

## **RSPO RESEARCH AGENDA**

Last Updated: 25 July 2018

Document Title : Research Agenda

Document Code : RSPO-REF-P04-001 V1.0 ENG

Scope : International

Document Type : Reference

Effective Date : 07/18

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## RSPO RESEARCH AGENDA

### Background Information

Since 2004, RSPO has been taking active steps to collaborate with the global oil palm supply chain and other key stakeholders, to transform the industry towards our vision of making sustainable palm oil the norm. As we progress through the years, we have continuously sought to improve ourselves through experiential learning, employment of innovative new approaches, and ensured that we are always kept informed by international best practices. In 2017, RSPO took a huge step forward through the development of a Theory of Change (ToC), to better articulate, manage, and measure our progress towards this vision.

The ToC, as its name implies, is a theory at best. It requires thorough testing and further assessment, to allow us to determine the extent in which the theory can be supported. In the past number of years, there has been an increase in the amount of research on sustainable development, sustainability standards, and certification. However, the existing research on the impact of voluntary sustainability standards, especially RSPO, is still limited. Therefore, the level of understanding on the impacts of RSPO certification remains low with substantial knowledge and evidence gaps. Furthermore, research efforts were often uncoordinated, sector specific, geographically restricted, and with methodological limitations.

In order to address these challenges, we have developed this Research Agenda to help focus, inform, and coordinate our research work to test and validate our ToC, as well as to foster collaboration and partnership between RSPO members, industry peers, research community, interested investors or funders, and other related stakeholders in advancing knowledge on the impacts of RSPO certification. One of our main objectives through this document is to gather and utilise research results and evidence, to inform our work for continuous improvement towards our intended impacts, goals, and vision, as described within the ToC. As a member of ISEAL Alliance, this objective will be aligned with ISEAL's goal of improving the impacts of sustainability standards, and our work through this Research Agenda will form part of our compliance with the ISEAL Impacts Code.

### What is the scope of this Research Agenda?

This document compiles a list of research questions centred around six different themes related to RSPO: Cost & Benefit Analysis; Certification, Assurance & Grievance; Demand Generation & Support Sector; Human Rights; Smallholders; and Ecosystem Conservation & Management. **The primary scope of this Research Agenda is to understand and demonstrate the performance and impact of RSPO's interventions and strategies, in line with our ToC, so that we can improve our standards to perform better.** The ToC, which clarifies the priority outcomes and impacts that RSPO certification system, seeks to achieve and to define the pathways by which the system intends to deliver these results. The ToC provides a clear guiding framework for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting the effects of the certification system, and for adjusting the system's standards, strategy, and activities to deliver key outcomes more effectively over time. This Research Agenda is designed to complement the evidence base available from RSPO Assurance and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) processes. Research studies

allow a more in-depth assessment of what and how key outcomes are delivered through RSPO certification. Furthermore, if designed using experimental or quasi-experimental approaches, can help evaluate causal linkages between RSPO certification and defined outputs and outcomes, as well as describe broader impacts, including the unintended effects of certification.

A key challenge with research studies is that they often focus on a specific location, result, group of producers, or aspect of the supply chain. This limits the generalisability of research findings to all certified producers or all RSPO certified area. Therefore, the questions listed are broad in scope and we have not specified any single geography or aspect of the palm oil supply chain. This broad scope is applied as we are keen to understand how various territorial, social, topographic, and spatial factors affect or limit the effectiveness and impacts of our standards.

### **How was this Research Agenda developed?**

This Research Agenda was developed based on the RSPO ToC and its related causal chains, as part of the RSPO M&E system, in consultation with key experts within the RSPO Secretariat. The process has and will also involve communication of the Research Agenda to our stakeholders from the seven sectors of the palm oil industry: oil palm producers, processors or traders, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks/investors, and environmental and social non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Our aim of including the key stakeholders of various sectors in the palm oil industry is to ensure that research conducted will be aligned with the interest of the industry.

Our idea is to have this document function as a living document, whereby it will evolve over time with new and updated information. The updates will subsequently occur as the industry evolves and as the knowledge gaps in the field are filled, leading to a shift in focus or priority questions.

### **What are the requirements of this Research Agenda and how will it be used?**

This Research Agenda is a public resource that will be used by RSPO to reach out to and engage with the research community at large. We will periodically post tenders at <https://rspo.org/news-and-events/tenders/> for selected research to be commissioned by us. At RSPO, we also encourage the undertaking and publication of independent research on the impacts of RSPO and will strive to assist researchers throughout the research period.

For researchers who are interested in conducting studies as per the listed questions below, please contact RSPO Research and Advisory Manager at [rspo.impacts@rspo.org](mailto:rspo.impacts@rspo.org) and/or fill out the RSPO Research Request form online, at <https://rspo.org/about/research-request>.

