

# **Earthworm Foundation's Deep Dive Grievance work – Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC)**

Investigation of allegations relating to SRC operations  
Public Summary of EF Findings and Recommendations  
July 31, 2023

## CONTEXT

Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) is a subsidiary of the Socfin Group. On December 1, 2016, the Socfin Group published its responsible management policy and became a member of the Earthworm Foundation (EF) in March 2017. This responsible management policy of the Socfin Group, which was revised on March 30, 2022, is articulated around the following main principles: (i) commitment to local and rural development in Africa and Asia, (ii) commitment to employees and communities, (iii) commitment to our planet and (iv) transparency.

Despite the progress made so far in implementing its responsible management commitments, the Socfin Group continues to receive environmental and social complaints from the international media and NGOs, even in cases where the Socfin Group believes that it has published analysis and documented responses to the complaints concerned.

In order to better understand the allegations made by ReAct Transnational and the International Alliance of Local Communities of Socfin Plantations, Earthworm Foundation was engaged by Socfin to carry out investigations at SRC; and Socfin has pledged to develop an action plan to credibly respond to any allegations that are supported by evidence.

The work at SRC is part of a broader piece of grievance investigation that Earthworm Foundation is undertaking across Socfin operations, which is split into two main phases:

**Phase 1**, March to June 2023: Investigations focused on grievances raised against Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) in Liberia and SOCAPALM Dibombari in Cameroon.

**Phase 2**, beginning in August 2023: Additional investigations into the grievances raised regarding Socfin operations in Cambodia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia and elsewhere in Cameroon.

This public summary presents the synthesis of findings and recommendations related to the investigation done by Earthworm Foundation (EF) from May 1, 2023 to May 10, 2023 in SRC with the following objectives:

1. To investigate all allegations made against SRC in the Mongabay article titled “At a rubber plantation in Liberia, history repeats in a fight over land” published on 17 January 2023; and in documents shared by ReAct and the International Alliance of Local communities of Socfin Plantations, as well as allegations raised in interviews with international and Liberian Civil Society Organisations.
2. To understand the progress made to date by SRC to develop policies and systems for prevention of the type of allegations raised in the article and documents shared.

3. To develop recommendations for how to responsibly address allegations that are supported with evidence and how to prevent similar incidents in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for the investigation included a literature review as well as meetings and discussions held with various stakeholders, including:

### Communities living near SRC operations

The team visited communities and worker camps surrounding and inside the SRC concession area, where we heard concerns and looked at the evidence through community/town meetings, focus group discussions, individual interviews and direct observation. We visited a total of **four out of six worker camps** and **13 out of 82 surrounding towns**, but three towns declined to share information due to their having brought a court case against SRC and the Government of Liberia.<sup>1</sup> As part of our research, we conducted interviews with **60 women**, either through focus groups or individual interviews.

At the beginning of every town meeting, we took time to introduce each member of the investigation team and explain the investigation. Keeping with the principles of free, prior, informed consent (FPIC), we made it clear that every individual and community had the right to participate or not and that all names would be kept confidential. Everything explained was also translated into the local language (Kpele) and was provided in writing to the town leaders and any other individual who requested it.

### Local and international civil society organisations

For the Liberia investigation at SRC, Earthworm Foundation contacted those raising the grievances to understand the specific concerns and review any supporting evidence. We reached out to several of the organisations cited in the Mongabay article and others as part of our preparation for the investigation. We explained our relationship to Socfin and the investigative work we were undertaking. In the case of NGOs who raised the concerns, many were not willing to be involved or meet with us to discuss.

A public announcement about the investigations was shared on both the EF and the Socfin Group websites, including an email address that anyone could contact to ask questions or share information ([socfin.investigation@earthworm.org](mailto:socfin.investigation@earthworm.org)).

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<sup>1</sup> After our trip we came to understand that the court has ruled that SRC be dropped from the case.

In addition, we met three CSO leaders in person in Monrovia, who helped us identify which communities to visit and people to interview. We shared the names and contact details of the field investigation team, comprised of 1 man and 3 women, with CSOs with whom we were in contact.

