
Cameroon: Local people respond to Socapalm's ISO 14001: 2004 Certification

The oil palm company Socapalm in Cameroon plans to renew its ISO 14001 certification, which expired in 2017. We expose the company's attempts to cover up the destruction caused to the communities and the environment

Socapalm was established in 1968 by the Cameroonian government and was privatized in the year 2000. **It is controlled by SOCFIN, a multinational agro-industrial group that specializes in palm oil and rubber tree plantations.** SOCFIN is controlled by Belgian businessman Hubert Fabri and Frenchman Vincent Bolloré. The group has financial and operational companies in Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, which manage plantations in around a dozen African and Asian countries. **The group's aggressive expansion policy has led to land grabbing practices,** the impacts of which have provoked numerous reactions from villagers. **With the arrival of the plantations in Cameroon in 1968, large areas of forest were cleared and replaced with monocultures of oil palm. This also reduced the forests** that had been used by local populations for harvesting and hunting activities (1).

Communities located near the agro-industrial plantations of Socapalm (a subsidiary of SOCFIN Bolloré in Cameroon) are concerned about the way in which the company's activities **have polluted their environment.**

They have continuously denounced an environmental management system that exposes them to **serious diseases and a host of other problems.**

In Central Africa, many companies have received ISO 14001 certification, which deals with the protection of the environment where the company carries out its activities. **Socapalm's ISO 14001 certification expired in May 2017. Prior to that date, Socapalm hired a consulting firm to carry out an environmental impact study so as to renew said certification.** We oppose the renewal because of the way in which Socapalm pollutes our environment, added to the legal work carried out by the consultancy in question.

The inhabitants of six Socapalm plantations have reported blatant cases of non-compliance with the requirements of ISO 14001: 2004 in terms of the general principles of environmental protection, the legal and regulatory requirements of the Republic of Cameroon, and also the agreements between the Cameroonian State and Socapalm.

Water sources used by local people for cleaning and consumption have been **contaminated by fertilizers and chemicals** that are washed away in runoff after the rains. Residues that accumulate in the lagoons also enter these water courses which, **without proper treatment, supply the neighboring villages.** Beetles that originate in the oil extraction plant enter the plantation, leading to **the proliferation of flies, added to which is the nauseating stench coming from the lagoons.** **Furthermore, the air is filled with ash smoke released by Socapalm factories.** The validity of the ISO certification is conditioned to the continuous and satisfactory operation of the Socapalm

management system.

Article 29 of the Framework Law on Environmental Management and Article 5 of Law No. 98/005 of April 14, 1998, which deals with the water regime, prohibit such practices. The pollution of the environments inhabited by communities living downstream leads to an exponential increase in the number of victims of waterborne diseases. Fecal matter from septic tanks is discharged into non-functional lagoons or watercourses. Each year, Socapalm dumps the contents of septic tanks from the toilets used by plantation workers into the lagoons and some of the waterways instead of providing their own treatment plants for such wastewater. This is a flagrant violation of Decree No. 2001/165 / PM issued on May 8, 2001, which specifies the methods for the protection of surface and groundwater from pollution.

Furthermore, fertilizer bags are used to collect loose or fallen fruit. During the harvesting of palm nut clusters, some fruits fall to the ground. So as not to lose these, **Socapalm asks young children and women to collect them in bags contaminated by dangerous toxic chemicals** (pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides), thus exposing them to illnesses caused by these products and contaminating a large part of the harvest. This is a violation of the regulations established in Law No. 2003/003 of April 21, 2003 regarding phytosanitary protection, which in Article 19 and those that follow advocates specific treatment for such hazardous waste.

Community concerns have not been taken into account. We, the inhabitants of the areas surrounding the plantations and the main victims of the failures mentioned above, have consistently reported these problems and many similar issues directly with Socapalm. However, the company has never attempted to provide lasting solutions. Furthermore, they have not complied with Article 8, paragraph 1 and following on the transfer agreement of 90% of the shares that are the property of the State in terms of Socapalm's assets, signed on June 30, 2000.

The only thing that matters to Socapalm is generating more profits with impunity and the help of ISO certification, which it certainly doesn't merit. However, according to the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), "Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."

Synaparcam (National Association of Peasant and River Populations - Synergie Nationale des Paysans Et Riverains du Cameroun)

(1) SYNAPARCAM, [Mobilisations des paysans a travers le Cameroun](#) (Mobilizations of farmers throughout Cameroon).