

## **Open Letter to Socfin, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020:**

### **We demand justice and safety for workers on Socfin's rubber/oil palm plantations during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Dear board members and shareholders,

We, the undersigned, are writing you in regards to the conditions of workers on the Socfin plantations as well as the conditions of neighboring communities, in particular during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Even before this current Covid-19 crisis, many people in the communities and among the workers lived in a crisis-like situation. Witnesses from the plantation sites report that the loss of land due to the establishment of Socfin plantations hampered agricultural activities and livelihoods and increasingly threatened the communities' food security; and that workers faced miserable working conditions, often in temporary jobs. Now with the pandemic, the situation has become even more difficult for them and we hear worrying reports from Socfin's various plantations from both workers and affected communities.

In Sierra Leone, during the recent 3-day lockdown, workers on the SAC plantation apparently continued to work and only stopped after sustained condemnation from the public. We were astonished to learn from your memorandum, dated 04/04/2020, that – should the lockdown be extended – you are considering unpaid leave for your employees. At the moment, SAC is reportedly ignoring the government regulations of partial lock down by allowing their workers to cross between different chiefdoms. It is also reported that the company is disrespecting social distancing measures as the company vehicles are normally crammed with workers when they are taken to work sites.

In Cameroon, we have received various complaints from workers that have been sent home on unpaid leave by Socfin Cameroon without compensation, especially those who are temporarily employed and work in the rubber sector. Additionally, the workers are transported in packed personnel transport vehicles without masks, and some come every day from big cities like Douala. This poses a risk for the workers, their families and also the villagers.

In Liberia, the SRC plantation appears to be closing down now, with only a few security and senior managers of the plantation still employed. The management of SRC plantation appears to be using the Covid-19 situation to redundant employees without prior notice. These people risk losing the benefits that they have as employees. People report that this previously happened during the Ebola outbreak and so they are worried that they will be hired merely as temporary staff once operations resume. At the LAC plantations, workers are reported to still be working.

In Ghana, communities affected by the Socfin plantations complain that the company is not respecting social distancing rules when it comes to the workers' treatment. The workers are still packed in the vehicles tightly while going to the farms; no hand washing gadgets are provided and no sanitizers.

Communities and villages in Africa are already vulnerable with the Covid-19 outbreak. Placing employees on unpaid leave or forcing them to work in current conditions without respecting the necessary measures, risking their lives and those of their family members and communities is not acceptable. We understand that during lockdown your operations and revenues are suffering, but we are convinced that it is within the financial capabilities of the Socfin group to pay full salaries to their employees during the Covid-19 outbreak. According to a recently published report, an estimated 30 million euros were paid to Socfin shareholders and directors Hubert Fabri and Vincent Bolloré and their families in 2018.<sup>1</sup> The company can refrain from paying out dividends to their shareholders in the coming years.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) state<sup>2</sup> that the spread of Covid-19 can be stopped only by practicing immediate and effective social distancing also at the work place and by implementing the respective measures to make that possible. This includes increased hand hygiene with water and soap or sanitizer and self-isolation measures with the family or community. It seems very difficult to ensure the safety of Socfin workers, their families and communities against Covid-19 in the present conditions on the plantations, particularly the social distance. We are especially concerned about workers who are transported in trucks, without sufficient space and from several different locations. The risks to workers on Socfin plantations are unacceptably high that they will be infected with Covid-19 and spread it further to their communities. Furthermore, due to the asymptomatic infectiousness of the coronavirus pandemic, the continuation of Socfin operations will undoubtedly lead to an increase in the spread of Covid-19 and endanger the lives of workers as well as people in host communities who interact with them on a daily basis.

Based on this, we urge Socfin to:

1. take immediate action so that all the recommendations of WHO, ILO and the respective governments are respected for all workers and neighboring communities;
2. immediately close down operations in all plantations until the above is ensured or the pandemic is under control;
3. provide workers fully paid leave during any close down or reduction in workforce, including temporary workers;
4. support full and verifiable community testing, including contact tracing and isolation that can guarantee the safety of the workers and population of host communities.

Now and beyond this current Covid-19 crisis, Socfin must start respecting their workers' rights and the rights of the affected communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Profundo (2020), Unravelling the Socfin Group, <https://www.profundo.nl/projecten/unravelling-the-socfin-group>

<sup>2</sup> ILO (2020), ILO Sectoral Brief: COVID-19 and the impact on agriculture and food security,

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_742023.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742023.pdf)

ILO (2020), ILO Standards and COVID-19 (coronavirus), [https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/WCMS\\_739937/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/WCMS_739937/lang-en/index.htm)

WHO (2020), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

CDC (2020), COVID-19 – How to protect yourself and others, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

We thank you in advance for taking this matter seriously and implementing our recommendations without a delay. Businesses must protect their workers and prevent further, unnecessary loss of lives.

Sincerely yours

Alliance for Rural Democracy (gathering Yeabamah National Congress for Human Rights and Abloja), Liberia

Green Advocates, Liberia

JUSTICITIZ (gathering Kwamuneh and LACDISTFAC), Liberia

MALOA (Malen Land Owners and Users Association), Sierra Leone

NMJD (Network Movement for Justice and Development), Sierra Leone

RADD (Réseau des Acteurs du Développement Durable), Cameroon

SEFE (Struggle to Economize our Future Environment), Cameroon

Synaparcam (National Synergy of Peasants and Villagers), Cameroon

Y.V.E. (Youth Volunteers for the Environment), Ghana

Organisations supporting this letter:

Bread for all, Switzerland

FIAN Switzerland

FIAN Belgium

GRAIN

Green Advocates International, USA

INSPIRIT Creatives, Germany

Milieu Defensie, Friends of the Earth Netherlands

ReAct, France

RRF (Rights and Rice Foundation), Liberia

SDI (Sustainable Development Institute), Liberia

Silnorf (Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food), Sierra Leone

World Rainforest Movement