## **Other stakeholders interviewed**

The investigation team also held meetings with some SRC employees and the SRC management team, members of the SRC Gender Committee and the teams in charge of security (FOSA Security and MOABEL). The field visits enabled us to confirm or not some of the information gathered during the document review or during individual or group interviews with the various stakeholders.

## Summary of Findings against Allegations

N°	ALLEGATIONS	STATUS	EVIDENCE	ACTIONS TAKEN BY SOCFIN TO DATE
1	<b>Limited Recruitment and Hiring</b>	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment records indicate that there are no workers from some affected communities, for instance, Jeh Jeh Town.</li> <li>• Most of the workers are contractors recruited and hired by contacting companies: there are 877 workers of which 120 are permanent employees, 144 are FOSA Security and 613 are MOBEL contractor workers (April 2023 figures).</li> <li>• SRC recruitment SOP is restricted to skilled jobs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a recruitment SOP for skilled jobs in place</li> <li>• SRC works with leaders of clusters (groups of communities) to recruit skilled workers</li> <li>• Some affected communities are named in the SRC workforce list</li> </ul>
2	<b>Sexual Harassment</b>	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instances of termination and denial of job opportunities due to refusal to engage in sexual acts, provide money or give gifts in exchange for job opportunities for the victims or their relatives (i.e. husbands).</li> <li>• Instances of unwanted and inappropriate physical touches and comments from male SRC workers.</li> <li>• Incidents of SRC workers making monetary offers for sexual favours within the workplace.</li> <li>• None of the above have ever been captured or investigated by SRC Gender Committee.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formed and started training Gender Committee. Defined TOR for the committee.</li> <li>• Company has developed sexual harassment policy.</li> <li>• Some socialization and training done for the Gender Committee on sexual harassment.</li> <li>• Gender Committee doing some monitoring in worker camps.</li> </ul>
3	<b>Improper Crop Compensation During Plantation Expansion</b>	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 612 individuals from 20 towns were compensated for their crops between 2010 and 2014 for a total of 546,722 USD.</li> <li>• SRC used the Compensation Agreement from LAC, its sister company in Liberia, for crop compensation in SRC. Multiple towns mentioned that SRC cleared their crops, and they are yet to receive compensation from SRC. Some individuals also reported they did not receive the full payment for their crops.</li> <li>• SRC has compiled a list of those who received crop compensation but is yet to validate the compensation list with affected communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compiled a list of recipients of crop compensation payment.</li> <li>• Signed receipts for people who received payments.</li> <li>• Documented and investigated some grievance cases and as a result one person received crop compensation payment.</li> </ul>

