

# The Power Dynamics of Multinational Corporations: The Case of SOCFIN Group in Liberia



*An Independent Investigation of the  
Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) and the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC)  
Conducted by the Public Trust Media Group, Inc  
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## **List of Acronyms**

YNCHR	Yeagbamah National Congress for Human Rights
CU	Citizen Union
CRC	Citizen Representative Committee
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Platform
NBC	National Bureau of Concessions
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EPML	Environmental Protection and Management Law of Liberia
ESIA	Environmental Social Impact Assessment
NRWP	Natural Resources Women platform
ARD	Alliance for Rural Democracy
GAI	Green Advocates International
CAO	Office of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman
IFC	International Finance Corporation
LAC	Liberian Agricultural Company
SRC	Salala Rubber Corporation
BFA	Bread for All
LINA	Liberia News Agency
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence

## 1.0 Introduction

In 1959, the Liberian Government granted concessions rights to the Liberian Agricultural Corporation (LAC) and the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC). LAC is the second largest rubber company in the country. Not much was heard about the struggles of the people directly affected by the operation of the companies under previous managements until the plantations were acquired by Socfin after the Liberian civil war. First, it was LAC in 1999 and then SRC in 2007. The farms have since been breeding grounds for conflict, partly because of Socfin's aggressive expansion agenda, with little or no regard for the poor and hungry.

The indigenous inhabitants who laid claims to the expropriated lands have cried times without number about the violations and pains they continue to suffer without redress. They were evicted from their ancestral land without their informed and prior consent, their crops were destroyed without adequate compensation, dispossessed of their livelihoods with no mercy and subjected to all manner and forms of humiliations with the backing of their government. Sadly, Socfin has so far remained unrepentant. Their responses to the legitimate cries of the affected people have been one of disdain. In fact, local and international rights organizations who have mustered the courage to engage the plantation owners, have themselves been attacked in unequal measures. In short, Socfin does not take kindly any scrutiny of their operations of the farms – a repressive regime of sort.

To this end, the Public Trust Media Group (information about the author at the end of this report), an independent Liberian company, sought to explore, analyze and document how SRC and LAC plantations and their parent organization, Socfin, react to grievances, not just from the indigenous affected communities, but human rights issues flagged by national, international and community-based activists and defenders.

Organizations supporting and/or giving ears to the cause of the affected communities, including the International Finance Corporation and its accountability watchdog, the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) have all faced the fury of the Socfin Group, because of matters relating to its fiduciary responsibility.

There is a shared pattern noticed in the modes of operation of the two companies. They appear to shy away from the independent media. For three days, we ran after the SRC and LAC managers for an interview, but to no avail. In fact, they stopped picking calls from our team in the end, suggesting that they might just be hiding something.

In the process of doing this work, background pieces of information have been sought from a range of local and international stakeholders including Green Advocates, Bread for All, Socfin (SRC/LAC) and media contents. Relevant government agencies were also reached to gauge their perspectives on the running of the farms and the looming human rights concerns and tensions being left behind. That added to the heavy rains, the bad roads and the uneasy calm on the farms, made the study all the more challenging.

However, findings from the study revealed a range of issues that speaks to corporate maneuverings to ride rough shod over structural weaknesses in enforcement of rights-based criteria for land exploitation and human rights standards. It suggests that a win-win situation is still farfetched and reinforces the need to exert pressure on the plantations' owners and their host government, to ensure adherence to minimum international best practices and legal frameworks for the benefit of not only the investors, but especially the affected communities.

## 1.1 Background

Founded in 1909, the Socfin Group is a powerful international agro-industrial conglomerate. It is a holding company listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange, with operations in oil palm and rubber plantations as well as dealing in oil palm seeds in Asia and Africa<sup>1</sup>. The Group owns two subsidiaries in Liberia - the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC), situated in Margibi and Bong Counties and the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC), in Grand Bassa County. Like LAC<sup>2</sup>, SRC was granted concession rights by the Liberian government in 1959<sup>3</sup>. Socfin Group then acquired SRC after the Liberian civil war in 2007 and embarked upon rehabilitation and an ambitious expansion of the plantation, having received a 10 million USD loan from the International Finance Corporation (IFC)<sup>4</sup> in 2008.

Ever since Socfin and its affiliates – SRC/LAC ramped up their investment operations in the concessions and the surrounding communities, the native inhabitants have remained restless for all the wrong reasons. There have been insistent reports of gross rights violations ranging from the illegal seizure and clearing of customary land without the people’s Free, Prior and Informed Consent, forced eviction and destruction of ancestral graves and sacred sites, water pollution, destruction of crops, displacement and loss of livelihood without adequate compensation. Aside these, arbitrary, detention, intimidation, physical violence, sexual harassment and other forms of rights violations have all marred the operation of the plantations.

The companies and their parent organization, have vehemently dismissed the claims, arguing that they followed all the legal procedures for obtaining the concessions. The companies have fought back robustly to defend their investments in the face of the continuing agitations and protests by the dispossessed and suffering commoners for some relief.

## 1.2 Key Objective of study

The research is intended to explore, analyze and document how SRC and LAC plantations and their parent organization Socfin react to:

- a. community people raising legitimate concerns and grievances over their operations on lands expropriated from the indigenous communities;
- b. national and community-based activists and human rights and land rights defenders raising legitimate concerns and grievances about the conditions, circumstances and situation of indigenous communities;
- c. organizations supporting the affected (local) people, including Green Advocates International and its partners as well as Bread for All, a Swiss NGO;
- d. to published reports and complaints to international institutions, i.e. the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO); and
- e. media reports documenting the impact of Socfin subsidiaries LAC and SRC operations on Indigenous communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.socfin.com>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.socfin.com/en/locations/lac>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.socfin.com/en/locations/src>

<sup>4</sup> IFC loan to SRC: <https://disclosures.ifc.org/#/projectDetail/SPI/26510>

## **2.0 Methodology of Study**

The methodology deployed were open and close ended questions designed with the purpose of determining the data gathering tools, to probe and understand respondents on specific issues related to the aforementioned research. The questions were administered to community residents and key stakeholders in the affected towns, villages and the plantations at large. It also factored in perceptions of local officials, opinion leaders and personal assessment and/or analysis of the researcher.

Secondary data has been mined from a couple of pertinent literatures on the context. These materials aided the research design and analysis to have an approximation of valid findings as a means of redressing the prevailing conflict prone reality that is looming in the plantation estate. The literatures scanned included statements and reports from SRC/LAC and their parent Company – Socfin group, as well as rights organizations that have been engaged with and defending the indigenous communities.

### **2.1 The Scope of the Study**

Primary data collection setting was the plantation communities and environs. The questionnaires were administered in a random sampling format that captured voices of nearly hundred residents and stakeholders from selected towns and villages including Doakai Town, Kuwah-ta, Monkaytay-ta, Deede-ta 1&2 and Ansa-ta in SRC; whilst New Ceezon, Gbafain Town, Wonwoulu, Jenikpa, Zoeworlor and Gbocleon were visited in the LAC concession. Other voices from Monrovia and local community-based organizations, as well as select agencies of government are also inputted into the data collection process.

### **2.2 Data analysis and Presentation**

As indicated questions were both open and close ended, this made room for responses to have been placed in matrix and graphs where percentage determination was made. Also, some of the responses were reduced to narratives, that sought to explain why certain things have been done or could not be done. There is therefore the possibility of drawing logical inferences from the accumulated primary and secondary data in a wholesome report as what has been produced.

