The logic of benevolent capitalism: the duplicity of Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon land grab and deforestation scheme as sustainable investment

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Abstract: This ethnographic study documents the concurrent debates pitting neoliberal ideology promoting economic growth and the generation of employment opportunities championed by the agro-industrial giant Herakles Farms, alongside the World Bank and the government of Cameroon – inherent in the establishment of a 73,086 ha oil palm plantation in Southwest Cameroon against the need for sustainable environment advocated for by local communities, NGOs and their transnational allies. Claims of benevolent capitalism are at odds with the perception and experiences of home loss and environmental degradation orchestrated by this project. The dissonance between the discourses and claims of benevolent capitalism with the perception and experiences of home loss and environmental degradation orchestrated by this project demonstrates that the neoliberal discourse of capitalist benevolence is a self-interested discourse that benefits the powerful at the expense of the subaltern. Local people should be empowered to negotiate with multinational corporations, laws recognising customary land rights instituted and implemented.

Keywords: neoliberalism; discourse; development; Africa; oil palm; land tenure; Cameroon; benevolent capitalism; deforestation; environmental degradation; Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon; Herakles Farm; land grab.


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1 Introduction

Over the past 50 years, Western governments have doled out an estimated $1 trillion of aid to Africa (Moyo, 2009). Celebrities – rock stars and actors in what can be dubbed ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ are campaigning for even more aid to flow from Western governments to Africa. This flow of aid Moyo (2009) concludes has instead ruined the continent thereby making it poorer and reduced, in the West’s eyes, to a childlike state of beggary. Moyo (2009) shows how, with access to capital and with the right policies, even the poorest nations can turn themselves around. She recommends that we must first destroy the myth that aid works – and make charity history. In other words, African governments should stop subcontracting their responsibilities such as economic growth, development and job creation to foreign governments, which leaves its citizens relying on dutiful Western benevolence because of its colonial past on the continent. While revisiting the aid-development nexus, Moyo (2009) asserts that aid festers corruption. She further points out that Western governments use aid as a tool for patronage (for their own self-interests) festering corruption in order to promote their foreign policy objectives (Moyo, 2009; Bond, 2006). At various world gatherings – including among others the Make Poverty History campaign, G8 Gleneagles promises and the UN 2005 Summit – Western governments and corporations have consistently marketed themselves as benevolent actors that care about Africa’s development needs. At such forums, they have rolled out programmes pledging to cut Africa’s debt burden and debt forgiveness, as well as increase aid to the continent (Bond, 2006). Is it possible to make charity and poverty history in Africa? How are western corporations complicit with African governments and replicating the discourse of benevolence to obscure the exploitative policies of the former on the continent? Can western capitalist benevolence foster socio-economic development in Africa?

This ethnographic study examines the competing perspectives between a capitalist alliance – comprised principally of the palm oil producer SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SGSOC, also and herein henceforth called Herakles Farms) – the Government of Cameroon (GoC) and the World Bank on the one hand and on the other hand – between them and local communities whose lands have been appropriated for oil palm production. The former group of actors justify the establishment of a 73,086 ha palm oil plantation in the forested contact zone of Southwest Cameroon as an act of benevolence, whereas the ground level reality consisting of land and home loss and environmental degradation points to the contrary. The paper draws and builds on similar studies undertaken in Africa and elsewhere that seek to write the obituary of the age of development (Vanaik, 2013). It explores the competing perspectives between grateful recipients/client communities and self-styled benevolent development actors who present themselves ‘as doing good’ (Ibid). This critical brand of literature constitutes the signature tune of the post-development approach which demonstrates that dominant discourses of development – that purport to fight against poverty – by providing employment opportunities and infrastructure are in sharp dissonance with local realities because of their deleterious effects (Escobar, 2009; Turner and Caouette, 2009; Ferguson, 2005, 1994; Della Faille, 2011; Bendix, 2016). These unfettered consequences include the social and environmental degradation associated with oil palm industries. In other words, a disjuncture underpins the discourse of development and the reality of development as evoked by national and international governmental agencies (Della Faille, 2011; Turner and Caouette, 2009; Scott, 1990;
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Escobar, 1984; Said, 1994; Ferguson, 1994; Rist, 2010, 2002). The stark reality is that the discourse of development is often disguised as benevolence and appropriated by different social actors and corporations for their self-interest. The stakes of these social actors include the domination of subaltern groups. This situation generates both resistance and agency by subjects of development or those caught in the development encounter (Li, 2007; Said, 1994) as encapsulated by the neoliberal capitalist development of ‘land grabbing’ by the Herakles palm oil project.

Since the 2008 financial and food crises, powerful (trans)national investors are increasingly descending on the Global South to acquire millions of hectares (ha) of arable land for biofuel and food production. Dubbed as ‘land grabbing’ – this phenomenon is generating intense and concurrent debates. Those who attack the land acquisition process (‘land grabbing’) perceive it as ensuring speculation in land and the appreciation of invested capital as well as undermining local livelihoods and the basic rights of local landowners (Oakland Institute, 2011). Supporters forward the acquisition of large-scale farmland as an investment opportunity with safe returns, as well as a way to promote local food security and economic development, suggesting the rise of a new model of agricultural development (Kelly and Peluso, 2015). A contrary group of critics argues that acquisitions cannot generate local development and that local people who are touted as beneficiaries of the process end up as victims since it will instead lead to landlessness and exacerbate the inequality of land ownership. The World Bank and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) do not forward land acquisition by transnational actors as a necessarily harmful process from an economic, social and environmental standpoint. They maintain that acquisitions can engender agricultural production, jobs and incomes for local populations and lead to significant investment in infrastructure [Deininger, 2003; Deininger et al., 2011; Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; cf. Reydon and Fernandes, 2012, p.3; Oakland Institute, 2011]. An adequate regulatory framework and code of conduct binding all stakeholders-business, nation-states and local populations, scholars concede, can lead to a win-win situation (Reydon and Fernandes, 2012), if a land governance system that determines and administers land rights is put in place [Byamugisha, 2013, p.xv; Oakland Institute, 2011].

The World Bank Group (WBG) that vigorously promotes private sector investment in developing countries mistakenly stands accused of supporting land grabbing/investment in large-scale agriculture. This support includes the direct financing of agribusiness firms and the shaping of client government’s investment climates. Furthermore, the bank undertakes investment in legislative reforms, pushes for the reduction of administrative and institutional barriers to investment as well as facilitates the investment process for investors among others (Oakland Institute, 2011). Field research commissioned by the Oakland Institute in seven African countries unearthed the WBG’s “orchestration of business-friendly environments for investor access to land. From helping attract investors, to shaping policy and law that allows for streamlined and lucrative investor contracts, [the] WBG’s agencies clearly enable and promote land investment” [Oakland Institute, 2011, p.1] while simultaneously glossing over critical concerns including “human rights, food security and human dignity for local populations” (Ibid). In the words of Harvey (2015), the bank provides a “facilitative regime for capitalist investment” that tends to obscure critical concerns by framing land dispossession and the destruction of the rainforest in terms of capitalist benevolence.

Besides the critics of the process of land acquisition, this paper seeks to foreground understanding of the process through which American-owned Herakles Farms leased an
initially estimated 73,086 hectares of land for an oil palm plantation in the evergreen forest of Southwest Cameroon. The region is unique because of its omnipresent imbrication in the international economic system through the production of national and international spaces. It is one of the hubs of conservation and plantation agriculture since colonial times (Konings, 2012; Jua and Konings, 2004). It has therefore been at the heart of processes of benevolent capitalism since corporate plantations and conservation areas largely benefit but the global commons at the expense of the local inhabitants. Even more interesting is Cameroon’s triple colonial heritage (German, British and French) that shaped the country’s land tenure system – especially its formalisation and commodification as well as how it expunged indigenous land rights and led to today’s conflict between the state and local communities (see Njoh, 2009). This study reveals that the market-oriented development strategies associated with globalisation involving finance capital and financial logics that exercise increasing influence over large-scale food production and distribution framed in terms of benevolent capitalism have adversely affected the livelihoods of Cameroon’s resource-rich but marginalised people. The paper suggests the need for the empowerment of local people in land deal negotiations with transnational corporations. The State should also institute and implement laws that recognise customary land rights.

