



Yaounde, Mbongo, Amsterdam, Zurich, Villeurbanne, Paris, Brussels

26 August 2022

To whom it may concern,

The RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) commissioned Assurance Services International (ASI) for a verification mission to investigate allegations in two media articles from WRM (World Rainforest Movement) in [July 2020](#) and Deutsche Welle in [January 2021](#) on the practices of Socapalm in its plantations in Cameroon. Before and after these articles were published, affected communities issued various grievances, related to lack of living space, land conflicts, pollution, labor rights, harassment and violence. Despite these grievances, several of the Socfin concession areas have received the RSPO label in 2020 and 2021. With communities publicly resisting these certifications in response in [Sierra Leone](#), [Cameroon](#) and [Ivory Coast](#).

Our NGOs are working with communities affected by Socapalm plantations. Together we analysed [the RSPO verification assessment](#) letter and we note the following:

**1. The verification assessment shows why Socapalm plantations should not be certified.** With gaps detected in their FPIC (Free Prior and Informed Consent), grievances, sexual harassment and other violence and pollution practices and policies, it again becomes clear that Socapalm does not live up to RSPO standards.

**2. Some of the findings do not align with community and civil society observations:**

- RSPO concludes that land ownership is sufficiently demonstrated. Various communities claim that their customary rights are violated. According to Synaparcam, examples are Apou'A Ngock, Ongue, Koukoueh, Dehane, Pongou aviation, Lendi, Kolbonda, Mbonjo 1 et 2, Bonassama, Souza, Bonaberi Souza. When Socfin took over the plantation, [FPIC processes were not followed](#). This provides for a toxic cocktail of ongoing land conflicts, aggravated by the failure of the government to retrocede 20.000 hectares of land to communities and the failure of the company to provide transparency on paper and clear pillars in the field on the boundaries of the plantation;

- the MINDCAF (Ministry of State Property and Land Tenure) project of participatory land mapping finds that Socapalm has encroached on village land. This confirms claims from villages that were not recognized by Socapalm. It is unclear if these lands are returned to the villages or not;

- other MINDCAF findings are contested by some villages. In February 2021, two communities in the Edea area wrote to the CONAC (National Anti-Corruption Commission) president that they do not accept the outcomes. Why did the RSPO fail to include this in the verification assessment letter?

- other communities contest that the process was participative and 'a clear report is available on site' as the RSPO verification assessment letter claims;

- the conclusion from MINDCAF - and apparently agreed to by Socfin - is that a band of one kilometer around villages is destined for living space. But this area is by far not sufficient to provide for livelihoods of affected communities now and in the future. The population in the area is growing, partly because of influx of immigrant workers and living space is insufficient. Also, it is not clear what happens to the Socfin plantation sites that already encroached in those living spaces. [Cases abound](#) where palm trees are planted up to the level of houses of community members;

- [women regularly report](#) on a climate of fear in the plantation areas. With G4S, Africa Security, the police, military and village security teams present in the plantation areas, the power relations are uneven and women live in constant fear. Also, prostitution has increased as an impact of the plantation development. Women explain they sometimes have to resort to it to have the possibility of accessing the guarded plantations, in order to meet their needs and those of their families;

- the RSPO verification assessment letter says that Socapalm provides potable water to those communities whose water is polluted or not available, because of the Socapalm plantation business. However, various communities claim this is not continuously available, but definitely when auditors pass by there will be water provided;

- not all communities have access to gardens, and it is unclear when this will be the case.

### **3. The process is unclear:**

- several civil society organisations provided information and evidence to substantiate allegations. Community members spoke with the ASI assessors. This information is not well included in the RSPO letter. There is no proper feedback loop from the mission;

- the letter is in English while most of the affected communities speak french and cannot read the RSPO letter in English, but RSPO did not provide a french translation;

- communities and civil society organisations do not understand why the RSPO chose to limit research on the allegations in the two media reports on Cameroon. In Cameroon, but also in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Nigeria allegations have been issued through abundant media reports, civil society or community communications;

- most importantly, it is unclear if the quarterly reports from Socapalm on the recommendations will be made public or if affected communities and civil society is consulted on the progress reports.

**4. We received reports that one community member in the Mbambou area was intimidated** when Socapalm staff payed him a visit because of his testimonies during the RSPO verification assessment mission. They reportedly said that he will be arrested for telling lies.

### **Given these observations, we request that:**

1. based on the outcomes of the verification mission, the Socfin certifications should be canceled in Cameroon, but also in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Ivory Coast since Socfin violates minimum requirements (see 5.5 Minimum requirements for multiple management units in RSPO-PRO-T01-002 V3 ENG);

2. the Socfin quarterly progress reports for the RSPO Compliance Sub-Division have to be made public and they need to be checked with affected communities and civil society;

3. other allegations, including the body of evidence send to the certification bodies by civil society, should be independently verified as well;

4. the reports on sexual harassment and other violence should be evaluated in the context of a climate of fear. This is a systemic problem. It should be eradicated at the roots, meaning that

security and military presence needs to be addressed, rather than only following the RSPO recommendation of sensitising the staff and communities.

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