## **3.0 Administering the Questionnaire: SRC Results**

Number of Respondents: 67

Communities visited: Doakai Town, Kuwah-ta, Monkaytay-ta, Deede-ta 1&2 and Ansa-ta

Age range: 18 years and above

Sex: M (48) F (19)

<b>Question</b>	<b>Affirmative Response</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Negative Response</b>	<b>%</b>
Knowledge of complaint with IFC	62 had knowledge:	<b>92.5%</b>	5 had no knowledge	<b>7.5%</b>
Did meeting frequency change following complaint	49 said SRC used those meetings to promise wells, schools, clinics, etc	<b>73.1%</b>	18 said no meetings held	<b>26.8%</b>
Did company get in touch with community leaders following complaint	38 said did get in touch with community leaders and outspoken people	<b>56.7%</b>	29 said they don't know	<b>43.2%</b>
38 focus of meeting with community leaders following complaint	38 said it focused on prevailing on them to denounce Green Advocates	<b>56.7%</b>	29 didn't know:	<b>43.2%</b>
Knowledge of the existence of Citizens Union and its date of establishment	60 knew it as being a newly established group, but not when it was established.	<b>89.5%</b>	7 did not know it or when it was established	<b>10.4%</b>
Citizens Union by whom	60 see it as a company (SRC) establishment which represents the company's interest	<b>89.5%</b>	7 didn't know	<b>10.5%</b>
Knowledge of the existence of Yeagbahma National Congress and its date of establishment	63 see Yeagbahma as a citizens' movement representing vulnerable people's interest	<b>94%</b>	4 didn't know	<b>5.9%</b>
Composition of Citizens' Union	59 consider it a conglomeration of people from both affected and nonaffected communities, as well as, company agents	<b>88%</b>	8 did know exactly	<b>11.9%</b>
Composition of Yeagbahma National Congress	63 consider it a being entirely comprised of men and women of affected communities	<b>94%</b>	4 didn't know	<b>5.9%</b>
Any intimidations etc of the community leaders or activists or attempts to convince them using money or similar?	62 said yes	<b>92.5%</b>	5 didn't know	<b>7.5%</b>

Forms of intimidations	Incarceration, termination of contracts and job denial			
Are communities aware that the Citizens Union wrote a letter to the Compliance Advisory Ombudsman (CAO) of International Finance Corporation (IFC) attempting to withdraw the communities' complaints and denying that Green Advocates represent the legal interests of communities?	67 said they were totally unaware	<b>100%</b>		
Communities aware that the Compliance Advisory Ombudsman (CAO) of International Finance Corporation (IFC) reviewed and rejected the letter from the Citizens Union and directed that the CAO proceed with the complaint assessment?	17 persons said they were aware	<b>25%</b>	50 said they did not know	<b>74.6%</b>
Who is funding the Citizens Union?	60 believes SRC funds the Citizens Union	<b>89.5%</b>	7 didn't know their funders	<b>10.5%</b>
What is the history of the Citizens Union in advocating for the rights of the affected communities?	60 see Citizens Union as having absolutely no history of advocating for affected communities SRC	<b>89.5%</b>	7 had absolutely no knowledge	<b>10.5%</b>

TABLE 1: SRC SURVEY 2020

### 3.1 Data Interpretation

Survey conducted in SRC strongly suggests that 62 out of 67 respondents representing 92.5% had knowledge of the complaint filed with IFC as opposed to 5, representing 7.5% who said they had no knowledge.

49 persons representing 73.1% of respondents said frequency of SRC's meeting with them changed with company using those meetings to promise wells, clinics, schools and payments for crops, while 18, constituting 26.9% could not say whether or not meeting frequency changed, following complaint with IFC.

38 respondents representing 56.7% said company got in touch with some community leaders and outspoken people following the filing of the complaint, while 29, representing 43.3% said they had no knowledge.

38 respondents constituting 56.7% said the meetings with community leaders were used to prevail on them to denounce Green Advocates as their legal representative on grounds that that this would pave the way for the company to meet their demands in the soonest possible time.

Survey further implies that 60 interviewees representing 89.5% of respondents are aware of the existence of Citizen Union but not the exact date of establishment, as opposed to 7 representing 10.4% who said they are not aware of its existence.

60 persons representing 89.5% said the Citizen Union is an establishment of the SRC and that it represents SRC's interest as well, while 7, representing 10.5% said they were not aware of the existence of Citizen Union.

63 of the 67 persons interviewed, representing 94% said they know of the existence of the Yeagbahma National Congress for Human Rights (YNCHR) and that it represents interest of affected communities, while 4 persons representing 5.9% said they did not know.

59 respondents representing 88% consider the Citizen Union to be a mix of people from both affected and mainly non affected communities, as opposed to 8, constituting 11.9% who said they do not know its composition.

On the composition of the YNCHR, 63 of the 67 interviewees, representing 94% consider the organization as being entirely comprised of men and women of affected communities, while 4 persons representing 5.9% said they do not of its composition.

62 respondents (92.5%) said the company uses intimidations (incarceration, termination of contracts and job denial) and enticements to convince community leaders and activists while 5, representing 7.5% said they were not aware of any such tactics.

All 67 interviewees (100%) said they were not aware that the Citizens Union wrote a letter to the Compliance Advisory Ombudsman (CAO) of International Finance Corporation (IFC) attempting to withdraw the communities' complaints and denying that Green Advocates represents the legal interests of communities.

17 persons representing 2.5% said they were aware that the Compliance Advisory Ombudsman (CAO) of International Finance Corporation (IFC) reviewed and rejected the letter from the Citizens Union and directed that the CAO proceed with the complaint assessment, while 50, constituting 97.4% were not aware. This implies that the 17 mentioned above, only got to know after the CAO of the IFC reviewed and rejected Citizen Union's letter and instructed the CAO to go ahead with the complaint assessment.

Sixty respondents representing 89.5% believe SRC is the main funder of the activities of Citizen Union, while 7, representing 10.5 said they did not know. Another 60 interviewees (89.5%) also see Citizen Union as having absolutely no reputation for advocating for affected communities in SRC area.

#### **4.0 Findings and Assessment**

There is a strong suggestion that the degree of commitment, fairness and transparency required of SRC and LAC to address issues surrounding destruction of crops, villages, towns, sacred grounds etc, raised by communities affected by their expansions, leaves more to desire. Consequently, trust and mutual respect between affected communities and citizens on one hand and SRC/LAC on the other is largely nonexistent. This has diminished prospects for smooth, peaceful resolution in the shortest possible time. It is even further compounded by the formation of groups such as the Yeagbahma National Congress for Human Rights (YNCHR) and Citizens Union (CU) in SRC, and Ablojay in LAC, all professing to be pressure groups, working for the affected communities. But in SRC for instance, CU and YNCHR appear to work at variance with each other, which could potentially explore into a full-blown conflict between the two groups one day, to the disadvantage of very “people” they claimed to defend. Below, we will give you a full picture of the character and modus operandi of these various groups.