As per ISEAL requirements, we are committed to publish and publicly share full evaluation reports for all research commissioned by RSPO on our website. Independent research on the impacts of RSPO will also be listed on our website with links to the full-text journal reports/articles. We will also strive to have all our commissioned research and highly encourage all independent researchers who embark on research

as per listed below, to produce full evaluation report(s)/article(s), subjected to a peer review process prior to publication. In addition, we will also set up a Research Steering Group, on a research project basis, consisting of key experts (depending on the topic of research) to facilitate and review all commissioned research and any publications arising from it. Such quality assurance mechanisms help to ensure that publications will be of high scholarly evidence, with the highest levels of academic merit, research value, and accuracy. In addition, all research conducted in collaboration with RSPO are required to be in compliance with the RSPO Research Ethics, as well as their respective university's/organisation's research ethics.

## Research themes & key priorities

### Cost & Benefit Analysis

*At RSPO, one of our key goals is to ensure that sustainable palm oil drives economic growth and development at local, regional, and national levels. Therefore, we are interested in determining how our strategies and interventions contribute towards this goal, through cost-benefit analysis of RSPO membership and certification, with a particular focus on growers who lie at the base of the palm oil value chain.*

1. Cost-benefit analysis for smallholders to attain and maintain RSPO certification. How can the costs be reduced and benefits amplified? How sustainable are these benefits over time (e.g. how sustainable is a focus on improving livelihoods, solely through improved productivity and quality)?
2. What is the cost-benefit for medium growers to attain and maintain RSPO certification? How do the costs compare to the benefits they receive? How sustainable are these benefits over time?
3. Cost-benefit analysis of large plantation companies in achieving and maintaining RSPO certification. How can the costs be reduced and benefits amplified? How sustainable are these benefits over time?

### Certification, Assurance & Grievance

*RSPO aims to have a trusted and credible assurance system, which will help to drive support and uptake of sustainability requirements. In line with the ToC, we are interested in assessing the impacts and effectiveness of both our assurance system and complaints system, as well as to identify any potential gaps that require improvement. To date, the RSPO Certification and Assurance system still offers many opportunities for system improvement and learning.*

1. Analysing the role, capacity and performance of third party audits and assessors in driving improvement and upholding accountability of RSPO certified palm oil plantations. What are the challenges and gaps, why do these gaps (if any) prevail and how can we address them?

2. The implementation of a complaints or grievance system and procedures: a comparison between RSPO and other similar certification schemes. What are the gaps and challenges, why do these gaps (if any) prevail and how can we address them?

### **Demand Generation & Support Sector**

*There is currently an imbalance between the production and uptake of sustainable palm oil. There needs to be balance of both ends, in order to provide long-term security of supply for buyers of sustainable palm oil products, and market for growers and their supply chain partners. In this section, the questions are aimed at determining the obstacles and opportunities of RSPO certification in increasing demand and support of sustainable palm oil. One of the key goals for the theme is to ensure the growth of global and diverse markets, with increased commitments and purchase of sustainable palm oil to incentivise its production. An emerging focus area of RSPO certification is emerging markets with high consumption of palm oil, such as China and India. Other areas of interest include the potential role of financial institutions on RSPO certification, and on potential collaboration and partnership between RSPO and local governance bodies, in the countries where it operates.*

1. Sustainable vs. unsustainable palm oil production and sourcing: Case study on reputation, brand image, and business risk.
2. Business case study for banks on sustainable palm oil. What is the value of RSPO certification in relation to the reduction of costs and risks for banks? (*Comparison between banks with RSPO certification, banks with sustainability practices/policies that closely resemble RSPO certification requirements, and banks without any certification or sustainability policies*)
3. What are the opportunities and limitations of partnered governance between RSPO and other government or certification schemes, in particular countries and sectors where it operates? Is RSPO effective in improving compliance with existing laws and regulations and if so, under what conditions?
  - Is RSPO membership and certification effective in improving compliance of oil palm plantations to the requirement of owning IUP (Plantation Permit; 'Izin Usaha Perkebunan') and HGU (Right to Exploit; 'Hak Guna Usaha') permit in Indonesia? How does this compare to non-member and non-certified companies?
4. What is the value that RSPO membership and certification bring in terms of convening industry wide dialogue and discussion on key issues? How does the stakeholder profile, in relation to the oil palm industry value chain of RSPO members compare to non-RSPO members, and when does the change occur (pre or post RSPO membership and certification)?

## Human Rights

*Oil palm is a valuable agricultural crop, contributing substantially to the socio-economic development not only of oil palm producers or farmers, but also to workers at the plantations. The plantations contribute to the livelihood of both stated parties by serving as a source of income, as well as employment opportunities. In some cases, especially in rural areas, oil palm plantations have been linked to poverty alleviation. Despite their economic importance and potential contribution to social development, plantations around the world continue to be associated with poor working conditions and conflicts with local communities. The questions listed below are reflective of the ongoing conversation about the extent to which RSPO certification can assist in protecting and improving rural livelihoods, social well-being, as well as ensuring that human rights are respected.*

