

Communities accuse Socfin and Earthworm Foundation of greenwash in West Africa

by Victoria Schneider on 21 June 2023

- A grievance assessment mission commissioned by Belgian oil palm and rubber company Socfin has been rejected by communities affected by the company's operations in several African and Asian countries.
- Reasons include the Earthworm Foundation's relationship with Socfin as a paying member, lack of adequate coordination with affected stakeholders, and the company's history of refusing to enter conflict resolution suggested by third-party bodies.
- Phase one, consisting of missions to Liberia and Cameroon, has just been concluded without the participation of local groups, who say they were not included in the planning process.

Over the past decade, communities affected by transnational palm oil and rubber company Socfin's plantations have raised complaints with local authorities and in international media. Socfin recently initiated an investigation into selected allegations by a supply chain consultancy company, the Earthworm Foundation (EF, formerly the Forest Trust). Even before it began, however, the investigation was rejected by prominent community and international organizations.

In May, a number of local organizations from communities affected by Socfin's plantations — including Synaparcam in Cameroon and Green Advocates in Liberia, supported by international NGOs like GRAIN and ReAct — wrote a letter to Socfin chair Hubert Fabri, rejecting EF's invitation to local advocates to participate in the investigation. "The process made public by Socfin and EF does not provide any guarantees as to the criteria that any investigation aiming towards conflict resolution should meet," they wrote.

Socfin is a transnational holding company headquartered in Luxembourg that operates oil palm and rubber operations in eight countries in West and Central Africa, as well as Cambodia and Indonesia.

Mongabay has reported on communities' allegations against Socfin subsidiaries operating plantations in [Cameroon](#), [Sierra Leone](#), Nigeria and Liberia, covering violations of land rights, pollution of water courses, destruction of graves and sacred forests, [sexual abuse](#), corruption, and failure to secure free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from host communities.

Socfin says the current investigations are a sign of the progress it is making in responding to community complaints, in line with what it calls its "responsible management policy," adopted in 2017. "We have decided to credibly address the concerns with the help of an external organisation," it said in an April announcement, which also promised that the findings would be "responsibly addressed."

"They took all our land to plant their rubber," said James David, an elder from the Liberian town of Kollendarpolo. Image by Ashoka Mukpo for Mongabay.

Questioning Earthworm Foundation's independence

Over the past 15 years, communities living around Socfin's plantations have filed numerous complaints against the company's various subsidiaries. They have approached local government authorities and company managers with their complaints, and turned to the grievance mechanisms of international bodies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank's Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO).

Socfin officials have typically dismissed reports implicating them in abuses, sometimes accusing international NGOs working with affected communities of fabricating the issues. When the OECD's Belgian National Contact Point released its findings, saying that [the company violated OECD guidelines in Cameroon](#), Socfin responded with a press release insisting that that wasn't true.

The company's representatives have similarly rejected allegations when approached by Mongabay. In 2017, for instance, former Socfin CEO Luc Boedt responded to an email regarding the perceived lack of community engagement in Sierra Leone: "[Our sustainability report] gives a clear and controlled impression of what we are doing. If all the good thinkers in Europe could do the same, Africa would certainly be in a better condition."

Socfin became a member of the Earthworm Foundation when it adopted its new responsible management policy in 2017. EF describes itself as an organization that helps transnational corporations manage supply chains in the Global South sustainably. EF members, which include Nestlé, Golden Agri-Resources, and the Hershey Company, pay an annual membership fee as well as an annual "work plan budget" that covers expenses like field missions, staff salaries, and overhead costs.

In its role as a best practices consultant for Socfin, EF visited the Salala Rubber Corporation Liberia in 2019 and the Socapalm plantation in [Cameroon](#) in 2020. EF has also been involved in Socfin's applications for certification by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

When it comes to impact, local and international organizations say EF's visits and subsequent reports have not translated into action addressing problems with Socfin's management and grievance mechanisms. "They [EF] have been working with Socfin for years to implement the commitments on the ground, but people declare they don't see much change," Léa Papinutti from the French organization ReAct Transnational told Mongabay in an interview.

"Nothing has changed," said Emmanuel Elong, founder and president of Synaparcam. He and other critics of EF say the current mission is an act of greenwashing as EF's track record has not been one of solving issues they find.

Some people living near Socfin's plantation in the Sahn Malen chiefdom in Sierra Leone still harvest kernels from their own small stands of palm, crushing them in water and skimming off the oil which floats to the top. Image by Maja Hitij for Mongabay.

Seeking justice through other channels

The signatories of the joint letter explained their rejection of the investigation in the context of Socfin's previous dismissal of numerous recommendations and findings reached over the years by various international bodies. They say previous investigations led by EF have failed to produce tangible change for affected communities.

