

Independent Review of the Intermediary Organisation (IMO) Community Outreach and Engagement Programme

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Acronym

COEP – Community Outreach and Engagement Programme

CSPO – Certified Sustainable Palm Oil

ESOPP – Edo State Oil Palm Programme

FDS – Foremost Development Services Limited

FGDs – Focus Group Discussions

GIS – Geographic Information System

IMO – Intermediary Organisation

KIIs – Key Informant Interviews

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

LGAs – Local Government Areas

NPPAN – National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria

P&C – Principles and Criteria

RSPO – Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

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Executive Summary



This report presents the findings of an independent review of the *Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP)* implemented by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in Edo State, Nigeria. The review was commissioned by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) to evaluate the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of FDS's role as an Intermediary Organisation (IMO) in promoting RSPO's Principles and Criteria (P&C), grievance mechanisms, and inclusive sustainability practices among local communities in palm oil-producing regions.

The overarching goal of this review addresses: alignment with IMO programme goals, progress on issues from the 2014 Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) Status Assessment and Outreach Plan, contributions to RSPO's mission and Theory

of Change, and identification of unaddressed challenges and barriers, culminating in actionable recommendations to enhance sustainability and inclusivity in Edo State's palm oil sector, which contributes 12% to Nigeria's national output.

The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach across six Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Edo State, combining: 97 quantitative survey responses from community members, 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholders including women, youth, and elders, and 7 key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from government agencies, private companies, and NGOs. Sampling methods ensured gender representation and geographic diversity, while the analysis employed thematic coding for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for survey results.

1. Alignment with IMO Programme

Objectives: FDS's programme management effectively aligned with IMO objectives to foster informed and vigorous community engagement in RSPO initiatives. Through extensive training, 87% of respondents participated in sessions on RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C), achieving a 91% awareness rate. FDS strengthened RSPO's outreach by establishing accessible grievance mechanisms, utilised by 86% of respondents, and facilitating community dialogues that enhanced trust and collaboration, with 50% reporting improved interactions among smallholders, companies, and authorities. These efforts ensured a broad demographic and geographic reach, empowering communities to participate in RSPO processes actively and reinforcing FDS's role as a trusted intermediary in Edo States

2. Progress on 2014 Forest Peoples

Programme Assessment Issues: The COEP addressed critical issues highlighted in the 2014 FPP report, including low awareness, weak grievance systems, and limited smallholder inclusion. Pre-intervention, 64% of respondents lacked RSPO knowledge, but post-intervention, 75% reported extensive understanding, reflecting FDS' success in awareness-building. The programme bolstered grievance mechanisms, with 86% of respondents engaging in dispute resolution and 46% citing conflict resolution as a key training outcome. While 7% of respondents received training on smallholder supply chain integration, gaps in equitable inclusion—particularly for women (48% participation) and youth (14% aged 26–

40)—persist, indicating a need for continued focus on these areas to fully address the 2014 assessment's concerns.

3. Contributions to RSPO's Mission, Vision, and Theory of Change:

FDS's COEP significantly advanced RSPO's mission to promote sustainable palm oil production, aligning with its Theory of Change. Short-term outcomes included heightened awareness (89% better informed) and improved grievance mechanism access (49% clearer on processes). Medium-term impacts saw 53% of respondents adopting sustainable practices, such as reduced bush burning and adherence to the "No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation" (NDPE) principle (19% prioritised), with 46% emphasising biodiversity protection. Long-term sustainability compliance is progressing, though the practical application of training outcomes is still maturing. Success stories, such as reduced community-company conflicts reported by Presco Nigeria Limited, highlight enhanced trust and collaboration, supporting RSPO's vision of an equitable, environmentally responsible palm oil sector.

4. Unaddressed Issues, Conflicts, and

Barriers: Despite notable achievements, challenges remain. Financial constraints, cited by 58% of respondents, hinder sustainable practice adoption, while 34% noted insufficient training and 8% struggled with P&C comprehension due to literacy barriers. Land tenure disputes and poor infrastructure (25.3%) fuel conflicts, compounded by delayed RSPO commitments (41.2%) and land-grabbing

concerns (7%). Inequitable participation, particularly for women and youth, risks social tension, with cultural and logistical barriers limiting their involvement. These financial, educational, and structural barriers threaten long-term programme efficacy and require targeted interventions.

Strategic Recommendations

To ensure continuity, inclusivity, and long-term impact, the following strategic actions are recommended:

- **Strengthen Local Infrastructure and Engagement:** Establish permanent community liaison units in each LGA to sustain engagement and ensure responsiveness to local needs.
- **Enhance Financial Access:** Partner with government and financial institutions to create microfinance and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), addressing the 58% financial barrier.
- **Enhance Capacity Building:** Deliver refresher training and practical, context-specific workshops to address comprehension gaps and foster hands-on learning.
- **Institutionalise Grievance Mechanisms:** Establish community-based grievance committees for ongoing dialogue and conflict resolution to manage disputes locally, enhancing transparency and accessibility.

- **Promote Gender and Youth**

Inclusion: Introduce quotas for women and youth participation, develop mentorship programmes, and integrate gender-responsive policies.

- **Address Structural Barriers:**

Collaborate with the Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP) to formalize land rights and develop infrastructure partnerships, tackling tenure and infrastructure deficits.

- **Monitor Long-Term Impact:**

Implement longitudinal monitoring to track training application and ensure alignment with RSPO's Theory of Change.

Conclusion

The COEP in Edo State represents a significant step toward localising global sustainability standards. FDS has effectively demystified RSPO's principles, enhanced community engagement, and catalysed behavioural change among stakeholders. However, for these gains to be sustained and scaled, critical gaps—especially those related to financing, inclusion, and infrastructure—must be addressed through coordinated efforts involving government, RSPO, and local actors. With the right support mechanisms, Edo State can consolidate its position as Nigeria's leading palm oil producer while serving as a model for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable palm oil production globally.

1.1 Introduction



The palm oil industry is a critical component of global agricultural production, contributing significantly to the economies of producing countries, including Nigeria. The sector plays an important role in poverty reduction and provides sustainable livelihoods. Oil palm production is a major agricultural sub-sector in Nigeria having Edo state as one of the major producers of palm oil. Today, Edo State is the number one oil palm producing State in Nigeria, contributing about 12% to the aggregate oil palm production in Nigeria with the closest being Akwa-Ibom and Cross River State contributing between 5% to 8%.¹

Various studies have confirmed the oil palm sector as a profitable venture. This is evidenced in its versatile use in the production of palm oil, vegetable oil, cosmetics, biofuels, and bio-fertilizers, among others, culminating in its great demand globally.² While the sector contributes significantly to rural livelihoods, it also faces issues such as land use conflicts, low smallholder productivity, and limited adoption of sustainability standards³.

To address these concerns, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) which is a leading initiative aimed at driving the global adoption of Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO) tries to ensure sustainability in palm oil production through the Principles and Criteria (P&C) initiatives launched the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) in Nigeria, focusing on Edo State. This initiative sought to enhance local communities' understanding of RSPO standards, foster informed participation, and rebuild trust between civil society and the RSPO.

¹ Igiekhume, D. (2024, May 7). *Obaseki reforms: Edo now Nigeria's number one oil palm-producing state, contributing over 12 percent to nation's aggregate production*. Edo State Government. <https://edostate.gov.ng/obaseki-reforms-edo-now-nigerias-number-one-oil-palm-producing-state-contributing-over-12-percent-to-nations-aggregate-production/>

² Adewale B (2020) Profitability and sustainability of smallholder oil palm farming systems in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development* 1-12

³ <https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/landscapes/nigeria/>

Given the completion of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme by Foremost Development Services (FDS) Limited in June 2024, an independent review was commissioned to assess the programme's effectiveness, identify barriers, and provide actionable recommendations that can ensure the programme's effectiveness is long-lasting.

1.2 Objectives of the Review

The review is aimed at conducting an independent review of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) for Edo state, Nigeria by the IMO partner, Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) Nigeria.

The overall objectives of the review are to evaluate:

- Programme management/coordination by the IMO to assess whether the work carried out by the IMO implementation partner is in accordance with their project objectives to secure informed and vigorous engagement of communities in RSPO at all levels, by establishing a strengthened outreach of RSPO through intermediary organisations as stated above.
- The Programme management/coordination by the IMO; to assess whether the work carried out by IMO implementation partner has been able to address the issues outlined in the Intermediary Outreach and Engagement in Producing Countries, Status Assessment and Outreach Plan (prepared by Forest Peoples Programme, October 2014)
- The entire role, set-up, activities, achievements and impacts of the Programme that have been implemented, including how this programme has contributed to the achievement of the RSPO's mission and vision, and Theory of Change.
- Identification of issues that remain unaddressed, points of contention or conflict, and to assess what were the barriers to effective implementation of the Programme

1.3 Scope of the Review

VIISAUS, tasked with conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Intermediary Organisation (IMO) within the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme for Nigeria, specifically in Edo State, carried out the evaluation to assess the extent to which the programme has met the core objectives outlined in the RSPO Community Engagement Plan, including:

Securing Informed and Vigorous Engagement of Communities in RSPO Initiatives:

- Evaluated the effectiveness of the programme in fostering active, informed participation of local communities at all levels in RSPO activities.

- Assessed the depth of engagement and the level of awareness among community members regarding the RSPO's role and objectives.

Strengthening RSPO Outreach through Intermediary Organisations in Edo State:

- Assessed the impact of intermediary organisations in expanding the reach of RSPO's outreach efforts, specifically in Edo State, Nigeria.
- Examined how intermediary organisations have facilitated improved communication, trust-building, and collaboration between RSPO and local communities.

Enhancing Local Community Knowledge and Understanding of the RSPO Mechanism:

- Evaluated the effectiveness of the programme in enhancing community knowledge about the RSPO mechanism.
- Assessed the accessibility of RSPO information and the extent to which local communities are equipped to engage in sustainable palm oil practices.

The assessment covered six Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Edo State: Ovia Southwest, Ovia Northeast, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Owan West, and Uhunmwonde. The goal is to provide a conclusive report on whether the programme has successfully met the objectives of strengthening community engagement, expanding RSPO outreach, and enhancing local understanding of the RSPO's mechanisms.

1.4 Methodology

This independent review employed a mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the Intermediary Organisation (IMO) of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme for Edo state. The review was conducted across six (6) local government areas (LGAs) in Edo State namely:

1. Ovia South-West LGA
2. Ovia North-East LGA
3. Ikpoba-Okha LGA
4. Orhionmwon LGA
5. Owan West LGA
6. Uhunmwonde LGA

To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous assessment, data collection was conducted using a structured approach, incorporating surveys, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) across multiple communities and stakeholder groups.

1.5 Sampling Technique/Sample Size

The evaluation identified selected communities that participated in the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme through desk research of documents received from Foremost Development Services (FDS). The evaluation then utilised 50% of attendees from the community outreach and engagement programme ensuring a balanced spread and gender representation. This method enabled the inclusion of diverse perspectives while focusing on individuals with direct experience and insights into the programme's impact.

Table 1. Proposed Sample Size for Field Survey

LGA	Community	Target per Community	Male	Female
Ovia Southwest	Madagbayo	15	8	7
	Gbelebu	15	8	7
	Maroghionba (AT&P)	15	8	7
	Udo	15	8	7
Uhunmwode	Irhue	15	8	7
	Oke	11	6	5
	Orhua	14	7	7
Owan West	Avbiosi	6	3	3
	Uzebba	6	3	3
	Ugbeturu	6	3	3
	Ora	5	2	3
	Eti Ose	6	3	3

	Ugbubezi	6	3	3
	Atoruru	6	3	3
	14	141	73	68

The evaluation proposed a target sample size of 141 respondents for the field survey, comprising 73 males (52%) and 68 females (48%), alongside Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in 10 communities and five Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with participating organizations. This sample was strategically distributed across selected communities to ensure comprehensive coverage and robust data collection. However, only 97 survey responses were collected, and FGDs were conducted in six communities instead of 10. Additionally, seven KIIs were completed, exceeding the planned five. The reduced sample size resulted from:

1. Security challenges and communal clashes in some targeted communities, which restricted access and participation;
2. Lack of consent from certain community members, who were unwilling to participate due to mistrust or competing priorities; and
3. Logistical constraints, including transportation difficulties and time limitations, which hindered outreach to all planned respondents.

Despite these challenges, the collected data-maintained a near-equivalent gender balance, with 52% male and 48% female respondents, closely mirroring the proposed distribution and ensuring equitable representation of perspectives. Geographic diversity was also preserved, as the 97 survey responses and six FGDs spanned all six targeted Local Government Areas (Ovia Southwest, Ovia Northeast, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Owan West, and Uhunmwonde), capturing a broad range of community contexts. The additional two KIIs further enriched the dataset by incorporating diverse stakeholder views from organizations such as the National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria and the Edo State Oil Palm Programme. This robust, representative sample enabled the evaluation to generate meaningful and reliable insights into the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme's impact, supporting credible conclusions and actionable recommendations.