The aim of the study is to compare the discourses and claims of benevolent capitalism versus the perception and experiences of local actors on whose land Herakles Farms has established its plantation. Contrary to the neoliberal development troika who conjure up an appealing and benevolent picture of the corporation as ‘helping people to help themselves’ through the provision of employment opportunities and social services, most locals decry the dispossession they were subjected to.

Below, I first examine the concept of benevolent capitalism. I tease out its basic elements and lay out the theoretical and methodological framework informing the data elicitation process for this study. Secondly, I situate the study area of Southwest Cameroon and highlight its linkages to the production of national and international spaces through conservation and plantation agriculture – including the Herakles Farms project. The third section delves into the concurrent discourses at the interface of extreme environmental protection measures and at the detriment of human life between various social and corporate actors. Two sets of intertwined discourses are examined – neoliberal ideology fostering economic growth versus the need for a sustainable environment and the discourse of neoliberal conservation and export-oriented agriculture against local food security and community rights. These crosscutting discourses are examined from the concurrent perspectives of neoliberal actors (Herakles Farms and the GoC) and national/local community and local and international NGOs (their transnational allies). The debates are characterised by the multiple voices, identities and positionalities of participants at the local level. By exploring various forms of individual and collective measures of resistance and protests orchestrated by this neoliberal development that evinces and prioritises profit making over environmental conservation, I further address the agency of the subaltern. In the fourth part, (the conclusion) the paper shows that the Herakles Farm’s discourse of capitalist benevolence is a ruse that is meant to achieve its profit-making aim at the detriment of the environment and human life. Poverty and environmental degradation framed as capitalist benevolence have been imposed by the palm oil development venture under the auspices of Herakles Farms.
1.1 The benevolence of neoliberal capitalist development

The concept of benevolence has resonances with the basic elements of the colonial discourse, which includes the construction of ‘inferior otherness’, the sense of mission ‘combined with the duty of tutelage’ [Bendix, (2014), p.27]. The dualistic structure of colonial discourse is comprised of dualisms that project the ‘West’ but simultaneously denigrates and presents the South as in need of ‘development’, ‘progress’, ‘help’, ‘benevolence’ and ‘civilisation’ among others. The benevolence of the North and the civilisational needs of the South are further articulated through dualisms including among others – good versus bad, progressive versus unprogressive, backward, civilised versus uncivilised, enlightenment versus barbaric [Bendix, (2014), p.27; Kothari, (2006), p.11f] that pervades the discourse of benevolence, or what is also dubbed as “the white man’s burden” [Osterhammel, (2006), p.115f; cf. Köhler, 2011]. As a mechanism for amending the deficits of the South – development implies capitalist growth measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and the adoption of Western practices and norms in tandem with the colonial view that the West serves as a benchmark and the ideal norm for development (Köhler, 2011; Tiffin and Gilbert, 2008; Cross, 2014). Ideas of beneficence actually tend to evince relationships of power as evidenced more generally in ‘development praxis’ [Kothari, (2006), p.18], which tacitly reflects the unequal power relationship between givers and receivers in development encounters [Mandal Commission as quoted in Crewe, Priyanthi, (2006), p.51; c.f. Köhler, 2011; Li, 2007]. Despite its overly exploitative, dehumanising and suppressive nature, the proceeds of capitalism should be appropriated by both individuals and nations and positively influence the lives of poor people and nations worldwide. If business stakeholders pursue the principles of benevolent capitalism, which is but a disguised form of capitalism, it will “result in community reinvestment and national development” [Barnabas, (2014), p.81]. Analogous with responsible socialism, benevolent capitalism is “that form of capitalism that is channelled to the betterment of the greater number of services at the most affordable prices as well as the most generous remuneration package for workers” [Ibid, see also Cross, 2014; Tiffin and Gilbert, 2008]. As a form of capitalism, it will harness market forces to meet the needs of the less privileged in our society (capitalist society) and at the global level to meet the needs of poor nations. Bill Gates has appealed on the benefactors of capitalism to “find a way that [capitalism which] serve wealthier people [could also] serve poorer people as well” (Hopkin, 2008; Turner and Caouette, 2009). It implies creating and following up on a green image and corporate social responsibility (CRS) so as to ensure sustainability. That is the cultivation of a positive environmental and social image. Benevolent capitalism is the fusion of charity and free enterprise with the aim of adding ‘another veneer to the face of capitalism’, making it more acceptable. It is variously designated as cultural-capitalism, ‘philanthropy funded by capitalism’ and ‘capitalism’s moral foray’ among others. It is undertaken by business and the global elites who sponsor social programmes but woefully lack the ability and desire to deal with the deep-rooted structural, historical problems that underlines poverty, inequality and environmental degradation etc. (Sachs, 1995; Richards, 2012; Hopkin, 2008; Ferguson, 1994; Turner and Caouette, 2009; Tiffin and Gilbert, 2008).
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2 Theory and methods

This section will document the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this analysis of the concurrent debates surrounding the Herakles Farms plantation project that pits neoliberal capitalist development against sustainable development and local livelihoods in Southwest Cameroon. Postcolonial development studies, Bendix (2014) maintains, captures the omnipresent influence of colonial power relationships in shaping contemporary ideas and practices of development through the establishment of hierarchical differences between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ societies. The latter is construed as deficient with regards to knowledge and technology and therefore in need of rescue (Li, 2007; Escobar, 1984; Kothari, 2011; Ferguson, 1994). In the words of James Ferguson, the ‘development apparatus’, this machine with a life of its own, is “reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes ‘poverty’ as its point of entry launching an intervention that may have no effect on the poverty but does in fact have other concrete effects” [Ferguson, (1994), pp.255–256; Sachs, 1995]. Postmodern critiques of development have found issues of power and representation “pertinent to analysing…development since discourses and materialities form strategic constellations in order to address particular development issues” (Brigg, 2002; Escobar, 1984; Ziai, 2007; cf. Bendix, (2014), p.22]. Benevolent capitalism is both a rhetorical device and a weapon of domination that is achieved through negative representation and the need to improve with the help of outside development agents (see also Li, 2007).

The post-development scholarship on which this study draws upon capture hierarchical power relationships in the development encounter and the agency of subaltern groups (Escobar, 2009; Ferguson, 2005; Turner and Caouette, 2009; Bendix, 2014; Kothari, 2005; Scott, 1990). It further articulate competing discourses among social agents and the self-interested appropriation of the discourse of development (Turner and Caouette, 2009; Bendix, 2014; Kothari, 2005; Scott, 1990) by powerful groups and actors including Herakles Farms, the World Bank and elites who often mask development interventions that negatively affect local people in terms of benevolence. Benevolent capitalism, therefore, reinforces longstanding discourses of development that perpetuate unequal power relationships.

Firstly, subjects for interviews and focus group discussion sessions (FGDs) were purposely selected; either because of their deep knowledge and experiences or because they could best inform the research questions and enhance our understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research methods comprised of unstructured individual in-depth interviews, focus group and informal discussion sessions, as well as consecutive participant observation took place for three months at a time (June–August 2010–2012 and therefore for a total of nine months), were used to generate the data for this study. This combination of methods proved adequate and appropriate for exploring the negative impacts of the Herakles plantation project on local livelihoods and on the environment. Key informant interviews took place with diverse social actors – indigenous landowners, opposition leaders, international critics, workers, chiefs and Herakles managers. It afforded these different social actors with the latitude to express their opinions and experiences and therefore for capturing competing claims
between development agents who frame their actions in terms of benevolence and segments of the local community that are vigorously opposed to the project because of its presumed debilitating effects. Additionally, four operatives from the NGOs Struggle to Economise the Future Environment (SEFE), the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) as well as four local representatives of Greenpeace International and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) were interviewed in Mundemba and Yaounde respectively. These NGOs stand by the desire of defending sustainability and indigenous rights. The data set for this study is comprised of six FGDs (two each with men and women) of the Mbo, Bakossi and upper Balung ethnicities who are spread out in various villages and on whose land Herakles is setting up its plantation. Complementing these FGDs were 100 individual in-depth interviews. Altogether, some 180 participants formally took part in the study. On most occasions, respondents decided on the venue for the interviews. Face-to-face interviews permitted for the observation of facial expression, especially non-verbal language cues. It further ensured confidentiality and the safety of respondents (see Oltmann, 2016) in a context where dissent is not tolerated by the government. Secondly, a review of the literature, documentary sources, Youtube videos, newspaper articles and internet blogs provided secondary data for confronting concurrent conversations surrounding the establishment of the Herakles Farms plantation.

