

SOMO and ICN statement to reactions by Rainforest Alliance and Unilever following publication of the SOMO report: [Certified Unilever Tea: Small cup, big difference?](#)

Following the publication in October 2011 of a report by SOMO and ICN revealing labour right violations in Rainforest Alliance (RA) certified tea production for Unilever both RA and Unilever have made several public statements (see below). The positions that are reflected in these statements were communicated to SOMO and ICN already before publication of the report. Hence, wherever it was deemed relevant in the context of this study their position has been discussed in the report (see especially the discussion chapter 4).

However in the study we have hardly focussed on positions voiced in their statements in reference to specifically SOMO *not* being cooperative, open to dialogue, constructive and contributing to positive change. This is because these positions relate to the role of SOMO in the interactions/dialogue with Unilever and RA following the draft results of the research and in general. They do not relate to assessing working conditions on RA certified tea plantations, the principle subject of the study. Yet because these arguments are now emphasised publicly in an attempt to delegitimise us, we need to shed some light on this issues in order to put these arguments in perspective.

Indeed in the context of the study we - both SOMO and ICN - have met, and shared information with, Unilever PLC management and RA (see for more details section 1.1.2. of the report). However for SOMO the purpose of this interaction was principally to allow for a right of reply on our findings. It was not our specific intention to start or enter in a continuous process of addressing problems flagged in the research together with RA and Unilever. While Unilever and RA are framing the discussion this way we have explicitly not committed to this and they were well aware of that.

Indeed in the discussion with Unilever and RA we have made it clear that it is neither SOMO's or ICN's role nor our objective in the project to provide specific and tailor made technical advice for business or other organisations on how to solve their problems relating to sustainable production. There are consultancies and (other) NGO's that are better equipped for this. Moreover as a research organisation focussing on multinationals SOMO does not work for companies by

principle to avoid potential conflicts of interests. It should also be stressed, as we do in the report, that we did provide the evidence of ineffectiveness of approaches as strong and as material as we could.

That being said we did express our interest (and we still are interested) in further discussing the implications of the research and challenges and approaches of promoting sustainable production of tea in general or – in the case of ICN- which a specific focus on the situation in India. We also made it clear that we saw this as a discussion that would need to be pursued out of the context of the formal right to reply process which ended at that point. Yet this might not have been in the interest of Unilever and RA because getting locked in a longer dialogue or improvement process at the moment would prevent us from going public with our findings therefore preventing possible reputation damage for RA and Unilever. It is in this light that these allegations must be seen.

SOMO and ICN are confident of being constructive, as will be clear from the report itself. What we did is exposing the apparent ineffectiveness of current approaches by Unilever and RA to address precarious working conditions. This issue now need to be addressed by RA, Unilever and their suppliers. SOMO and ICN are open to further assist in this in the way described above.

References:

Rainforest Alliance website, 'Statement in response to the SOMO Report from the Rainforest Alliance', 29 October 2011, <www.rainforest-alliance.org/agriculture/somo-statement> (15 November 2011)

Unilever website, 'October 2011: Unilever response to report by SOMO into our tea plantation in Kericho, Kenya', <www.unilever.com/sustainability/news/news/ResponseToReportBySOMO.aspx#Tq__ReYlniI.twitter> (15 November 2011)