Table 2: Proposed Sample Size for Focus Group Discussion

LGA	Community	Target per Community
Ovia North - East	Agbanikaka	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Owan	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Uhiere	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
Ikpoba-Okha	Iyanomo	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Agbomoba	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Obayantor	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
Orhionmwon	Orogho	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Evbuehia	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Obagie-Nunuamen	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders
	Sakponba-Aideyenba	Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & 2 Community Elders

Table 3: Proposed Sample Size for Key Informant Interview

Project Stakeholders (Group)	Organisation/Agency
Growers	Representative of PRESCO
Public Sector	Representative of Edo GIS, ESOPP
Environmental & Social NGO	Representative of IDH
Oil Palm Association	Representative of National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria (NPPAN)

1.6 Quantitative Data (Survey)

Surveys were administered across selected communities to capture community-level perceptions, experiences, and awareness of the RSPO initiatives. The survey was administered physically using the Kobo toolbox, ensuring broad reach and precision. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions which were organised into three sections capturing programme evaluation, identification of unaddressed issues, sustainability challenges and recommendations for the next stages to gather detailed feedback. The surveyed communities included:

- **Ovia Southwest LGA:** Madagbayo, Maroghionba (AT&P), Gbelebu, and Udo.
- **Owan West LGA:** Avbiosi, Uzebba, Atoruru, Ugbubezi, and Ora.
- **Uhunmwonde LGA:** Irhue and Oke.

1.7 Qualitative Data

1.7.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The FGDs incorporated key community stakeholders to ensure a broad spectrum of voices and insights, including the Community Head, Youth Leader, Women Leader & two Community Elders to facilitate in-depth qualitative insights into stakeholder engagement, awareness of RSPO mechanisms, and the effectiveness of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme

within the community. Due to security challenges, FGDs were conducted in six out of the ten proposed communities, ensuring meaningful insights while prioritising safety. The communities visited include:

- **Ovia Northeast LGA:** Agbanikaka, Owan, and Uhiere communities.
- **Ikpoba-Okha LGA:** Obayantor community.
- **Orhionmwon LGA:** Evbuehia and Obagie-Nunuamen communities.

1.7.2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Targeted KIIs were conducted with key project stakeholders to gather expert perspectives on programme implementation, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability challenges. Interview guides were used to allow for flexibility in exploring emerging themes while ensuring consistency across all interviews. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes and was conducted through a mix of physical and virtual meetings. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. The interviews included representatives from:

- National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria (NPPAN), Edo State Chapter.
- Edo State Geographic Information System (GIS).
- Presco Nigeria Limited
- Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP).
- Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Edo State
- Ministry of Agriculture, Edo State.
- Okomu Palm Oil Nigeria Limited

1.8 Data Analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the RSPO Community Outreach and Engagement Programme in Edo state. The qualitative insights, derived from focus group discussions and key informant interviews, captured stakeholder perspectives on programme effectiveness, engagement strategies, and awareness of RSPO mechanisms. Meanwhile, quantitative data from surveys helped quantify community participation patterns and assess broader programme impact. Together, these methods facilitated a well-rounded analysis of stakeholder engagement, community knowledge, and barriers to effective outreach, offering valuable insights for strengthening RSPO's future engagement strategies.

1.8.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were thoroughly analysed to provide deep insights into the RSPO Community Outreach and

Engagement Programme (COEP). Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach, facilitated by NVivo software to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and usability for future research. Each transcript was systematically reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes, which were then grouped into categories such as programme relevance, community awareness, implementation barriers, and outcomes. This rigorous process illuminated stakeholder experiences, perceptions, and priorities, enabling the identification of key patterns—such as heightened environmental awareness and persistent financial constraints, while offering a nuanced understanding of the programme's impact and areas for improvement.

1.8.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

For the quantitative data collected through surveys, a data analysis was conducted using Power BI. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were utilised to summarise key demographic characteristics and community awareness of RSPO initiatives. Data processing steps—such as cleaning, normalisation and interpretation- were meticulously documented to ensure transparency and replicability. This analytical approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the community outreach and engagement programme, giving a well-rounded view of its successes and areas for improvement and informing actionable recommendations for strengthening RSPO's engagement strategies.

2.1 Results and Findings



2.2 Demographic Composition of the Respondents

The analysis reveals that male respondents constituted the majority at 52% (see figure 1A), while females made up 48%. This slight gender disparity may be influenced by cultural norms, access to information, or engagement opportunities. Despite this, the notable presence of women highlights their involvement in RSPO-related activities. Additionally, 81% of respondents are indigenes, while 19% are non-indigenes, suggesting that the RSPO program has primarily engaged local community members who are directly affected by palm oil activities. The presence of non-indigenes, though smaller, reflects some level of external involvement, possibly from settlers or industry stakeholders. These findings highlight the importance of fostering inclusive participation, ensuring that both men and women, as well as indigenes and non-indigenes, have equal access to information, resources, and opportunities within the RSPO framework.

Gender

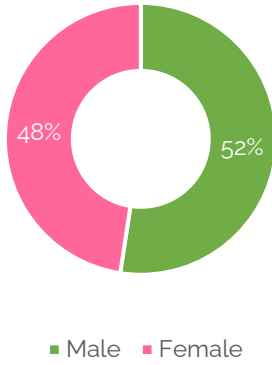


Figure 1A. Gender distribution of Respondents.

Indigene Status

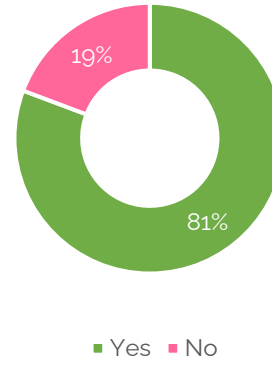


Figure 1B. Indigene status of Respondents.

Length of Stay

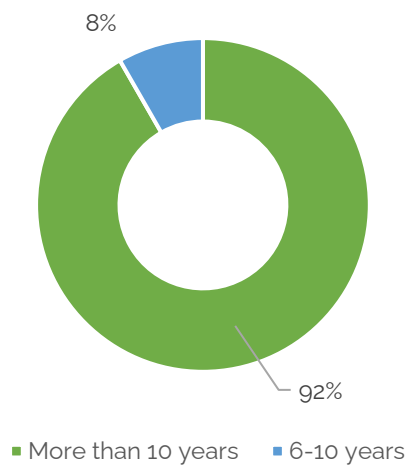


Figure 2A. Length of Residency of Non-indigenous Respondents

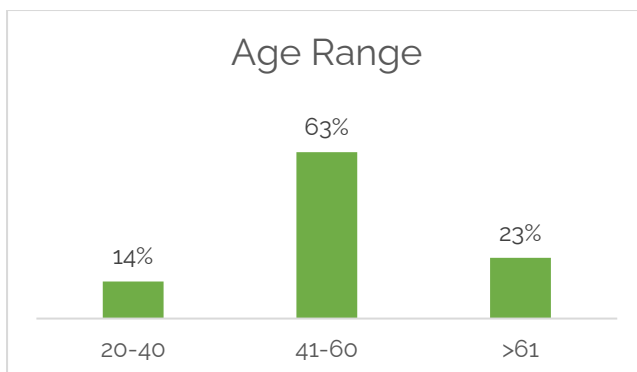


Figure 2B. Age Distribution of Respondents

Figure 2A shows that 92% of non-indigenous respondents have lived in the community for over 10 years, indicating deep familiarity with its socio-economic and environmental dynamics. In terms of age distribution, 63% of respondents fall within the 41–60 age group, making middle-aged individuals the most engaged demographic. Additionally, 23% are above 60, bringing extensive experience and historical knowledge, while only 14% are between 26 and 40, suggesting lower youth involvement in RSPO-related activities. This highlights the importance of encouraging greater participation from younger generations to ensure long-term sustainability and continuity in community-driven palm oil initiatives.

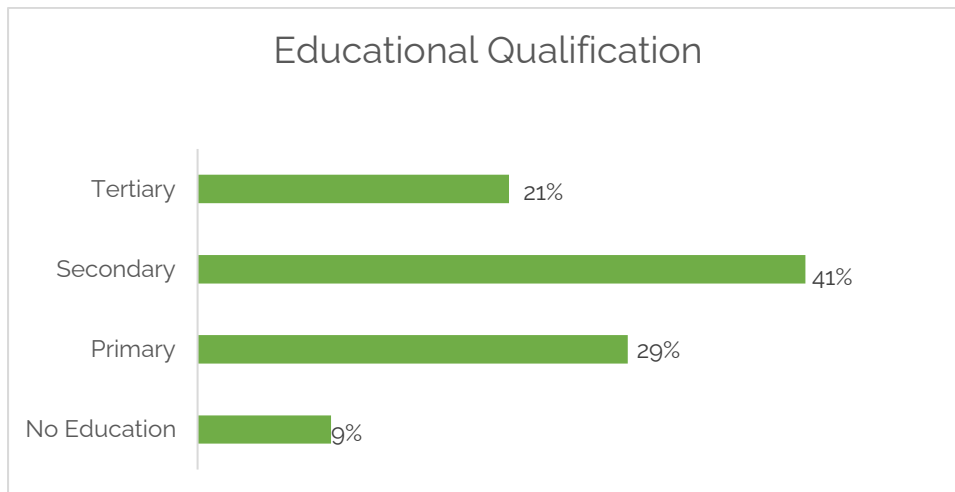


Figure 3. Educational Distribution of Respondents

Figure 3 shows the educational distribution where the majority of respondents have some level of formal education. Meanwhile, 21% of respondents possess tertiary education, suggesting that a notable portion of the population has advanced knowledge, which could be beneficial for community engagement and sustainable practices. 41% have completed secondary education and 29% attained only primary education. A smaller percentage, 9%, have no formal education, which may indicate potential challenges in literacy and access to information. The variation in educational attainment highlights the need for tailored communication strategies in RSPO programs to ensure inclusivity, particularly for those with lower education levels, while leveraging the knowledge of those with higher education to drive awareness and implementation efforts.

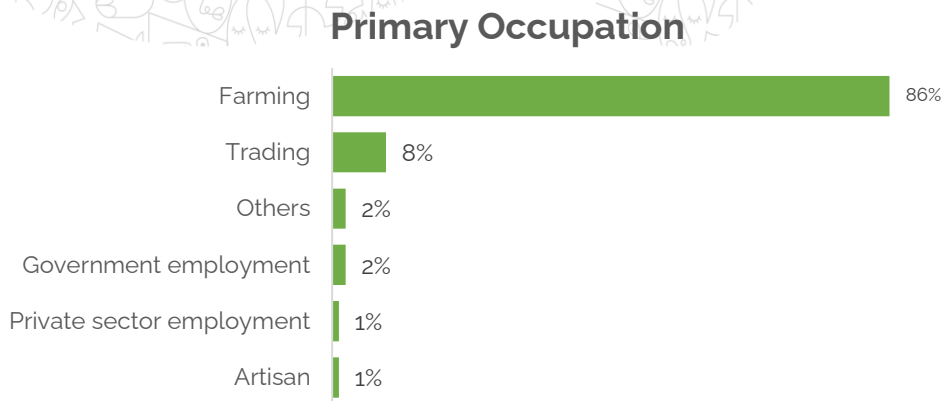


Figure 4. Occupational Distribution of Respondents

This distribution highlights that farming is the dominant occupation among respondents, with 86% engaged in agricultural activities, reinforcing the community's heavy reliance on farming, particularly in the palm oil sector. The low representation of government employees (2%), private sector workers (1%), and artisans (1%) suggests limited occupational diversity within the community. Additionally, 2% are engaged in other miscellaneous roles, indicating that non-agricultural employment opportunities are scarce. These findings emphasise the importance of supporting farmers through capacity-building, access to resources, and sustainable agricultural practices while exploring ways to diversify economic opportunities within the community.

3.1 Evaluation of FDS Alignment with IMO Community Outreach Programme and RSPO Standards



Respondent's Participation in FDS training

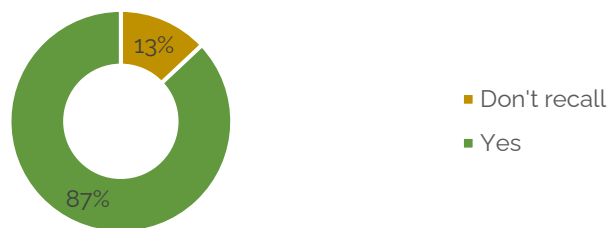


Figure 5. Distribution of Respondents' participation in FDS training

The findings presented in Figure 5 indicate that a significant 87% of respondents confirmed participation in the FDS training. This suggests that the FDS training initiative had a robust reach and was well-attended among the target group. However, 13% of respondents were unable to recall the training, possibly due to the time that has passed since its completion in June 2024 or due to unclear communication around training events. This suggests the need for refresher sessions or ongoing engagement to reinforce learning and sustain knowledge retention.