They also view EF's last-minute outreach ahead of visiting their communities as a sign that the investigation is aligned with Socfin's interests rather than those of the people affected by the company's plantations.

In April, EF contacted individual members of local organizations representing affected community members, asking them to assist with the investigation by providing evidence of grievances and facilitating access to communities. In Cameroon, EF proposed that Synaparcam, a local land rights organization in Cameroon that has been speaking up against Socfin since 2013, sign an agreement to assist the investigators.

"They planned their project without contacting us and are asking us to participate without preparation. If they are truly interested in working together they will have to reschedule," Elong said.

The terms and conditions EF sent to Synaparcam spelled out precise terms for the involvement of the rights organization: to propose an itinerary, accompany EF's investigation team during community visits, and make documentation available to the investigators. The email also set out precise dates for the investigators' visit; but in Synaparcam's view, the terms presented locals with an unworkable timeline.

"We feel that Earthworm is not able to deliver this kind of investigation in a very transparent manner as we have seen them before when they were here in 2012-2013," said Francis Colee from Green Advocates, a Liberian grassroots organization. Colee was referring to a previous investigation by EF of Golden Veroleum Liberia, a decade ago, which [documented a flawed public consultation process](#) and [other rights violations](#) but did not result in significant consequences for the company or redress for communities.

Young men in Sierra Leone's Sahn Malen chiefdom, one of the areas the Earthworm Foundation's investigators will visit. In 2011, Socfin leased 18,000 hectares of land in Malen; many locals say they were dispossessed without consent and inadequately compensated. A 2019 report found Socfin's plantation here occupied land not covered by the lease agreement. Image by Maja Hitij for Mongabay.

Field visits taking place without local activists

EF's team visited Liberia at the beginning of May. Civil society organizations who represent community members and have spoken up against Socfin declined EF's request to facilitate access to the communities and again submit evidence to investigators. Besides seeking help through the World Bank's CAO, which Socfin dismissed, [residents of 22 affected communities](#) and Green Advocates have [turned to the local courts](#).

"The community has long advocated for engagement with the companies through a dialogue. We had meetings with officials in 2015, 2016, but they did not accept," said Paul Larry George from the Alliance for Rural Democracy, based in Monrovia, Liberia. "Now that the matter is in our local courts they want to investigate in the communities. That is unacceptable. We cannot share evidence without the lawyers."

Affected communities also say EF's fresh search for evidence of each allegation is insulting. Alfred Brownell, a Liberian human rights lawyer in exile in the United States, told Mongabay that mountains of evidence have been gathered and submitted over the years. "This is not the first time communities in Liberia say they don't think EF is the right organization to do this. People have concerns about their independence so how do they now come and impose themselves on the communities?"

As of publication, EF investigators had completed their field visit to Liberia and were in the field in Cameroon, but did not respond to questions from Mongabay. Socfin responded to a request for comment on the rejection of the process by local advocates only by sending a copy of its statement announcing the field mission.

The first phase of the investigation was concluded last week with EF's visit in Cameroon. Phase two, which includes visits to plantations in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Cambodia, will be conducted later this year. According to the Earthworm Foundation's website, the process is planned to be concluded by December 2023, after which a summary of findings will be published alongside "an action plan on behalf of Socfin to address any allegations found to be credible."

Synaparcam president Emmanuel Elong in 2020. Socfin acquired a plantation near his home in Mbonjo, Cameroon in 2000. "The first thing they did was get rid of the old contracts ensuring the employment of the local youth. The second thing they did was to cancel the smallholder contracts families had with the state-owned plantation. They had their own factory, and the local people were left out." Image by Dylan Collins for Mongabay.

A world of hurt

While grievances against Socfin in Liberia and Cameroon have received the most international attention so far, issues remain in other countries too.

[Last year, a report](#) by the UNDP on land degradation in areas around Socfin's Sierra Leone subsidiary described the communities' perception of the company as generally negative. "The activities of companies in these communities have largely been regarded as unprofitable to indigenes," was one of the concluding observations in the report, which was compiled through questionnaires and group interviews.

Plantation workers on the SAC plantation in Sierra Leone's Sahn Malen chiefdom. Image by Maja Hitij for Mongabay.

In Cambodia, the conflict between locals and Socfin's subsidiary dates back to 2008, when the company acquired land that was inhabited by the Indigenous Bunong community. Irregularities during the environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) process and no adequate community consultation left members of the Bunong without access to land, which were documented in a [report by the International Federation for Human Rights \(FIDH\)](#) in 2011. Socfin dismissed the findings that highlighted the "lack of recognition of indigenous peoples' rights."

The case was taken to a French court but dismissed in 2021 based on the communities not holding formal land titles. The decision was criticized by international organizations

Both Sierra Leone and Cambodia are going to be assessed during the second phase of EF's investigation.