In a nutshell, if results gathered from the study are anything to stand by, SRC and LAC are yet to demonstrate the commitment and sincerity required to reach terms with affected communities. The Town Chief of Dedee-Ta Amos Bainda, for example, said “we can’t trust SRC anymore my brother, because everything they tell us is not the truth. They have been meeting and meeting with us and promising this and that but not one they have done. The citizen’s union you just talked about is not in our interest. SRC put them together and after their inauguration, we wrote and told them that Citizen Union is not in our interest. We told them that we will not work with them because they are not there for us.” It wasn’t possible to get a copy of that letter, but there is a general feeling in the affected communities that CU is a proxy group.

#### **4.1 The Citizens’ Union (CU)**

The CU is viewed as a Pro-SRC organization, put together apparently as part of the Company’s divide, rule and capture strategy. The group is used mostly to undermine and/or weaken legitimate concerns by affected communities and those speaking on their behalf, including YNCHR, Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD) and especially Green Advocates. The CU appears to be a brainchild of SRC management, conceived 2019, in the aftermath of the complaint filed against the Company with the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO). Its mode of operation is chiefly to counter anything that appears to stand up to the Company and hold it accountable for wrongs committed against the people. This is exemplified both by the letter to the CAO and their attempts to erode trust of people towards those groups that have been there with the people since several years (more details follow below). However, some residents accept that the group was put together by SRC to create harmony between citizens and SRC, and in so doing, enable the company resolve disputes on the plantation the company’s own way. Former local

government official, commissioner of Cinta Township William B. S. Julye, was at one point sorrowful of the plight of the affected people during his time in service. Now, he changed his mind and leads an effort sympathetic of the Company (see more below). Together with Joseph K. Marshall and Rev. Henry F. K. George – the three are the architects and founders of CU and have remained firmly in charge - they occupy the positions of Chairman, Secretary-General and Treasurer respectfully of the CU. These men are among 16 people who signed the position statement<sup>5</sup> to the IFC, denouncing the complaint against the Company. By that time, they were referred to as the Citizen Representative Committee (CRC).

Meanwhile one of the signatories of the letter [name known to the author], has denied ever signing a letter. The person was met working in their garden in Baypolu, on a second visit on the plantation. Baypolu is a relatively large settlement in SRC. The person only recalled attending a meeting meant to discuss payment issues. “That is the pure true and I never signed any paper like that. I am not living with anybody to be scare. No one is feeding me, the person stressed.

#### **4.2 Yeagbaha National Congress for Human Rights (YNCHR)**

YNCHR, is a community-based rights group organized in 2013, to represent the interests of affected people within SRC operation areas. It is one of the supporting organizations of the indigenous people that filed the complaint with the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO). Some of its members, including its founding Chairman, Abraham Kamara and Abraham Pennoh are documented victims of the struggle to redeem their land. They’ve suffered all sorts of attacks and reprisals against their persons and family members while standing up for the cause of the affected citizens - who were dispossessed of their livelihood.

#### **4.3 Security**

A senior member of the Yeagbahmah National Congress for Human Rights (YNCHR) Abraham Pennoh of Ansa-ta said he no longer move freely in the plantation. “I had to force my way to come meet you guys after I heard you passed by and asked for me. They sacked my wife on June 9, 2015 because they said she was working and supporting me and keeping me strong in my advocacy,” Pennoh said during our interview in the heart of the plantation, where he met us as we made our way back from his village. He went on to explain that they have repeatedly been detained for long periods without trial. In one of several attempts to arrest him and his wife in the same year, he said he lost his daughter on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015 in the pandemonium. “My wife was the first to spot the combined group of plantation guards and armed government police men [Emergency Response Unit] and said they are in large number. At that moment, I jumped out and ran away. She also escaped, leaving behind our little daughter.” He said by the time his wife returned, their daughter was nowhere to be found. Pennoh claims the child’s lifeless body indicated that blood was drained from her through the neck.

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<sup>5</sup> Position statement to IFC [file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/2019%2009%2030%20Certificate%20&%20Position%20Statement%20Communities%20\(SRC\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/2019%2009%2030%20Certificate%20&%20Position%20Statement%20Communities%20(SRC).pdf)

Our fixer himself became somewhat fearful at one point during our tour of SRC when he cautioned against foot-dragging in plantation areas. We had stopped to take photos, when he became anxious. On the eve of our departure from SRC, which was the fourth day on the plantation, men believed to have been agents of the Citizen Union bombed into us in Monkaytaya, where we were interviewing people. A woman called and told us after we left to retired in our guest house, to be careful if we had any plan to return to the plantation. She hinted that plans were in the making to attack our team. We immediately informed our fixer. Though he previously expressed concerns when we appeared to move slowly, he allayed our fears this time, assuring that he would lead us through ways that we would be safe. Our last day on the farm, would be more cautious as we avoided using one path more than once until we exited.

Memories are still fresh about how one William Siafa went missing on the plantation in 2018. Explaining his ordeal, Madam Kayma Siafa, wife of Siafa, said days before he disappeared, SRC completely destroyed their newly planted rubber trees on grounds that they were planted on SRC property. According to Mrs. Siafa, following the destruction of their farm, her husband went to work one fateful day and never returned. She alarmed that she hadn't seen her husband for days and the situation soon claimed the attention of the communities within SRC. A massive search got underway involving mainly local residents. After searching for more than one week, his dead body was discovered far away from his guard post, stuck under a tree in a creek, with the corpse already decaying. The people were in shock, resulting to violent disturbances on the plantation. Asked whether SRC has identified with her since the tragedy happened within the company's vicinity, she said not in any form or manner. Madam Siafa, who appeared ill said she depends on the good will of company workers for assistance and other kind-hearted people to help her cater to her children as she was not physically fit at the moment to do any sort of hard work for their upkeep.

There is an uneasy calm at SRC owing to obvious strained relations between SRC and community dwellers. The two sides see each other as being inimical to the other's existence. Citizens for example, on one hand, are disenchanted that the company, in addition to other abuses, treats them no more than mere criminals – using state security to brutalize and drag them behind bars simply for speaking out for their rights.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the company sees the community people as being the single largest stumbling block to their continued growth.

#### **4.4 Peace Pipe**

Despite multiple reports by rights groups and community members that relations between SRC and locals on the ground are frosty, the company's view contrasts any such assertions. The Daily Observer Newspaper<sup>7</sup> quotes the Liberia News Agency's (LINA) Margibi County Correspondent, Richard Baysah as reporting: "Following years of bitterness and distrust between the management of the Salala Rubber Corporation, (SRC) and members of local communities within

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<sup>6</sup> More details can be found in the Bfa report.

<sup>7</sup> The Libera News Agency reports about peace talks: <https://www.liberianobserver.com/news/src-locals-smoke-peace-pipe/>

the concession area of the company, both sides have resolved to put the past behind them and open a new page where they would coexist in peace and harmony". According to the LINA correspondent, the calls were made in Gleegbah Town, Gibi District in Upper Margibi County, during the second stakeholder meeting the SRC management organized in April of 2018. On behalf of Management, Corporate Public Relations Manager Lewis Shillings informed the residents that the meeting was intended to create a peaceful atmosphere between them and SRC. The gathering followed the mysterious death on January 9, 2018 of William Siafa on the plantation, which led to vandalism on the company's housing units. The referenced peace meeting reportedly took place in April 2018. Mr. Shillings regretted the situation, adding, "it has never been the intention of the SRC to be at loggerheads with residents in the concession area, but to rather live in peace and harmony with all..." Speaking for the local government at the meeting, Cinta Township Commissioner, William Julye who now heads the Citizen Union, said it was a very difficult task for him to have initiated the process leading to brokering a peace deal with the company and citizens. He remembered how over the years there had been numerous allegations of crop damage, water pollution, land grabbing among others, which were factors that exacerbated the tension. He assured the SRC Management that as per the peace deal, the residents will now serve as the best security for the company.