I simultaneously kept copious notes of interactions with respondents and took snapshots of important events and places. Site visits took place during which palm tree nurseries, plantations, cocoa farms in which Herakles had planted pillars demarcating the land and areas where the corporation and its agents had cut down forests was visited. I also sat through two court sessions at the Court of First Instance in Mundemba where SEFE representing the community had sworn Herakles Farms for forcefully confiscating local lands. During these sessions, activists were demonstrating in the court premises. With prior consent from the participants, I tape-recorded the interviews and FGDs for further reference. Preceding the data elicitation process was the transcription of the interview data and verification of the transcripts with the recording. The interviews were thereafter analysed thematically (Sargeant, 2012; Creswell, 2009) in the light of the objectives of the study. The thematic analysis involved the identification “of patterns of meaning across a data set that provides an answer to the research question being addressed.” “The identification of patterns involves a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding and theme development and revision” [Braun and Clarke, (2006), p.77]. Apart from its capability of use within different frameworks, it can answer myriad research questions; it allies with questions related to people’s experiences, or people’s views and perceptions [Braun and Clarke, (2006), p.77] of a development intervention.

Next, I set the international political economic context in which Southwest Cameroon has historically been imbricated through both plantation agriculture and conservation and situate the Herakles palm oil plantation project. It should, however, be noted that the legal hierarchy between traditional and modern tenure arrangements put in place by the colonial encounter effectively set the stage for today’s land grabs. It is also at the heart of the concurrent claims between states and local communities whose customary land rights within the context of formalisation are the subject of ambivalence (see Cotula, 2016; Pemunta and Fonmboh, 2010; Levitt, 2011; Kelly and Peluso, 2015; Njoh, 2009; Richards, 2013; World Bank, 2010; Nguiffo and Schwartz, 2012; Bjorklund, 2016; Pemunta, 2013a, 2013b).
3 Background

3.1 Southwest Cameroon and the international economic system

Southwest Cameroon, a former German and later British territory which now belongs to the postcolonial French-dominated Cameroon state is the site of the Herakles Farms plantation and a developmentalisable space because of its development deficit. This is despite the region’s huge natural resource wealth comprised of arable land, evergreen forests and black gold. The creation of protected areas and plantations in the region has led to the ‘neoliberalisation of nature’ (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). The conversion of parcels of land into corporate plantations and conservation areas, thanks to formalisation, has transformed natural resources into the benefit of the global commons at the expense of the local inhabitants in the name of benevolence.

The southwest region of present-day Anglophone Cameroon has since colonial times been integrated into the global economy and therefore subjugated to the production of local and international spaces. It is not only an integral component of the West African ‘cocoa belt’, but the seat of plantation agriculture especially the production of export-oriented crops – rubber, tea, bananas and palm oil for colonial and postcolonial powers. During the German colonial era (1884–1916), while fertile volcanic lands at the foot of Mount Cameroon were unilaterally transferred to European plantation owners, the indigenous Bakweri populations were herded into reserves without any compensation [Njoh, (2009), p.310; Pemunta and Fonmboh, 2010]. The coastal plantation economy that resulted from German colonial rule heralded the production of oil palm, bananas and rubber and linked the region to the national and international capitalist system. Apart from colonial powers coveting arable land in Southwest Cameroon, the region is close to major urban and industrial centres as well as the Atlantic coast for the export of the produce (White et al., 2015). The plantations were reverted to the British colonial administration following Germany’s defeat in World War 1. Instead of returning the land to native Bakweri population, the British decided in November 1946 to lease the circa 100,000 ha to the newly created agro-industrial corporation, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC). The CDC has doubled the cultivated area from an estimated 20,000ha to more than 40,000 ha as of 2012 with rubber, palm oil, banana and tea [Konings, (2012), p.7].

Formalisation reverts ownership of land, the resources on the land, its uses and its transactions in the hands of the state. “The recognition and inscription by the state of rights and conditions of access within specific boundaries” [Hall et al., (2011), p.28; cited in Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.474] is a quintessential step in the production of a market society. In such a society, market relations that are dependent on clear property rights subsume nearly all social relations (Polanyi, 1944; Watts, 2001). Clear property rights lead to the commodification of state lands and resources [Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.474, see also Cotula, 2011, 2016]. The establishment of the Herakles Farm plantation pits neoliberal ideology promoting economic growth against the need for the sustainable environment within the context of neoliberal reforms and the rolling back of the state.

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the 1980s led to deep cuts in public investment expenditures, privatisation and the liquidation of public companies as well as contraction in the size of the public sector (Amin, 2008). It also witnessed the ceding away of state-owned enterprises including agro-industrial plantations as well as the leasing of
some for 99 years [Nguiffo and Watio, 2015; Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.482]. Additionally, the SAP placed “conservation policies in the context of broader social and economic changes that define neoliberalism” [Igoe and Brockington, (2007), p.432; see also Harvey, 2005]. One antidote to cushion the effects of the SAP was the expansion of the agricultural sector through the setting up of large-scale agribusiness with foreign funding. Among other effects, agricultural expansion is supposed to lead to an increment in palm oil production from 300,000 (2015) to 450,000 tonnes (2020) [Pemunta, (2016), p.109; Hoyle and Levang, (2012), p.5]. Although the state provides a ‘facilitative regime’ (Harvey, 2005) for most of these agricultural expansion projects, they are being undertaken void of any environmental safeguards, with neither any redistributive attempts at land reforms nor an institutional reorientation that recognises community land tenure and ownership so as to deliver on climate change goals, conservation and to improve livelihoods. They often lead to the forced displacement of local landowners. “State lands become frontiers when changes in broader political economy and logics of economic development reconstitute the relationships between capital, society and state authorities” [Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.475].

Southwest Cameroon has historically been a magnet for state-backed capitalist agro-industrial development on formalised state lands. Successive colonial and national governments have explicitly created state lands for capitalist investment. Lands traditionally used by local indigenous people for agriculture, hunting and gathering have been enclosed and taken away as a hub for plantations, conservation areas; timber reserves and timber exploitation etc. [see also Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.479; Pemunya, 2014]. The greatest beneficiaries of the formalisation of state lands in Cameroon have been colonial, national and corporate/private enterprises [Kelly and Peluso, (2015), p.483]. The area is also host to Pamol, one of two agro-industrial complexes that have held sway in Cameroon’s western plantation sector. It also hosts parts of the parastatal, the CDC [Pemunta, (2016), p.119]. Despite its natural resource wealth (comprised of green and black gold), it remains one of the most isolated and marginalised regions in Cameroon [Konings, (2012), p.509]. Paradoxically, the region’s acute lack of infrastructural development seems to account for the state’s enthusiasm in transforming the region into a developmentalisable entity in the name of benevolence whereas the whole scheme is about capitalist development and exploitation.

As in the colonial era, state ownership guarantees foreign investors larger and fertile parcels of land at the expense of indigenous populations that are cramped into the least desirable parcels in the name of ‘development as benevolence’. Also called ‘Benevolent Capitalism’ – it is the point of view that capitalism is never done just for the profit motive, but that it has to benefit the capitalist and everybody else through CRS as a way of contributing to the society and ensuring sustainability [Cross, (2014), pp.6–7; Baylouny, 2010; Gardner et al., 2014]. CSR and sustainability concerns were embedded in the environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) report produced by Herakles to highlight its green credentials in the face of an international outcry against the corporation.

