

Position statement

12/09/2022

On 25 August 2022, the NGO Milieudefensie published a [letter](#), which was included in the [article](#) recently published by Mongabay, questioning the RSPO certification obtained by Socapalm for its palm oil plantations in Cameroon and raising serious allegations against our commitment to the responsible management of our activities.

We regret that the organizations involved with this letter did not look into actual facts that would clearly demonstrate the strict implementation of our commitments and monitoring systems. Our activities on the ground are always conducted in transparency with the objective to support long-term development while empowering and protecting communities' rights, quality of life and the environment in and around our plantations.

We would therefore like to provide answers to the allegations made in this publication.

1. Socapalm is committed to the RSPO standard and respects its Principles and Criteria as well as all the processes required for the certification of its operations. Socapalm worked with two certification bodies accredited by Assurance Services International (ASI) and recognised by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) itself. The RSPO certifications obtained for our plantations are the result of field investigations consisting of visits and physical controls of the company's operations, interviews with workers, meetings with local communities and stakeholders, and documents reviews. The auditors conducted their mission on all our certified sites without bias and in an impartial and independent manner. Socapalm thoroughly implements the certification body's recommendations to ensure that it is producing a sustainable palm oil and to respect the RSPO standard's high requirements.

Regular monitoring audits (both internal and external) are conducted on the plantations to ensure continuous and long-term compliance with the RSPO certification's policies and procedures, as well as to assess the implementation of environmental and social management systems.

2. It is of paramount importance for Socapalm to respect its contractual engagement with the State of Cameroon, as well as to maintain good neighbourly relations with the communities living in and around the plantations. The State of Cameroon created Socapalm in 1968 and the state-owned company developed its oil palm plantations between 1968 and 1999. Due to the local socio-economic context, a privatisation process was initiated and became effective in June 2000, when the Socfin Group acquired Socapalm. The company operates on land that remains the sole property of the State of Cameroon through a 60-year lease. The initial lease area was 78 529 hectares but it is important to note that this lease was re-evaluated in 2005, and an area of 20 466 hectares was returned to the State of Cameroon, its legal owner.

Since 2019, Socapalm participates in a process of field verification of the concession conducted by the State through the MINDCAF - Ministry of Domains, Cadastre, and Land Affairs. This inventory, requested by Socapalm, is conducted in a participatory manner comprising of consultations with the local communities on all of our plantations, and still requires, in some cases, the installation or densification of boundary markers. This process contributes to:

- Clarifying land use and possible land encroachment from any party;
- Improving the relations with neighbouring communities;
- Reducing the surface under the lease agreement between Socapalm and the State, where necessary.

Evidence of the active participation from the local communities in the process is documented through minutes of meetings.

Contrary to the information presented in the letter from Milieudefensie, the proposition of a one-kilometre band to be kept as living space around community villages has not been agreed on by Socapalm.

3. Socapalm applies a zero-tolerance approach on harassment and violence against women. We have thus developed a strict policy on the prevention of sexual harassment and other forms of harassment and violence in the workplace. It applies to all direct and indirect employees of Socapalm: our own workforce, subcontractors and their teams, temporary workers, and security personnel. This policy is communicated, explained and displayed as per an annual training calendar validated by the General Manager. Random interviews of workers are organized continuously to assess the efficiency of our sensitization methodology and to ensure that the contents of our policies are understood by all in the appropriate language.

For every suspected violation of the policy, Socapalm carries out an impartial investigation with, if requested, the respect of the anonymity of the complainant, through the Gender Committee. When necessary, the relevant local authorities are involved. All evidences and reports of such violations have been provided with transparency to the RSPO assessors. This is clearly demonstrated in the letter from the RSPO secretariat published on 15 July 2022, which presents the results of the verification assessment. The letter, cited by Milieudefensie, details documented cases of misconduct that have been reported to Socapalm. It clearly shows that these cases have been fully investigated and that severe sanctions were taken when required.

4. Socapalm is committed to protect its natural environment and has established systems to ensure its potential environmental impacts are prevented and mitigated. As such, Socapalm was the first oil palm plantation in Central Africa to receive the ISO 14001 certification for its environmental management system. Environmental and social impact studies were completed on all of our industrial sites and appropriate environmental and social management plans are implemented. These plans are duly approved and monitored by the competent authorities. In addition to the annual RSPO audit, government authorities (including the Ministry of the Environment, Industry, and Agriculture) also carry out quarterly audits.

It is important to note that the water discharged by the oil mills does not contain any chemical products; it only requires treatment to reduce its organic load through a system of effluent ponds. A company technician is in charge of following a list of quality parameters from these effluents to ensure that potential discharges from the systems do not affect the local environment and comply with legal requirements. A certified laboratory regularly tests the water treated through the effluent ponds systems, as well as samples collected upstream and downstream.

To go even beyond Cameroon's legislative requirements, studies conducted in 2018 and 2019 have also identified HCV (High Conservation Value) areas, including important water systems and riparian areas around watercourses. Management plans have been developed to ensure these areas are safeguarded following recommendations from international experts and approved by the RSPO.

Results of these studies and results of water tests are communicated with the local communities.

In addition, Socapalm contributes to providing safe drinking water for community villages. This action takes place through the installation and maintenance of water wells and with the distribution of water in villages using tankers.

To conclude, we want to emphasise that Socapalm is committed to develop a responsible tropical agriculture. We strive for our operations to benefit all: our employees, smallholders and communities, by improving their livelihood and protecting their environment.

[Click here](#) for more information on Socapalm's commitment to sustainable development.