Figure 6. Community Leaders of Agbanikaka responding to interview questions



"RSPO, which stands for Round-table Sustainable Palm Oil, engaged with us through FDS which stands for Foremost Development Services (Limited). They even took some of us to OTI Hotel for training on how we can have value for our palm oil business and how our community will position herself to enjoy from its future initiatives"

Community Representative, Agbanikaka

Community Perceptions of Training Benefits

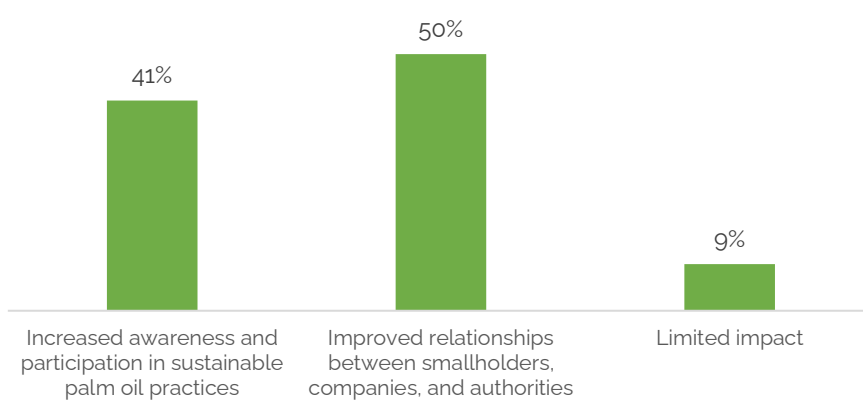


Figure 7. Community Perception of FDS training

The training programme had a notable impact, with 41% of respondents reporting increased awareness and participation in sustainable palm oil practices—demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted capacity-building in promoting behavioural change. Furthermore, 50% noted improved collaboration between smallholders, companies, and authorities, underlining the role of structured engagement in strengthening trust across the value chain. However, 9% of participants felt the training had minimal impact, citing operational challenges and the need for more tailored, context-specific content to address local realities and barriers to implementation.

Key Lessons and Insights Gained from the Training

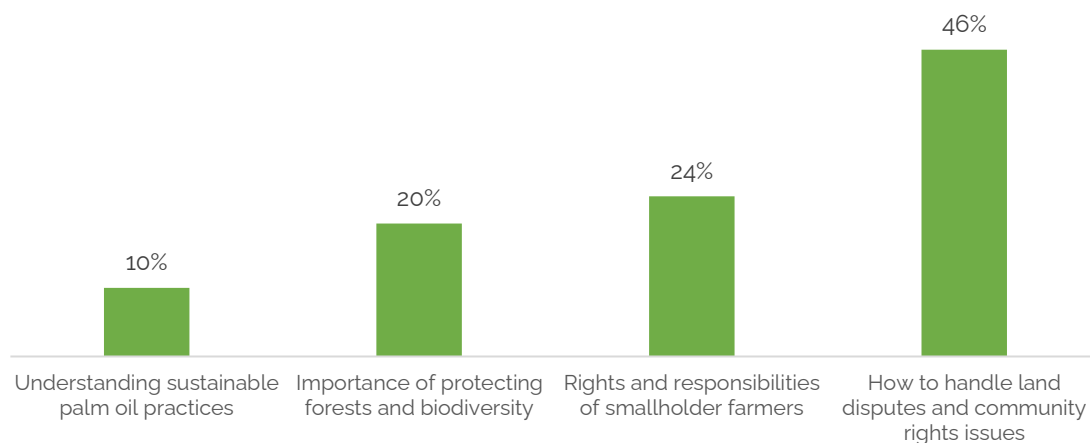


Figure 8. Key lessons and Insight gained by participants from the training

The analysis of the data presented in Figure 8 highlights several key insights from the training. A significant 46% of respondents indicated that their primary takeaway was related to conflict resolution in land disputes and community rights. This underscores the critical role of equitable land management in ensuring the sustainability of palm oil production. Additionally, 24% of participants reported a deeper understanding of the rights and responsibilities of smallholder farmers, reflecting the need for enhanced awareness of both regulatory and operational frameworks that govern the sector. Furthermore, 20% of respondents recognised the importance of forest and biodiversity conservation, signifying an increasing focus on environmental sustainability within the industry. Finally, 10% of participants cited sustainable palm oil practices as the most important lesson. These findings demonstrate that the training successfully addressed pressing socio-environmental challenges, with varying levels of impact based on participants' existing knowledge and individual priorities.



Figure 9: Community Representatives of Obayantor responding to interview questions



"Let me list out what we learnt, we learned how to carry out palm oil production seamlessly. We also learned that we should stop bush burning. If the government or any entity wants our land for use, we can engage with them through our community leaders to find a way for everyone to benefit. Additionally, we should not engage in violence with government officials. While all land belongs to the government, we can negotiate with them peacefully"

National Palm Oil Produce of Nigeria, Edo State Chairman

Key Challenges Faced by Community Members in the Palm Oil Sector

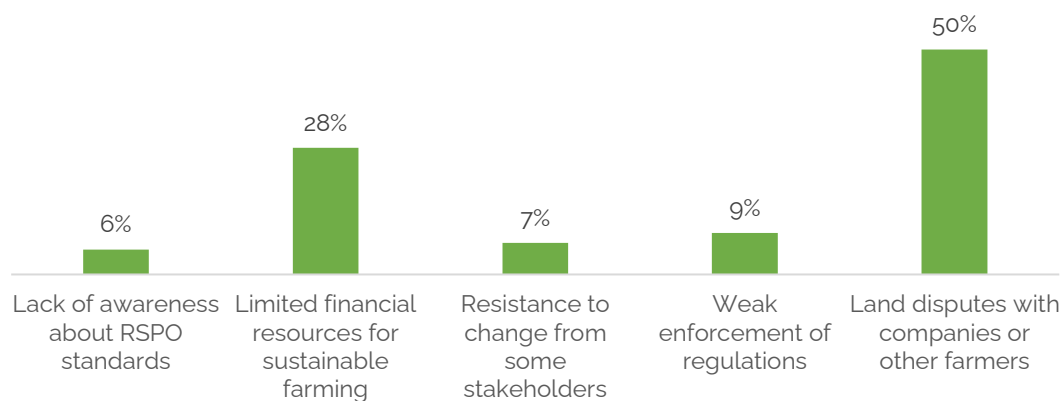


Figure 10. Key Challenges faced by communities' palm oil sector

The analysis, as presented in Figure 10, indicates that 50% of respondents encounter difficulties in their engagements with companies and fellow farmers, underscoring the necessity for enhanced stakeholder relationships and effective conflict resolution strategies. Moreover, 28% of participants identified constrained financial resources as a significant impediment to sustainable farming practices, pointing to the critical need for improved access to funding and investment opportunities. Additionally, 9% of respondents highlighted inadequate enforcement of regulations, revealing deficiencies in policy execution and oversight. Resistance to change among specific stakeholders was noted by 7% of participants, stressing the value of ongoing education and engagement initiatives. Finally, 6% of respondents reported limited awareness of RSPO standards, emphasising the importance of strengthened outreach and capacity-building efforts to ensure adherence to sustainability guidelines.



"Most of our meetings with communities have always been about complaints regarding land disputes—community members facing issues with companies and the government, especially when the government intends to carry out concession activities."

Representative of Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP).



Figure 11. Community Representatives from Owan Participating in Interview Sessions

Capacity to lodge a complaint

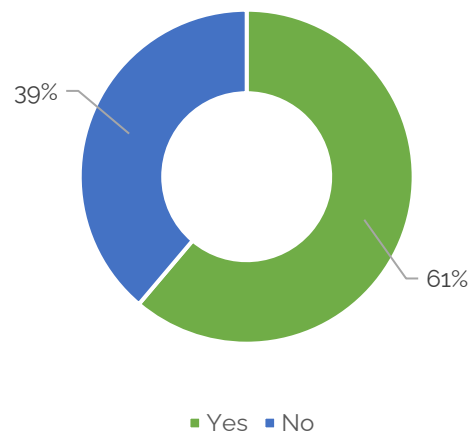


Figure 12. Respondents' capacity to lodge a complaint

The analysis reveals that 61% of respondents' have knowledge of the procedure for lodging a complaint in instances of a breach of peace, whereas 39% lack this understanding, as evidenced in figure 12. This suggests that a substantial segment of the participants is familiar with the complaint mechanism, indicating a degree of awareness and accessibility within the system. Nevertheless, the notable proportion of uninformed individuals underscores the necessity for enhanced outreach and educational initiatives. Bolstering this knowledge throughout the community is critical to empowering all individuals to take appropriate action when required, thereby promoting a more transparent and accountable framework.



Figure 13: Community Representatives of Evbuehia responding to interview questions

Awareness and Accessibility Assessment of RSPO's Grievance and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

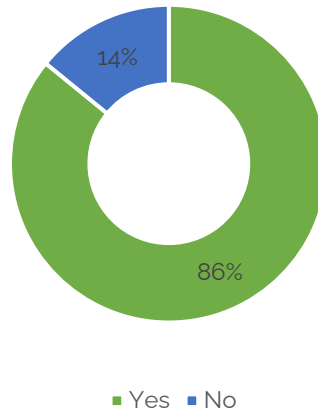


Figure 14. Respondents Awareness and Accessibility Assessment of RSPO's Grievance and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

Figure 14 illustrates that 86% of respondents have utilised the RSPO mechanisms provided by FDS to file grievance and dispute complaints, reflecting a significant level of engagement with the established conflict resolution frameworks. This high participation rate indicates that the mechanisms are both accessible and frequently employed by stakeholders seeking to address disputes. However, 14% of respondents have not engaged with these mechanisms, potentially due to factors such as limited awareness, lack of trust in the system, or the absence of grievances necessitating formal resolution.



"It is very accessible. As long as you or your neighbor have a phone and there is internet, you can log your complaint"

Community Leader, Owan



Figure 15. Community Representatives of Uhire Responding to Interview Questions

Impact of Training on RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C) for Participants

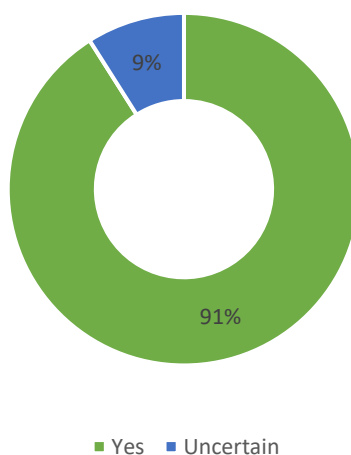


Figure 16. Response on impact of training on RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C)

The analysis presented in Figure 16 reveals that 91% of respondents confirmed that they now have knowledge on the RSPO Principles and Criteria, while 9% indicated uncertainty, stating they could not recall. This uncertainty may be attributed to the time lapse since the training, which was completed in June 2024. The gap between the training date and the survey suggests the need for

follow-up activities to reinforce learning and ensure continued clarity and retention of key concepts.



"We were taught standard practice in our palm oil farming such as child labour, go about it. In short, the training was very holistic. We truly learnt a lot."

Community Leader, Agbanikaka

Distribution of Training Received by Respondents in Key Sustainability and Grievance Areas

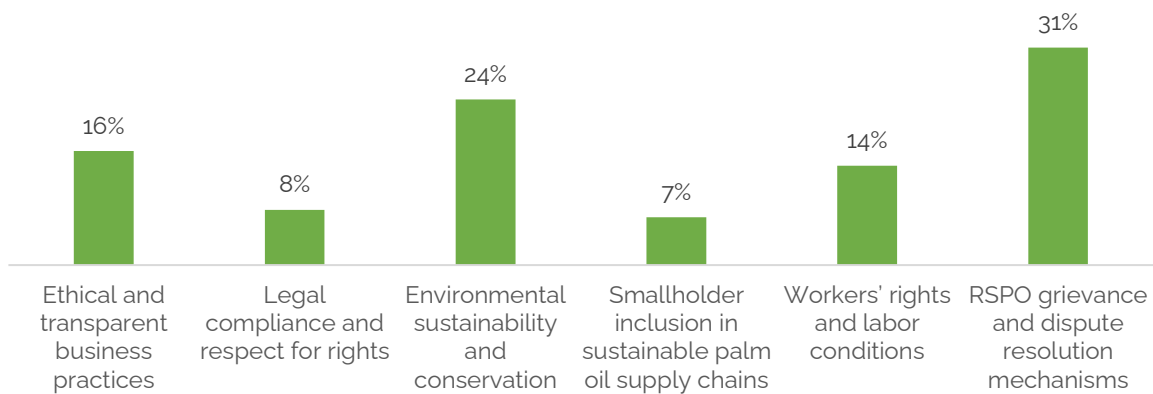


Figure 17. Distribution of Training Received by Respondents

The training provided by FDS included topics that had a significant impact on respondents during the sessions, as evidenced by the respondents who reported receiving such training (Figure 5). Among those trained, 16% focused on ethical and transparent business practices (see Figure 17), underscoring a deliberate effort to foster integrity and transparency within the palm oil industry. This emphasis is essential for building stakeholder trust and ensuring long-term business sustainability, as ethical practices help mitigate reputational risks and enhance credibility. Additionally, 8% of respondents received training on legal compliance and respect for rights, highlighting a targeted initiative to equip participants with knowledge of the legal frameworks governing palm oil production. Such training is critical for preventing legal disputes, promoting fair treatment of workers and communities, and ensuring adherence to regulatory standards.

