

Realities of RSPO implementation: a preliminary consideration on workers and communities

Presenting Ms. Toh Su Mei

Wild Asia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The standards developed by the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil, a voluntary, multistakeholder organization, is one of the first “sustainability” standards for a major global commodity. Officially launched in 2007, the standard includes social, environmental and agronomic performance standards. Whilst it is still early days of implementation, RSPO membership now stands at 40 percent of palm oil producers, while RSPO certified area now covers 966,000 hectares, producing an estimated annual production of about 9 percent of global palm oil, or 46 million tonnes annually. The numbers are growing in significance, but there has yet to be a comprehensive assessment of the changes or improvements brought about by RSPO certification.

This paper attempts to start a discussion on the realities on the ground in the Malaysian context, particularly on the emerging changes of RSPO implementation on oil palm workers and communities, one of the key areas of sustainability interest. The findings discussed in this paper are based on the authors’ experience as external advisors and/or assessors with RSPO-aspirant companies in Malaysia and other relevant research.

The paper charts the circumstances and changes that had been observed by the authors since the trial-run of the standard since 2004, and juxtaposes the standard’s ideals with the realities faced by oil palm and mill managers, workers and communities, as well as those created by institutional challenges. The emerging issues include decent living wages, working conditions, migrant workers and community engagement.

Finally, it also discusses the barriers and spaces for opportunities that RSPO creates for oil palm workers and communities affected by oil palm development; and for the producers themselves.