



The Centre of Social Excellence Africa

A new chapter in palm oil production

A Case Study

How CSE alumni are building deep communication between companies and communities and earning new social licenses to operate: the case of Safacam and Socapalm

Part 1

The Challenge of History

The complex and fraught relationships between company and community

Historical Rifts

In Cameroon, a long history of operation by major palm oil companies has created substantial divisions between company and community, often stemming from conflicts over land rights. At the same time, with limited government investment, communities looked to these major companies to build local infrastructure and invest in long-term economic prosperity for worker communities. Without proper social management strategies, this dependency on 'the company' combined with poor relations created a complex state of play.

For decades, local communities felt increasingly resentful towards companies such as Socapalm and Safacam, both subsidiaries of the SOCFIN Group, believing these companies were exploiting local workers and taking away their land. When the companies did seek to address community issues, the approaches have historically been uninformed, often feeling more like hand-outs rather than mutually agreed development strategies that promote transparency and accountability in the long-term.

Challenging Land Rights

Companies such as Socapalm and Safacam have come under increasing scrutiny by communities for their right to land itself, with certain communities claiming this land was illegally seized while the companies maintain that they acquired the titles legally.

Though the companies have produced legal accords, in the case of Safacam acquired generations ago, all parties recognise that at the time, these consultations probably involved only local elites, excluding most of the population.

Indeed, within the companies themselves, there is also an increasing recognition that there must be action. "Whether Socapalm did grab land or not," reports one company manager, "the communities think it is that way. We arrived and we earned millions. And what is left for them? If we want peace, we have to distribute. and especially since we pay rent to the government but the State does not give anything or little to the communities!"

Further, former non-participatory processes to land mapping and high-profile instances of desecrations of sacred sites have hindered attempts to find mutually-beneficial solutions.

Company Interests

In the case of Socapalm, the challenge of its privatisation since 2000 meant huge investment was required in its first decade of operations to upgrade its infrastructure, during a time of low palm oil prices. As a result, the economic imperative to keep production costs as low as possible deprioritised issues of social and environmental sustainability.

At the same time, in their work with communities, there has been a historic lack of transparency and record-keeping about social management issues in the companies. As communities demanded accountability and the companies themselves became more concerned with upholding their end of the bargain, Socapalm sought new mechanisms for engaging with stakeholders.



As the state gives...little to the community... we are forced to make peace."

Director General, Socapalm



Part 2

Help is at hand

How CSE Africa's training marks a new chapter for the SOCFIN Group

On the recommendation of Earthworm Foundation, the Centre for Social Excellence (CSE) Africa has worked with the SOCFIN Group since 2017 to offer bespoke training to assist the companies in managing conflicts with communities and support its subsidiary companies with their responsible management policy, including the social and environmental requirements of acquiring Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification.

As one Managing Director stated, 'CSE Africa brought a new perspective and lens to our work... to forge deeper and stronger bonds with the local communities and to develop alongside one another in peace.'

Over the past 4 years, CSE Africa has trained 11 staff members of SOCFIN's Cameroon companies. As part of ongoing consultation with CSE, Socapalm has now appointed a dedicated sustainability manager to lead the company in this new direction.

Now, company to community relations are beginning to change for the better and the process has evidenced how meaningful participatory processes and community consultations produce both internal and external value.

With CSE's best-in-class training and newly-appointed dedicated professionals with a deep understanding of community concerns and participatory processes, Safacam and Socapalm are addressing previous conflicts and, with a portion of the plantations already certified since December 2020, they are on their way to achieving full RSPO certification.



The entrance to the Safacam plantation at Dizangue



Part 3

Reaping the benefits

Early signs of impact for the company, its workers and local community

With CSE Africa's support, the companies have begun easing long-standing tensions and are on the path to developing meaningful strategies to manage conflictual relationships and to meet the needs of communities in which they operate.