It is interesting how commissioner William Julye, was lamenting the dire situation on the plantation, for which he initiated the smoking of a "peace pipe" in April 2018. But a little over a year on, in September 2019, he wore another garment as he signed the position statement to the CAO and the IFC as Chairman of the Citizen Representative Committee (CRC), [now the Citizens' Union], claiming that the government of Liberia and local authorities were not aware of the complaints from the communities. In an attempt to undermine the legitimate cries of the people, he would now argue that there was not complaint at all - a contradiction of sort!

#### **4.5 A Protected Zone**

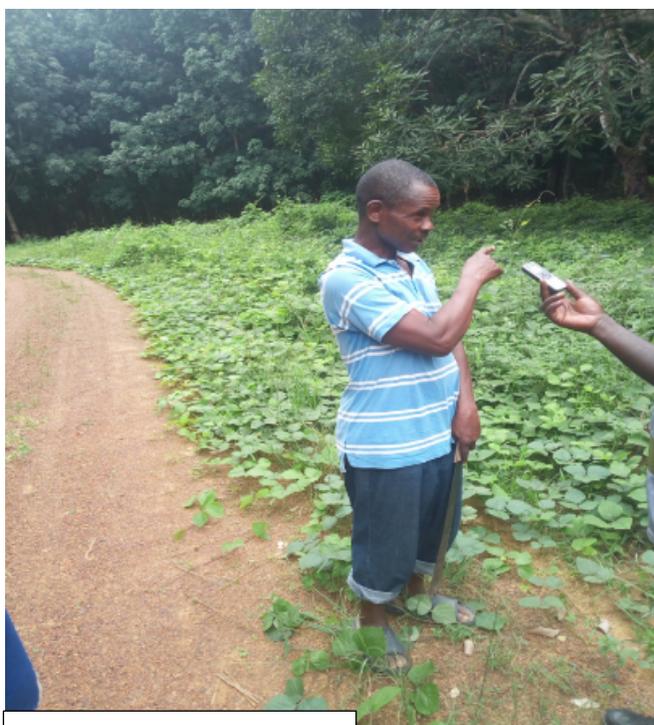
SRC looks more or less like a protected security zone, where agents are posted in villages and on the plantation looking out for anybody (strange) that appears to be seeking information of any kind. They look to eavesdrop on conversations with the view to picking up anything deemed unfriendly to the company's interest. Once these informants/agents were around during our study, it made it difficult, if not impossible for people to freely express themselves during interviews. At the end, some of the interviewees and/or bystanders would whisper and say to us the reason the level of response was low was because of the presence of someone they would describe as company informer. Residents are literally under self-imposed curfew due to safety concerns, ensuring they are at home early.

SRC referred us to Mr. Richard Baysah, who happens to be the Liberia News Agency (LINA) Correspondent in the area to comment on their behalf. We find that interesting because it is the same Baysah who reported that the company and the people had smoked peace pipe. Speaking to our team by phone, Mr. Baysah said, SRC's operations were temporarily shut and that its management in Liberia had been strictly advised by headquarters in Brussels against speaking to

the press. Again, this is further testament of how Socfin uses power and influence to maneuver its way around.

#### 4.6 The Erasure of Landmarks

There is some degree of trauma being experienced by people from affected communities not mainly owing to destruction of crops, towns, villages, etc; but the erasure of landmarks. Their childhood and current memories are built around where they fetched water, sacred sites where they performed communal rites, burial sites and several others. Monue Stanley who hails from Kuwah-ta town explained how “SRC brought in bulldozers and destroyed all that we owned – houses, crops, sacred and burial sites. Even water sources were all polluted. We have been jailed several times in the past and released without trial for merely speaking out for our rights”. Stanley says the company has only been interested in sending them to jail, but failed to appear when the case was called for hearing.



*William Binda of Lango-ta*

In another instance, a man took us near what was once his ancestral village, in Lango-ta, traces of which have been completely lost to the rubber plantation. Fighting back the tears, William Binda pointed to the spot his mother’s grave laid, now covered by rubber trees. When you talk with them, the loss of those parts of their history appears to hurt more than the crops and ordinary buildings.

While on the field, it was gathered that SRC/LAC have been distributing food to communities within and around their respective plantations as their contributions to the COVID-19 Response, though community members describe the gestures as nothing more than a drop in the ocean.

#### 4.7 Affected Communities Filed Complaint

In May 2019, 22 communities in Margibi and Bong Counties, represented by Green Advocates International (GAI) and other local partners, filed a complaint against SRC with the independent watchdog and accountability system of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO).<sup>8</sup> The complaint outlined a number of human rights abuses committed against the affected indigenous people including: land grab and forced eviction, lack of free prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples, destruction of their

<sup>8</sup> CAO Report: [file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/CAOAssessmentReport\\_SalalaRubberCorporation-01\\_Liberia\\_March2020\\_ENGLISH.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/CAOAssessmentReport_SalalaRubberCorporation-01_Liberia_March2020_ENGLISH.pdf)

ancestral graves and sacred sites, economic displacement and loss of livelihood, the pollution of their waters, poor employment conditions, and labor rights violations among other issues. The people also called attention to violations of national and international laws, as well as non-compliance with IFC's Performance Standards. Essentially, the IFC had granted a 10 Million USD loan for the rehabilitation and expansion of the plantation. CAO investigation team was dispatched to Liberia to determine the veracity of the complaint.

During the hearings, the Company resisted and dismissed all the allegations brought against it, including claims to the concession land by indigenous communities. The company argued that "deeds or tribal certificates of land within the Development Area dated after 1959 when the Concession Agreement was signed, held by individuals or groups, are ineffectual under Liberian Law because the Concession Agreement supersedes any subsequent grants to the title." The Company told the assessment team that although notice was received from individuals and groups, claiming land within the Development Area, none of the deeds from the claims received pre-dated 1959, and no original documents were provided to verify the authenticity of the Registration Numbers with the Land Commission. (see CAO report p9, for the complexity of land rights in Liberia for this case see Bfa report)

#### **4.8 Government Agencies**

Meanwhile, our team reached out to the newly established Land Authority to check if the conflict between SRC and the community dwellers in the concession area has claimed their attention. Surprisingly Mr. Othello Mason who says he is the responsible official for concession land said the matter has not been brought to them. Asked whether government was concerned about the running tension between the company and the communities, he said it should be concerning but that the people have not made their concerns official. According to Mason, if they had done so, the National Bureau of Concessions (NBC) would be on top of such complaint and then there would a meeting between the two agencies to the effect. He encouraged the affected communities to make their grievances official.

