

Smallholder oil palm growers in Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT:

Smallholder oil palm growers produce about 30% of PNG's FFB in 6 project areas. The lives of these farmers are complex. The concept of the simple single family farming unit cultivating a few hectares of oil palm applying normal business principles is not the common reality. Many farms are occupied by co-resident families and extended family groupings whose lives revolve around overriding demands from complex customary obligations, with social tensions and conflict being common. The aspirations and motivations of these farming communities are not necessarily oil palm centric because oil palm is often only one of many livelihood strategies pursued by farmers. Smallholder compliance and certification against the RSPO P&Cs presents a formidable, but not impossible, challenge. Smallholder compliance is achieved through coordinated support and management by certified milling companies, Government extension services and research and development programmes. The premiums gained from RSPO certified oil are too low and inconsistent to be of much value in motivating self-compliance amongst smallholders. In an attempt to address this the PNG certified milling companies are paying a 'sustainability incentive' to certified smallholders equivalent to USD10 per tonne of CPO calculated back to FFB using actual average extraction rates. There are two main elements to achieving smallholder certification in practice; i) control of where and how smallholders establish new plantings and ii) maintaining effective awareness, support and monitoring programmes to encourage and influence adherence to good agricultural practice and other aspects of sustainability. Poor levels of education and very high rates of illiteracy amongst smallholder communities are major constraints to effective education and awareness programmes. However recent and dramatic changes to smallholders' access to information and communication technologies open some very promising opportunities to improve awareness and support programmes.