A stronger company

First and foremost, the companies have developed strategies to deal with all layers of society, not just the chiefs or those with 'the loudest voice'.

The benefits of this goes both ways: the company better understands the community's aspirations and needs, and the community better understands the constraints felt by the companies and what is realistic to expect from a corporate body.

With CSE staff who are able to frame arguments in the most constructive ways, the company can better represent its interests to the community. Staff are able to better explain how corporate tax should enable the government to take on its responsibilities, even if in practice this may not happen.

The companies are also benefiting from a newly invigorated culture shift. CSE alumni and peer-to-peer training mean new approaches are getting shared company-wide. Leaders such as Emmanuel Gang, Assistant Manager in charge of stakeholders relations and who graduated from CSE in 2019, bring a fresh new style, inviting staff to go on site visits with him to fully understand community needs.

As the managing director evaluates, Emmanuel's inclusive style has meant the community has been directly able to deepen its relationship with company staff. "It helped to raise awareness for both the trainees and others around them of the importance of these relations in our daily work."

Emmanuel believes his approach to collaborative community work stems from his CSE training, particularly from modules focusing on communication. "My job as social manager is very sensitive," he says. "You need to use all your senses when in front of the community." The impact is strongly felt by the community, who recognise Emmanuel as a positive - if limited - force for good. As one plantation manager explains, the communities frequently say, "If it was only [Emmanuel in charge], all would be good! But he is not the decision maker!"

With the support of CSE alumni, both companies are also on the way to getting its RSPO certification. This focus, since 2018, is the next big step. This means taking practical steps to better protect the environment. For example, over the past years, new waste management systems have been introduced, the use of fertilizer is controlled and prohibited in protected zones, and unregulated burning of crops is forbidden.



A proud graduate, Patience Ekoule, of CSE Africa at Socapalm



Part 3 Reaping the benefits [continued]

Protected workers

The positive impact is also felt by workers themselves. Beforehand, there was a real lack of transparency and record-keeping in the company. This hampered efforts to respond to concerns and complaints from those working for the company. Thanks to processes led by CSE-trained staff, grievance mechanisms have now been strengthened and the company has a new commitment to respond to all concerns in a timely manner. As a managing director stated, “We now know that we must always respond... in good time. If we don't, it will come back as a boomerang.”

Similarly, CSE-trained staff have been able to revise health and safety regulations and ensure the ready availability of protective equipment. Transportation, which previously saw workers travelling alongside machetes and produce, has now been radically improved, with separated trucks mitigating safety concerns.

Invested communities

For communities, there is a new sense of feeling genuinely invited to 'the table'. With a dedicated focal point within the company, it is now clear who community members can reach. One local chief explained how before, they were “forced to go straight to the Director General. But now, with [a dedicated focal point]... they are the ones who come to us.” With trained staff who understand the varying interests of the company and community, progress is possible.

CSE alumnus Emmanuel explains the importance of mediation. “Community demands can be unrealistic, asking [the company] for what is the government's responsibility. So you have to work out what you can give and what you can't. With the absence of health and educational structures provided by the government, communities look towards the company to provide these services.” With his training, Emmanuel is able to frame arguments in the most constructive ways, so the needs of the company and community can be simultaneously addressed.

In the long term, communities having greater agency also allows for the development of more ambitious plans. This includes communities being able to hold companies to account for their long-term promises, made possible thanks to new formal channels developed by CSE alumni for community-wide engagement. They are also able to better advocate as a group for infrastructural developments, such as health centres, water towers, and schools. Economic benefits are further felt through projects that build the capacity of the community, with the companies sponsoring mills so that community-run women's groups are able to process their produce in self-organised collectives.

In some exemplary cases, communities have also been able to seek redress for historical conflicts. On one plantation, anguish felt over the desecration of a sacred site over 40 years ago is finally being addressed, thanks to the mediation of the CSE alumni. Going forward, new roles have been defined to ensure such issues don't occur again.