Further analysis indicates that environmental and social sustainability remain key priorities within the training programmes. Approximately 24% of respondents reported receiving training in environmental sustainability and conservation, underscoring an increased awareness of the importance of reducing the ecological impact of palm oil production while promoting conservation initiatives. This emphasis aligns with the sector's growing commitment to

sustainable practices as fundamental to long-term operational success. In addition, 7% of respondents received training on the inclusion of smallholders within sustainable palm oil supply chains, reflecting ongoing efforts to integrate small-scale producers into the value chain. While the proportion remains modest, it represents meaningful progress toward enhancing smallholder participation and access to improved market opportunities. Furthermore, 14% of respondents indicated they had received training on workers' rights and labour conditions. This reflects a targeted effort to address labour-related challenges within the sector and is a critical step towards improving working conditions, ensuring fair treatment, and safeguarding the rights of workers—contributing to a more equitable and responsible industry landscape.

The training's impact is further evident in the area of conflict resolution, with 31% of respondents reporting training on grievance and dispute resolution mechanisms. This substantial focus underscores the importance of equipping stakeholders with the tools to manage and resolve conflicts effectively, fostering peaceful negotiations and maintaining harmonious relationships within communities and with external stakeholders.

By prioritising grievance mechanisms, the training enhanced the capacity of respondents to address disputes proactively, reducing the likelihood of escalation and promoting a more collaborative environment. Collectively, these training initiatives demonstrate a comprehensive approach to building capacity in sustainability and grievance management, empowering respondents to contribute to a more transparent, equitable, and environmentally responsible palm oil industry.



"FDS trained participants on what RSPO certification is and how financial institutions like banks require it to do business with smallholder farmers".

Representative, Edo State Geographic Information System (GIS).

Barriers faced by Communities in complying with the RSPO P&C

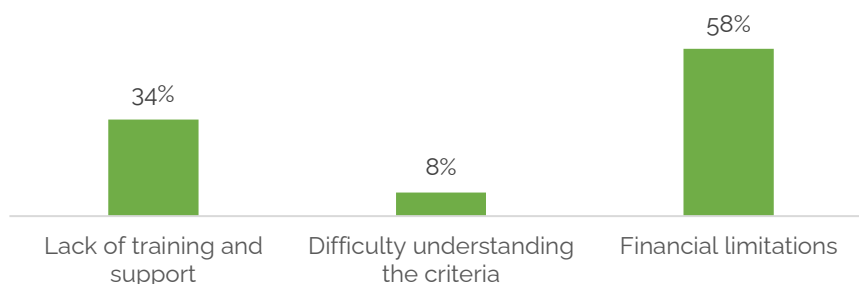


Figure 18. Barriers faced by Respondents in complying with the RSPO P&C

The implementation of the RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C) is pivotal for sustainable palm oil production, yet it is hitting roadblocks that demand immediate action, as revealed in Figure 18. A significant 58% of respondents pointed to financial limitations as the biggest barrier, sounding an urgent need for innovative funding solutions to unlock compliance. Meanwhile, 34% cited a lack of training and support, a gap for a robust capacity building to empower producers, while 8% struggled to understand the criteria, waving a red flag for simpler guidance and hands-on training.

These findings are a roadmap to transformation, given that financial barriers, inadequate training, and confusing criteria are not just insurmountable; but challenges needing bold, and targeted solutions. The tackling of these structural and educational roadblocks can pave the way for RSPO P&C to deliver on its promise: a future where sustainable palm oil is not just an aspiration, but a reality.



"These issues were talked about and addressed. Part of the technique to address our issue of improved productivity is that we should buy improved seedlings, limit bush burning and undertake general environmental conservation practices. But to be frank, the practice is okay, global standards, but it may not be sustainable for us due to the financial state of some of us"
"Chairman, National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria (NPPAN), Edo State Chapter"

Most Important RSPO Principle According to Respondents

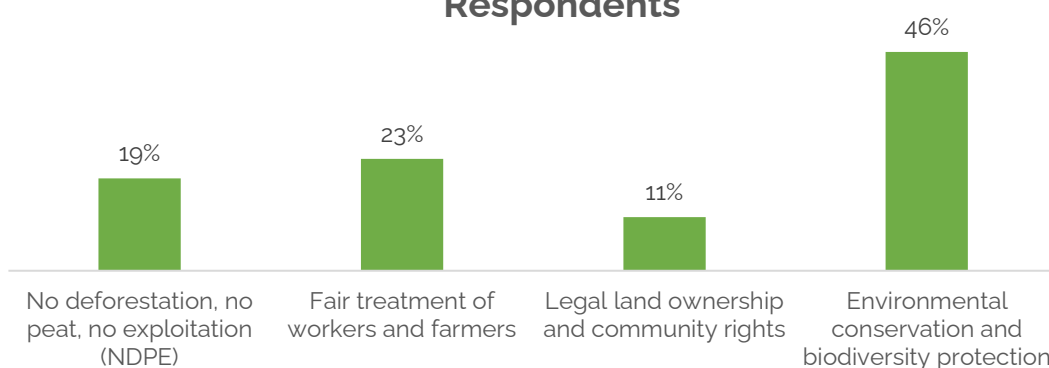


Figure 19: Most Important RSPO Principle According to Respondents

Figure 19 sheds light on the aspects that participants value most within the RSPO framework, and call-to-action. A total of 46% of respondents identified environmental conservation and biodiversity protection as the top RSPO principles, showcasing a steadfast dedication to safeguarding the planet's ecosystems—proof that ecological sustainability is a priority for the communities. Meanwhile, 23% zeroed in on the fair treatment of workers and farmers, a statement

for justice and equity that should not be ignored, while 19% championed the "No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation" (NDPE) principle, thrusting responsible land use and sustainable farming into the spotlight as non-negotiable. Rounding it out, 11% insisted on legal ownership and community rights, a clear cry for secure land tenure and respect for local voices. These responses recorded are not a breakdown of preferences, but an account that even though environmental stewardship leads the charge in their understanding of RSPO principles, but social fairness and legal clarity are indispensable pillars of a sustainable future that will be built.



"These communities, and the progress made by the RSPO should be acknowledged and supported."

Representative of Edo State Geographic Information System"

Applicability of RSPO P&C to participants daily activities

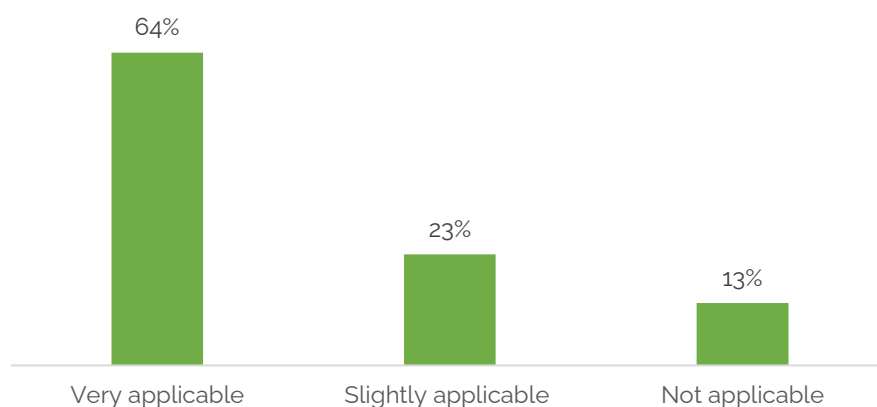


Figure 20. Applicability of RSPO P&C to Respondents' daily activities

The analysis presented in Figure 20 reveals a significant alignment between the RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C) and the operational realities of stakeholders, with 64% of respondents affirming their direct applicability to daily activities. This strong correlation underscores the relevance of these sustainability standards in fostering practical integration across routine practices within the palm oil supply chain. However, 23% of respondents indicated that the principles are only partially applicable, suggesting that while certain elements resonate, others may not fully address the nuances of their specific contexts, potentially due to operational or structural mismatches.

Meanwhile, 13% reported that the RSPO P&C bear little to no relevance to their activities, a disconnect attributed to factors such as limited awareness, insufficient resources, or the distinct

nature of their roles within the supply chain. These findings illuminate the necessity for customised support mechanisms and strategic interventions to enhance the adoption and effectiveness of RSPO standards, ensuring they are both accessible and impactful across the diverse spectrum of stakeholders involved. Addressing these gaps is critical to advancing sustainable practices comprehensively and equitably.



"We follow it diligently. Due to FDS' emphasis on how irregular practices can affect the quality of our products, impact our health, and lead to complaints—especially when they affect our fellow farmers—we now adhere strictly to the guidelines. It has become part of our routine."

Community Leader, Obagie-Nunuamen



Figure 21: Community Representatives of Obagie-Nunuamen responding to interview question

3.2 Evaluation of FDS Impact on Intermediary Outreach and Engagement in Edo State, Nigeria.



Awareness Level of Communities about RSPO Activities

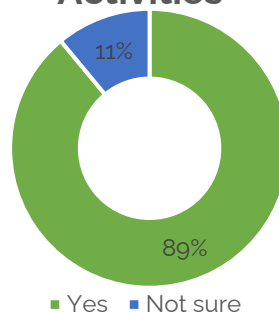


Figure 22. Level of Awareness among Respondents' regarding RSPO Activities

Illustrated in Figure 22, the analysis shows that 89% of respondents reported being better informed about RSPO activities following the training—demonstrating a strong level of fulfilment and a readiness to apply the knowledge gained. This indicates that the intervention was largely effective in enhancing awareness and understanding of RSPO principles. While 11% of respondents did not report a noticeable improvement, this highlights an opportunity to further strengthen engagement through complementary learning methods. Overall, the high percentage of informed participants reflects the training's success in equipping community members with the tools and confidence needed to actively engage in sustainable palm oil practices.



"We now have a much clearer understanding of our community rights, entitlements, and the bodies, companies, and other organisations interested in our palm oil activities. FDS did an excellent job in raising our awareness, especially about the harmful effects of past practices like bush burning—not just on the environment, but also on our health and that of our children." **Community leader, Agbanikaka**

Knowledge of RSPO before the intervention

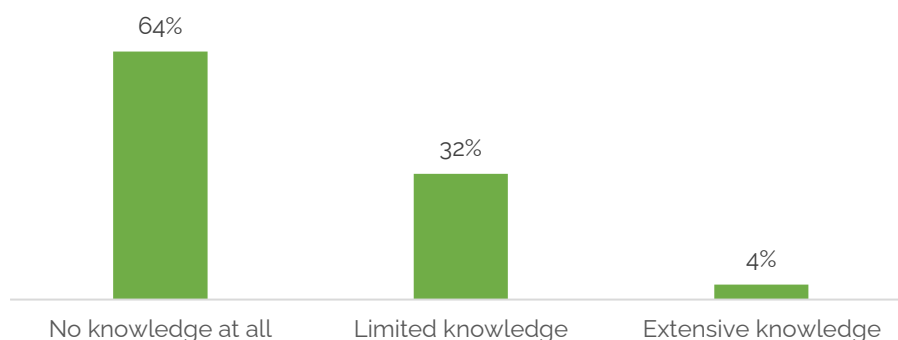


Figure 23. Respondents' knowledge on RSPO before intervention

The analysis presented in Figure 23 highlights a significant gap in respondents' knowledge of RSPO operations prior to the intervention. Specifically, 64% of respondents reported having no awareness of RSPO's functions, including its grievance and complaint mechanisms and Principles and Criteria (P&C), while 32% indicated only limited knowledge, and just 4% claimed extensive understanding. These findings reveal a notable deficiency in awareness and comprehension of RSPO's role and processes, potentially due to insufficient outreach efforts, limited stakeholder engagement, or inadequate dissemination of information regarding RSPO policies.

This lack of knowledge could weaken effective participation in sustainability initiatives, restricting access to grievance redress mechanisms, and hindering compliance with RSPO standards. However, the strategic efforts of Foremost Development Services (FDS) Limited have proven instrumental in breaking barriers to entry, enabling the RSPO Principles and Criteria to reach community members more effectively and fostering greater awareness and adoption of sustainable practices where previous gaps once prevailed. This underscores the critical need for continued and enhanced educational and engagement strategies to build on FDS's foundational work.



"In the past, our approach to addressing grievances and complaints often involved confrontations with government officials and contractors, which, in some cases, led to unfortunate incidents. This reflected our limited understanding of more constructive engagement mechanisms at the time."