But contrary to Mason's call for the affected communities to formalize their complaints, the Liberian government has actually been seized of the situation at SRC at some point. In 2014, "The Government and local environmental group Green Advocate have agreed to investigate the standoff between the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) and villagers in the company's concession area." A local news outlet, Global News Network (GNN)<sup>9</sup> quoted the Liberia News Agency, as reporting that "Deputy Internal Affairs Minister for Administration, Varney Sirleaf made the disclosure at a meeting in Gorgbor Town." That same story asserts that "Deputy Executive Director of the National Bureau of Concession, Dixon Yarsiah, called on the villagers to remain calm while government looks into their problem." The NBC's involvement with the resolution of that conflict then, also contradicted the Land Authority official that the affected community had not made their grievances official. Additionally, we got the current Deputy Director General for

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<sup>9</sup> The Liberian Government and Green Advocates to investigate tension in SRC <http://gnnliberia.com/2014/03/09/liberia-govt-ngo-to-probe-src-villagers-row/>

Concession at the NBC, Nathaniel Bracewell, Jr. by phone on the third attempt for comment but he said he was in a discussion and could not speak definitively because he did not have the records before him. He however disclosed that NBC has (incrementally) setup 15 Multi Stakeholder Platforms (MSP) in 10 counties across the Country in the last two years, but could not also say whether SRC was one of them. The MSP is a UNDP-funded program intended to promote dialogue and peace between the concessionaires and the affected communities. He therefore requested an official enquiry at his new office to afford him pull out the relevant data. Incidentally, the NBC is moving into a building vacated by the Land Authority.

While speaking with Francis Colee, he displayed a communication from the EPA<sup>10</sup> dated May 3, 2017, in reply to a letter from GAI seeking information of the compliance status of SRC and LAC with the Environmental Protection and Management Law of Liberia (EPML). In keeping with its mandate to enforce the Law, EPA said, it issued several permits to the two companies, including operating permits, effluent discharge permit and/or rubber processing permit. The records showed then, that they had permits.

LAC carried out its expansion program in 2004 when the EPA was not fully in operations and Environmental Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) process was not in place.

The letter, under the signature of Mr. Urias S. Goll, Deputy Executive Director of the EPA, however disclosed that the EPA has not permitted any of the two companies for expansion of their acreage. LAC had already expanded from its original land areas prior to the issuance of the effective date of the EPML. SRC's application for renewal of operational permit in 2016 intimated that there might be expansion of the current acreage. The EPA therefore insisted that prior to any expansion program, SRC must show proof of ownership to the land. This mandate is laid out as a permit condition in the current permit, which is valid up to October 2017. "To date, SRC has not notified the EPA of its plan to expand and has not submitted proof of ownership to the new acreage. The EPA will launch an investigation into claims of expansion by SRC and will take appropriate actions where necessary."

This revelation by the EPA, goes a long way in validating some of the claims by the indigenous people of the seizure of their farm lands without their prior consent. But the sad truth is that the government of Liberia has not acted to restrain the expansion these companies, even after declaring that it "will take appropriate actions where necessary."

#### **4.9 CAO Under Attack**

According to the CAO report, Socfin/SRC rejected any mediation effort by the CAO team, though the affected communities (complainants) were keen on engaging in a dispute resolution process. But the Company later challenged the CAO report in a position statement, that it turned down a dispute resolution option put forth by CAO. The Company instead claimed it fully cooperated with the assessment mission, but that it had "significant misgivings" regarding the form and

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<sup>10</sup> See the EPA letter regarding permit:<file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/Letter%20from%20EPA%20to%20Francis%20-%202017.pdf>

manner in which the CAO conducted its assessment, which in its view was ground enough to doubt if the exercise would have yielded any impartial outcome, alleging conflict of interest.<sup>11</sup> The statement said, “Both mediators selected by the CAO to assist with the assessment process had prior links to Green Advocates International and its founder, Alfred Brownell, in violation of the CAO’s Operational Guidelines.”

In a communique<sup>12</sup> issued on June 29, 2020, the CAO acknowledged receipt of the Company’s concerns with the assessment process and the partiality of CAO’s local mediators, as well as letters written by some community members who were opposed to the complaint ‘after the facts.’ “To ensure appropriate action was taken to address these concerns, CAO’s Vice President reached out to the local consultants in Liberia and considered input from CAO staff before responding, confirming CAO’s satisfaction that the assessment process had been conducted in accordance with its Operational Guidelines.”

The communique indicates that CAO published its assessment report in March 2020 documenting the process followed and the perspectives shared by the complainants and the company. Given the company’s concerns about engaging with the community through a CAO dispute resolution process, the complaint was referred to CAO’s compliance function for appraisal of IFC’s performance. This appraisal is currently ongoing, the communique added.

#### **4.9.1 Telewoyan Addresses link**

One of “The local mediators” referred to by the company is Mr. James Tellewoyan. SRC accused him of working for GAI because he is said to have taught Francis Colee down the line who now works for GAI.

Commenting on the allegations against him, James Tellewoyan said he worked as a professional person for the CAO and cannot respond as an individual because it was a collective work done. He wondered why SRC was not concerned with what the community people said in the content of the report instead of focusing on Francis Colee, whom he trained back in the 90’s. Yes, he admitted to training Francis who has excelled to the position of current Programs Officer at GAI. By this reasoning, James argued that SRC should have also mentioned the people on their staff that he trained also, who were part of the CAO engagement. He thought the company needed to come clean in their valuation of his relationship with people on both sides.

Tellewoyan further disclosed that he and the Human Resource Manager of SRC [Jallah Mensah] know each other very well as they hail from the same county, the same district and that their towns are five to ten minutes’ walk apart. He asked “why didn’t he (HR)influence me?” He concluded by saying “I trained people from both sides, so let them balance the argument.”

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<sup>11</sup> Socfin’s position statement: [https://www.socfin.com/dashboard/download/2020-03-cao-socfin-position\\_final/](https://www.socfin.com/dashboard/download/2020-03-cao-socfin-position_final/)

<sup>12</sup> CAO Communique: [http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/CaseCommuniqueSalalaRubberLiberia\\_June2020\\_000.pdf](http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/CaseCommuniqueSalalaRubberLiberia_June2020_000.pdf)

As a result of the attack on the credibility of the assessment and in keeping with CAO's Operational Guidelines, the complaint by the affected communities will now be handled by the next layer of the accountability mechanism of the IFC, the Compliance Audit Function.

Notwithstanding its client's (Socfin) disparaging comments about the CAO assessment report, the "IFC remains committed to pursuing a satisfactory outcome." In a letter<sup>13</sup> to CAO dated March 19, 2020, the IFC thanked the CAO for the assessment report and said its project team will support the CAO staff as required during compliance appraisal, which is the next layer of the investigation into the corporate abuses by SRC. This posture by the IFC, the giver of the 10 million USD loan to Socfin Group for investment into SRC, is on less a slap in the face of the company and exposes its bully character. We will wait and see if Socfin will submit to appraisal.

#### **4.10 Green Advocates Disowned**

In an attempt to further discredit and invalidate the CAO report rightly or wrongly, SRC took the fight to GAI, the lead supporting organization for the complaint against the company. In fact, there seems to be a clever design to exclude GAI from any and all negotiations aimed at settling the dispute. And this easily leaves more suspicion and mistrust in the minds of affected people about the sincerity of Socfin. By attempting to break the people's bond with GAI, (an organization they have relied on all through the years) also makes one feel that the company has something under its sleeves.

