

Earthworm Foundation's (EF) Deep Dive Grievance work - Socapalm (Dibombari)

Investigation of allegations relating to SOCAPALM
Dibombari operations

Public summary of EF Findings & Recommendations
July 31, 2023

CONTEXT

SOCAPALM Dibombari is one of the six sites of Socapalm, a subsidiary of the SOCFIN Group in Cameroon. 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 which are: (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, Socfin 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 SOCAPALM's Dibombari operations; and Socfin has pledged to develop an action plan to credibly respond to any allegations that are supported by evidence.

The work at SOCAPALM Dibombari 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 executive summary presents the synthesis of findings and recommendations related to the investigation done by Earthworm Foundation (EF) in SOCAPALM Dibombari.

The field visit was conducted from May 31st, 2023 to June 8th, 2023 with the following objectives:

1. Investigate the allegations linked to:
 - o Sexual harassment of women in SOCAPALM plantations and surrounding communities;
 - o Occupation of sacred sites by plantations;
 - o Lack of land for livelihood/land retrocessions;
 - o Water pollution and difficulties accessing drinking water;
 - o Limited access to schools and health centres;

2. Highlight factual evidence relating to each allegation (founded or unfounded).
3. Formulate recommendations for improvement.

METHODOLOGY

From a methodological point of view, alongside the literature review, meetings and discussions were held with various stakeholders

Communities living near SOCAPALM Dibombari

The team visited communities and worker camps surrounding and inside SOCAPALM Dibombari plantation areas, where we heard concerns and looked at the evidence through community/village meetings, focus group discussions, individual interviews and direct observation. EF's team sent a letter to each of the local communities informing them of Earthworm Foundation's mission and asking for their consent to participate, in accordance with the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). A total of five worker camps and 6 out of 7 surrounding communities were visited: Nkende, Souza, Bomono Gare, Mbonjo I, Mbonjo II and Bomono Ba Mbengue II.

Local and international civil society organisations

For the investigation at SOCAPALM Dibombari, 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 by the documents shared by ReAct and the International Alliance of Local Communities of Socfin Plantations (and others as part of our preparation for the investigation). We explained our relationship with Socfin and the investigative work we were undertaking. The organizations were not willing to be involved or meet with us to discuss for time-constraints.

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

Other stakeholders interviewed

The investigation team held meetings with some SOCAPALM Dibombari employees, the SOCAPALM Dibombari management team, the SOCAPALM Dibombari sustainability team, members of the gender committee and the teams in charge of security (G4S and Africa Security).

The investigation team also held meetings with the administrative authorities and the local heads of government service provision, the head of Dibombari's health district, the Divisional Officer of Fiko, the gendarmerie commander of Kappa, and the military.

With a view to ruling on water pollution issues, water analyses were carried out on samples taken from the factory's condensate discharges and river water by a licensed laboratory.

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. The investigation team visited three sacred sites, two primary schools and two water pumps.

Summary of Findings against Allegations

N°	ALLEGATIONS	STATUS	EVIDENCE	ACTION TAKEN TO DATE
1	Lack of land for livelihoods/land retrocessions	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land pressure continues to mount around the SOCAPALM Dibombari concession. This is linked to several factors, including demographic dynamics and the expansion of the city of Douala. • There is a disparity within the community regarding the level of information about the retrocession process. • For some communities, the slowness of the land retrocession process is attributable to SOCAPALM. • Discussions with communities on the issue related to lack of land revealed that the problem is actually linked to the fact that communities don't have enough land. • Some communities feel that article 6, paragraph h of the emphyteutic (long-term) lease has not been implemented during replanting operations. For its part, SOCAPALM believes that this article is confusing and requires clarification from the administrative authorities. • The land survey report and map have not yet been shared with the communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MINDCAF has set up a technical team to examine SOCAPALM's land issues. • The creation by the prefect of Moungo Department of an ad-hoc commission responsible for surveying and demarcating the plots of land supporting SOCAPALM plantations in the Fiko and Dibombari districts. • The land survey (current state of occupation of the concession) has been carried out by the land registry services (MINDCAF), and the reports and maps are available. • The retrocession process has been underway for several years.
2	Gender-based violence/sexual harassment	Founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There have been repeated reports of rape and harassment of women. ▪ A case of rape confirmed by a doctor and committed by a SOCAPALM employee occurred in 2021. ▪ Generally speaking, the rape investigations carried out by SOCAPALM have had various results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arrest and conviction of the guilty party by the authorities; - Withdrawal of alleged victims following financial arrangements between the victim and the aggressor; - The alleged perpetrators and the families of the victims fled, putting an end to further investigations. ▪ Some members of the Gender Committee are not trained in handling and managing cases of violence. ▪ Some community women are unaware of the Gender Committee's existence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of a policy on sexual harassment and other types of harassment in the workplace, tools for collecting and processing complaints • Gender Committee set up (SOP + action plan), members trained in gender concepts • Awareness campaigns run by the Gender Committee. • The Gender Committee investigates complaints of rape or harassment. • Socfin has raised human rights awareness among Africa Security and G4S teams