3.2 The Herakles Farms plantation project

Comprised of two blocks, the Herakles plantation area is sandwiched between the Ndian and Kupe-Manenguba divisions and between protected areas of high conservation value (HCV) in Southwest Cameroon. The Nguti concession is slightly above 42,000 ha while
the Mundemba-Toko concession area covers 31,000 ha (Achobang et al., 2013; Greenpeace, 2013; Pemunta and Mbu-Arrey, 2013). According to the state-investor agreement between the GoC and American-based Herakles Farms, the latter obtained the rights to 73,086 ha through a 99-year land lease to plant nurseries and plantations of oil palm and processing plants on 60,000 ha [Greenpeace, (2013), p.1]. The remaining 12,000 ha was set aside as “sensitive protective resource area for the implantation of social infrastructure and for the activities of subsistent villagers” (Ibid, see also https://www.heraklescapital.com). The contract further stipulates that the company pays an annual rent of US$1 for the lease of the land per ha for land in use and 0.5 US$ per ha for undeveloped land (https://www.heraklescapital.com). Greenpeace (2013) estimates that the GoC will get as little as US$66,000 per annum once all of the lands are planted.

Figure 1  Map of the Herakles/SGSO plantation in Cameroon (see online version for colours)

The project is situated in an area with high biodiversity, around five protected areas – The Korup National Park (KNP: 126,000 ha), the Rumpi Mountains (45,000 ha), Nta Ali Forest Reserve (31,500 ha) and the Bayang-Mbo sanctuary (48,500 ha) and the Mount Bakossi (189,000 ha in Nguti (Pemunta and Mbu-Arrey, 2013).

These protected areas are habitats for scarce and threatened species and serve as a corridor for the migration of species. Environmental NGOs argued that the project would
disrupt the protection and growth of wild fauna, including parts of the world class protected KNP, which provides refuge to endangered primates. These protected areas also contain hosts of non-timber forest products – that in addition to subsistent farming is the mainstay of the local economy and provide revenue for the communities. Three ethnicities inhabitant the area. First is the Mbo who constitute 15,000 people and live around the Mbo sanctuary. Secondly, is the Bakossi clan who number over 18,000 people spread out in 11 villages. Thirdly, there are the Upper Balung people. They number over 6,000 people; occupy seven villages [Achobang et al., (2013), pp.356–357]. Most of these subsistent farmers and grow cocoa as a cash crop. The Bassossi, for instance, produce over 10,000 tonnes of cocoa annually. The people also cultivate palm oil trees; gather non-timber forest products, njansa, African bush mangoes, pepper, bitter cola, etc.

To counter the discourse of environmental NGOs including SEFE, CED and their transnational allies about the negative social and environmental effects of the project, Herakles Farm commissioned an ESIA. The aim of the ESIA was to document both the short and long term, as well as the positive and negative impacts of the project on the local “economy, biodiversity, water supply, indigenous rights and many other dimensions” and to “contribute to environmentally-sound and sustainable development” [HKND Group/ERM, (2015), p.2]. It also included mitigation measures such as financial compensation and resettlement plans for those who were to be displaced (see Cotula, 2016, 2011; Levitt, 2011; Kelly and Peluso, 2015; Richards, 2013; World Bank, 2010; Nguiffo and Schwartz, 2012; Bjorklund, 2016).

Figure 2 Cleared forest for oil palm nursery in Talangaye Village (see online version for colours)

“The Herakles Farm concession lies in an area where the protection of nature and conservation through the creation of the contiguous KNP and other protected areas has already led to the ceding of enormous parcels of land for development and conservation as well as for the resettlement of conservation refugees ”(Pemunta and Mbu-Arrey, 2013). This ‘neoliberalisation of nature’ (Igoe and Brockington, 2007) shows that corporate profit is clearly taking precedence over environmental protection – a situation that has led to unending debates between partisans and those opposed to this ‘benevolent’ project.
4 Concurrent discourses and the illusion of ‘development’ as benevolence

The Herakles Farm plantation project is a typical example of foreign direct investment (FDI). Such an agro-industrial project is not an act of benevolence (Barnabas, 2014; Kothari, 2005). It is rather an investment venture that is masked as humanitarianism. In this section, I argue that philanthropy is underpinned by the argument that giving (benevolence), has historically served the prestige-accumulation of the rich [Baylouny, (2010), pp.141–142; Cross, 2014; Gardner et al., 2014] and that the modernisation discourse is intertwined with the politics of domination. It is, therefore, a mechanism for reinforcing the dominance of powerful groups. By giving to the poor, the rich not only legitimate their wealth but also accumulate respect, which they can later exchange for labour or loyalty. Framed as benevolence, the discourse of development serves as “…a justification for the …intervention of the North in the name of higher goals” [Bourdieu, (1980), p.125, cf. Baylouny, 2010].

In a critical review of some of the myriad benevolent policy frameworks targeting Africa, Patrick Bonds sums up the continent’s marginal gains as ‘mainly limited to public relations’. These benevolent capitalist frameworks include – the Make Poverty History campaign, G8 Gleneagles promises and the UN 2005 Summit. Among other objectives, western nations promised: “to provide relief from crushing debt loads, to double aid and to establish a development round of trade.” Patrick Bonds further concedes that “The central problems remain exploitative debt and financial relationships with the North, phantom aid, unfair trade, distorted investment, capital flights and the continent’s brain drain/skills drain” [Bond, (2006), p.iv, see also Moyo, 2009]. This suggests that development is actually a dominant discourse appropriated by various actors for their self-interests [Sachs, (1995), p.1ff]. Developmentally deficient nations are presented as in need of economic growth, social modernisation and western technology in order to progress on the universal path of development and to reach the target state of developed society [Ziai, (2007), p.138ff] in an incorporative and universalistic, yet hierarchical manner [Kothari, (2005), p.63]. Like development cooperation, neoliberal capitalist development is ‘not demand-driven but donor-driven’ [Bendix, (2014), p.30]. The ceding of large portions of land to transnational corporations in the third world for various development investments is often justified as [agricultural] ‘development’ and an insurance against food insecurity. In reality, these governments are only entrapped in the fantasy of the promise of development (Ferguson, 2005; Sachs, 1995). Poor countries cannot rely on the altruistic intentions of multinational corporations to promote internal development (Brooks, 2010; Khel, 2009; Ferguson, 2005).

Corporations are appropriating the need of countries in the less developed world to achieve national economic development goals as a ruse to serve narrow interests and to legitimise actions that are antithetical to local livelihood systems. National development goals and local interests need not be mutually exclusive [Ferguson, (2005), p.87]. As low and middle-income countries strive to attract FDI in agriculture to catalyse growth and economic development, they face staggering environmental consequences that disproportionally affect habitats and species as well as significant social and distributive dimensions [Cotula, (2016), p.178].

The modernisation discourse of the GoC and the World Bank is embedded in the production of the fantasy of the “less-developed country [region]” [Ferguson, (2005), pp.77–79]. It is further underpinned by the assumption that poor peasants must be
modernised through technology that will lead to poverty alleviation. According to Adele Mueller, development discourse is employed in perpetuating first world domination over the less developed world. The problems of underdevelopment are articulated in language embedded in technical criteria requiring the first world’s expertise, thereby reinforcing the domination of centralised big projects [Mueller, 1986; cf. Della Faille, (2011), p.225]. In the views of colonial and neocolonial regimes – national, regional and local elites perceive local people as deficient, backwards and in need of improvement or modernisation (Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Jarosz, 1992). The solution they put forward to technical problems often mask the structural conditions that created the problem in the first instance. Locals are blamed for their condition without interveners examining their responsibility-institutions and the people responsible for development who often impose their views--including the fortress view of conservation on locals [Li, (2007), p.123].

Herakles Farm’s modernisation discourse constructs the peasant other as the point of benevolent intervention – a site for the realisation of the moderniser self through agro-industries. This, in turn, entails a “powerful intensification of activities and rural transformation, or contract farming to corporations.” This discourse advocates “technology… as neutral and inevitably beneficial, not as an instrument for the creation of cultural and social orders” [N’Cho-Oguie and Florence, (2009), p.192]. Large-scale agriculture development is in line with development policies aiming to modernise infrastructure as well as minds (Della Faille, 2011). The argument is that “the west possesses the expertise, technology and management skills that the non-west is lacking” [Escobar, (2009), p.47].