SRC/Socfin and the Citizen Union appear to see GAI, The Natural Resources Women platform (NRWP), Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD) and YNCHR as stumbling blocks to their operation. These CSOs are the supporting organizations for the affected communities. They even accused the four organizations of extorting money from community members. The Citizen Union, (a pro-SRC group) is said to be behind a notarized letter (dated 30 September 2019) written to the IFC purportedly by affected communities, in which they denounced Green Advocates as their legal representatives and called for the withdrawal of complaints filed with IFC on behalf of the indigenous people against SRC.<sup>14</sup> A statement issued on June 9, 2020 following the conclusion of the CAO mission to Liberia, reinforced the letter to the IFC, declaring that "Salala Residents Say Green Advocates Does Not Represent Their Interest".<sup>15</sup>

Reacting to the claims against his organization, Green Advocates Lead Campaigner and Legal Counsel, Alfred Brownell vowed that, "the affected communities are upbeat about the evidence of wanton abuses perpetrated against them by SRC and are prepared to go at any length to get the Company to pay for the damages, but they are also prepared to exhaust all the dispute

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<sup>13</sup> See the IFC letter thanking the CAO for the report:

[file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Salala%20Rubber Liberia IFC%20Response%20CAOAssesmentReport.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Salala%20Rubber%20Liberia%20IFC%20Response%20CAOAssesmentReport.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/2019%2009%2030%20Certificate%20&%20Position%20Statement%20Communities%20\(SRC\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/2019%2009%2030%20Certificate%20&%20Position%20Statement%20Communities%20(SRC).pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Green Advocates does not represent us <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-salala-residents-say-green-advocates-does-not-represent-their-interest/>

resolution mechanisms available.”<sup>16</sup> GAI said the communities and their representatives were bemused by the allegation of partiality against the CAO team, when in fact, it was the IFC that awarded the loan that facilitated the expansion of SRC’s concession area. Brownell said, “It is baffling that a client of the IFC, the Salala Rubber Corporation is alleging foul play in an investigation led by a group working for the very IFC to look into claims of corporate misconduct by SRC against the poor people.”

GAI says it continues to enjoy the confidence and respect of the people. “We got involved with the SRC case after communities complained of corporate abuses at the hands of the SRC and will remain engaged as long as they continue to demonstrate that they still enjoy our confidence”, GAI’s Head of Program Francis K. Colee insisted. On allegations that GAI has been collecting money up to \$10 USD per person and giving them tickets, he said that allegation was baseless. Colee said the citizens formed themselves into the YNCHR and decided to charge themselves five Liberian dollars (less than 3 Cents USD) per month each as membership due. Money collected was to be used to finance their own activities such as the movements of their leaders. “The money they collected never came to Green Advocates and will never come to Green Advocates”, Colee stressed. “We engage and support affected citizens on a pro bono basis and absolutely no fee has ever been charged. Besides, GAI operates on basis of complaints filed and all interactions are also based on the free prior informed consent of the communities”, he added. He also disclosed that over the years the GAI has provided free legal, technical assistance in the form of awareness, human rights training, etc to community people.

For their part, two executives of Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD) rejected allegations by Citizen Union that their (ARD, GAI and others) advocacies are not well intentioned but are instead for self-aggrandizement at the detriment of citizens of affected communities in SRC. Messrs Larry George and Simpson Snoh said SRC is using the divide and rule tactics in order to baffle the complaint they gathered and filed with IFC against them. They observed that SRC was buying time in order to enable it to engage and persuade affected communities to drop their case and to allow them do further expansion of their plantation. “Our engagement with the affected communities had been cantered on human and environmental abuses being committed by SRC against the poor people.

#### **4.11 No Sexual Harassment**

One of the damning allegations contained in the complaint by the affected communities through their representative – GAI, relates to sexual harassment within the plantation. But the survey could not independently verify this, probably because for many people in local settings, discussing such topic especially with strangers is often considered a taboo. Besides, the company appears to have been involved in creating awareness against various kinds of rights abuses including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), evident by sign posts erected in strategic

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<sup>16</sup> GAI Statement -SRC under fire <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-salala-rubber-corporation-src-under-fire-as-22-communities-complained-of-abuses/>

locations of the plantation denouncing for example, child labor and SGBV. Meanwhile during our return on the plantation barely two weeks later, the sign posts were conspicuously absent.



Whether this was a cover or ploy to dissuade attention from the reality, is not known. But this awareness came only after the issues were flagged by rights defenders engaged with the plantation. In 2018, Bread for All, a Swiss-based NGO sent to Socfin for comment ahead of the publication, preliminary findings of a report highlighting the prevalence of sexual assaults on the plantation, but the company swiftly moved to put down the allegations. On this occasion, they ran to the court and the local prosecutor for support. A communication<sup>17</sup> from Magistrate Magdalene C. Peters of the Baypolu Town Magisterial Court dated 22 November 2018, said “the entire report of Bread for All which was published is false and misleading.” With the subject, *CLARIFICATION TO BREAD FOR REPORT*, the communication said “As Stipendiary Magistrate of the Baypolu Town Magisterial Court, I have not received any complaint of sexual harassment and sexual violence being committed by any contractor, head and or security guard of SRC as alleged.” We find this very interesting and strange because there is a maxim in law that says, the court cannot do for party litigant what the party should do for itself. The Court was not jointly accused; and yes, “the Court did not receive any complaint of sexual violence.” So, how could the Magistrate react to an allegation that was not before her?

On the same date (22 November 2018), the company similarly sought the intervention of the City Solicitor of Kakata City, Margibi County, Atty. Randall Saul. He too wrote a letter, with nearly similar subject as the Court’s: “CLARIFICATION ON PUBLICATION MADE BY BREAD FOR ALL ABOUT SRC<sup>18</sup>. Atty. Saul wrote, “As State Prosecutor of the Republic of Liberia by and

<sup>17</sup> Magistrate to the defense of SRC [file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/SRC-LAC%20Research/09b\\_Dokument.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/SRC-LAC%20Research/09b_Dokument.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> City Solicitor dismisses sexual assault claims by BFA [file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/SRC-LAC%20Research/09c\\_Dokument.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/SRC-LAC%20Research/09c_Dokument.pdf)

through the Ministry of Justice, I am surprised to read publication from BREAD FOR ALL stating about violence against women on the SRC plantations. As a State Prosecutor that have been responsible for prosecution of cases at the Baypolu Magisterial Court over the years, there has been no report of Sexual Harassment and or sexual violence reported to our office for an appropriate action. The Solicitor also dismissed as false and misleading, the second allegation of arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders, contained in the BFA report. The prosecutor suggested in essence that “people claiming to be human rights defenders have been perpetrators of crimes committed against the Management of SRC.”

We are not lawyers here, but the acts on the part of the Magistrate and City Solicitor to write opinions on case that was not brought for hearing, look very much like an ethical infraction. But their conducts further point only to the manipulative design of Socfin to dominate. In fact, back in March 2015, Commissioner, William Julye is said to have corroborated allegations by citizens that SRC Management was using the police and officials of the Magisterial Court in Baypolu, Margibi County to intimidate and harass them<sup>19</sup>. This is the same Julye [now Chairman of the Citizen Union], who also said citizens did not call the attention of local authorities to their complaints when he served as Commissioner of Cinta Township, being quoted by the News Newspaper here.

