



**The Centre of Social Excellence Africa**

# **Social Practice in an Ivorian Palm Oil Company: towards full certification**

## **A Case Study**

How CSE alumni are helping one company to achieve a new standard in corporate social responsibility



## Part 1

# The Journey to Change

Making the investment towards RSPO certification

### Beginning a journey to change

In the Ivory Coast, the palm-oil company SIPEF-CI has undergone a transformative journey. This journey, led by trained and committed Centre of Social Excellence (CSE) interns and alumni, has seen the company achieve full Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification and establish a deeper and richer relationship with the communities alongside which it operates.

Founded in 1997 after the privatisation of the state-owned Palmindustrie, SIPEF-CI operates through both larger plantations and smallholdings, from which 41% of its supplies come. Previously, the absence of a strong social management plan created substantial issues: local communities weren't fully engaged in decision-making, company workers were frustrated, and environmental degradation was underway through overuse of chemical fertilisers, contamination of water supplies, and the absence of adequate buffer zones.

Since taking on interns and alumni from CSE Africa's programme, SIPEF-CI has invested in its social responsibility for fair management of workers, their rights, and responsibility to sustainable and clean environmental stewardship. The inclusion of CSE interns was a pivotal moment. As one manager reflects, "It's hard to find people with the right skills... we cruelly miss quality training in this country. Unlike other interns... CSE students are able to identify problems and offer solutions. CSE is training people to become top-level management."



CSE students are able to identify problems and offer solutions."

*Manager, SIPEF-CI*

### A new company culture

In recent years, SIPEFCI became the first of just two companies in the Ivory Coast to obtain full RSPO certification. The certification process has seen major positive impacts on the company. To achieve certification, minimise its environmental impact and strengthen its social practice, CSE-trained staff have pushed for investment in a company-wide culture shift.

This has led to extensive on-the-ground changes - not just theoretical ones. Company workers now benefit regularly from protective personal equipment, strong and fair grievance mechanisms are in place, and good sanitation facilities are now available so workers - and especially pesticide operators - can properly clean themselves after dealing with chemicals.



*Fresh fruit bunches are harvested*



## Part 2

# Supporting communities

Putting in place participatory processes that benefit all

### Ensuring all voices are heard

For local communities, public and participatory consultations ensure voices from across the community are heard and respected; through their community representatives, SIPEF-CI is better able to communicate their intentions and upskill villagers. As expressed in one meeting, “we want to help you develop new agricultural techniques so that you can increase your production and have a better respect for the environment so that you don’t tell your children, there used to be forests, but there aren’t any left now.”

### Boosting production and acumen

Alongside participatory processes, local communities are also experiencing an increase in production thanks to new agricultural methods. New environmentally-informed practices introduced through CSE-trained staff, such as the use of natural fertilizers, enhanced pruning techniques, harvesting planning, and manual weeding have boosted the output of plantations. As one producer exclaimed, “Production increased because we implemented new practices. The harvest is twice as much as before!”

In addition, social and economic training, especially around financial management and agri-business, is helping individuals develop their businesses and plan for the future. Learning basic financial accounting - even knowing the price of fresh fruit bunches, as one producer noted - has had a huge impact. These trainings are helping small-scale producers carry out better financial planning, which has contributed to greater household spending on schooling and nutritious food for children.

### Defending workers' rights

As SIPEF-CI works with local communities’ interests at heart, basic workers’ rights are also enhanced. This begins with better feedback and grievance mechanisms allowing producers to raise issues with the company. These are now all recorded in a register and reviewed by the company leadership. They can then be dealt with immediately or in due course. One producer reflects how CSE-trained staff “helped [me] with how to put forward problems to the company. Now they keep their promises when we go to them. Now it is in writing.”



SIPEF-CI managers relax at a palm wine brewery





# In their words

How CSE staff are viewed by the community and their colleagues

Villagers appreciate the respect given them by [CSE] alumni, they notice a quality of listening and engagement that is different.

- Local community member

CSE produces students that take us forward. Without CSE, we would have gone forward, but with less expertise.

- Company Manager

She is always there. If someone falls off a bridge or someone is sick, she's the first to be there.

- Local community member

I learn from them on environmental issues, biodiversity and on managing social issues. Once they explain new ways to me, I can better explain to the producers.

- Plantation supervisor

[CSE alumni] know how to engage well with the producers...they are very good at transmitting messages and communicating well. They capture the attention of the people they speak with.

- Company Manager



## Part 3

# A stronger environment

Practical changes benefiting local ecosystems and production

### New practices take root

SIPEF-CI's new commitment to sustainable practice has already seen the demarcation of buffer zones, better waste management and the near-elimination of chemical fertilisers. For instance, producers are now reducing the amount of burnt matter, instead letting it become organic fertiliser.

The same practice goes for weeding. Rather than using chemical herbicides to reduce weeds, encouraging practices of manual weeding allow for cut grass and vegetation to be composted and turned into organic fertiliser. This has the double gain of not only reducing chemical waste, but also boosting production through increased organic fertiliser.

Working with the community, CSE-trained staff have created new systems for recycling oil canisters, collecting waste oil and old tyres. The teams have also identified zones in accordance with RSPO requirements where pesticide use is not permitted.



A village meeting with CSE intern Armand Anamou



## Part 4

# What next?

## From company to the community: sharing good practice

### Certification for smallholders

A major next step for SIPEF-CI and its CSE-trained staff is to encourage and support independent smallholders to achieve the same RSPO certification that SIPEF-CI now holds. Currently, there is only one example known across Africa of independent smallholders receiving this certification, the Sierra Leone-based company, GOLDTREE (SL) Ltd, that has RSPO-certified its independent smallholders.

To achieve this next milestone, certain key challenges need to be overcome. These challenges include smallholders not having the financial capacity to engage in the certification process and the necessary changes to production methods, such as more resource-intensive manual weeding as an alternative to spraying pesticides. It is also often prohibitively expensive for smallholders to purchase the required safety equipment (as one local producer said, “it’s not easy for us to afford... we are told to wear adapted work clothes, but we just don’t have any”). Another key concern, and one that is preoccupying the current CSE interns, is to develop stronger payment mechanisms so that the smallholders get a maximum return and on time.

With the chief priority for many smallholders being simply turning a profit, SIPEF-CI is hoping to conduct extensive training that will increase economic return and create a real incentive for better environmental management through new practices.

To this end, CSE-trained staff are leading the generation of creative solutions that benefit all. One approach suggested by a current CSE intern is to set up a local banking scheme for independent smallholders and associate producers. This would allow them to save money at peak production times to finance the purchase of seeds and fertilisers at a later date.

Other ideas seek to cut out the middleman in payment processing, by using for instance mobile payment methods, ensuring smallholders get a maximum return on their harvest. Another avenue for exploration is encouraging diversification of revenue streams. “We tell them not only to look at palm plantations”, one CSE alumni says, “in order to ease pressure from price fluctuations.”

### Sustainable growth: long-term

With all these challenges, the priority for CSE-trained staff is cultivating a sustainable growth mindset, resolving the remaining environmental challenges, dealing with river pollution from organic waste, and embedding better management practices with all palm oil producers in the surrounding local communities.

The company and communities all recognise that intensive agriculture has had its day. Now, momentum is gathering around a new agenda, a ‘both-and’ solution where production is optimised and the environment is protected.





*CSE intern Martine Djieba surveys smallholders about their RSPO interest*



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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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