied the creation of the Transnational Alliance of Local Communities Affected by Socfin Bolloré Plantations, and was the final scale-up from local to international level.

In response to ongoing pressure from the Alliance’s members, Bolloré agreed to meet with representatives from the villagers’ organisations. The first transnational negotiation took place in Paris on 24 October 2014. The Bolloré Group agreed to an independent land assessment that would shed light on the land conflicts, and to a meeting the following year in order to track the progress made. It was also specifically agreed that Socfin representatives would attend the follow-up meeting as they had ignored the Alliance’s request that they appear at the first meeting. However, the negotiation timeline was not respected as Bolloré did not involve Socfin in the dialogue and Socfin continued to refuse to take part. This first encouraging opening of the dialogue thus came to a halt. Thereafter, the Socfin and Bolloré Groups handed over negotiating responsibility to local management and attempted to publicise the few positive steps taken. However, these were far from meeting the demands of local residents affected by their operations.

Relocating the fight

Faced with the refusal of decision makers to negotiate at the international level, the communities were compelled to step up local momentum. This sparked a new series of
actions between April and June 2015: peaceful protests in the plantations of Djbombari and Mbongo in Cameroon, a march to the LAC plantation management offices in Liberia, a sit-in in Cambodia, and a large people’s assembly in Côte d’Ivoire. These actions led to renewed local negotiations in Cameroon, Liberia, and Cambodia. Tripartite platforms were set up for negotiations to take place in Cameroon and Cambodia between the company, the local authorities and the communities. The same year, several transnational solidarity actions were organised to protest against the arrest of organisation leaders in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which resulted in their release. However, the charges against some leaders were maintained as a pressure and other criminal lawsuits were later filed by Socfin in Sierra Leone.

**Strengthening grassroots power: community organisation in remote areas**

Given the stance of the Socfin and Bolloré Groups, which both refused to manage the conflict at international level, the local dimension had to be strengthened. To facilitate the mobilisations in the different countries and different plantations, the local organisations were compelled to organise and structure themselves more effectively.

After the first phase of supporting collective organisation by linking up those directly affected had successfully led to the creation of the Transnational Alliance of Local Communities Affected by Socfin Bolloré Plantations, ReAct then focused on helping to strengthen several local organisations. Given the lengthy struggle for their rights and the multinational’s power, the local communities were obliged to organise themselves more sustainably and develop a long-term strategy. Drawing on community-organising methods developed by Saul Alinsky (1971) and on the model designed by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), ReAct worked to strengthen the tools, methods
and skills required for effective local community organisation. This enabled ReAct to provide more robust support to local organisations, particularly in Cameroon and Liberia. Alinsky (1971) adapted the tactics for trade union organisation, action and negotiation in a factory environment to apply them to defending citizens’ rights. Moreover, he formalised the organisational function by making the mission of recruitment and organisation-building into a real profession. The ACORN community-organising model defines in detail the role of an organiser and sets out the different steps for constructing a community organisation: ‘the organising drive’. Strategic and tactical elements are also described in detail to enable members of an organisation to conduct campaigns. ReAct’s community organisers thus provided support for organising the residents of the villages surrounding the plantations. According to this approach, there are five ingredients for effective organisation:

- **A group of people who coordinate themselves**: a vast number of people became members of the supported organisation, thanks to recruitment efforts by the organisers, particularly in Liberia and Cameroon.
- **A collective identity**: this was built on a shared feeling of injustice, with each organisation having a name specific to each country, and sometimes to each plantation.
- **Clearly defined objectives and methods**: collective demands were defined by each village assembly, then at the level of each plantation, each country and finally at the international scale; very quickly, collective actions became pivotal to the strategy and methods implemented by the organisations, including at a very local level.
- **Collective rules**: as leaders became empowered and the organisations became structured, collective and democratic ways of working were defined, which sustained the elected leaders’ representativeness, accountability and collectively supported decision making. The tasks and responsibilities were shared out and roles defined. Group facilitation tools
taken from popular education methods helped to facilitate the members’ participation and emancipation.

- **Resources**: each member paid dues to ensure the organisation’s autonomy and means of action.

This community-organising model is also based on an incremental strategy that first targets small victories to strengthen the members’ involvement and vision. Some local organisations were thus able to identify initial achievable victories (have an out-of-order borehole repaired by the company, develop a market place, or maintain the village’s access routes), which helped to keep the residents involved over time, without discouragement, while at the same time seeking to gradually obtain more rights.