N°	ALLEGATIONS	STATUS	EVIDENCE	ACTION TAKEN TO DATE
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some workers are unaware of the Gender Committee or how to contact it in case of need. ▪ Victims denounce the lack of confidentiality in the harassment complaint process. ▪ There is no procedure in place for arrests made by security teams. ▪ Attempts by individuals to falsely portray themselves as Village Vigilance Committee (CVV) agents, including in one case of rape. 	
3	<p style="text-align: center;">Occupation of sacred sites by plantations</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Founded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some sacred sites are located in planted areas. ▪ Management plans for sacred sites signed by Socapalm and village chiefs exist, but there is no evidence that they are shared with the communities concerned. ▪ Despite the results of HCV studies and the implementation of management plan, some communities feel that the issue of sacred sites has not yet been resolved. ▪ Reports on investigations into disputes relating to sacred sites are not made available to communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participatory social mapping was carried out with the communities to identify sacred sites ▪ Management plans for these sacred sites have been drawn up with the communities in a participatory manner and are currently being implemented.
4	<p style="text-align: center;">Water pollution by SOCAPALM</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Partially Founded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EF reviewed SOCAPALM’s approach to water sampling and testing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SOCAPALM utilises an approved independent laboratory which undertakes regular collection and analysis of water quality across its operations. - Overall, the results for 2022 Dibombari wastewater sampling were compliant. - The results of the March 2023 wastewater sampling for Dibombari were also compliant. • Results of water analyses are shared with communities. • The communities recognize that the construction of the lagoons has had a positive impact on environmental protection (water quality in streams and rivers) • An inspection of the palm oil mill at Dibombari showed that waste water was being captured in effluent ponds and there was no discharge from these ponds. • We did however identify a single source of waste water from the condenser that was bypassing the effluent ponds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring reports for HCV areas are available ▪ SOCAPALM is certified ISO 14001/2015 ▪ Water management plans are assessed regularly by a RSPO certification body



N°	ALLEGATIONS	STATUS	EVIDENCE	ACTION TAKEN TO DATE
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A sample collected at this point and sent to an approved laboratory revealed that the physico-chemical parameters of this effluent was not compliant 	
5	<p>Difficult access to drinking water</p>	<p>Founded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The provision of drinking water, as required by the ESMP, remains a fairly recurrent demand within the communities. We note that SOCAPALM is committed to building this basic infrastructure but that they do not have an implementation program (standard, budget, schedule/timeframe for completion, etc.). The Environmental and Social Management Plan follow-up report for the 2nd half of 2022 submitted by SOCAPALM to the MINEPDED Moungo Departmental Delegate on 07/03/2023 shows a 25% completion rate for drinking water supply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The boreholes available in the workers' camps located near the riverside villages are accessible to all. Water intended for consumption is regularly tested. SOCAPALM has helped several communities gain access to drinking water: Mbonjo and Bomono Ba Mbengue 2 villages.
6	<p>Limited access to schools built by SOCAPALM</p>	<p>Not founded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See actions taken to date by SOCAPALM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The schools are accessible to all. Statistics show that pupils include children from the surrounding villages as well as SOCAPALM workers' children. Schools receive minimum packages and twenty-seven teachers from schools located in the SOCAPALM concession are paid by SOCAPALM.
7	<p>Limited access to SOCAPALM health centers</p>	<p>Not founded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See actions taken to date by SOCAPALM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SOCAPALM offers free consultations to employees and local residents. Medicines are free for employees. Residents who have benefited from a consultation receive a prescription and buy their medication in private pharmacies. In emergencies, free medical care is provided to local residents. Statistics from the company's medical center clearly show that local residents are consulted at the SOCAPALM health center.



Recommendations

Below are the recommendations for each allegation.