4	<b>Lack of Protection of and Access to Old Town Site/Sacred Sites</b>	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instances of old town sites that existed at the time of plantation establishment in the 1960s were consistently reported by Elders in each town visited. Most sites matched the description in the articles.</li> <li>• Any destruction of town or households pre-dates the acquisition of the plantation by Socfin.</li> <li>• SRC is yet to identify or admit the existence of some historical and old town sites; Elders guided us to three of these.</li> <li>• SRC has identified and gone around some existing towns in the expansion area (such as Jokporlorsue and Kollie Town) but did not provide adequate farmland for the households living there.</li> <li>• SRC has created a desk-based map of one town, Jorgborlorsue, but is yet to do ground-truthing to understand the situation with regards to farmland available per household.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identified and demarcated some existing town sites and sacred sites especially in expansion areas.</li> <li>• Responded to and resolved some grievances about sacred site destruction.</li> <li>• Allocated 200m around some existing towns and villages.</li> </ul>
5	<b>Limited Access to Safe Drinking Water</b>	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to communities interviewed, most of the hand pumps built by SRC and other NGOs dry out during dry season due to poor service providers.</li> <li>• Instances where SRC built hand pump for the community but it was not working at the time of this assessment as a result of dryness during dry season period.</li> <li>• Most communities get drinking water from the creeks.</li> <li>• Also, Monkey Tail water source was cleared by SRC motor grader during demarcation of the plantation boundary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SRC has either constructed or rehabilitated hand pumps in some villages, although hand pump in Monkey Tail was poorly constructed and hand pump lacks water during the dry season</li> </ul>
6	<b>Reprisals, threats, harassment, bribes and intimidation</b>	Partially founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The investigation team witnessed a security guard requesting a bribe, and multiple townspeople complained about such behavior.</li> <li>• Although multiple people reported feeling unsafe or insecure with their jobs if they say anything negative about the company, there were also many people who work for SRC who were confident to criticize the company openly.</li> <li>• Almost all first-hand accounts of accusations of violence were at the hands of police officers responding to calls for help from SRC Security Staff, and not from SRC Security staff themselves.</li> <li>• Interviews of women revealed cases of harassment and threats.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has done Security Risk Assessment</li> <li>• Has developed policy for security guards</li> <li>• Security guards do not carry guns and do call the police when illegal or risky incidents occur</li> </ul>
7	<b>Limited Access to Schools</b>	Unfounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SRC schools are open to all both workers and communities. But communities are charge minimum registration and tuition fees.</li> <li>• The key concern raised during our meetings with communities was the company should reduce the tuition fees for their children since most of them are not working with the company and thus do not get free tuition for their children.</li> <li>• There are also government schools in the area for communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company allows students from affected communities to attend the Company Schools; registration and tuition fees are charged but these are lower than in similar communities elsewhere.</li> </ul>
8	<b>Water Pollution</b>	Unfounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numerous water tests have been done between 2022 and 23. No one reported water pollution in the findings.</li> <li>• There are buffer zones along rivers visited. But it is unclear if the buffer zones are in line with EPA requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company is conducting water, air and soil quality tests.</li> <li>• There are buffer zones along waterbodies</li> </ul>

9	<b>Limited Access to Health Facilities</b>	Unfounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SRC Health Centers are open to both workers and communities. But communities are charged for treatment and medication.</li> <li>• The key concern raised during our meetings was that they want a reduction in the cost of treatment and medication since most of them are not working for the company and do not get free access.</li> <li>• The pricing list for treatment and medication was available at the health centre visited.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company allows citizens from affected communities to use the company's Health Centers; there are charges for treatment and medication, but these are at lower rates than in similar facilities elsewhere.</li> </ul>
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## Priority Recommendations