Amidst conflict with the local community, Herakles is more concerned with making a profit than with sustainable development. The company’s claim of “addressing a dire humanitarian need in the Republic of Cameroon” (Campaign Update Cameroon, 2013) through the introduction of technology (modernisation) should be read as implying that it is encouraging economic development for its own self-interest. It also cares less about sustainability and the future of these communities. Apart from dubiously parading the project as a ‘government project’ – meaning the government cares for the well-being of the local population, promises of providing social amenities so as to stifle local resistance have not and may never be delivered. This form of benevolence with an altruistic flavour involves a structural relationship that situates Herakles Farm as a dominant and benevolent enterprise. As one local Herakles official maintained:

“We are helping these people to help themselves. We are empowering them so that they can have some money, a better life, have roads and other facilities. It is just a matter of time and they will understand how good we are. Our technology will make farming less cumbersome (Project Manager, Tema, Interview, 30 August 2010).”

The above interview excerpt shows how complicated benevolence can be. Technology embodies the West and modernity and the primitive peasant is categorised in relation to their lack of modern technology in the neoliberal alliance’s discourse. Considered as a site to be acted upon by the modernisers who can bring new technology, they are perceived as lacking their own agency (see Della Faille, 2011). Secondly, the GoC’s development machine has the consistent effect of expanding and strengthening its bureaucratic state and police power through its spatial reordering policy. The SAP alongside state territorialisation under neoliberalism involving multilateral donors and
foreign state agencies imposed spatial reordering practices on the State of Cameroon. This reordering of man-nature relationship included the creation/expansion of protected areas and the need for the respect of indigenous rights. By embedding various enclosures – protected areas and agricultural expansion – in the colonial land tenure system that transformed the customary land into state tenure, the GoC in collusion with Herakles silences the voices of local inhabitants. The former also maintains an ambivalent position on indigenous peoples1.

“Who are we, can we speak? SG and the government have silenced us and are taking our land. We just got up and saw machines and people demarcating our land. We are told it is for development and we have no voice (Ebong Robert, Interview, 20 June 2010).”

Robert’s view resonates with the position of a large majority of the people in the communities where Herakles is setting up its plantation. He perceives development as a top-down process that ensures the domination of subaltern groups. In the development encounter, these groups are never consulted since their voices and needs do not matter. Development is clearly “not demand-driven but donor-driven” [Bendix, (2014), p.30]. Through the hierarchical development encounter that characterises neoliberalism, they are perceived by so-called developers as objects of intervention in the name of improvement (see Li, 2007; Ferguson, 1994). The development apparatus expands bureaucratic control through such development projects that silence the people whose land was appropriated for setting up the Herakles Farm plantation. What makes development such a contradictory and self-subverting process and how do those caught at the core of this contradiction live through it?

4.1 Concurrent voices: land grab and the rhetoric of benevolence

This section lays bare various competing, but mutually reinforcing narratives surrounding the Herakles land deal with a focus on the competing discourse between neoliberal conservation and local food security and community rights. In both cases, local people are losers since conservation and large-scale agriculture negates community land rights and benefits but the global commons and multinational corporations. It also examines the various loyalties, identities and positionality of local social actors. Within the framework of narrativity, ‘people talk about their acts, feelings and their people’s lives’. Narratives are tools through which we ‘reflect on ourselves as the markers of culture’. We use different ways of telling our stories due to different experiences and expectations in our everyday life [Isick, (2015), p.105]. Communities, groups and institutions all have their stories and stories are told within specific interactional, institutional and political contexts [Barthes, (1977), p.79].

The concurrent arguments for and against land grabs essentially pit two opposing views with a range of intermediate positions between them (see Kelly and Peluso, 2015; Reydon and Fernandes, 2012; Oakland Institute, 2011). Partisans of land grab by multinationals concede that it leads to technology transfer, promotes local food security and economic development through the creation of jobs that provide incomes for local people. On the contrary, their critics maintain that apart from the dispossession of locals, the problem of land scarcity would be exacerbated. These discourses show simultaneous, parallel claims of reality and experiences as well as the lack of a unitary conception of culture and therefore the existence of polyphonic voices in the land grab debates. Voice
represents the form or format through which narrators tell their stories. Using a single or multiple voices, a social agent externalises his or her feelings and experiences into words that provide a sense that a social actor is a real person conveying a specific message. Simply stated, it is a social actor’s/individual point of view. Opponents including civil society organisations and individuals see land grabs as encapsulating a threat to the livelihoods of the rural poor (Reydon and Fernandes, 2012; Oakland Institute, 2011). As one civil society activist stated:

“Herakles is involved in the unilateral demarcation of the local forest without any respect for sacred sites, burial grounds, local livelihood systems and areas of High Conservation Value. Those supporting Herakles have political and economic interests at stake (Ebong, Interview, 20 July 2010).”

Similarly, but seemingly, in favour of sustainable development, one local farmer Sam Ekubo stated:

“While we are not opposed to development, the threat to level our forest while making us refugees with no hunting rights and farmers with no land is unacceptable. To create the Fabe nursery, HF has already levelled over 50ha of the pristine and robust forest. Crops were destroyed, beacons and pillars have been planted in our cocoa farms...Some government officials and chiefs have received brown envelopes to allow this injustice (Interview, 20 August 2012).”

This indigenous landowner and farmer who made the statement quoted above is clearly a moderate. He sees development as progress, as an improvement on the socio-economic wellbeing of members of his community. He is not opposed to development per se, but rather to the tearing down of the pristine forest and the unilateral takeover of native land without consultation and the destruction of crops planted on the land. The view of this local farmer resonates with the discourse of the apparent neglect of local people’s needs by large-scale agro-industrial ventures and conservation organisations. According to Jim Igoe and Dan Brockington, large-scale land grabs for agricultural expansion and conservation take place in territorialised areas that are “trans-nationalised spaces governed according to the needs and agendas of transnational networks of actors and institutions” [Igoe and Brockington, (2007), p.441]. These neoliberal actors include the World Bank, which imposed neoliberal environmental governance on African countries as part of the SAP and Herakles through which World Bank policies promoting economic liberalisation facilitated its entry into Cameroon. While this huge and interconnected network negotiate resource use rights and access at multiple scales – international, regional, national and local, local communities have been drawn “into the market economy through the commodity chain” [Ciccantell and Smith, (2009), p.361; cited in Pemunta, (2016), p.114] as well as into land and natural resource battles that are analogous with colonialism. This network of transnational actors has reinforced broader political and economic structures that have “historically marginalised rural peasants from the sources of their livelihoods” [Corson, (2011), p.707]. Similarly, the territorialised organisation of governance it around national parks or enclosures in the name of agricultural extension continue as significant forces under capitalist production. This is where economic forces materialise territorially into state policies [Brenner and Elden, (2009), p.363; Harvey, 2005, 2003; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Brenner, 1999]. These economic policies are concretised independent of the will of the local community inhabiting the area because of the state’s monopoly over all parcels of land as well as symbolic violence (see Althusser, 1971a).
The World Bank and host country governments in their neoliberal logic point to land grab as a catalyst for development and food self-sufficiency and therefore as a benevolent act. This is the case even when the shady deal in the case of Herakles does not include clauses obliging the investor to sell its produce on the local market. The company plans to export a portion of its projected 400,000 metric tonnes (MT) of crude palm oil and 40,000 MT of palm kernel oil per year while leaving some for domestic consumption in Cameroon ‘depending on market condition’. Despite promises of jobs to many locals, it will be impossible for the company to absorb the entire local labour market. Local and international critics maintain that the projects will likely have a negative net employment impact as thousands of displaced small-scale and subsistence farmers will fail to find work with the company. They further concede that it will instead induce the transformation of small-scale farmers and indigenous communities into low-paid farm workers. Furthermore, some 25,000 people who depend on the land for small-scale food production, hunting and non-timber forest products were risking displacement (IRIN News, 2012).

