

RSPO certificate for Socfin in Sierra Leone despite blatant land conflict

Freetown, Brussels, Amsterdam [18 March 2022] - The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certified the Socfin subsidiary in Sierra Leone in January 2022, in spite of numerous land conflicts, violence against human rights defenders and grievances on pollution and other forms of environmental harm from affected communities. This certification is next in line of a number of highly controversial certifications of the SOCFIN group in Nigeria, Cameroon and Ivory Coast. RSPO is totally biased in favor of the industry and is not fit for purpose to guarantee sustainability and respect for human rights in palm oil supply chains.

The RSPO¹ consultation process was riddled with missteps. Relevant stakeholders, including affected landowners, were not consulted. A crucial [government report](#) that orders revocation of the principal lease and a participative process to solve the current land disputes was rejected as evidence. The audits were not independent from the company and a safe space for consultation was not provided despite the huge risks of reprisals for people.

Since 2011, this subsidiary (SAC) of the multinational company SOCFIN has acquired more than 18,000 hectares of land for an industrial palm oil plantation in the Malen Chiefdom (Pujehun district, Southern Sierra Leone). From the beginning, communities have denounced this acquisition as pure land grabbing which was done without their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). Since then, a land conflict has raged between SOCFIN, the local authorities and the communities. Although, under local and international pressure and with the aim of obtaining their labels, SAC has improved some practices, the [land conflict is still not resolved](#) nor the [negative impacts on local communities](#). A [peace building project by UNDP](#) is still running, proving that the conflict still needs to be addressed.

The communities of Malen learned in September 2020 that auditors were coming for a certification audit. During the consultation process, local communities and numerous civil society organizations provided the auditors from the certification body, SCS Global Services (SCS), with evidence that SOCFIN's practices go against the principles and criteria of the RSPO.

After communities in Sierra Leone [denounced the certification process](#), civil society organized an [investigation](#) and filed a formal complaint against SCS. Among grave irregularities and shortcomings, the public summary of the audit report fails to mention the ongoing criminalization of Malen land defenders. Eighteen of them were still facing court at the time of the field audit, before being released for lack of evidence in December 2020, after more than a year of proceedings. These arbitrary arrests and prosecutions followed [new riots in the SOCFIN plantation](#), which resulted in the death of two villagers and which were brutally repressed by security forces with the logistical support of SOCFIN. This is only the latest event in a long series of acts of criminalization against land rights defenders from MALOA (Malen Land Owners and Users Association). This criminalization has been regularly denounced by local civil society as well as international human rights organizations and [UN experts](#). "How can auditors certify a

¹ The RSPO has the dual purpose of guiding consumer choice and maximising corporate profits. Created in 2004 by the major players in the palm oil industry with a handful of environmental NGOs, the label presents itself as the sector's key self-regulation instrument. The label developed a set of environmental and social criteria which companies are supposed to comply with. The absence of land conflicts and the respect of FPIC are one of RSPO's fundamental criteria.

palm oil plantation affecting more than 32,000 people, in less than 10 days and by consulting only hand-picked representatives for a few hours?” asks Aminata Fabba, one of the community spokespersons from MALOA. She recently received the [Front Line Defenders Award](#) in late December 2021, for continuing her fight for her land occupied by SOCFIN despite the pressures, intimidation and physical and judicial attacks she has endured. "There was a clear conflict of interest at play when the SCS auditors were provided with vehicle and translator by the company to carry out their independent duty," said Member of Parliament Shiaka Sama, advisor and former spokesman of MALOA.

“The audit report granting the grail to SOCFIN is marred by obvious irregularities and unfounded assessments which should have prevented a certification. SAC is even allowed to derogate from the RSPO requirements and to restore hundreds of hectares of destroyed environment for the plantation development in another country. While these areas are of importance to local biodiversity and livelihoods, the loss is felt more in the host communities”, explains Joseph Rahall from Green Scenery. In total contradiction to the RSPO criteria and rules of procedure, the report voluntarily discards the records documenting the land conflict still present on the plantation. “It even claims that we are represented by the chiefs of our choosing, but town and section chiefs who questioned the company have been deposed and others arbitrarily appointed by the Paramount Chief without any elections for over 10 years now” adds District Councillor Francis Mannah. Mannah’s claim is very current and has recently been relayed to the President of Sierra Leone, in a [letter sent by MALOA](#). The same letter is asking the President to respect his promises and launch the dialogue led by the Vice-President to resolve the age-old land conflict. This is in contradiction to the RSPO report claiming that there is no conflict in Malen Chiefdom.

The SOCFIN group seems to be in a hurry to get each of its African subsidiaries certified in order to maintain and extend its finance and market share, and green its image. Following other unjustified certifications of the group's plantations in 2021, affected communities in [Cameroon](#) and [Ivory Coast](#) demand the RSPO certification be undone.

Affected communities, and the civil society organisations supporting them, are calling on RSPO to immediately withdraw the certification. Florence Kroff from FIAN Belgium explains: “We call upon European and other policy makers to acknowledge the inability of voluntary certification systems to truly assess complex social, sociological and environmental situations and identify significant harms”. We need effective binding regulation that sanctions companies that violate human rights and harm the environment at all levels. But she warns also that “It would be extremely dangerous to use such voluntary certifications as a model for future legislation, [currently under discussion at EU level](#) and in the Member States. The Socfin case is a further glaring example of how inappropriate this is”.

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This press release is supported by the following organisations: MALOA - Malen Land Owners and Users Association; Green Scenery; Network Movement for Justice and Development; Center for Democracy and Human Rights, United for the Protection of Human Rights [From Sierra Leone]; FIAN Belgium; Milieudefensie - Friends of the Earth Netherlands [From Europe]



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For more information see:

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- MALOA, [Letter to the President, Failure of the Malen Chiefdom land crisis mediation led by Vice President Dr. Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh](#), 22 February 2022.
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<https://corporatejustice.org/publications/unpacking-the-upcoming-eu-law-to-stop-corporate-abuse/>