Community Leader, Obayantor

Knowledge of RSPO after the intervention

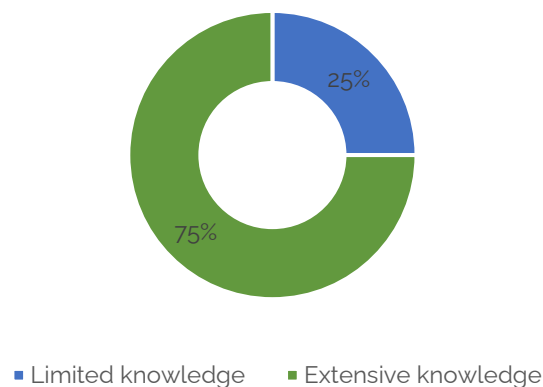


Figure 24. Respondent's Knowledge of RSPO after the intervention

The analysis presented in Figure 24, conducted at the conclusion of the intervention, reveals that 75% of respondents reported possessing extensive knowledge of RSPO operations, while 25% indicated they retained only limited understanding. These results reflect a substantial improvement in awareness and comprehension of RSPO operations compared to the baseline assessment, underscoring the intervention's effectiveness in disseminating critical information and fostering stakeholder engagement.

Nevertheless, the persistence of limited knowledge among 25% of respondents' points to ongoing barriers to achieving universal comprehension, potentially attributable to disparities in pre-existing knowledge, unequal access to informational resources, or difficulties in retaining and applying the content delivered. Additionally, the areas of application for lessons learned from FDS training may not have fully developed at the time of this evaluation, suggesting that the practical integration of this knowledge into daily operations or community practices might still be evolving. These findings emphasise the need for continued, targeted strategies to address these challenges and ensure comprehensive understanding and effective implementation across all participants.



"Through our participation in FDS training and engagement sessions, we have developed a deeper understanding of responsible practices. We now recognise that challenges involving companies and government institutions can be resolved through dialogue rather than conflict. Additionally, we have ceased activities that negatively impact the environment and have made substantial progress in reducing child labour, in alignment with the principles and criteria of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)" **Community Leader, Obayantor**

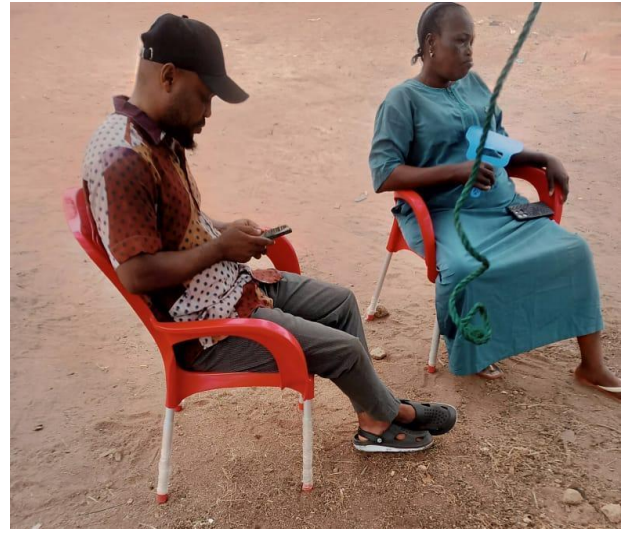


Figure 25: Data collectors Administering Evaluation Tool to Respondents

Learning outcomes for participants from the training session

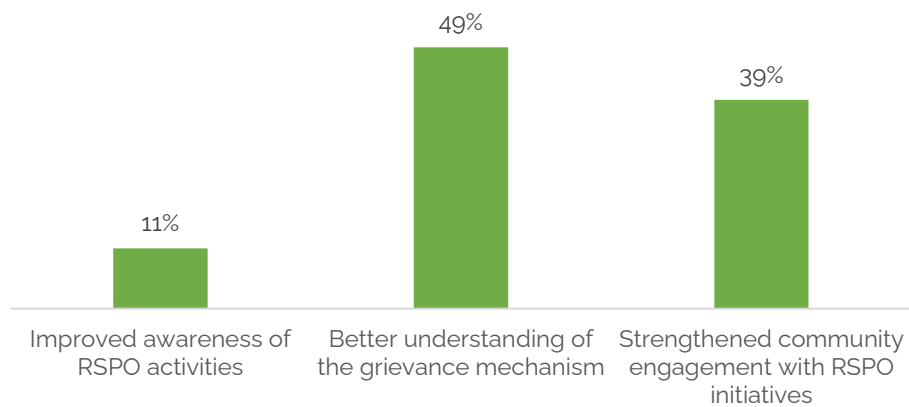


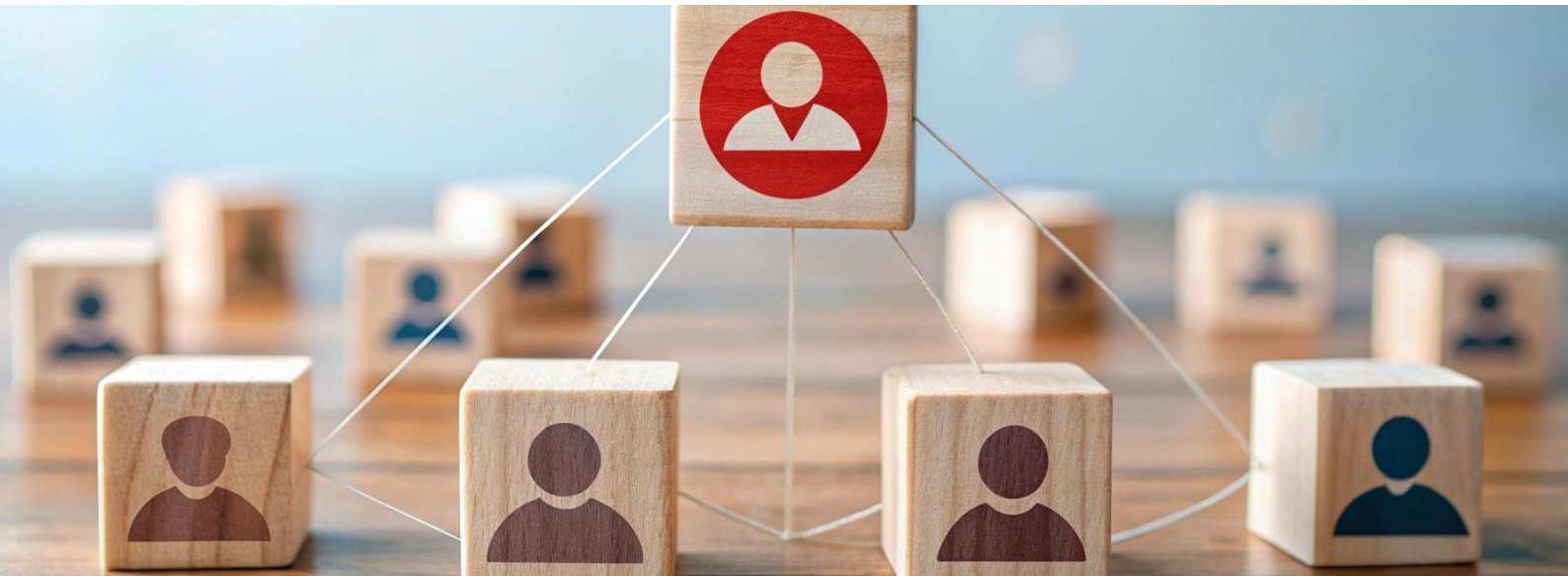


Figure 26. Learning Outcomes for Participants from the Training Session

The analysis presented in Figure 26 interestingly demonstrates the transformative impact of the intervention on stakeholders' understanding of RSPO operations, with 49% of respondents reporting a markedly improved grasp of the grievance and complaint mechanisms. This finding robustly highlights the intervention's efficacy in demystifying the processes for addressing disputes and concerns, rectifying a pre-existing knowledge deficit that previously constrained stakeholders' ability to effectively leverage RSPO redress channels. Such evidence points to a critical shift, empowering participants to engage more meaningfully with sustainability frameworks. Furthermore, 39% of respondents indicated enhanced knowledge of strategies to strengthen community engagement with RSPO initiatives, reflecting a significant rise in awareness of participatory methodologies and the pivotal role of local communities in advancing sustainability efforts.

This outcome underscores the indispensable value of fostering collaborative synergies between grassroots stakeholders and RSPO structures, a cornerstone for amplifying the adoption and execution of sustainable practices. However, only 11% of respondents noted a broader improvement in awareness of RSPO activities, suggesting that while the intervention adeptly bridged specific gaps in comprehension—particularly around grievance processes and community involvement—the wider dissemination of RSPO operational knowledge remains an area necessitating further, sustained reinforcement. Collectively, these results affirm the intervention's targeted success while signalling the academic and practical imperative for continued efforts to ensure comprehensive stakeholder enlightenment across all facets of RSPO's mission.

3.3 Evaluation of Programme Structure, Achievements, and Contributions to RSPO's Mission and Theory of Change



The evaluation of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP), implemented by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in Edo State, Nigeria, provides a comprehensive assessment of its structure, achievements, and contributions to the RSPO's mission and Theory of Change. Conducted across six Local Government Areas using a mixed-method approach—encompassing 97 survey responses, six Focus Group Discussions, and seven Key Informant Interviews—this review examines how FDS' programme design and execution have advanced RSPO's vision of transforming the palm oil industry into a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive sector.

The findings highlight FDS' success in fostering community awareness and engagement with RSPO Principles and Criteria, strengthening grievance mechanisms, and promoting sustainable practices, while also identifying structural gaps that influence its alignment with RSPO's long-term goals of environmental stewardship, social justice, and economic viability, as articulated in its Theory of Change. This section elucidates the programme's role in translating RSPO's strategic framework into tangible outcomes, offering critical insights into its effectiveness and areas for refinement to ensure sustained impact within Edo State's palm oil sector, a key contributor to Nigeria's national output.

Effect of Training on Participant Engagement and Behaviour

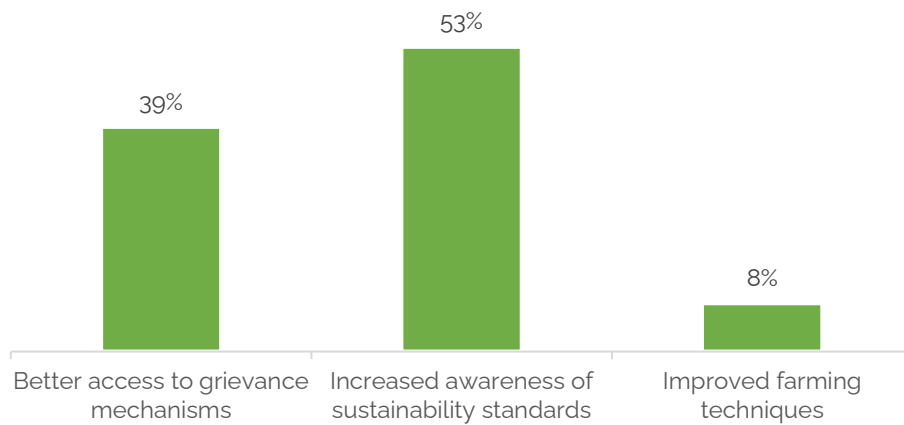


Figure 27. Effect of Training on Respondents' engagement and behaviour

Based on the analysis presented in Figure 27, 53% of respondents reported that heightened awareness of sustainability standards has positively influenced their smallholder farming practices. This indicates that most smallholder farmers acknowledge the value of sustainable methods, potentially leading to enhanced productivity, environmental preservation, and expanded market opportunities. Furthermore, 39% of respondents underscored the importance of improved access to grievance mechanisms, suggesting that a robust system for resolving complaints and disputes is vital for building trust, transparency, and accountability within farming communities. Such access likely boosts farmer satisfaction and promotes adherence to agricultural regulations and standards.

The remaining 8% of respondents pointed to overall improvements in their farming activities, a testament to the concrete advantages stemming from sustainable practices and effective grievance systems. These gains could stem from greater knowledge, resource availability, and a supportive regulatory environment that empowers farmers to maximise their agricultural output and efficiency.