There are mixed feelings and divergent opinions among locals. While a few expect jobs, most will prefer working on their farms than becoming paid labourers and work for a pittance and under other slave-like conditions. A few respondents even pointed out that they will earn more as small-scale cocoa farmers than as industrial plantation labourers. Herakles Farms proposes unconvincing livelihood alternatives for people who lose their farms and access to the forest (Greenpeace, 2013). The failure by Herakles to comply with standard ESIA procedures and principles put to question its green reputation and credentials as a pro-poor entity (see World Bank, 2014; HKND Group/ERM, 2015). The company’s promises of social infrastructure such as the provision of water and electricity (if there is excess), company housing, schools and roads, are incentives to colonialism. The provision of such facilities is meant to keep workers on site and ensure control over them, transport produce for export and for broadcasting power. It is actually part of a ‘cost-saving surveillance strategy’. Apart from becoming ‘a captive pool of tenants’, “employer-provided housing will guarantee employers with a steady flow of income from rents that will be directly deducted from the employee’s paycheque, thereby nullifying the possibility of default” [Njoh, (2009), p.312].

The neoliberal trilogy of Herakles Farms, the World Bank and the GoC stand by the discursive repertoire intimating that the broken livelihoods and human insecurity engendered by the establishment of palm oil plantations are about development, growth and the provision of employment to the local residents. While Herakles Farms, in particular, employs its rhetoric of being a pro-poor and environmentally friendly consortium that is meeting a ‘dire humanitarian need’, it is wrecking livelihoods – evicting natives and taking over their land without any form of due process as well as destroying crops and desecrating sacred sites. According to anthropologist Joshua Linder of James Madison University who has conducted long-term research in the region, “[The Herakles Farms plantation] is a lose-lose situation. Local people might lose their way of life; while the region’s great biological diversity will be put in great jeopardy” [Greenpeace, (2013), p.14]. The creation of new access routes into the project area poses a significant danger to biodiversity in the surrounding forests, generates new safety and environmental risks and displace hundreds of farmers (25,000 in 31 villages) in one of Cameroon’s poorest regions (Greenpeace, 2013). The project will also lead to extensive drainage of the land and widespread use of agrochemicals that will further
degrade local water resources. Respondents complained and I observed that their eviction from their land was disrupting their forest-based livelihood systems.

“They said they were bringing development to us. We realise that it is about the chopping down of the forest on which our ancestors depended and which is the only source of our livelihood. Is the chopping down of the forest to plant palm trees when we already have enough palm trees really development? Is the taking away of our land and therefore the taking away of our livelihood really about development?” (Esame, Interview of 23 July 2012)

The interview excerpt quoted above is from a conversation with an affected farmer, Esame. According to him, the Herakles plantation engenders environmental degradation. Since the people will loss both their land and forest-based livelihood system, the project is a form of economic erasure. Similarly, the respondent cited below complains of the economic, cultural disruption and loss of identity engendered by eviction and dispossession from ancestral land. The so-called benevolent development is, therefore, tantamount to cultural, social, economic and ecological erasure, showing the entanglement of environmental degradation and poverty [see Sachs, (1995), p.29].

“They are building pillars on people’s land, desecrating graveyards and sacred sites, have already driven us from our homes and arable agricultural land without consultation. They say the government owns both our land and us. They have destroyed cocoa farms and rendered people jobless, are pushing us out of the forest, the very source of our livelihoods and existence bequeathed to us by our ancestors. It seems that it is better to die than to live through this dispossession in the name of development.” (Esengue, Interview of 23 August 2012)

The apparent disjuncture between the eviction and takeover of native land engendered by this project raises the issue of altruism and self-interest that is masked as benevolent capitalism. Herakles is involved in a market transaction in which its investment – politely called development–is offered in exchange for profit [Tiffin and Gilbert, (2008), pp.1–2]. From my observations and interviews, its rhetoric of benevolence and sustainability contrasts sharply with reality on the ground. As Cross (2014, pp.6–7) observes, large-scale infrastructure is “built upon an economy of anticipation […] [for] contemporary capitalism is built upon dreams as well as nightmares.” The local residents decry the seizure of their land (Greenpeace, 2013). This is what Harvey (2005) calls “possession through dispossession.” They pointed to the lack of participatory consultation, which is a clear indication of the use of coercion that contradicts the core principles of a standard ESIA procedure (HKND Group/ERM, 2015; World Bank, 2014). The inhabitants further argued that since they have a historical connection to the land as the home of their ancestors, the project is reminiscent of cultural, socio-economic and ethnic erasure. This contrasts sharply with the view of capitalist development as humanitarianism and meant to pull the poor out of poverty by providing employment opportunities and infrastructure. It instead engenders social and environmental degradation (Escobar, 2009; Turner and Caouette, 2009; Ferguson, 2005, 1994; Della Faille, 2011; Bendix, 2014) depicting that ecological constraints and environmental consequences are a stark testimony of the inability of western capitalist development as a universal gold standard as well as the entanglement between poverty and environmental degradation [Sachs, (1995), p.29]. The Herakles project can, therefore, be said not to be about tackling poverty but rather as having ‘other concrete effects’ [Ferguson, (1994), p.255].
Although the company’s ESIA intimated that subsistence agriculture is the main activity conducted inside its land concession, it downplayed the negative impact of their farm on local livelihoods by describing the land as ‘degraded’ and ‘secondary forest only’\(^4\). This is clearly not the case (Greenpeace, 2013). Despite claims that its project will not displace communities, the contract gives Herakles Farms the exclusive right to farm within the concession as ‘well as to arrest and detain’ any person crossing the concession. This clause is contrary to both national and international laws ratified by Cameroon including the country’s constitution and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. The displacement of impacted populations is a form of ‘involuntary resettlement’ (Greenpeace, 2013; Richards, 2013; Li, 2007). This demonstrates that while both the discourse of benevolent capitalism and the discourse of sustainable development are self-serving, poverty and environmental degradation are intertwined [Sachs, (1995), p.29]. The forceful resettlement engendered by the Herakles project resonates with the situation in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia where in the name of conservation as development, local people were forcefully resettled on less arable land. Apart from exclusion from their land, they also became drawn into the market economy through intensive agricultural production [Li, (2007), p.61]. In the light of widely used international standards such as The Equator Principles, the displacement of impacted populations requires Herakles Farms to pay them adequate compensation for the loss of their farmland and to promote alternative livelihoods activities [see also HKND Group/ERM, (2015), p.2; World Bank, 2014]. Unfortunately, the company’s ESIA contained no compensation plans and weak alternative livelihood programmes (Nguiffo and Watio, 2015). This is another contradiction of internationally recognised standard ESIA procedure (World Bank, 2014).

Displacement and its consequent negative impacts, including loss of livelihood resources, food insecurity, joblessness, homelessness, increased morbidity, marginalisation, community disarticulation, loss of access to common property resources and the pauperisation of local communities [Cernea, (2000), pp.42–43] are evident in places where land has been handed over to investors. The local masses face a new spatial reality and loss of identity because of displacement. Additional burdens stem from contemporary issues that will also threaten the local cultural integrity. This includes ongoing disputes involving property rights, repatriation of sacred artefacts and natural resource management as well as reducing indigenous rights, degrading resource access and increasing cultural conflicts [Richards, (2013), p.7]. Faced with the so-called eight-impoverishment risks that underpin the impoverishment risks and reconstruction (IRR) paradigm [Cernea, (2000), pp.1–2], members of the affected communities are manifesting both individual and collective measures of resistance. Simultaneously, loyalists of the ruling Cameroon Democratic Movement Party (CPDM) are attempting to reap political capital from the Herakles Farm plantation by presenting those with counter-voices (particularly NGOs) as self-interested individuals.

