



Friday, 19 February 2016

Right to reply:

Weekly news from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre

Sierra Leone's Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Socfin Agricultural Company (Socfin Group) concerning the abuses committed, since 2013, by 6 persons (oil palm damaging) in its plantation. It is regrettable that certain organisations interpret this as a lack of independence on behalf of Sierra Leone's judicial institutions, which in their daily work, contribute to their country's development.

As a reminder, the Socfin Group has been managing and developing agro-industrial plantations in Africa and Asia for more than a century. The Group's professional know-how and understanding of enclosed regions, provides it with the recognized experience in managing relations with local communities surrounding the plantations. Various development project, in partnership with local communities, have been successful.

Through the Socfin Group, more than 50.000 smallholders work in collaboration with the industrial plantations.

- *What does this consist of?*

When a plantation is developed, a villager, who planted his fields, has the free choice between either : keeping his land and receiving a compensation for his crops or becoming a rubber or oil palm smallholder and entering into a win-win partnership with the plantation.

A smallholder benefits from the technical assistance offered by the plantation : supply of selected planting material, technical consults related to the maintenance of his plot and a guaranteed purchase of his production at market price.

In other words, the set up of an agro-industrial project entails an economic development of remote regions. The construction and maintenance of access roads open up the region to commerce and facilitate the distribution of local produce, in turn creating markets for the purchase of inputs, indirect job opportunities and educational and sanitary infrastructure etc.

In conclusion, the creation of an agro-industrial project together with a network of smallholder plantations, is an unexpected opportunity in these isolated regions.

Concerning the project in Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone's Minister of Agriculture, after having visited the LAC plantation (Socfin) in Liberia in 2009, decided to call on the Socfin Group to develop a project in his country. The objectives of the Minister of Agriculture were to decrease the country's dependence on the import of staple commodities and to modernise agricultural techniques.

Subsequently, a process of upward dialogue was embarked upon together with all stakeholders : farmers, landlords, traditional and community chiefs. A green belt is created around the villages within the plantation to allow the inhabitants to maintain their vegetable farming sites.



At that time, a majority of village farmers decided to participate in a project with SAC, while others refrained from doing so.

Today, some of them regret not having joined the project and regularly request the plantation for the set up of a new partnership :

- July 2015 : letter from the villagers of Jao
- September 2015 : letters from the villagers of Fayama

Consequently, these symbolic actions (abuses), supported by external associations are likely to weaken the relations developed over time locally.

At various occasions, so-called « associations representing the villagers » turned out not to be representing neither legally nor legitimately the local communities surrounding the plantation and are sometimes just protecting personal interests.

This approach is progressively irritating the traditional and legal authorities of the local communities, which is proven by the increasingly frequent letters received from the traditional local authorities.

A letter dated 14 February 2016, written by the villagers and addressed to European media, calls for vigilance. The « international associations of villagers », created entirely and in all likelihood for personal profit, are in no case their legitimate representatives.

- 14 February 2016 : letter from the Malen Chiefdom Pujehun District. (See attached)

More specifically, Socfin's operations in Sierra Leone are not limited to an agro-industrial project ; Socfin actively participates in the development of the rural Sahn Malen region : modernisation of the hospital, construction of bridges, improvement of the road network connecting the plantation and the villages to Sierra Leone's second city, improved access of the inhabitants to health care, education, investment opportunities, electricity, water, rice production and other environmental projects (reforestation, children's club), medical sensibilisation campaigns (Ebola, HIV, malaria, diarrhoea), training in agricultural techniques etc.

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