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Summary: Independent Research Report on the Socfin RSPO Certification Process¹ in Nigeria

Milieudefensie commissioned research to document the RSPO consultation process for OOPC in Nigeria. This document summarizes our findings.

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Public Summary by Milieudefensie of internal research report: "SCS Global Service's consultation for SOCFIN companies' RSPO certification: Research for documenting the consultation process in Nigeria, A case of Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC (OOPC), December 2020"

May 2021

The Milieudefensie-commissioned research was conducted from December 2020 to January 2021. It documented the RSPO consultation process for OOPC in Nigeria. The researcher analysed documents and conducted interviews and focus-group discussions with representatives from affected communities, including traditional leadership, from 12 villages and 6 native Okomu communities.¹ The researcher also interviewed community-based organisations and other civil society actors. On 7th January 2020, OOPC was awarded RSPO certification by SCS Global Services (SCS) and its licence was renewed in April 2021 (Certificate number: SCS-RSPOPC-000121).²

Analysis of research findings against RSPO-PRO-T01-002 V2.0 ENG (2017)³: RSPO certification systems for principles and criteria:

ON PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS (ARTICLE 4.6.1)

1. Did SCS Global Services (SCS) respect requirements for the timing of the announcement and invitations to stakeholders, the selection of stakeholders, appropriate means, format and language?

Several communities in Ovia South West say they have received formal invitations to RSPO audit meetings, but were not informed about the agenda in detail. Relevant stakeholders such as women and youth representatives say they could not make it at the announced time because of their schedules. Most community respondents stated they only got verbal invitations to RSPO meetings at short notice and found it difficult to prepare well as a result. Some said they struggled in sessions where no translation to local languages was provided. The Okomu native communities (Okomu community, Makilolo, Owelke, Agbede, IK Village and Ijwgbene) claimed they were excluded from the audit process. The perception from traditional leaders was that they were not involved because of ongoing discussions with the company: "all we have been asking was for OOPC to fulfill its corporate social responsibility, to stop evicting our people from their ancestral land and burning down houses, and to stop locking the gate to the only access road to the communities."

There is also confusion amongst communities involved in RSPO processes, about which communities should have been invited for the certification audit. This arises due to the fact that only the Okomu main estate is certified (9,383 hectares). Extensions 1 and 2 and Agripalm (around 15,000 hectares) are not certified, even though these areas are listed to supply palm fruit to the OOPC mill.⁴

ON STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION (ARTICLE 4.6.3, 4.6.5)

2. Did SCS consult all relevant stakeholders and identify all relevant information to assess compliance? Did it include all information in the public summary report?

SCS noted the prominent community concern over the company's decision to close gates and prevent access to plantation roads in the public summary report. Communities made several appeals to the company to solve this, but SCS notes there were no complaints reported and does not include an assessment if this concern is a potential human rights violation (freedom of movement). Rriverine communities such as Okomu, Owelke, Ijwgbene and Makilolo note a decline in fishing yield, potentially due to pollution. Women say they cannot fish at will, because military personnel have taken over or blocked parts of the river and reportedly seize fish nets or arrest fisherwomen. This deprives women of opportunities to sustain their livelihoods. Those issues are not included in the public summary report and potentially not included to assess compliance.

3. Did SCS provide a safe space for stakeholders, guaranteeing confidentiality where needed, and facilitate comments from stakeholders?

Village members say that in November 2020, ahead of the auditor's visit in Nigeria, OOPC human resources staff visited them to ask them to inform the incoming team that "the company has been doing a lot for them." One community member told the research team he did not want to share negative comments for fear of conflict with the company. According to the Gbelebu community, the RSPO meetings took place on company premises.

¹ The certification audit took place in November 2019, and because of the larger timespan between the audit and the interviews, the study provided less detail compared with Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast.

² <https://rsps.org/certification/search-fsc-certified-zones/> (Socfin' in search field for the audit report and certificate).

³ The audits took place in November 2019, long before the new version of the Standard for Certification Systems was approved in November 2020.

⁴ SCS, 23 March 2021, RSPO Principles and Criteria Surveillance ASA 1, Public Summary Report, Okomu Oil Palm Company.

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