Still determine to clear its name of sexual violence allegations, Socfin lifted a story published in The Daily Observer Newspaper, December 6, 2019 edition on its website<sup>20</sup>, dismissing claims of sexual harassment on the plantation. “...at no time has the SRC Management carried out any form of sexual harassment against women or requested sex as a precondition for employment, as contained in the GAI report”. The story also said the Chairman of the Salala Agricultural Workers Union Oldman Kollie, emphatically rejected the allegation. “In all the years (15 years) I have worked for the SRC, no one has ever reported such a claim, specifically from a female employee that any of them were ever sexually harassed,” the paper quotes Mr. Kollie.” This, however, seems highly unlikely as sexual harassment and sexual-based violence are rampant problems in the country as several reports by international organizations highlight (for more sources see Bfa report). Just over a week ago, there have been powerful anti-rape protests happening in Monrovia<sup>21</sup>.

#### **4.12 Rampaging Peacefully?**

Prior to filing the complaint to the IFC in 2019, affected residents decided to hold a mass citizen action to celebrate their resolve to get the company to account. Along with their supporting organizations - ARD and GAI and others,<sup>22</sup> they assembled peacefully in Kuwah-ta with placards calling for the return of their land. SRC responded characteristically by reporting the matter to

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<sup>19</sup> Citizens accused Magistrate & police of working for SRC <https://allafrica.com/stories/201503050959.html>

<sup>20</sup> Workers denied sexual harassment <https://www.socfin.com/en/src-employees-rubbish-sexual-harassment-claim>

<sup>21</sup> See for example <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200827-liberia-police-tear-gas-anti-rape-protesters-on-third-day-of-monrovia-march-sexual-violence-weah>

<sup>22</sup> Video of the mass gathering of the citizens <https://web.facebook.com/Kmtvlib/354299791894872videos/>

police authorities in Monrovia, that residents in the plantation had gone on the rampage setting up road blocks and cutting down rubber trees. The Police dispatched the Emergency Response Unit (ERU). But the power play had probably reach too much, as the tricks of the Company would soon be found out. Upon arrival in Margibi, the local police decided to first verify the fact before the deployment of the ERU. The team moved in and found otherwise, as people were seen merely eating, drinking and merry making. The head of the team is said to have given those in the gathering USD 10 as an apparent appreciation for their orderly assembly before ordering his men back to Kakata. The professionalism of the police on this occasion was rather outstanding. On another day, they would have harshly dispersed the people and taken some of them prisoner. But still, this seems to support claims that SRC/SOCFIN have been using government structures, including the police to quash legitimate grievances.

## **5.0 Liberian Agriculture Company (LAC)**

We met Dr. Albert Karnga in Buchana on our way to the LAC plantation. He's the Founder and Chairman of the Resilience Council of Elders, a pressure group for affected communities in LAC. Reflecting on his experience with the company, the old man who's now confined to a wheelchair said for the affected communities, there's no clear distinction between LAC and the Liberian Government. They consider them one and the same. "The Government of Liberia (GOL) is wearing LAC's cap and LAC is wearing the government's cap; that's how they have operated all through the years in afflicting our people." This explains how complicated it has been for the ordinary people to fight for their land. "The GOL is the protector of LAC. When you go against LAC, you have gone against the government", Dr. Karnga added. He claims that there were times LAC had local government officials including judges, superintendents and chiefs on its payroll. He said he had documents to prove his allegation, but was unable to search for the documents during the interview. Though, this disclosure about the company paying local government officials could not be verified, the stories about bad labor practices and other human rights abuses and sometimes, the use of state security to put down legitimate grievances of indigenous people in concession areas across the country, lends credence to old man Karnga's revelation. There is a pattern from SRC to LAC that suggests government's complicity in all these corporate abuses. And that can be seen in how SOCFIN has succeeded in influencing state functionaries and structures. It makes good sense for government to protect multinational investments, but it is something else for government to be lukewarm over the gross violation of the rights of its citizens by these powerful companies. Meanwhile government is easily restless and mobilized when the company complains about the obvious.

### **5.1 The Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP)**

In 2019, local people with the support of GAI and ARD established a new group in LAC in order to bring forward the issues and complaints of local people. The new group was called Ablojay, meaning 'our land business' in the Bassa vernacular, and took over from an already existing group called LAC Districts 3 and 4 Affected Communities (LAC-DISTFAC). Ablojay aimed to

unite people from all over the county who are fighting for the land rights, with a focus on LAC affected communities.

In the same year, the National Bureau of Concessions (NBC) started a Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) initiative funded by the UNDP<sup>23</sup>, apparently seeking to improve citizens' engagement in concessions management and managing concession-related conflicts. The National Bureau of Concessions believes, forming and operationalizing the MSPs under its signature program "Strengthening Conflicting Prevention through Establishment of Multi-Stakeholder Platforms and Improved Alternative Livelihoods in Concession Areas"<sup>24</sup>, can help reduce tension between the affected communities and the concessions they host. GAI sees the MSPs as a clever attempt to water down, manipulate or highjack the people's legitimate struggle for the self-determination.

In the first sitting of the MSP, the people said that they already had a group to represent their interest, called Ablojay. The NBC accepted this and included Ablojay in the MSP as the most powerful representation of the affected people. But according to community rights activist and Ablojay leader Nathaniel Monway, the unspoken strategy was to neutralize community activists and break resistance by affected communities against the Company's expansion and the violation of their rights. Prior to the formation of Ablojay, Nathaniel had been the leader of LAC-DISTFAC. Nathaniel thought he would head the new group because of his popularity and advocacy history, but the Company and the NBC succeeded in installing a leader of Ablojay who is not from any affected community. "The company resisted my leadership of the group because I had been fighting them", said Nathaniel. He said he has notwithstanding remained actively engaged with the cause of the affected communities because of the confidence of the people.

Like affected communities in SRC areas, indigenous people within LAC do not only see themselves as losers in LAC's expansion programs, but victims of exclusion as well. Mr. Joseph Baba of Zondo town, for example, said their town is never considered whenever LAC is undertaking development or employment. Baba thinks the reason is because, unlike other communities that LAC easily dislodged for its expansion, the people of Zondo vehemently resisted LAC. "They completely hate us. If LAC brings 1000 projects for the communities today, Zondo will get Zero." Well, on this one, the people of Zondo cannot eat their cake and have it. They rightly resisted the use of their land by LAC, how can they demand jobs at the same time. Isn't reasonable that the jobs and developments are reserved for those affected by the operation of the company? Maybe not. Baba recalled he was among 94 citizens of Zondo who were jailed several years back, while resisting the destruction of their towns and villages for the plantation.

## 5.2 Disappearances

Baba also reflected on the disappearance of a toddler from the hospital in LAC early March 2020 with no trace of the child to date. "One of our sisters from Zondo baby got missing in the

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<sup>23</sup> MSP's shared experiences: <https://www.lr.undp.org/content/liberia/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2018/msps-use-platform-to-share-experiences-on-how-to-respond-effecti.html>

<sup>24</sup> MSP for LAC <https://kmtvliberia.com/first-multi-stakeholders-platform-for-lac-expansion-affected-communities-established-by-nbc/>

company's hospital" he said. The story of the missing child was captured by most of the major news outlets in Liberia and went viral on social media.

Frontpage Africa<sup>25</sup> narrated that "A baby of a 16-year-old girl, who was transferred from the Zondo Health Center to the Liberia Agriculture Company Hospital on March 14, has been reported missing prompting residents of the town to demand the whereabouts of the child. G. Nelson Gbotoe, a relative of the mother told FrontPage Africa, "We took our daughter and her baby to the LAC hospital for treatment but on Monday morning we got a call that the baby got missing from the hospital". He explained that Mary Bacon, who is the mother of the child, left the baby on the hospital's bed and went to use the bathroom but when she returned the child could not be found on the bed.