Villagers meet with Emmanuella at a village near Safacalm

Community consultations at the village level

Finding constructive ways forward in the past and present

It's mid-afternoon and members of a village near Safacalm take their seats in the open-air balcony of the community centre building. The villagers gather to meet with Safacalm's community relations lead, Emmanuella, to discuss a new project for the cultivation of local.

As a hush descends, Emmanuella begins. "Over the next 2 to 3 weeks, we'll be taking into account the social and cultural value of the land. We need your help. Perhaps there are medicinal tree barks? Perhaps you use certain waters for traditional rites? We've agreed to protect these areas, but we need you to show us these sites and identify them on GPS."

As Emmanuella concludes, the villagers ask for further clarifications, to identify the exact land in question and establish a date and time to conduct the mapping.

In the meantime, a discussion breaks out and a tall man of around 40 and a well-respected village dignitary, stands up. He thanks Emmanuella but points to the past. "We are seeing great changes. But we also have a past. Our ancestors are dead and angry. Safacalm needs to appease our ancestors." He asks for the company to pay tribute to appease the historical wrongs. Another dignitary then stands up to say that they were disconcerted to hear about Safacalm's first RSPO certification from a third party, and not directly from Safacalm. He said that Safacalm is ready for certification yet in their view. "They get a diploma even when they are not ready. It is as if a student is still learning and he gets his certificate! For over 100 years, we have been in pain, and Emmanuella has just come. We are talking and there are promises, and already you have your diploma! I don't understand how they gave it so soon"

As the afternoon continues, representatives of Safacalm and the village continue to discuss, seeking solutions to the past, and finding collaborative ways forward for the future. At the close of the meeting, Emmanuel checks the meeting minutes with the village secretary, ensuring mutual agreement on the record of the points discussed.



Part 4

What next?

Towards a future with social license and mutual understanding

Towards full certification

Over the coming years, it is a priority for SOCFIN to obtain RSPO certification for all its palm oil companies. This requires not just meeting minimum standards and maintaining them, but continuous improvement year on year. To achieve this, SOCFIN is committed to further strengthening community relations, though this takes years.

After 3 years in the job, CSE alumnus Emmanuel says that only now is he “almost at the tipping point”, on the cusp of establishing positive impacts across multiple sites. Though it takes time to bring all the different stakeholders together, he says “we are in the process of knowing who does what and who needs what and how the company can truly meet these needs.”

On one such site, Emmanuel is currently putting participatory management of natural resources into practice. Together with the local community, “we have identified the High Conservation Value areas and the forest and river boundaries.

The next step is to work out who does what: to develop a co-management strategy including tree nurseries and reforestation projects of indigenous species in degraded High Conservation Value areas, and clear demarcation of chemical pesticide-free buffer zones to regenerate natural vegetation. We are creating new “Eco Guards” posts within the concessions”.

A long-term social management plan

Stemming from this is the need for long-term plans that are agreed by all stakeholders. These should be roadmaps for sustainable development and community empowerment, avoiding short-term profiteering or simple handouts.

By embedding CSE-trained staff, SOCFIN is on the road to improved community relations and a new participatory approach from which the company, communities and local environment stand to benefit. The next steps are to widen the impact of these staff by creating parallel posts in other sites, offering CSE’s short courses to the company’s staff more generally, and ensuring the practices and approaches introduced have the buy-in from everyone, from top-level managers to plantation workers.



Emmanuella and village chief in SAFACAM





Palm trees in Safacalm



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The Centre of Social Excellence (CSE) is a strategic programme of Earthworm Foundation. CSE's mission is to create an enabling environment for social harmony and realised human rights by equipping companies, civil society, and governments with well-trained social practitioners from the regions where they operate.

We mobilise diverse social experts who have real-world experience addressing social issues to design and teach courses to students on the front lines of company-community interactions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. CSE's Africa training centre is based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. [Learn more about CSE.](#)

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