Allegations	Priority Recommendations	Timeframe
<p><b>Limited Recruitment and Hiring</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Amend SRC Recruitment SOP to include a point on giving, at equal skills and competencies, preference to local community members. Clarify the procedure for communicating work opportunities to nearby townspeople, including opportunities to work as staff, contract workers (long-term and short-term contract workers) and casual workers. Ensure that the official procedure for how to apply is clear, and the town of origin of applicants is confirmed by town leaders. Consult with town leaders and community members in focus group discussions to ensure the revised recruitment communication procedure is well understood and meets the goals of reaching community members. Monitor to ensure that the revised procedure is followed.</li> <li>2. Be clear and transparent about the pay calculations, benefits, and rights of short-term contract and casual workers.</li> <li>3. Put notice boards in each community to post recruitment, including pay and benefits, and how to report grievances.</li> <li>4. Check community origin information of workers with respective towns for accuracy.</li> </ol>	<p>Dec 23</p> <p>Sep 23</p> <p>Jan 24</p> <p>Dec 23</p>
<p><b>Sexual Harassment</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarify and implement steps for investigation and penalties for cases of sexual harassment, including in specific cases already identified and prevention of retaliation.</li> <li>2. Strengthen SRC's Sexual Harassment policy with specific examples and clear steps for investigation and penalty + other points.</li> <li>3. Review the hiring process by contractors and tappers to prevent third-party requests for indecent favours such as exchanging sexual favours.</li> <li>4. Develop strategies to increase the representation of women in decision-making roles.</li> <li>5.</li> <li>6. Strengthen the reporting Mechanism for Sexual Harassment by working with outside experts to carry out a series of focus group discussions with women workers and in communities.</li> <li>6. Strengthen the Gender Committee – either by hiring an independent Liberian women's NGO to carry out the role, or through additional recruitment, training and resources for an in-house Gender committee.</li> <li>7. Strengthen training on Sexual Harassment – ensure all workers receive training with clear examples and signed understanding.</li> <li>8. Improve conditions for female Security Personnel.</li> </ol>	<p>Sep 23</p> <p>Sep 23</p> <p>Dec 23</p> <p>Dec 23</p> <p>End of 24</p> <p>Oct 23</p> <p>Sep-Dec 23</p> <p>Sep-Dec 23</p>
<p><b>Crop Compensation</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Either</i> Explore with surrounding towns what a holistic process for resolving crop compensation and other allegations could look like – leading to a documented plan for engagement and resolution that is witnessed and signed off by the relevant authorities. <i>Or</i> Identify and carry out steps needed if SRC decides to only focus on a crop remediation process, and not a holistic multi-allegation resolution process. Include a full inventory of all towns and households with crop compensation grievances, validation of history of payments with town leaders, participatory mapping of original crop sites and crops destroyed.</li> <li>2. Develop the process for resolving the crop compensation issues through focus group discussions with town leaders and community members to ensure that it is well understood, transparent, and agreed to by elected town leaders.</li> </ol>	<p>Oct 23</p> <p>23-24</p>
<p><b>Old Town Site/Sacred Sites</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Build a constructive and respectful relationship with surrounding towns, including having a process to gather historical evidence of old towns relocation pre-dating the acquisition of the plantation by Socfin.</li> <li>2. Develop a profile for each town including an inventory of water sources, employment, access to infrastructure, access to farmland, town development priorities, etc. Co-develop CSR development plans prioritizing the highest needs with town and cluster leaders. Do so in a collaborative and transparent way so that all town leaders and community members are able to easily access information about what activities are in the CSR development plans and the agreed time frame for implementation.</li> <li>3. Get legal advice on the impact to SRC of the 2018 Land Rights Act.</li> </ol>	<p>Oct 23</p> <p>Dec 23</p> <p>Dec 23</p>



<b>Limited Access to Safe Drinking Water</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work with Monkey Tail Town to ensure a safe source of drinking water and to rehabilitate their water source destroyed by road grading.</li> <li>2. Inventory current drinking water sources for each town, and co-create plans for drinking water protection and improvement.</li> </ol>	<p>Oct 23 23-24</p>
<b>Reprisals, bribes and intimidation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clearly train security staff to not accept or solicit bribes and monitor closely, including by checking for grievances with local communities.</li> </ol>	<p>Sep 23</p>

## Conclusion

We investigated nine (9) allegations out of which five (5) were founded; one (1) was partially founded and three (3) were unfounded based exclusively on the samples related to our visit. It is clear that although SRC is trying to address issues related to sexual harassment and resolving grievances with local communities, they still have a long way to go to fully address these in a robust manner. To address these priority concerns at the scale required will require dedicated, well-trained staff for both the Gender Committee and the Community Relations (or Liaison) Team.

Most of the towns visited in the Investigation are eager to meet with the company and explore opportunities to reach an agreement about how to resolve their grievances related to job access, improper crop compensation, lack of farmland, lack of drinking water, and history of giving up land with the expectation of job, school and health care access. Some of these requests have been responded to positively by SRC. However, many of the requests to date have been written off as impossible or unreasonable by the company.

The company should meet with local towns on a more regular basis and in a more respectful manner to develop and carry out joint plans for how to improve access to land, jobs, clean water, schools and health care while addressing grievances in a more holistic way. To do this, the company must invest in more community meetings and more staff to carry out the meetings. Additionally, mediated grievance resolution processes will be necessary when direct meetings cannot reach an agreement. It will be important to include independent government officials in validating any agreements reached, and ensure that clear implementation steps are outlined in the agreement so that both sides can monitor.