"Indeed, we have witnessed a decline in environmental degradation and an improvement in the management of complaints and grievances. We are truly appreciative of the work done by FDS in bringing this RSPO initiatives to these communities"

Representative, Ministry of Agriculture, Edo State

Effectiveness of FDS's Engagement

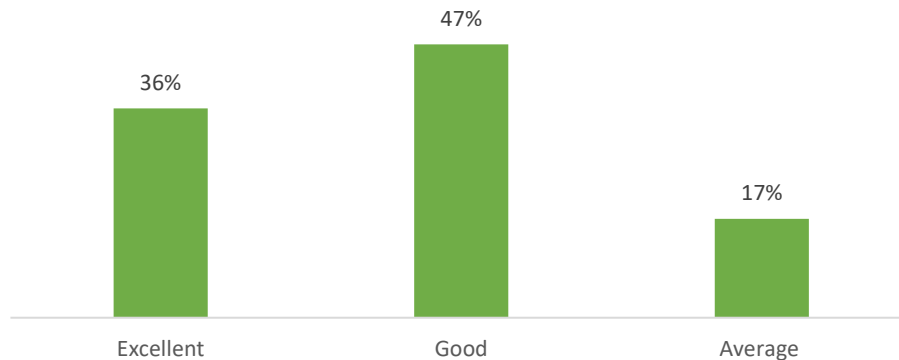


Figure 28. Effectiveness of FDS Engagement

Figure 28 presents the participants' evaluation of the effectiveness of training delivered by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS), revealing that a combined 83% of respondents rated it as either good (47%) or excellent (36%). This reflects a predominantly positive reception, with many participants finding the sessions beneficial, well-organised, and highly impactful. In contrast, 17% rated the training as average, suggesting potential shortcomings in aspects such as content clarity, delivery approaches, or participant interaction that warrant attention. Collectively, these results underscore a predominantly positive reception of FDS' training efforts, while simultaneously pointing to specific areas where refinements could further elevate its effectiveness and alignment with stakeholder needs.



"I will rate them four (4). Because they really tried to communicate details of the training engagement using examples and illustrations participants could relate"

Representative of Okomu Palm Oil Nigeria Limited

The Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP), implemented by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in Edo State, Nigeria, under the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) framework, has significantly advanced sustainable palm oil production by aligning with RSPO's Theory of Change (ToC). Table 4 encapsulates how FDS' strategic interventions—spanning training, grievance mechanism outreach, and stakeholder collaboration across six Local Government Areas—have driven short-term awareness, medium-term adoption of sustainable practices, and long-term sustainability compliance. Supported by evidence from a mixed-methods evaluation involving 97 survey responses, six Focus Group Discussions, and seven Key Informant Interviews, the table illustrates FDS' contributions to RSPO's mission, highlighting measurable outcomes such as 87% training participation and 86% grievance

mechanism engagement, while identifying areas for further progress to address financial and inclusivity barriers.

Table 4: FDS' strategic *interventions* alignment to RSPOs ToC

RSPO ToC Outcome	FDS Contribution	Evidence
Enhanced Community Awareness	Delivered training on RSPO P&C, grievance mechanisms, and sustainable practices across six LGAs. Conducted awareness campaigns via community meetings and tailored materials.	87% of respondents participated in FDS training; 91% reported awareness of RSPO P&C (Figure 16). 75% gained extensive knowledge of RSPO operations post-intervention (Figure 24).
Improved Knowledge Access	Simplified RSPO P&C into relatable messages and provided training on legal compliance, ethical practices, and environmental sustainability.	64% of respondents confirmed P&C applicability to daily activities (Figure 20); 49% reported improved understanding of grievance mechanisms (Figure 26).
Strengthened Stakeholder Trust	Established accessible grievance channels (e.g., hotlines) and facilitated dialogues with companies and government agencies.	86% of respondents accessed RSPO grievance mechanisms (Figure 14); 50% noted improved collaboration between smallholders, companies, and authorities (Figure 7).
Adoption of Sustainable Practices	Promoted NDPE principles, biodiversity conservation, and reduced bush burning through training and practical demonstrations.	53% of respondents reported changed farming practices due to sustainability awareness (Figure 27); 19% prioritised NDPE principles (Figure 19).
Strengthened Dispute Resolution	Trained communities on conflict resolution and grievance processes, reducing land disputes and fostering peaceful negotiations.	46% of respondents highlighted conflict resolution as a key training takeaway (Figure 8); 86% utilised grievance mechanisms (Figure 14).
Increased Inclusivity	Engaged women (48% of respondents) and youth in training, though gaps remain. Facilitated community dialogues to promote participation.	48% female participation (Figure 1A); 14% aged 26–40 (Figure 2B). Recommendations for gender quotas and youth leadership training proposed.

Sustainability Compliance	Built capacity for P&C adherence through training on environmental, social, and governance standards, laying the foundation for CSPO certification.	46% prioritized environmental conservation (Figure 19); 24% trained on environmental sustainability (Figure 17). Practical application still evolving, indicating need for follow-up.
Equitable Economic Growth	Advocated for financial inclusion and collaborated with ESOPP to address financial barriers, though resource gaps persist.	58% identified financial limitations as a barrier (Figure 18); recommendations for microfinance and VSLAs were proposed.
Environmental Stewardship	Promoted biodiversity protection and deforestation prevention through training and community engagement.	46% prioritised biodiversity protection (Figure 19); 20% gained insights on forest conservation (Figure 8).
Resilient Community Structures	Laid groundwork for community-based grievance committees and stakeholder collaboration, though institutionalisation is ongoing.	86% engagement with grievance mechanisms (Figure 14); recommendations for permanent liaison units and community-led initiatives proposed.

3.4 Identify sustainability challenges in the palm oil sector relative to the community outreach engagement programme in Edo State, Nigeria.

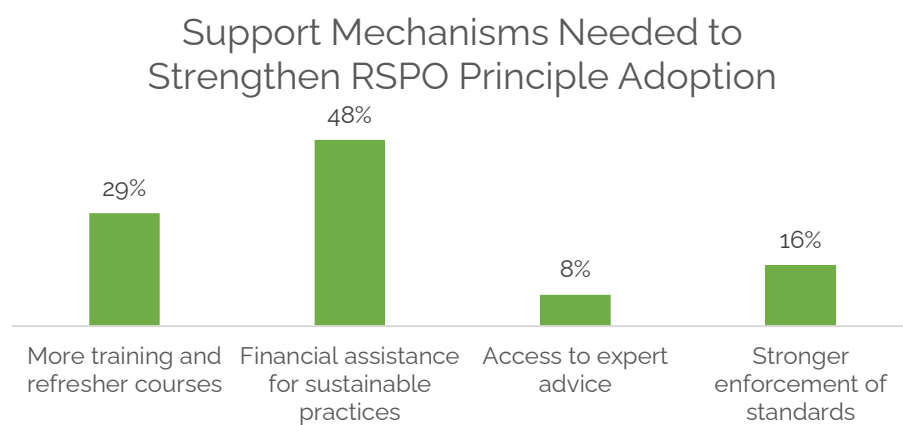


Figure 29. Support Mechanisms Needed to Strengthen RSPO Principle Adoption

Figure 29 provides insight into the additional support required for implementing RSPO Principles and Criteria, with 48% of respondents identifying financial assistance for sustainable practices as essential. This majority perspective underscores the perception among smallholder farmers that financial resources are a critical enabler for adopting and sustaining RSPO-compliant practices, highlighting financial constraints as a primary barrier to full implementation. Additionally, 29% of respondents emphasised the need for expanded training and refresher courses, indicating that ongoing education and skill enhancement are vital for equipping farmers to apply sustainability standards effectively.

Furthermore, 16% noted the importance of stronger enforcement of standards, suggesting a lack of confidence in the consistency and robustness of current monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and pointing to the necessity for more rigorous regulatory oversight to ensure compliance. Lastly, 8% advocated access to expert advice, reflecting a belief that specialised guidance could assist farmers in overcoming operational challenges, refining practices, and adhering to RSPO principles. Collectively, these findings reveal a multifaceted need for financial, educational, regulatory, and advisory support to facilitate successful adoption of RSPO standards in Edo State's palm oil sector.



"RSPO should continue this training to help us keep learning about best practices. Additionally, we would appreciate financial support, either through loans or grants, to enable us to apply the knowledge gained, particularly in sustainable palm oil production"

Chairman, National Palm Produce Association of Nigeria (NPPAN), Edo State Chapter

Community Perspectives on Strengthening RSPO Support Systems

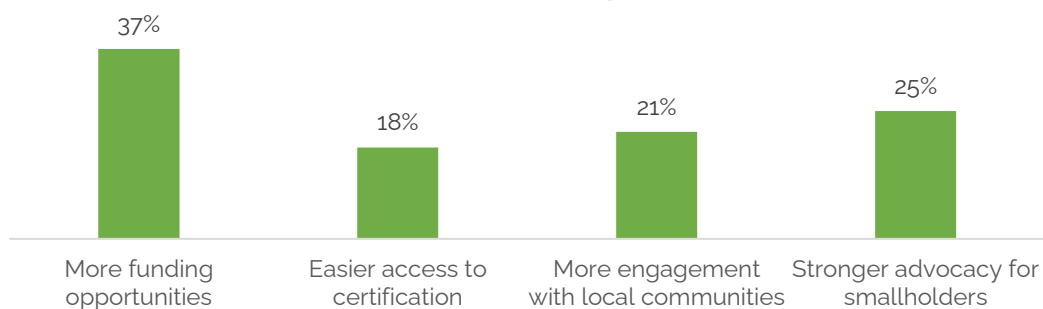


Figure 30. Community Perspectives on Strengthening RSPO Support Systems

Figure 30 captures community perspectives on the additional assistance needed to strengthen RSPO support systems for smallholder farmers and local stakeholders in Edo State. According to the findings, 37% of respondents emphasised the critical need for increased funding opportunities, reflecting a widespread view that financial resources are essential to improve farming practices, adopt sustainable technologies, and access broader markets. This perspective highlights a community consensus that financial barriers significantly limit their ability to align with RSPO's sustainability goals. Additionally, 25% of respondents advocated for stronger representation and advocacy for smallholders, indicating a community desire for a louder voice in policy discussions to secure favourable regulations, better resource access, and recognition of their vital role in sustainable palm oil production.

Furthermore, 21% stressed the importance of deeper engagement with local communities, suggesting that fostering a sense of ownership and active participation is key to ensuring RSPO

initiatives resonate with local values and needs, thereby enhancing their effectiveness, also 18% of Respondents pointed to the need for easier access to RSPO certification, revealing a community concern that current certification challenges hinder integration into global sustainable supply chains. Simplifying this process, they believe, would unlock opportunities to benefit from RSPO programs, boosting both sustainability and economic prospects. These perspectives collectively illustrate a community-driven call for enhanced financial, advocacy, engagement, and certification support to fortify RSPO systems and ensure their relevance and impact at the grassroots level.



"I really hope RSPO can help us in providing improved seedlings, finance and also help us to engage with government and companies so that we can keep farming on our hectares and let it not be concession to companies because these concessions have reduced our production"

Community leader, Agbanikaka

Challenges to Long-Term Impact

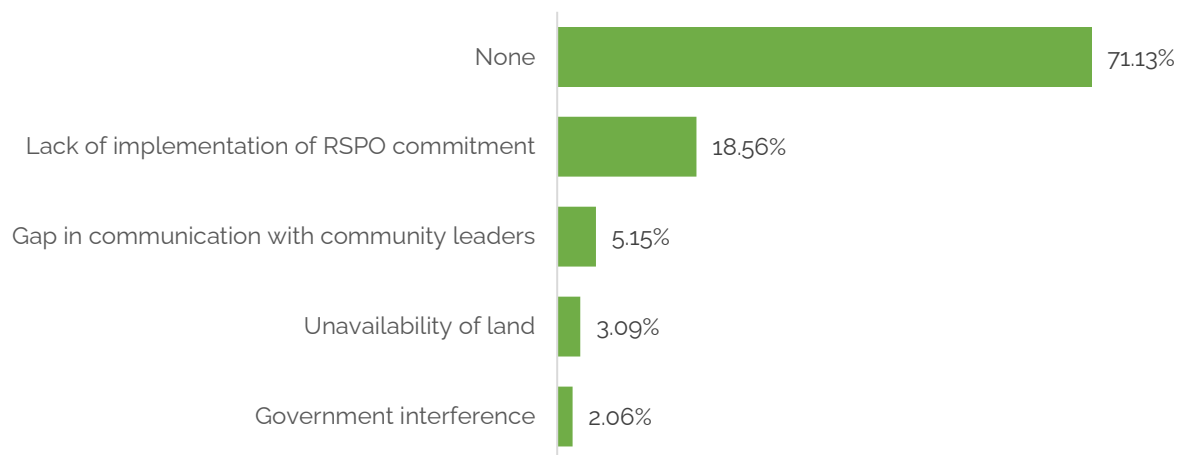


Figure 31. Challenges to Long-Term Impact

Data from Figure 31 reveal that while a substantial majority of respondents (71.13%) express confidence that the RSPO will encounter no future challenges in implementing its projects within Edo State communities, a notable minority have flagged potential impediments. Specifically, 18.56% of respondents identified a perceived lack of sustained RSPO commitment as a critical risk to the initiative's long-term viability, suggesting doubts about its ongoing dedication.

