

The Socfin RSPO complaints process: paperwork versus reality

On 3 March 2022, Assurance Services International (ASI) [published](#) the long awaited outcome of our complaint. Milieudefensie filed the complaint against the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification body SCS Global Services after local researchers and civil society [documented](#) various missteps in the certification process of Socfin plantations in Cameroon, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. Socfin is one of the biggest plantation companies in Africa with over [90.000 hectares planted](#). Their certifications are clear examples of the RSPO shortcomings. Issues related to landgrabbing, criminalisation of human rights defenders, under-aged labor, sexual harassment, pollution, deforestation and labour rights violations in the Socfin plantations have been widely published¹.

The outcome of the complaint process is weak. Civil society and affected communities want the RSPO certificates to be canceled, which did not happen. ASI determined only one finding upon which SCS has to act: the lack of social expertise in the audit team in Nigeria. This is a crucial finding, because the complex land rights conflicts, security issues, criminalisation of human rights defenders and militarization of the plantation area warrant proper consultation with affected communities.

Rita Uwaka, coordinator of the Friends of the Earth Africa Forest & Biodiversity campaign: ‘Communities in the Socfin plantations in Nigeria are struggling to survive and maintain their livelihoods. Their main roads are blocked by company security, much of their land has been taken without consent or compensation, women are not allowed to fish, resistance has been met with intimidation and aggression amidst divide and rule tactics. The whole area is militarised. The concessions are in a forest reserve next to a national park, with huge impacts on its biodiversity. How can a team of external auditors come in, talk for a few hours with some people and promptly deliver a so-called ‘sustainability’ certificate from RSPO?’

ASI also determined that field assessments are needed in Nigeria, Cameroon and Ivory Coast to conclude on the complaint. ASI will investigate the lack of consultation of communities with land rights conflicts and the failure to include concerns about environmental and social harms. Communities and civil society at the plantation sites will continue to monitor these next steps, but in our view this is an insufficient determination, because convincing evidence was already provided. Communities in [Cameroon](#), [Ivory Coast](#) and [Sierra Leone](#) have publicly demanded cancellation of the certificates.

A huge gap exists between the RSPO standard, which has several strong social and environmental principles, and the reality in the plantations. Structural weaknesses in the certification process have been identified by many organisations². Not in the least because the certification body is hired and payed by the company it certifies, which greatly undermines its independence. Other structural weaknesses are lack of time for proper stakeholder consultation, over-reliance on company data, lack of expertise in audit teams, failure to include civil society and community evidence and failure to provide a secure environment for consultations in high risk plantations.

Danielle van Oijen, forest program coordinator at Milieudefensie says: ‘The whole complaint process felt like walking into a wall over and over again. Questions were not answered and evidence and statements from the community and local researchers were not taken seriously. How can ASI claim audits were independent from the company? Company staff and communities state that company translators were indeed present during the consultation sessions in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. And in Cameroon one village send the audit team away because it arrived with the company cars and staff. If the audit team does not even speak with communities that lost their land and are in conflict with the company, how can it determine that Socfin complies with land rights principles in the RSPO standard?’

Socfin is in a hurry to get RSPO certified, a precondition for continued support from financiers. We believe one of the tactics used to speed up the RSPO certification is to limit the audits to parts of the plantations. We find this goes against the rules, but RSPO secretariat or ASI are not responding to our concerns. Why is Socfin allowed to leave out parts of the plantation from the audits with large scale deforestation (São Tomé), a court case on land

1 See for example: <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/11/at-a-certified-palm-oil-plantation-in-nigeria-soldiers-and-conflict-over-land/> , <https://www.fian.be/Landgrabbing-by-SOCFIN-in-Sierra-Leone-documentation?lang=fr> , <https://www.rtbf.be/article/belfius-huile-de-palme-mineurs-exploites-et-pollution-dans-un-fonds-durable-10493768?id=10493768> , <https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-africa-stateless/2018/10/763a57cf-763a57cf-brief-liberia-cameroun-version-finale.pdf>

2 See: <https://eia-international.org/news/palm-oil-watchdogs-sustainability-guarantee-is-still-a-destructive-con/> , https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2021/04/b1e486be-greenpeace-international-report-destruction-certified_finaloptimised.pdf and <https://en.milieudefensie.nl/news/palm-oil-certification-not-out-of-the-woods.pdf>

and other conflicts (Nigeria) and community grievances on land and environmental harms (Ivory Coast, Cameroon). Furthermore, the certification body has to assess all uncertified management units against minimum criteria. To avoid that a company can get a certificate for one unit, but violates core RSPO principles in another plantation. This review was not executed properly.

More information:

Complaint outcome: <https://www.asi-assurance.org/s/complaints>

Background to the complaint: <https://en.milieudedefensie.nl/news/palm-oil-certification-not-out-of-the-woods.pdf>

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