Divisions on political and self-interest grounds are evident in the conflicting and simultaneous narratives pitting sustainable development among some chiefs of the area against the multi-scalar outcry of environmental degradation by local and international NGOs. The former who are mostly members of the ruling CPDM party are supporting the Herakles project out of their political and economic self-interests. Similar to the discourses of these politicians – all people, ‘classes, human groups, have their narratives’ – that depends on their location within the social structure of society [Barthes, (1977), p.79; Işik, 2015]. As reflected in the competing claims over CDC land between
the GoC and the Bakweri ethnic group, these divisions show ‘how even the notions of culture and identity are contested issues’. It also shows the various locations of some political actors and their ambivalence vis-à-vis the state [Pemunta and Fonmboh, (2010), p.45]. Furthermore, it demonstrates how as a multidimensional actor in both its action and intents, the state often uses both coercion and the incorporation of the interests and priorities of particular social actors in the achievement of its hegemonic agenda and projects (Gramsci, 1971). As auxiliaries of the state and purposeful agents, chiefs that support the Herakles Farms land deal in the name of development and as speaking for their people are giving ‘unitary and unifying expression to what is, in reality, multifaceted and differential experiences of groups within society’ [Ong, (2006), p.738]. As citizens, they are constantly making themselves and concomitantly being reconfigured through their relations with the state as well as strategically positioning themselves into particular kinds of relationships with the state by supporting the state’s discourse of development [Pemunta and Fonmboh, (2010), pp.49–5]. This support of the state’s development discourse is what René Lemarchand calls ‘benefit patronage’ (Lemarchand, 1988). Extrapolating from Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, I will call attention to two criteria that are necessary for the subaltern to speak. These are the actual content of the speech and … the question of representation whereby the speaker passes as representative of a particular group and therefore his or her discourse is the basis of the subject’s constitution through a dominant discourse (Spivak, 1988; Butler, 1990). This shows the relationship between discourse and power. Discourse is a medium of power and controlling discourse is also about controlling power (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008). Insofar as people have a contrary voice, they tend to be constructed as a mute category in relation to public discourse and western knowledge claims (Butler, 1990). Here, the pro-establishment chiefs, as potent agents and accessories of the state like other members of the ruling political class claim to be speaking on behalf of their subjects. In reality, they are defending their beneficial interests.

For example, Chief Nobert Nangiya Mbille of Lipenja I and Paramount Ruler of the Batanga people (Ndian Division), challenges the counter-discourses and voices of anti-palm oil campaigners. He pointed out that the latter “are acting out of their self-interest.” Contrary to the transnational alliance of NGOs, he appropriates the state’s vision of development by framing the palm oil project as an act of benevolence. In other words, he packages it as development and poverty alleviation project and not a project that will lead to environmental degradation:

“The fear of these environmental NGOs is that without forest they will have no project to execute in our country and that will mean an end to their mission here. We have given our blessing to the palm oil project because we want development that will eradicate poverty in our community.” (Interview Eva, 22 March 2014)

In the same light, Chief Dr. Atem Ebako of Talangaye disparaged opposition claims thus:

“We are not opposed to any project that brings growth in our area: local indigenous people are sometimes offered drinks and T-shirts with anti-palm oil project slogans written on them, to give the impression that there are protests coming from the local community. This is false and we know the people behind such gimmicks…These NGOs have no right to speak for us because they have never done anything to help our community out of poverty. We need development and we know these plantations are going to bring infrastructural
Both chiefs present the project not in terms of environmental degradation but rather as a benevolent venture that will serve as a catalyst for socio-economic development, growth and the provisioning of infrastructure including schools and hospitals in the community. Environmental NGOs have stakes in and are reportedly only interested in the forest and in the animals, not in the wellbeing of the local community. Through environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and the WWF, neoliberal conservation is a self-interested mechanism of controlling local communities.

Chief Ebako allegedly instructed villagers to be reticent about the project: “to speak to no one about the SGSOC project without his permission and to avoid contact with environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF” [Achobang et al., (2013), p.357]. It is obvious that community representatives are ignoring the wishes of the people. While Chief Ebako and other establishment chiefs are fervent advocates and supporters of the project, their subjects are fiercely opposed to it. As a political actor, Chief Ebako presents the project through the logic and prism of ‘benefit patronage’ (Lemarchand, 1988) – for his selfish political aims. He further presents it as a government project to oblige compliance and silence dissenting voices from within the local community. According to another pro-establishment chief, Oben Nkongho, Herakles Farm has come to fill the investment gap created by Cameroon’s poor business environment and worldwide notoriety for corruption as consistently rated by the German NGO Transparency International. The same situation holds sway in Ayong village where Chief Lordson Asek was co-opted as community development officer by Herakles Farm. He was given the mandate of educating his people, most of whom are fiercely and openly hostile to the project (Ibid).

Figure 3 Nasako Besingi and other activists of SEFE (see online version for colours)

Another supporter of the Herakles project is the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Jean Kuete (2006–2011). He allegedly told a press conference that while palm oil production is significant to the government’s plans for growth and poverty reduction, Cameroon’s infrastructure would benefit from improvements in roads, schools and electricity and health facilities.
“These projects are going to provide indirect employment with an economic multiplier effect, [and] bring more revenue to the state through direct taxes, royalties and utility bills.” (Ibid)

In an op-ed, a US-based native, Dr. Constantine Chienku, questioned why environmental NGOs are “blocking access to healthcare and education in one of the poorest countries in the world.”

“It is an interesting phenomenon that every time a big development project is announced in Cameroon or anywhere in Africa, a large phalanx of environmental movements rears its collective head and starts protesting about the dangers such a project would pose to the environment. Their primary concerns are in the following order: the forests, the animals and at the tail end, the local populations.” (Eva, 2014)

Like other supporters of this neoliberal development, Chienku decries the perking order in which local people come last through fortress conservation that often prioritises the flora and the fauna at the expense of the protection of sources of local livelihood systems. Supposedly aimed at poverty alleviation, environmental NGOs stand accused of blocking the capitalist development of palm oil production. On the contrary, in “The Ndiba 2010 Declaration” (Ngolo Chiefs, 2010) the chiefs of Ngolo like most community members including the Vice President of the opposition social democratic front (SDF) party Joshua Oshie have shown great antipathy towards the Herakles Farm land deal. They point out that it is economically counterproductive to smallholder farmers. In the video The Herakles Debacle (CorpWatch, 2014), Oshie states:

“Plantation jobs have always been modern day slavery. We have seen many industrial plantations develop around these areas and nothing, nothing has happened to the population.”

The protest against the loss of land to plantation or the presence of Herakles is, however, not synonymous with the protest against development per se, but rather with sustainability.

4.2 Challenging the state’s hegemony: can the subaltern speak?

The rhetoric of benevolence is actually a way of silencing the voices of both local and transnational protesters. The duo of Herakles and the GoC justify the land deal between themselves through the neoliberal discourse of the “collective interest racket or the good of all argument” [Pemunta and Fonmboh, (2010), p.49]. This implies that the project will bring about collective benefits including the provision of employment, food security and rural development to the local masses. It is, however, skewed in favour of dominant groups. This makes their neoliberal agenda a governmentality regime as well as a silencing strategy. The state is exercising its hegemony by controlling indigenous people and their environment through the regulation of land use by appropriating the colonial public interest discourse that was operationalised through police power: “the right of whole communities to regulate the use of private property with a view to protecting the interests of the general public” [Njoh, (2009), p.311]. This act of governmentality has generated both individual and collective measures of resistance from below (Scott, 1990; Amoore, 2005; Bernstein and Terence, 2001; Borras et al., 2011). Apart from the failure to consult the local community, by its very nature, power is fragmentary offering both
opportunities for resistance and agency (Foucault, 1976/1998; Ong, 2006; Rose and Miller, 1992).

"The government and Herakles Farms have killed us. Apart from silencing our voices, they have destroyed the very roots of our culture and identity. They have desecrated the graves of our ancestors in the sacred forest. We cannot simply fold our arms like women and watch them zoning out our entire patrimony." (Isselle James, 24 July 2012)

In the interview excerpt cited above, Isselle James, a wealthy local cocoa farmer who lost an estimated 10 ha of land to the Herakles palm oil project vehemently decries what he perceives as the conspiracy between the duo of Herakles and the GoC. The latter are parading their action, which has dispossessed and impoverished him as ‘development’ and therefore meant for the well-being of the people. Eviction from native land clearly implies that even lives are under control (Li, 2007). In reality, eviction from land and sacred sites constitutes cultural erasure because, in the theosophy of the people, land and burial sites symbolise links that they maintain and nurture with their ancestors. The living-dead are believed to influence the daily lives of individuals and the community. This omnipresent link between the worlds of the living and the death is sacrosanct to their existence and identity as a people. In the same light, “Some shrines belong to a family, such as those connected with departed members of the family or their graves. Others belong to the community and these are often in groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, under certain trees and similar places. People respect such places” [Mbiti, (1975), p.9]. He implores members of his community to rise up alongside the dense network of national and transnational NGOs opposed to this project in protest to protect their culture and their land.

