

An investigation into the stakeholders' consultations for agroindustry's RSPO certification: The case of Safacam in Cameroon, conducted by SCS Global Services. February 2021, Guy Patrice Dkamela
Summary by Milieudéfensie, April 2021

The Milieudéfensie-commissioned research was conducted from December 2020 to January 2021. It documented the RSPO certification process and analysed the quality of the audit and consultation process for Safacam in Cameroon. The researcher analysed documents and conducted interviews and focus-group discussions with key resource persons, community members and representatives from four villages affected by Safacam plantations (Dikola, Koungué Somsè, Koungué Lac Ossa and Nséppé Elog-Ngango), civil society and community-based organisations. Safacam engaged in the RSPO certification process in 2018 and was awarded the RSPO certificate on December 30, 2020.¹

RSPO-PRO-T01-002 V2.0 (2017)²: RSPO certification systems for principles and criteria.
ON PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS (ARTICLE 4.6.1)

1. Did SCS Global Services (SCS) respect requirements for the timing of the announcement and invitations to stakeholders?

The announcement of the consultation was posted online on the RSPO website, only in English and not in French, which is an official language in Cameroon and most commonly used in the plantation area. The announcement was not actively shared by SCS or Socfin with all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, international, local and national stakeholders did not have access to the notification or the opportunity to provide relevant information for SCS to plan the audit and inform the assessment.

RSPO-PRO-T01-002 V2.0 (2017): RSPO certification systems for principles and criteria.
ON STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION (ARTICLE 4.6.3)

2. Did SCS consult all relevant stakeholders and identify all relevant information to assess compliance? Did it include all information in the public summary report?

Three villages were selected for participation in the field audit and received an invitation from Safacam a week before the consultation session. A limited number of community members took part in the audit for several reasons, including availability and lack of time to prepare and organise the subgroups. The agenda for the meeting was not known to the communities. One riparian village was not invited, potentially because of its conflict with Safacam over the validity of its land title since 2008. In one village, community members stated they were not represented by their legitimate leadership. Community representatives who regularly issue criticism about the company, claim they were not included in the consultation. Also, women and farmers could not make the day and hour for the one-hour consultation session, for which the schedule was presented and perceived as non-negotiable. Another village refused to take part and sent away the audit team because of lack of trust in the independence and transparency of the process as well as grievances with Safacam. One community-based organisation that regularly files grievances about the company was not invited to the consultation. Community members also reported that consultation fatigue and lack of trust in the village leadership and company processes led to very low levels of participation in the RSPO consultation process.

Communities reported on various grievances and potential non-compliances with RSPO principles and criteria, which were not covered in the public summary report. Amongst others, these included water pollution, unfulfilled commitments to social projects such as electricity, health, distribution of oil palm seedlings, education, water and road building, unemployment, collection of palm nuts and the creation of new villages on customary lands.

3. Did SCS provide a safe space for stakeholders, guaranteeing confidentiality, and facilitate comments from stakeholders?

The invitations for the consultation to the communities were sent by Safacam. The audit team travelled in Safacam vehicles and was accompanied by Safacam staff, who (in one case) left the consultation space before it started. For one village, the lack of independence of the audit led them to send the audit team away.

¹ https://www.socfin.com/sites/default/files/2021-01/2025%2012%2029_Safacam_RSPO_CRT_P%26C_2020%2012%2030_1.pdf for the period 30/12/2020 – 29/12/2025 (Certificate number: SCS-RSPOPC-000177).

² The audit took place before the new version of the Standard for Certification Systems was approved in November 2020.

Two community representatives say they were strongly challenged by Safacam management about the exact wording and statements they made during the consultation audit. This was experienced as intimidation. It raises questions about the independence of SCS, because Safacam should not have access to statements from stakeholders during consultation sessions. One village chief did not want to say anything critical about the company to the audit team for fear of reprisal and being seen as “rebel” or a “detractor.” Community representatives also complained about their lack of knowledge about RSPO. Safacam organises sessions about RSPO, but these are focussed on getting agreement from the communities to be positive about Safacam practices, including during the audits. Village chiefs also stated they are under pressure from the sub-divisional officer to sign the RSPO-related documents, such as the dispute settlement, even if they do not agree. There is a complex power relation between the local administration, the village chiefs and the company. The village chiefs feel pressure from the administration to agree, or they choose to work voluntarily with the company, even if this is against the interests of their communities.

RSPO-PRO-T01-002 V2.0 (2017): RSPO certification systems for principles and criteria.
ON LAND DISPUTES (ARTICLE 4.6.4)

4. Did SCS review whether oil palm operations have been established in areas which were previously owned by other users and/or are subject to customary rights of local communities and indigenous peoples? Did it consult directly with all of these parties to assess whether land transfers and/or land use agreements have been developed with their free, prior and informed consent and check compliance with the specific terms of such agreements?

At least three land conflicts are current in the area, and seem not be taken into account by SCS, as they were not reported in the public summary, even though involved communities were on the auditors’ stakeholder list. Safacam is perceived by communities to use “divide and rule” tactics, for example between the chiefs who receive individual benefits and the broader community, which complains about lack of participation and transparency in decisions over their land. In one case, two villages are in conflict over illegal encroachment by Safacam of their lands. Communities have been waiting for more than seven years for a formal committee from the Sanaga maritime department that should be formed to measure their land. One community with a long-lasting land conflict over the validity of the Safacam land title (originally from 1956) was not invited to the audit. Past injustices, from the colonial era, are not reported on by SCS, while these are the root of the problem and are still perceived as injustices by communities until today.

Research conclusions:

The research findings indicate that several articles in the RSPO Standard on Certification Systems for Principles and Criteria have been violated by SCS during the Safacam consultation and audit process. The announcement was not made in the appropriate language, communities and subgroups in communities were not able to join the consultation or were not invited in the first place. As a result, SCS did not plan or execute the audit to ensure it gathered evidence from relevant stakeholders on all relevant issues. Important information to investigate for potential non-compliances against the RSPO Principles and Criteria was not taken into account. Various land disputes as described by the community members in great detail were not assessed by the auditors. Those land conflicts and other grievances were not included in the SCS RSPO public summary audit report. The independence of the audit was questioned by communities during the audit itself, and at least two community members reported on intimidation by Safacam related to the audit. Confidentiality and a safe space for community members in the consultation process, were not achieved.

In our view, the audit was a tick-the-box exercise that does not reflect reality and the positive certification decision for Safacam is unfounded.