"When our daughter [child's Mother] asked the other patients for the child, the patients said that a man walked out with the child and they thought it was a family member of the mother," Gbotoe said. Madam Victoria Harris, a certified midwife at the Zondo Health Center, told reporters that she "delivered Mary Barcon on Friday, March 13, 2020, but her condition was not good because she was bleeding and the child was born depressed..." A janitor, James S.K Dukpo was later arrested as prime suspect in connection with the disappearance of the baby. The case is currently before the second Judicial Circuit Court in Buchanan City, Grand Bassa. Final arguments were heard in the case on August 27, 202, with the ruling expected this September, according to the Public Trust Media Group.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, in March 2019, one Fayiah Kettor, 40, an employee of the Company, went missing while he was undergoing treatment at the same hospital<sup>27</sup>. His lifeless body was later found after a major search operation by authorities about ten minutes' walk away from the hospital. It is not yet clear why these disappearances happened in the hospital. Police arrested four of the nurses who were on duty, along with the hospital administrator, Momolu Johnson for questioning in this instance case. Angry citizens rioted after the incident, setting ablaze buildings.<sup>28</sup> Police spokesperson, Moses Carter told the Inquirer Newspaper the autopsy report of Fayiah Kettor, established that death was natural.

### 5.3 Chained effects

Wonwoulu is another community in LAC that hosts several disenfranchised people in LAC. One of its inhabitants, Emmanuel Gongar recounted the huge losses incurred in the destruction of their properties and the chained effects it has had on them. He lamented the destruction of their farm lands, hunting bushes, fishing creeks and their entire source of livelihood. "Some of us used to

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<sup>25</sup> Baby goes missing from LAC Hospital: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/county-news/toddler-goes-missing-from-lac-hospital-in-grand-bassa-county/>

<sup>26</sup> Trial of the alleged Kidnapper of a baby from LAC Hospital <https://newspublictrust.com/in-grand-bassa-co-court-rules-friday-in-3-day-old-missing-baby-case/>

<sup>27</sup> Fayiah Kettor body discovered after going missing <https://bushchicken.com/missing-mans-body-found-at-lac-plantation/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theinquirernewspaper.com/lnp-rules-out-foul-plays-in-2-deaths/>

live on crabs we caught from the waters, while others lived on hunting”, Gongar added. He is disappointed that after defiling their waters, seizing their lands and trampling on their rights, LAC is yet to make amends. In the words of Gongar, “they don’t even appear to be willing to do anything”.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The multimillion-dollar investment by Socfin Group in SRC and LAC in Liberia should actually be a blessing in the wake of the harsh economic realities in the country, but the investment has been nothing but a “pain-in-the-ass” largely for ordinary Liberians living in the concessions and surrounding areas. The lingering conflict with the indigenous people could have been managed without much trouble only if Liberian authorities had struck a delicate balance between protecting the concessionaires and the investment on the one hand, and citizens on the other. Situations have changed between times, since the concession was granted in 1959. So, one would imagine that successive governments would have created room in the concession agreements for the greater good of not just the investors, but the general inhabitants. As it is now, the government appears to be subservient to the company, leaving the people vulnerable to scramble for life at the mercy of the powerful company. It is unthinkable that a foreign investment of this size would operate without a human face. The struggling people must make way for the investment – they are dislodged from their habitat and dispossessed of their livelihoods with little or no compensation with the acquiescence of their government. The company is so powerful that it appears to get very incensed when called to account for excesses committed in its operations. And it gets really hopeless for the ordinary people whose survival depend wholly on the very land they are contesting with the powerful. The farms look like a no-go zone for people who want to ask questions about humanizing the people. And those who dare venture easily become persons of interest.

Admittedly, we are persons of interests, interest not in the heads of the managers of the company, but persons who are interested in the company and the people living side-by-side. But like everybody else who has shown interest and raise their voices about happenings on the plantations, we are aware that Socfin could also come after us ruthlessly in defense of their investment. Yes, we have seen how they have attacked Green Advocates, Bread for All, YNCHR and others who have merely been giving voice to the poor. We have seen how they went after Abraham Pennoh and his family, and Abraham Kamara who’s fast losing his sight as a result of tear gas being directly sprayed in his eyes for simply standing up and showing leadership for the rights of a dispossessed communities. We can add the many helpless people who have been suppressed and left dirt poor and hungry by the giant company and its host government. Interestingly we are also aware that the mighty Socfin has not even spare the CAO/IFC and Mr. James Tellewoyan in their aggression. What a powerful company!

Actually, it should be said that, these groups and individuals who are targets of the Socfin’s attacks, are the real deal. Without these people and institutions, nobody would know about the abuses and violations being perpetrated on the SRC and LAC plantations. The government of

Liberia, like most investors would say, “is in our pocket.” So, who cares? Who would dare question Socfin if these people did not ask? And it is exactly because these local and international organizations have been pressing for corporate accountability, that Socfin would go after them. To be honest, the complaint against the company and the CAO assessment mission to Liberia, hit the company very hard. No wonder why they have escalated their attacks. They are simply fighting back – fighting to redeem what is left of their image. If you want to know the weapons in their arsenal, we say they are using the very people (complainants) they are victimizing, the authorities, money and the most of all, the media.

## 7.0 Recommendations

- SRC and LAC must try to win the confidence of affected communities by proving in words as in deeds that they are truly committed to addressing issues bordering on losses they (affected people) sustained in the wake of expanding the plantations, as raised in their complaint.
- The companies must also stop using surrogate groups to engage affected communities in the name of representing affected communities. This only further angers indigenous people, exacerbates the conflict and narrows any window of opportunity for a win-win resolution.
- The companies must also enhance security environment by avoiding clamp downs on critical voices in the communities.
- SRC and LAC should turn a new leaf by engaging communities with open mind, despite previous occurrences and drop preconditions that may have to do with excluding any group from taking part in settlement talks.
- The companies should also not be seen as inseparable from government in their dealings, despite the fact that government regulates the activities of concessionaires. Their collaboration with government to undertake anything should at all times be in good faith and not to harm any side.
- If it is still possible to reverse some of the damages, all should be done to repair harm inflicted on sacred heritage sites and all other properties affected by plantation expansions. Measures should be put in place to avert any recurrence of such damages during future expansions.

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### ***About the Author***

*This study was conducted by the Public Trust Media Group, an independent multimedia company engaged in the production, distribution and syndicating of a range of media products and services. Renowned Liberian journalist and founder, Frank B. Sainworla, Jr., is the lead investigator of the study, aided by two field researchers - journalists William Selmah and Edwin Fayiah.*

*Frank holds a BA degree in Mass Communication from the University of Liberia. He is a noted Liberian journalist with more than 20 years of professional experience. He grew from a reporter to Editor-In-Chief at state radio, (the Liberia Broadcasting System). He then moved to the highly rated Independent Star Radio and became a Producer/presenter before the station was shut down by the Charles Taylor regime. His fearless and professional advocacy won the respect of the media community as he got elected Secretary General of the Press Union of Liberia. Frank joined the Catholic owned Radio Veritas (the Truth), where he served as Assistant Station Manager until his departure for West African Democracy Radio (WADR) in Dakar as head of the English desk. He's a trainer and a Hubert Humphrey fellow.*

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