**Concrete progress that shows it is possible**

Increasing efforts enabled the local communities to win substantial victories. These included compensation totalling US$54,800 to 133 peasant families for crops destroyed by the LAC, the construction and repair of boreholes in some ten villages, the delivery of drinking water cisterns when the river used by Lendi village was polluted, the setting-up of a health centre, the extension of the power line in Mbambou and Dikola in Cameroon, recognition of the 142 hectares of sacred forest and community land in Cambodia along with a financial contribution for the ceremonies to appease the spirits, the integration of village children into plantation schools and the launch of the construction of a new school in Liberia.

These and other victories showed that the balance of power was gradually changing. In addition to the admittedly fragile dialogues set up, the media coverage of land grabbing by the Socfin and Bolloré Groups was an important victory for the local communities mobilised. Certainly, although the situation was still little known to the general public until a few years ago, the press articles, media reports and interviews have
multiplied since 2015, which has gradually given visibility to the land conflicts and the multinational’s abuses. In 2015, the World Bank’s International Financial Corporation cancelled a loan under study for the Socfin Group apparently due to the existing and now visible conflicts. In December 2016, Socfin made a series of unilateral commitments under its CSR policy and, in early 2017, produced an action plan with a road map and complaints management process. To help set up its action plan, the Group hired The Forest Trust organisation (now EarthWorm). The verdicts of the libel lawsuits brought against the journalists and NGOs that published material on the subject reinforced the legitimacy of the struggle, and the Bolloré Group was even condemned several times in early 2019 for malicious prosecutions.

While Socfin’s commitments are highly inadequate and the unilateral process unsatisfactory, the Transnational Alliance of Local Communities Affected by Socfin Bolloré Plantations has managed to gradually shift what once appeared to be immovable fronts, with support from a coalition of NGOs (Fian Belgium, Bread for All, Confédération Paysanne – Via Campesina France, GRAIN, ReAct, aGter, World Rainforest Movement, SOS Faim, Sherpa, and others). The building of a coalition of allies is another tool to strengthen the campaigns and makes it possible to pool a variety of skills and expertise in the form of surveys, media contacts, legal knowledge, capacity building and so on. The challenges of rebalancing power relations among the different actors in the value chains were huge. Strengths and skills have to be combined. As a Cameroonian proverb says, ‘a single hand cannot fasten a bundle of wood’.

**Increasing leverage to exert pressure**

To reinforce the Transnational Alliance of villages defending their rights, the coalition of allies is now trying to activate different levers: media-related, legal and economic levers,
particularly in Europe where the Socfin and Bolloré Groups are headquartered. Some of the avenues to be followed or further explored in order to rebalance the power relations among the different actors in this production chain and ensure a fairer value distribution throughout the chain include informing and calling for action from customers of the plantations’ output, such as Michelin for rubber or Nestlé for palm oil, and from financiers like the ING bank. ReAct is keeping watch on the implementation the 2017 French law on the duty of care of parent companies and subcontractors, and investigating the financial arrangements and the Group’s governance.

Conclusion

This experience thus gives hope that change is possible and will lead to an economy enabling workers, farmers and local communities to access the social, economic and environmental resources required for a decent standard of living. Although the progress made is minimal when compared to the violation of rights and environmental degradation experienced by these communities, this ongoing process can continue on its path and be further developed. Moreover, these experiences and the mistakes that may have been made have allowed a replicable model to be defined more precisely. One of the key lessons learnt is the importance of having robust, well-structured and democratic collective organisations. If campaigns are to succeed on a global scale, the local level must be extremely robust – effective coordination is impossible without well-structured local forces. The ‘community-organising’ tools developed within the different models bring a rigorous methodology to take this dimension further.

As a result of this experience, it seems crucial to develop the organisers’ network worldwide in order to give professional support to mobilising citizens and workers so that value of production chains can be more fairly distributed. Experiences of citizens’ associations capable of taking action on a wide range
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of issues have grown in number and strengthened this model, while greater resources will bring about the scale change needed to shift the global economy towards one based on the principles of solidarity and justice in the struggle against the impunity of multinationals.

Notes
1 www.socfin.com/sites/default/files/2020-04/2019%2012%2031%20Organigramme%20Socfin_0.pdf
2 www.socfin.com/en/investors/socfin

References