



Statement on the criminalization of Land rights defenders



Meeting on 9 December 2019 in Yaoundé at Hôtel Azur in the context of Mobilization day against the criminalization of land rights defenders, and ahead of International Human Rights Day,

We, civil society organizations, representatives of local and indigenous communities and defenders of the environment and land rights in Cameroon,

Made the following observations:

1. Local and indigenous communities oppose and resist the spoilment of their lands by the State and investors, including through the use of all peaceful mechanisms available (administrative remedies, legal complaints, dialogue with companies, etc.). While in a few cases these efforts have been successful, it is generally at the cost of unacceptable violations of the rights of these defenders and of other community members (administrative or judicial harassment, police custody or arbitrary detention, convictions, etc.).
2. Criminalization is increasing: land rights and environmental activists are subject to legal proceedings and various forms of bullying by local authorities, in order to hinder their claims and discourage other attempts at resistance.
3. Cameroon has been attracting many land-based investments for agro-industry, mining, forestry, and large infrastructure projects in recent years. All these investments, occurring throughout the country, are presented as essential for national development, as they could, under right condition, contribute to

- job creation and to the generation of public revenues in order to improve the living conditions of the population.
4. The laws in force in Cameroon in the land sector are more than forty years old and are no longer adapted to the present-day land rights situation of local and indigenous communities. This is exacerbated in a context marked by increasing pressure on land and other natural resources, and by the very precarious status of communities' land rights, whose customary ownership is not recognized as equivalent to formal land ownership.
 5. Rural communities represent about 50% of Cameroon's population and are highly dependent on land and natural resources. Indeed, land is part of the cultural identity of local and indigenous communities, and is at the heart of their production system. Moreover, family farming is the first source of employment.
 6. There are close links between good local land governance and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly in the current context, marked by the preparation of the assessment of the implementation of the Determined Contributions at the National level.

We call on the State and investors respectively:

1. To acknowledge that land rights are human rights and must be respected as such. There is no dignity for local and indigenous communities without recognition and protection of their land rights;
2. To better protect the customary land rights of local and indigenous communities in the land tenure laws and regulations;
3. To stop the abusive proceedings currently underway against environmental and land rights defenders;
4. To put an end to the criminalization of environmental and land rights defenders;
5. To include the obligation to protect environmental and land rights defenders in the mandate of national institutions responsible for the protection of human rights and the management of natural resources in Cameroon and in investment contracts.



Land Rights Now

Land Rights Now is an international alliance campaign to secure Indigenous and community land rights everywhere. We call on governments and others in power to take action. The campaign is open. Anyone-active citizens or communities or organization-who endorses our goal can join and act under the banner of Land Rights Now. Together we can make a difference.

National Engagement Strategy in Cameroon (NES Cameroon)

NES is a platform-based process initiated by the International Land Coalition (ILC) to support its ten commitments for people-centered land governance and to support the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Land Tenure applicable to land, fisheries and forests. In Cameroon, the platform is made up of 25 institutions that aim that contribute to the improvement of land and natural resources governance through the adoption and implementation of texts and practices allowing equitable and sustainable management to ensure the well-being of everyone.



Milieudefensie

Milieudefensie is based in the Netherlands and is part of the grassroots environmental justice network of Friends of the Earth. Our forest campaign strives to halt the expansion of industrial monoculture plantations and related environmental and social abuses. We campaign for a society built upon peoples' sovereignty and participation. Founded on social, economic, gender and environmental justice and be free from all forms of domination and exploitation, such as neoliberalism, corporate globalization, neo-colonialism and militarism.



Center for Environment and Development (CED)

CED is a Cameroonian independent organization working to promote environmental justice and protect the rights, interests, culture and aspirations of local and indigenous communities in Central Africa. As an active member of several networks, the CED has succeeded over the years to mobilize allies to influence positively legal frameworks, monitor natural resource exploitation activities, sustainably build the capacities of dozens of local communities, and produce important scientific and advocacy documentation.



Centre for Education, Training and Support for Development Initiatives (CEFAID)

The Centre for Education, Training and Support to Development Initiatives in Cameroon (CEFAID) is a Cameroonian CSO active in the sustainable management of natural resources (Land, Forests, Wildlife, Mines) and access to basic social services (Education, Justice, Citizenship, Employment, Health) through information, sensitization, animation, training, advisory support, technical assistance, research and advocacy in a rights-based approach. Its vision for a society in which local and indigenous communities fully enjoy their rights and flourish is the promotion and protection of the rights of the most disadvantaged groups. Its objective is thus to improve the living conditions of its target groups through technical support that can lead to their empowerment.



LandCam

LandCam is a project which objective is to secure land and resource rights and improve governance in Cameroon. Implemented since 2017 and for 5 years, LandCam will work with key stakeholders across Cameroon to improve customary and formal rights to land and natural resources through piloting land governance innovations at the local level and contributing to workable reforms of the relevant policy. IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development), CED (Centre for Environment and Development) and RELUFA (Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim) are the organisations implementing the LandCam project, working closely with a wide range of partners in Cameroon and internationally, including NES Cameroon, ILC Africa and Milieudefensie.



Community Aid (COMAID)

COMAID is a civil society organization founded in 2007 in Cameroon, working in the areas of land governance, biodiversity conservation, geographic information systems, value chain and institutional development. COMAID has supported local communities in the Mbaw Plain of the North West Region to improve on their land and natural resource governance as well as policy processes on the ongoing land reform of Cameroon.