Even in a context where relative political space exists for global organising, the Herakles Farms plantation project has been vigorously opposed by a network of international civil society, academic think-tanks and development; Global Justice Ecology Project, Greenpeace International and the Oakland Institute among others (see Greenpeace, 2013). The various acts of resistance by these organisations and the local masses constitute what Scott (1990) would variously call ‘public transcripts’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ as ‘Weapons of the Weak against domination’. The ensuing cacophonies of disenchanted voices that have gone viral on the internet (‘public transcripts’) (Scott, 1990) are directed at Herakles Farms, the World Bank and the GoC. Both the oppressed and the oppressor are, therefore, using the tools provided by neoliberal capitalism especially audiovisual media to state their competing positions and claims to reality. While the indigenous population is also using the media to voice their claims and expose the devastating consequences of this land grab on local livelihood systems, the troika is also appropriating the same media to give a semblance of truth to its action as development and as a form of charity. Both natives and transnational NGOs are increasingly using these tools to resist Western intrusion and the takeover of native lands in the name of development as benevolence (Turner and Caouette, 2009; Cernea, 2000).

The GoC has responded to various counter voices – forms of individual and collective protests – by displaying an arsenal of ‘symbolic violence’ (Althusser, 1971b). These repressive measures include the corruption of local decision-makers, intimidation and the use of brute force, the outright arrest and subsequent imprisonment, usually without due process, of local activists to thwart resistance from below. Nasako Besingi and four other Cameroonian advocates of SEFE were jailed incommunicado for three days in November.
Furthermore, on 3 November 2015, Nasako was handed a heavy 3-year imprisonment sentence as well as a fine of 1 million CFA (circa USD, 2000) for allegedly defaming Herakles Farms. He was also ordered to pay damages of 10 million CFA Francs (c. 20,000 USD) to the two civil parties and costs of about 200,000 CFA Francs (400 USD) to the court. (Interpress Service News Agency Monday, 7 October 2013).

Similarly, Samuel Nguiffo, Secretary General of CED is facing trumped up charges for allegedly ‘tarnishing the state’s reputation’. The real crime of these activists is their open advocacy against the Herakles Farms oil palm plantation and their insistence that the GoC lives up to its international obligations towards the protection of indigenous communities as enshrined in international treaties that the state has ratified. The transnational networks of local and international NGOs opposing Herakles actions represent the competing perspective between national and international law. The GoC has deployed unorthodox tactics aimed at stifling individual and collective measures of resistance. This dovetails with Gramsci’s observation that “the ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony is characterised by the combination of force and consent, in variable equilibrium, without force predominating too much over consent … [But] between force and consent stands corruption-fraud, that is the enervation and paralysing of the antagonist or antagonists” [Gramsci, (1975), p.1638; Turner and Caouette, 2009].

5 Conclusions

The particularity of the Herakles Farms project to processes of benevolent capitalism is its location in the evergreen forest of Southwest Cameroon where the convergence of export-oriented agriculture and environmental protection measures – the ‘neoliberalisation of nature’) (Igoe and Brockington, 2007) since colonial times – (German, British and French colonial eras) – is topical amidst widespread poverty. Although reputed for its huge natural resource wealth, the region ironically lacks infrastructure and its population suffers from abject poverty.

The concurrent perspectives between partisans and those opposed to the Herakles palm oil plantation project attest to the fact that knowledge assumes the existence of multiple realities – voices and narratives that are socially constructed by various social actors. “Reality is interpreted from the standpoint of a knower” [IŞik, (2015), p.120] – a knower that is located within the social structure of society. The interpretation process is creative and value laden and research unearth how meanings are created within specific interactional, institutional and political contexts (Merrigan and Huston, 2004; IŞik, 2015) that reflect class divisions, exclusions/inclusions, social structure, community life and identity.

The neoliberal alliance – largely comprised of partisans of the project (Herakles Farm, the World Bank, GoC and their local allies of pro-establishment chiefs) ignore the wishes of their people who decry the harmful environmental consequences, the land and the home loss engendered by this development as also pointed out by national/local and international NGOs. The former support the project because of their self-interests. The positionality of the neoliberal alliance in fostering economic growth against the need for a sustainable environment as well as neoliberal conservation and export-oriented agriculture against local food security and community rights echoes the view of benevolent capitalism as a donor-driven process where the needs and agendas of corporate actors take precedence [Igoe and Brockington, (2007), p.441]. It emphasises
modernisation and technology transfer as a way of ensuring the domination of local people. It further buttresses the superiority of Western science and technology as a means of domest icating the local environment [Jarosz, 1992; Li, 2007; Mills, (2007), p.24; cf. Della Faille, (2010), p.224; Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2002; Ferguson, 1994]. Multiple violations of both national and international law – including the displacement of communities without appropriate compensation or a culturally desired resettlement plan and sustainable alternative livelihood activities. Both sets of discourses analysed in this paper converge around the entanglement of poverty and environmental degradation imposed by neoliberal capitalist development ventures such as the Herakles Farms plantation project that are framed as acts of benevolence whereas they entail socio-economic, political and cultural erasure to the local masses who have been duped by Herakles.

An evaluation of the project by Greenpeace Africa demonstrates that after three years, it has been ‘a cemetery of broken promises’. For example, villages whose customary lands were included in the concession have witnessed little or no social investments. Herakles has neither constructed schools nor hospitals. The corporation has neither provided water nor electricity to these villages. Contrary to its promise to create 8,000 jobs in 2012 when fully operational, by October 2016, ‘it employed only a couple of hundred people’ and provided limited or non-existent employment in the majority of villages. The corporation also unilaterally and without due procedure terminated dozens of employees before their term and with neither notice nor compensation [Greenpeace, (2016), p.1]. The project is not about local food security. It is rather about the production of export-oriented cash crops, especially the production of foodstuff and biofuels. It is actually about the control of native populations and their natural resources and consequently, the curtailment of customary ownership rights (see Cotula, (2016); Turner and Caouette, 2009; Harvey, 2005).

Covert and overt resistance (Scott, 1990) by the local masses does not constitute opposition to development per se. Rather, it is the devastating environmental and socio-economic impact of the project and the representation of local people as objects of development – people that are ‘lacking’, ‘deficient’ and need to be acted upon through benevolence that constitutes the most disturbing issues. This representation resonates with the view that development discourse serves in constructing the ‘recipients as objects of intervention’ without harping on macro-structural, political issues such as the partition of the world into ‘developers’ (Herakles Farms) and those to be ‘developed’ (the local community) (see Said, 1994). The project resonates with postcolonial critiques that question the possibility of the ‘noble’ principles of benevolence in the context of colonial discourses that perpetuate western superiority and politico-economic inequalities [Baaz, 2005; Noxolo, 2006; Cooke/Kothari, 2001; as cited in Bendix, (2014), p.30].

For indigenous landowners, while dreams of development involve access to local services including electricity and the creation of jobs, their accounts of what the plantation actually entails revolve around broken livelihoods and tropes of environmental destruction and erasure (see Cross, 2014; Della Faille, 2011; Gardner et al., 2014; Baylouny, 2010). The best way of ensuring social justice, equity and sustainability are to empower local people to negotiate land deals with transnational corporations as well as to institute and implement laws that recognise customary land rights. The paper, therefore, articulates the need for equity in capitalist development schemes and for the institutionalisation of laws that will restore customary land rights.
References


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Notes

1 They are not considered as a specific people with internationally recognized inalienable human rights but rather as just one among the many ethnicities that comprise Cameroon.

2 Literary devices definition and examples of literary terms [online] https://literarydevices.net/voice/.


4 Article xxi–xxiii of Establishment Convention.