Furthermore, 5.15% noted deficiencies in communication with community leaders, a factor that could undermine stakeholder engagement and programme acceptance. Additionally, 3.09% cited land unavailability as a limiting constraint, while 2.06% raised concerns over potential government

interference. Despite the prevailing optimism among respondents regarding RSPO's future success, these findings highlight the necessity for consistent organisational resolve, enhanced dialogue with local leadership, strategic land-use planning, and robust advocacy efforts to counteract governmental influences, all of which are essential to safeguard the programme's enduring sustainability.



"The only challenge arises when promises made to us [community members] are not fulfilled—this often leads to agitation."

Representative, Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs

"I think RSPO will face challenges during future sustainability interventions if they are involved in selective community leaders' engagement"

Sociologist, Community Mobilisation Unit, Presco Nigeria Limited, Edo State

Percieved cause of the challenges

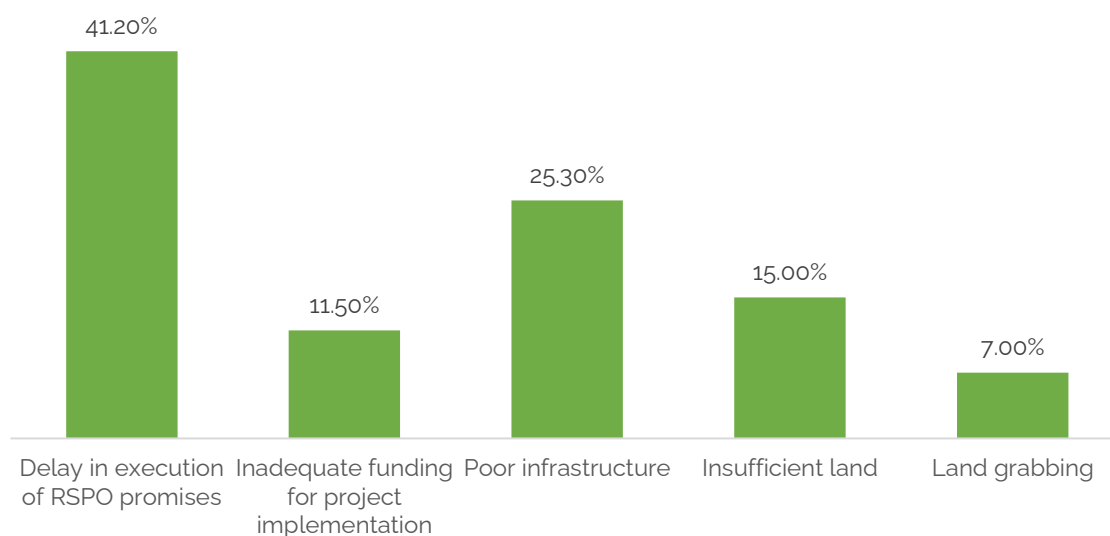


Figure 32. Perceived causes of the challenges

Among respondents who affirmed the presence of potential challenges to the successful implementation of the RSPO programme, as captured in Figure 32. 41.20% identified delays in fulfilling RSPO commitments as a primary issue, reflecting significant apprehension about the timeliness of promised actions. Additionally, 11.50% pointed to insufficient funding for project execution, underscoring financial constraints as a notable impediment. Meanwhile, 25.30% cited poor community infrastructure, such as inadequate roads or facilities, as a barrier to effective programme delivery.

Furthermore, 15% highlighted a shortage of available land for farming activities, indicating spatial limitations as a concern, while 7.0% emphasised land-grabbing as a critical challenge, suggesting that tenure disputes could substantially undermine RSPO interventions in the region. These responses collectively delineate a spectrum of perceived obstacles ranging from operational delays and resource deficits to infrastructural and land-related issues.

Recommendations to improve future outreach engagement/training programme



Figure 33. Recommendations to improve future outreach engagement/training programme

Figure 33 reflects the recommendations for improving future outreach engagement and training programmes. 35.56% of the respondents expressed a strong need for increased training and capacity building, underscoring a widespread desire for continuous education and skill development. 23.01% highlighted the need of improving communication channels between communities and organisations like RSPO, reflecting a community-driven call for better engagement strategies to build trust and strengthen relationships.

13.81% pointed to the need for enhanced monitoring and evaluation processes, suggesting that the respondents feel more effective tracking of project impact and outcomes is necessary. 12.55% emphasised the importance of transparency and accountability within the sector, reflecting a collective push for improved governance. Other key recommendations from the community include fostering partnerships with local stakeholders and leaders, providing financial empowerment, and offering support through fertilizers and improved seedlings. These insights convey the participants' overall perspective, highlighting the need for a holistic approach that integrates education, engagement, governance, and financial support to ensure the long-term sustainability of palm oil sector initiatives.

3.5 Successes of FDS in Communicating RSPO to the Communities



The evaluation's analysis underscores several key successes achieved by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in effectively communicating RSPO operations to targeted communities in Edo State. These accomplishments reflect FDS' pivotal role in enhancing stakeholder understanding and engagement with RSPO's sustainability framework, as detailed below:

1. **Increased Awareness of RSPO's Complaint and Grievance Mechanism:** FDS significantly advanced stakeholder education on RSPO's Complaint and Grievance Mechanism, ensuring that community members were well-informed about processes for reporting non-compliance and seeking redress. By simplifying procedural complexities and tailoring communication to local contexts, FDS enabled individuals and organisations to confidently navigate and utilise the grievance system, thereby amplifying its reach and relevance.
2. **Enhanced Trust and Transparency in the Grievance System:** Prior to FDS' intervention, many community members and leaders in the targeted region exhibited limited awareness or scepticisms regarding RSPO's capacity to fairly adjudicate conflicts. FDS addressed this gap by clearly delineating the steps, timelines, and anticipated outcomes of grievance resolutions, supplemented by case studies of successful interventions. These efforts bolstered stakeholder confidence in RSPO's commitment to sustainability and social justice, fostering greater trust in the system.

3. **Improved Accessibility to the Complaint Process:** FDS enhanced the accessibility of RSPO's complaint system by establishing practical reporting channels, such as hotlines, tailored to the needs of all stakeholders. This initiative notably reduced bureaucratic obstacles, particularly for smallholder farmers and local communities, enabling them to voice concerns efficiently and reinforcing the inclusivity of the grievance mechanism.
4. **Effective Communication of RSPO's Principles and Criteria (P&C):** The intervention successfully disseminated knowledge of RSPO's Principles and Criteria (P&C), ensuring stakeholders comprehended the environmental, social, and governance standards requisite for certification. FDS achieved this by translating complex sustainability requirements into clear, relatable messages. This enables participants to recognise the tangible benefits of adhering to RSPO standards and fostering informed engagement.
5. **Strengthened Compliance with Sustainable Practices:** Beyond raising awareness, FDS delivered comprehensive training sessions and capacity-building programs to equip industry actors and local communities with the skills to implement RSPO's P&C effectively. Covering critical areas such as deforestation prevention, fair labour practices, and human rights protection, these initiatives ensured that stakeholders could practically apply RSPO guidelines, enhancing compliance and embedding sustainability within operational frameworks.

These successes collectively demonstrate FDS' instrumental role in bridging communication gaps, building trust, and promoting actionable compliance with RSPO standards, thereby laying a robust foundation for sustainable palm oil practices in Edo State's targeted communities.



"Without a doubt, the FDS project has significantly improved our work. We now spend less time resolving complaints and managing conflicts. During the training, we observed the enthusiasm of participants—they actively engaged, asked insightful questions, and shared the challenges they face. Overall, I would rate FDS 85% for their performance." **Representative, Presco Nigeria Limited**

Success stories

"Thanks to the FDS training, conflicts between host communities and companies have significantly decreased. Whereas protests and clashes were once common, communities now have a better understanding of formal complaint mechanisms. This shift has greatly enhanced our efforts in conflict resolution and fostered a more constructive approach to addressing grievances."

Representative, Presco Nigeria Limited

"Since the FDS intervention, our community's engagement with palm oil companies has significantly improved. Company representatives now visit us regularly, listen to our concerns, and collaborate

with us to find sustainable solutions. This ongoing interaction has strengthened our relationship and fostered a sense of mutual trust and cooperation." **Community Leader, Obagie-Nunuamen**

"Colleagues in the designated department have been receiving calls from community members through the RSPO complaint mechanism. This platform has enabled us to respond promptly—either by visiting the communities to address concerns directly or by providing appropriate guidance. This responsiveness reflects the positive reception of the training and highlights its tangible impact on community engagement and issue resolution." **Representative, Presco Nigeria Limited**

3.6 Assessment of Unaddressed Issues, Points of Conflict, and Barriers to Programme Implementation



While Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) has achieved notable successes in implementing the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) in Edo State, the evaluation reveals several unaddressed issues, points of conflict, and barriers that hinder the programme's full effectiveness. These challenges derived from the analysis of stakeholder feedback and programme outcomes highlight critical areas requiring attention to ensure the sustained adoption of RSPO standards and the realisation of the programme's objectives.

1. **Unaddressed Issue: Limited Financial and Technical Support:** The lack of accessible funding, fertilizers, and mechanised tools restricts the capacity of smallholder farmers to adopt and maintain sustainable palm oil practices that aligned with RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C). This gap limits operational efficiency and also undermines economic viability which is a core component of RSPO's sustainability framework. The absence of robust support systems is a potential point of conflict, as smallholders may perceive disparities between programme promises and tangible resource availability, potentially eroding trust in FDS and RSPO initiatives.
2. **Barrier: Insufficient Community Sensitisation and Follow-Up Engagement:** Despite high initial awareness levels, the programme has yet to establish a systematic approach to

continuous sensitisation and follow-up engagement. The absence of periodic refresher training and ongoing interaction risks diminishing knowledge retention and long-term adherence to RSPO principles among smallholders and stakeholders. This barrier to effective implementation could lead to a gradual decline in programme impact, as stakeholders—particularly those with limited prior exposure—may struggle to sustain newly acquired practices without consistent reinforcement. This lack of follow-through also represents a point of contention, as communities may question the programme's commitment to their long-term development.

3. **Point of Conflict: Inequitable Participation in Training:** The programme has not fully addressed inclusivity in training participation, particularly for women and marginalised groups. Although women constitute 48% of respondents and are active in the palm oil sector, their representation and access to capacity-building opportunities remain disproportionate compared to men (52%). Similarly, other marginalised groups face exclusion due to cultural, economic, or logistical barriers. This inequity constitutes both an unaddressed issue and a potential source of conflict, as underrepresented groups may feel sidelined, fostering resentment and reducing the programme's social legitimacy. The lack of targeted strategies to broaden participation serves as a barrier to equitable knowledge dissemination and resource access, critical for achieving RSPO's inclusive sustainability goals.

These findings indicate that while FDS has laid a strong foundation for RSPO communication and engagement, the programme's effectiveness is constrained by structural deficiencies in resource support, gaps in sustained engagement, and inequities in participation. Addressing these barriers—financial and technical limitations, insufficient follow-up, and exclusionary practices—is essential to mitigate points of contention, resolve unaddressed issues, and ensure the COEP fully aligns with RSPO's mission of fostering a sustainable and equitable palm oil sector in Edo State.

4.1 Summary



This evaluation assessed the effectiveness of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) implemented by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in Edo State, Nigeria, under the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) framework. Spanning six Local Government Areas (LGAs)—Ovia Southwest, Ovia Northeast, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Owan West, and Uhunmwonde—the study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from 97 survey respondents, six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and seven Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders including growers' associations, government representatives, and environmental organisations.

The key findings are summarized below:

1. Increased Knowledge and Awareness:

The programme significantly improved local understanding of RSPO's sustainability standards. 87% of respondents participated in FDS training, and 75% reported substantial gains in knowledge of RSPO P&C. RSPO grievance mechanisms were actively used by 86% of respondents.

2. Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement:

Community participation improved, with 50% of respondents reporting stronger collaboration between farmers, companies, and government agencies. Conflict resolution practices were notably influenced by training, with 49% acknowledging improved use of dispute mechanisms.

3. Behavioural and Attitudinal Change:

Participants reported shifts in farming practices, particularly in adopting ethical business conduct, environmental conservation, and reducing harmful activities such as bush burning and child labour.

4. Barriers to Effective Implementation:

Despite progress, key challenges remain:

- Financial Limitations (58%) restrict adoption of sustainable practices.
- Inadequate Training and Support (34%) hampers retention and practical application of knowledge.
- Limited Inclusion of Women and Youth: Gender equity and youth engagement remain under-addressed, with only 14% of respondents aged 26–40.

5. Programme Perception and Impact:

83% of respondents rated the training as "good" or "excellent," affirming the programme's relevance. Communities expressed readiness to support future RSPO initiatives, including providing land for physical RSPO offices.

