

SUSTAINABILITY BRIEF

Update from the field

October 2017

Providing a Safe Place for Workers' Passports

The oil palm plantation sector is a labour intensive sector, and is highly dependent in particular on manual labour. In Malaysia, specifically in Sabah and Sarawak, plantation establishment largely occurred post British colonisation, which meant that plantation work, notably harvesting and plant maintenance, has always relied on foreign workers given that there is a shortage of local labour to fill these jobs. According to Malaysia Palm Oil Board (MPOB) statistics, there are 428,000 workers in the oil palm sector in Malaysia of which more than 70% are foreign workers, as of May 2017.

In many Malaysian plantations, it is commonplace for employers to take possession of workers' passports, to prevent workers from leaving without notice. The issue of workers' leaving without notice, is a key concern of estate managers' as when it does happen, it has cost and administrative implications such as, reporting to the various authorities. Estate managers also often worry about maintaining headcount, as there is a general shortage of plantation workers in recent years.

Recognising that passport retention is a key indicator of forced labour, Wilmar has taken a step forward in improving worker's rights by returning passport to our workers in phases, starting from June 2016. The initiative reinforces the Group's strong commitment to protect the rights of workers, and uphold the principles enshrined in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) core labour standards- a key tenet of our No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation (NDPE) policy.

Taking a step further, Wilmar is providing locker facilities for workers to safekeep their passports. We are in the process of rolling out this initiative to all our plantations in Malaysia. The locker keys are kept by the workers themselves and they can access their passport without restriction. Workers are only requested to record in a log book whenever they take their passports out from the lockers.



Passport Locker Facilities in Wilmar's Sapi estate in Sabah

Wilmar kick-started the process of returning passports to foreign workers in June 2016, where we engaged closely with our workers to seek their opinions on the best way to handle this issue. The idea of passport lockers was raised. We received very positive response from our workers who expressed satisfaction with the idea once put in place, workers felt safer when they have to be outside the plantations as they no longer fear getting stopped by the local authorities. Feedback from most workers further indicates the convenience they now enjoy when they have to travel for personal emergencies or even to just meet family members outside the plantation. One worker from Sapi plantation said that when her family member needed her assistance in Indonesia, she was able to rush back to home, without having to go through a lengthy procedure to obtain her passport.

We believe that the implementation of this initiative has fostered a higher level of trust between workers and estate management. Wilmar will be rolling out the same programme to all our other estates in the Group. At present, we aim to install about 10,000 lockers and return passports to all migrant workers in all our Malaysian plantation (i.e. Sabah and Sarawak) by November 2017.



Briefing workers on the new passport locker facility while returning their passport at Ribubonus Estate, Sabah on 13 October 2017



Returning the passport to our workers at Ribubonus Estate, Sabah

While we take steps to improve our labour practices, we continue to engage with all stakeholders to bring about a bigger impact. We have shared our experience with our suppliers in Malaysia, some of whom have also implemented similar lockers. For instance, Kim Loong, a longstanding CPO supplier of Wilmar, also returned passports to their workers in Peninsular Malaysia as part of their family day celebration in July 2017. A [short video](#)¹ documenting Kim Loong's experience was released by our partners [The Forest Trust](#).²



Kim Loong Palm Oil Mill returning passports to their workers

The journey towards improving workers' rights and conditions in the plantation sector is fraught with many challenges especially when trying to change entrenched practices and mindsets. We are realistic in our efforts and expectation that change is not going to happen overnight. We remain however optimistic that challenges can be overcome with collective action by all actors in the industry towards a common goal.

¹<https://youtu.be/1esjpsGs2w>

²<http://www.tft-earth.org/stories/blog/passports/>