1. How do the living wages of workers and working conditions (e.g. health and safety, child labour, work targets etc.) on RSPO certified plantations compare to those who are employed on non-certified plantations? What difference does RSPO certification make to worker's livelihood? How do these benefits differ between permanent / temporary, local / migrant and male / female workers? To what extent can the differences observed be attributed to RSPO certification?
2. What is the impact of RSPO certification (certified vs. non-certified) on the empowerment of plantation workers including sub-group workers (e.g. migrant workers, women, contract workers etc.)? What are the types of training provided to plantation workers and how effective are they?
3. To what extent does RSPO certification improve gender equity at the plantation work level? Are there barriers that limit women from participating and benefiting from RSPO certification, and how can these barriers, if any, be addressed?
4. What is the contribution of RSPO certified plantations to the development of communities (e.g. food security, healthcare, education, transportation etc.) affected by its operations? How does this differ between certified and non-certified plantations?
5. Operationalising the RSPO Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): Case study on experience with the RSPO FPIC guide and implementation of FPIC. How does the implementation of RSPO-guided FPIC impact social equity?
6. Case studies on practices of human rights and social-wellbeing at RSPO certified plantations, non-certified plantations, and prospective plantations seeking certification.
7. What are the unintended effects of RSPO certification on the livelihood of workers and affected local communities?

### Smallholders

*The RSPO certification system has historically put more emphasis on large oil palm growers in Malaysia and Indonesia, but our focus has shifted to be more inclusive of assisting smallholders on a global scale to produce oil palm sustainably, while earning a sustainable livelihood. In order to ensure smallholder inclusion, customisation to the RSPO certification system will be required. To this, we have consulted key stakeholders and listed questions that are emerging as knowledge gaps in this area.*

1. What is the impact of RSPO certification (certified vs non-certified) on the socio-economic status of smallholders?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of RSPO certification for scheme smallholders? What is the turnover rate of scheme smallholders and what are the underlying reasons for smallholders to remain with or leave a scheme?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of RSPO certification for independent smallholders (prospective and currently certified)? What is the turnover rate of independent smallholders and what are the underlying reasons for smallholders to remain with or leave a group? For prospective smallholders, what are the economic, environmental, and social changes that occur on the farm and household level, leading to RSPO certification and after certification?
4. Does RSPO certification improve gender equity in the production context? Are there barriers that limit female smallholders from participating and benefiting from RSPO certification, and how can these barriers, if any, be addressed?
5. Assessing the long-term effects of RSPO Smallholders Support Fund (RSSF): What are the underlying reasons for smallholders to remain in or leave a smallholder group that is assisted by the RSSF?
6. What is the effect of RSSF on organisations supporting/managing independent smallholders? Under what conditions are these organisations most effective in furthering positive outcomes for smallholders and to drive RSPO certification?
7. Assessing the potential role of RSPO in increasing effectiveness of mills in supporting independent smallholders. What are the underlying reasons that prevent mills from supporting independent smallholders (identify mills that are receiving Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFBs) from independent smallholders but are not supporting them)?

### **Ecosystem Conservation & Management**

*One of the main intended impacts of RSPO certification is to ensure that ecosystems and their goods and services are conserved, protected, enhanced, and made resilient to provide for future generations. Addressing climate change is also a big part of certification. The key to ensuring that the stated results can be achieved lies in the effective management of plantations, including sustainable consumption, production and management of natural resources, halting land degradation and biodiversity loss, and pollution control. The questions in this section are designed to allow us to gain insights on RSPO's progress towards the intended results of RSPO certification on ecosystem services, and to drive continuous improvement where gaps have been identified.*

1. Taking into consideration the different terrains and locality of oil palm plantations, how does the management (e.g. forest cover, size, configuration and health) of natural ecosystems and protected areas within RSPO certified plantations compare to non-certified plantations? Does RSPO membership and certification help reduce the degradation of such areas?
2. Comparison of fire incidences and management practices on RSPO certified plantations vs. non-certified plantations and pioneer RSPO certified plantations vs. newly certified plantations over time. What are the underlying factors that explain the differences (if any)?
3. To what extent and in what context does the adoption of RSPO's Principles and Criteria (P&C) contribute to the protection (maintenance and improvement) of biodiversity, especially rare, threatened and endangered (RTE) species, on oil palm plantations?
4. How does natural resource management and farm practices (fertiliser use, pesticide use, water use, soil health, waste management etc.) connected to cultivation of oil palm at certified oil palm plantations compare to non-certified plantations? How do the farm practices relate to yield? To what extent can the changes observed be attributed to RSPO certification and what are factors that stimulate the changes in agricultural practices of RSPO certified plantations?
5. How does RSPO certification affect the farm management practices on oil palm plantations? When does the change occur, pre or post certification?
  - Management of water supply and use
  - Erosion and degradation of soil
  - Soil fertility (fertilizer use)
  - Pest management
  - Energy source and use
  - Waste management
6. Case study on good management practices to maintain and conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services at RSPO certified plantations.

7. What is the effect of RSPO membership and certification on oil palm planting on peat and conservation of peat forest (e.g. management practices, hectare of oil palm planted on peat and conserved peat)?
  
8. What are the unintended effects of RSPO certification on biodiversity and ecosystems?



**RSPO will transform markets to make sustainable palm oil the norm**

**FIND OUT MORE AT**

**[www.rspo.org](http://www.rspo.org)**

**Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil**

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