



## FSC statement on report by Swedwatch

In response to the information provided in Swedwatch's report "Undercutting rights", the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) wishes to declare that FSC recognizes Swedwatch as an important stakeholder and we have reviewed the information about FSC's certificate holders mentioned in the report with scrutiny.

We welcome's Swedwatch opening statement that "Sustainable management of the world's tropical forests is critical for the achievement of goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", as well as their recognition that "in the tropical logging industry FSC-certified operations are widely considered 'best in class'." Thus an important question to ask is: what is the alternative to FSC-certified forestry in Cameroon? The report provides answers: a rubber plantation, clearance for agriculture, and logging operations that do not hold themselves up to external scrutiny in the way that FSC certification demands.

This challenge is encapsulated in the quote from a community representative: "*Rougier taught us so much about sustainable forestry, how to maintain the forest. Now the forest is disappearing. What will happen when Rougier leaves?*" Rougier have now left. Indeed, as the Swedwatch report mentions, both FSC-certified concessions visited have since been sold and are no longer FSC-certified. The implication is that FSC certification was no longer economically viable for the two concessions. This shows that as we demand more from the tropical timber industry, we need also to be prepared to pay more for sustainable, ethically sourced products. With its unique chamber balanced approach, FSC ensures the views of social, environmental and economic interests are all heard and weighed up in the development of our standards, and thus that requirements imposed on certificate holders are economically feasible. The FSC label then acts as a means for consumers and businesses to reward FSC-certified operations with higher demand for their products.

In spite of critical points raised in the report, also about FSC certified operations, the report highlights how moves instigated by FSC can drive positive change by forest concessionaires. It cites community members saying that "Rougier's decision to apply for FSC chain-of-custody certification was a turning point when relations with the company started to improve." And the report documents how the new requirements FSC introduced for Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) pushed FSC certified companies into engaging much more proactively with neighbouring communities and indigenous peoples found in their areas of operations.



FSC recognises that Indigenous Peoples in the Congo Basin face many detrimental situations that are deeply engrained in local society and not always the direct consequence of forestry operations, but which can lead to serious human rights abuses. FSC is deeply concerned by such abuses, which are directly contrary to our mission and the values we stand for.

One important tool to improve the situation is to ensure that the critical voices of indigenous peoples are being properly heard. FSC is thus in the process of further strengthening its FPIC processes by establishing a Group of Indigenous Experts, a pioneering innovation in the Congo Basin. This group comprises representatives of indigenous peoples from the various countries of the Congo Basin, whom concessionaires can consult to ensure that the voices of indigenous peoples are properly heard when they engage with them.

The Swedwatch report rightly cites several studies that have found that FSC-certified forestry operations can mitigate negative impacts on forests and safeguard biodiversity. Other studies that have quantified FSC's positive impacts on other issues such as sustainable development, social rights for Indigenous Peoples and forestry workers or participatory multi-stakeholder platforms in FPIC and other areas of interest.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, we also consider and listen carefully to the testimony of researchers that have pointed otherwise, and we have begun to address some of the issues that pertain to the impact of logging operations in tropical countries, such as Cameroon, with the adoption of a working group in the Congo Basin that is seeking solutions on how to monitor and maintain areas of Intact Forest Landscapes and other high conservation values inside FSC-certified concessions.

FSC is aware of the challenges that responsible forest management certification represents in the Congo Basin and the risks associated with the region's limited governance structure. However, as a voluntary model for responsible forestry, FSC's presence in countries that pose these challenges offers forest managers and companies the most demanding standards in order to improve the way forestry practices are carried out, while making a positive difference to the lives of the local population.

Finally, FSC wishes to reiterate that it is not and cannot be the only solution to the multiple challenges that global forestry poses such as deforestation, degradation, loss of biodiversity or human rights abuses. To this effect, it fully agrees with Swedwatch in its conclusions that local actors and government bodies need to actively participate to

<sup>1</sup> Swedwatch, Undercutting Rights report, February 2019, pg. 20.



take the appropriate decisions that will enable to reach the goals set by the UN 2030 Agenda.

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