Overall, the COEP enhanced community understanding of sustainable practices. 75% of respondents achieved extensive knowledge of RSPO operations by the programme's conclusion, and 49% gained clarity on grievance processes. Environmental conservation emerged as a priority (46%), alongside improved stakeholder collaboration (50%) and adoption of the "No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation" (NDPE) principle (19%). However, barriers such as; financial limitations (58%), inadequate training support (34%), and comprehension challenges (8%), compounded by structural issues such as land tenure disputes and infrastructure deficits. While FDS effectively broke entry barriers, enabling P&C dissemination, the practical application of training outcomes may not have fully matured at the time of this evaluation. These results affirm FDS' alignment with IMO and RSPO goals while highlighting areas requiring sustained effort to ensure long-term sustainability in Edo State's palm oil sector, which accounts for 12% of Nigeria's national output.

4.2 Recommendation



Drawing on the evaluation's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme's (COEP) impact, address unresolved challenges, and fully align with RSPO's mission and the Intermediary Organisation's (IMO) outreach objectives:

1. **Strengthen Programme Coordination for Community Engagement:** Enhance FDS' role as IMO by establishing permanent community liaison units in each LGA to sustain informed and vigorous engagement. These units should facilitate regular dialogues, ensuring RSPO initiatives remain responsive to local needs and aligned with the 2014 outreach plan's emphasis on participatory governance.
2. **Address Unresolved Issues from the 2014 Assessment:** Target persistent gaps—such as land tenure insecurity and limited smallholder inclusion—by partnering with the Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP) to formalise land rights and integrate smallholders into RSPO certification (noted by 18% of Respondents as a need), directly addressing the 2014 report's call for equitable access.
3. **Enhance Financial and Resource Support:** Mitigate the 58% financial barrier (Figure 18) by advocating for government-led funding mechanisms, such as microfinance linkages with Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), to provide smallholders with capital for sustainable practices, aligning with RSPO's vision of economic viability.
4. **Expand Training and Capacity Building:** Respond to the 34% citing inadequate training by implementing ongoing, simplified P&C workshops and practical demonstrations

(addressing the 8% comprehension gap), ensuring knowledge translates into action and supports the Theory of Change's focus on capacity development.

5. **Institutionalise Grievance and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Establish community-based grievance committees, as per the 2014 plan's emphasis on accessible redress, to manage disputes over land and rights locally, with training to ensure alignment with RSPO standards and transparency in resolution processes.
6. **Promote Inclusivity in Programme Activities:** Increase gender (52% male vs. 48% female) and youth (14% aged 26–40) participation through targeted quotas and leadership training, addressing equity gaps and enhancing the programme's contribution to RSPO's mission of social sustainability.
7. **Monitor and Evaluate Long-Term Impacts:** Implement a longitudinal monitoring system to track the application of training outcomes—still developing at this evaluation's close—and assess alignment with RSPO's Theory of Change, ensuring sustained impact and identifying emerging barriers.

These recommendations aim to consolidate FDS's achievements, overcome structural and educational barriers, and position Edo State as a leader in sustainable palm oil production, aligning local efforts with RSPO's global sustainability standards while fostering inclusive growth and community resilience.

4.2.1 Recommendations from the Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP) for Sustainable Palm Oil Practices

There is a need for government-led recommendations aimed at complementing FDS' efforts, address structural barriers identified in the evaluation, and reinforce Edo State's contribution to RSPO's global sustainability objectives while fostering a resilient and inclusive palm oil sector. As a governmental entity responsible for overseeing sustainable palm oil production in Edo State, the Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP) recognises the imperative for a structured, institutional approach to address key challenges and promote sustainable practices within the sector. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Sustained Awareness and Capacity Development:** Continuous education is fundamental to achieving sustainability. ESOPP recommends the extension of awareness campaigns and training programs to ensure that all stakeholders gain a comprehensive understanding of sustainable palm oil practices and RSPO standards. A second phase of community outreach which is complemented by targeted workshops is proposed to reinforce knowledge retention and enhance compliance across the value chain.

2. **Enhanced Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Sustainable palm oil production requires integrated efforts beyond isolated initiatives. ESOPP advocates for strengthened collaboration among government bodies, private sector entities, RSPO, and other relevant stakeholders to deliver comprehensive support to smallholders. Such partnerships are expected to improve agricultural practices, optimise resource mobilisation, and catalyse sector-wide transformation in Edo State.
3. **Improved Financial Access for Smallholders:** Recognizing financial constraints as a primary barrier (noted by 58% of respondents), ESOPP proposes collaboration with financial institutions and development partners to establish accessible credit facilities, grants, and financial instruments. These resources will enable smallholders to invest in sustainable inputs, such as improved seedlings and agroforestry techniques, and adopt responsible land-use practices, thereby enhancing economic and environmental sustainability.
4. **Resolution of Land Tenure and Governance Challenges:** Land tenure insecurity and illegal land transactions remain significant impediments to sustainable production. ESOPP recommends the development and enforcement of robust policies to regulate land transactions, prevent unauthorised sales, and promote responsible land management aligned with conservation goals. This approach will provide a stable foundation for smallholders to engage in RSPO-compliant practices.
5. **Expansion of Extension Services and Technical Assistance:** Smallholder farmers require consistent, hands-on support to transition to sustainable methods. ESOPP suggests expanding agricultural extension services to deliver guidance on best management practices, biodiversity conservation, and RSPO compliance. These services should be widely accessible, ensuring that all stakeholders benefit from technical expertise to improve productivity and sustainability.



"From my perspective, I think if we partner together to get access to finance and improve our infrastructures, we can solve most of the issues oil palm farmers face in their practice

Representative, Edo State Oil Palm Programme (ESOPP).

4.2.2 Recommendations for Addressing Gender Gaps in the COEP

Gender inequality has the potential to pose a challenge to the efficacy of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) in Edo State, particularly within culturally sensitive communities where women's access to decision-making and economic opportunities remains limited. This disparity is especially critical given that women are traditional oil processors and

active participants in the oil palm business, playing an essential role in the processing and marketing of palm oil within local economies. Their exclusion risks undermining the programme's goals of sustainability and inclusivity, necessitating their deliberate integration. To address these gender gaps, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Community Sensitisation on Gender Inclusivity:** Conduct targeted awareness campaigns to inform community leaders of the socio-economic advantages of gender-balanced participation, emphasising women's contributions as traditional oil processors and vital actors in the oil palm value chain. Engage local influencers, including religious and traditional leaders, to advocate for women's involvement, and employ storytelling and case studies of successful female empowerment in comparable settings to underscore the practical benefits of their inclusion.
- 2. Economic and Social Support Systems for Women:** Introduce specific economic support initiatives, such as microloans and financial literacy programs, to strengthen women's economic empowerment as traditional oil processors and business participants. Facilitate the creation of peer support networks to enable women to share experiences, address challenges, and develop strategies for overcoming gender-related barriers, enhancing their resilience and contribution to the programme.
- 3. Empowerment Through Leadership and Decision-Making Roles:** Provide targeted training and support for women to assume leadership positions within the traditional Indigenous leadership framework, recognising their role in the oil palm sector as a platform for driving community-level change. Offer mentorship and tailored leadership training programs to build their confidence and capacity and establish women-led advisory committees to influence programme design and implementation, ensuring their voices shape COEP outcomes.
- 4. Institutionalisation of Gender Quotas in Training and Programming:** Establish a minimum quota (e.g., 50%) of reserved slots for women in training sessions, capacity-building programs, and economic empowerment initiatives, acknowledging their active engagement in oil processing and trade as a basis for equitable access. Implement gender-responsive selection criteria to ensure fair participation, and introduce systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track gender representation and confirm adherence to established targets.
- 5. Policy Advocacy for Gender-Responsive Programming:** Promote the formulation of community-driven policies that mandate women's participation across all COEP initiatives, grounding these policies in their established role as key players in the traditional oil palm business. Encourage collaboration between programme implementers and local governance structures to institutionalise gender equality measures and enhance partnerships with civil society organisations focused on women's rights to bolster advocacy efforts and ensure effective policy execution.

These recommendations aim to leverage women's integral role in the oil palm sector to bridge gender gaps, ensuring their active participation enhances the COEP's alignment with RSPO's mission of inclusive and sustainable palm oil production in Edo State.



"At Presco, we also encounter similar challenges. Our strategy focuses on continuous engagement with community leaders to emphasise the importance of equal representation for project sustainability. Additionally, we allocate a specific percentage for women's participation and actively encourage community leaders to uphold this arrangement."

Representative, Presco Nigeria Limited

4.2.3 Recommendations for Addressing Sustainability issues (Funding, infrastructure, and Follow-up Engagement in the COEP)

Infrastructural challenges, including funding shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and limited follow-up engagement, significantly impede the sustainability of the palm oil sector in Edo State under the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP). These recommendations aim to address the structural and infrastructural deficits identified within the COEP by harnessing governmental authority and community agency. This ensures that funding, infrastructure, and engagement challenges are systematically resolved to support a sustainable palm oil sector aligned with RSPO objectives. Given the complexities of mobilising rural communities, which often lack independent organisational capacity, a structured, government-backed approach is essential. The following strategies are proposed:

1. **Government-Led Community Mobilisation:** Acknowledging that local farmers frequently lack the ability to organise effectively to access funding and infrastructural support. State and Local Governments, through their agencies, should take a leading role in forming structured farmer associations. These associations will serve as platforms for collective decision-making, financial oversight, and interaction with external stakeholders, facilitating the effective implementation and sustainability of COEP interventions.
2. **Establishment and Integration of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs):** The creation of VSLAs will be a critical step toward establishing a financial safety net for farmers, but their efficacy depends on more than community effort alone. Government intervention is required to establish these associations and ensure their integration with microfinance institutions and commercial banks, enabling farmers to save systematically and access loans for farm expansion, sustainable practices, and other investments, thus reducing dependency on external funding.

3. **Promotion of Community-Led Sustainability Initiatives:** To enhance environmental stewardship and economic resilience, communities should be empowered to spearhead sustainability initiatives, including reforestation programs to protect ecosystems, waste management systems to promote cleaner production, and training workshops to build local capacity for sustainable palm oil production. Government-backed technical assistance and resources will be vital to ensure these initiatives are effective and scalable.
4. **Development of a Government-Community Infrastructure Partnership Framework:** To address the persistent infrastructure gap and ensure long-term engagement, establish a formal partnership framework between State/Local Governments and communities. This framework should outline shared responsibilities, such as government provision of technical expertise and initial capital for infrastructure projects (e.g., irrigation systems or processing hubs), matched by community commitments to maintenance and operational support, fostering a sustainable cycle of investment and accountability aligned with RSPO's sustainability goals.

These recommendations collectively leverage governmental authority to provide structural support while empowering community agencies, ensuring that funding constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and engagement gaps are systematically addressed to strengthen Edo State's palm oil sector in accordance with RSPO's sustainability objectives.

4.3 Conclusion



This independent evaluation of the Community Outreach and Engagement Programme (COEP) implemented by Foremost Development Services Limited (FDS) in Edo State, Nigeria, under the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) framework, confirms the programme's significant contributions to advancing sustainable palm oil production. The study, spanning six Local Government Areas—Ovia Southwest, Ovia Northeast, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Owan West, and Uhunmwonde—utilised a mixed-method approach, incorporating 97 survey responses, six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and seven Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

The findings demonstrate that FDS effectively aligned its efforts with the Intermediary Organisation (IMO) programme objectives and RSPO's vision, mission, and standards, achieving an 87% awareness rate among respondents of RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C) and fostering widespread engagement with grievance mechanisms (86% utilisation rate). This success is further evidenced by enhanced community knowledge, with 75% of respondents reporting extensive understanding of RSPO operations post-intervention, a marked improvement from the initial 64% (figure 23) who lacked any prior knowledge.

FDS' strategic interventions broke down barriers to entry into palm oil producing communities, enabling the dissemination of sustainable practices and addressing key issues such as land disputes, environmental conservation, and stakeholder collaboration, as outlined in the IMO framework. Notably, 46% of respondents prioritised environmental conservation and biodiversity protection, while 50% noted improved collaboration across the value chain, underscoring the programme's impact on both ecological and social dimensions of sustainability. However, challenges persist, with 58% of respondents citing financial limitations as a primary barrier to P&C compliance, 34% identifying inadequate training and support, and unresolved issues such as land tenure insecurity and infrastructure deficits threatening long-term progress. The evaluation also

suggests that the practical application of lessons from FDS training may not have fully matured by the time of this assessment, indicating a need for ongoing monitoring to assess sustained impact.

In addressing sustainability challenges within Edo State's palm oil sector, which contributes 12% to Nigeria's national output, this report highlights the necessity of targeted interventions. Recommendations include institutionalising community-based grievance committees, enhancing financial inclusion through government-backed mechanisms, and expanding training to bridge comprehension gaps and bolster gender and youth participation. These measures are critical to reinforcing Edo State's leadership in sustainable palm oil production and aligning local practices with global standards. FDS has laid a robust foundation by fulfilling its mandate, yet sustained stakeholder collaboration, policy advocacy, and resource investment are imperative to overcome identified barriers and ensure the COEP's long-term efficacy. This evaluation thus serves as both a testament to achieved progress and a call to action for continued commitment to a more inclusive, equitable, and environmentally responsible palm oil industry in Nigeria.



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