ALLEGATIONS	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>1. Land retrocession</p>	<p>1.1 Consider the future of the current plantations of the concession of SOCAPALM Dibombari in light of the threats proposed by the current context by integrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Demographic dynamics; *The rapid expansion of the city of Douala; *Securing land assets; *The mill supply model (SOCAPALM plantations, business partnerships with local smallholders, etc.) <p>1.2 Obtain clarification from the administration on article 6 paragraph h of the emphyteutic lease and integrate these clarifications into the replanting strategy.</p> <p>1.3 Continue to socialize communities about the retrocession process, with a view to systematically collecting and addressing the concerns raised and, above all, reaching agreements for the drawing up of definitive maps. Transparency is a key to success</p> <p>1.4 Evaluate the retrocessions already carried out and draw on the lessons learned from these retrocessions to improve the current process (protocol for managing retroceded areas, etc.)</p> <p>1.5 Set up a system to disseminate information on the retrocession process to the entire community.</p>
<p>2. Sexual harassment</p>	<p>2.1 Intensify communication with workers and local communities on the existence of the Gender Committee and its role and activities.</p> <p>2.2 Increase the number and accessibility of channels for transmitting information to the Gender Committee.</p> <p>2.3 Set up Gender Committee relays in all riverside communities.</p> <p>2.4 Reinforce communication around the identity of the existing Gender Committee's relays at Worker Camp level</p> <p>2.5 Strengthen the technical capacities of Gender Committee members, particularly in the management of cases of violence</p> <p>2.6 Ensure the utmost discretion in the handling of complaints related to rape or sexual harassment (limit the number of people involved in the complaint management process, from receipt to finalization of investigations, etc.)</p> <p>2.7 Draw up and implement a procedure for the apprehension of potential suspects by security staff.</p> <p>2.8 Ensure that CVV agents are known to and identifiable by the communities.</p> <p>2.9 Ensure that all external security agents are fully aware of SOCAPALM's commitments.</p>



<p>3. Sacred sites</p>	<p>3.1 Provide communities with validated sacred site management plans. 3.2 Share reports on investigations into disputes over sacred sites with communities</p>
<p>4. Water pollution</p>	<p>4.1 Treat condensate effluent before discharge into the environment.</p>
<p>5. Limited Access to Safe Drinking Water</p>	<p>5.1 Carry out an analysis of the infrastructure needs to secure potable water access for Dibombari's neighboring communities. 5.2 Draw up and implement a long-term water infrastructure program, and periodically assess the level of implementation of this program.</p>
<p>6. Limited Access to Health Facilities</p>	<p>6.1 Communicate permanently and effectively to all communities about the opportunities offered by the SOCAPALM medical center (invite the medical team to certain meetings with the communities, etc.).</p>
<p>7. Grievance management</p>	<p>7.1 Clarify how complaints made during bipartite meetings are managed, and include all site-related complaints in the follow-up register. 7.2 Systematically communicate to communities the decisions taken by SOCAPALM after analyzing their requests, in order to avoid confusion.</p>
<p>8. Worker housing</p>	<p>8.1 Continue the renovation of worker accommodation and decide whether certain houses are fit for habitation or need to be replaced.</p>
<p>9. Local entrepreneurship</p>	<p>9.1 Communicate transparently about outsourcing opportunities for local businesses 9.2 Initiate a process to support local residents in entrepreneurship through subcontracting, while respecting legal requirements. 9.3 Ensure legal compliance of CVVs (provision of appropriate PPE, employment contracts, social security, etc.) and set up a compliance monitoring mechanism.</p>

Conclusion

Factual evidence relating to each allegation (both founded and unfounded) was identified, enabling the investigating team to formulate recommendations that will be incorporated into an action plan. We investigated seven (7) allegations, out of which four (4) were founded, one was partially founded and two were not founded based exclusively on the information acquired our visit.

In general, the communities we met recognize that improvements have been made by Socapalm in terms of engagement with the communities, although there is a need to strengthen the system for disseminating information to all community members. The

land issue remains a major concern for all parties (communities, SOCAPALM, administration) and will require a more inclusive and transparent approach.

Finally, it is important to structure an inclusive development approach by establishing a social infrastructure implementation program that takes into account the availability of resources and the needs of communities, by circulating subcontracting offers to all communities in order to encourage the emergence of new entrepreneurs, and by implementing a support program for young entrepreneurs.